

A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY OF JOHNSON
COUNTY, TENNESSEE'S GREEN BEAN INDUSTRY

A Thesis
by
BILLY DWIGHT WARD II

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APPROVED BY:

Patricia D. Beaver
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Jefferson C. Boyer
Member, Thesis Committee

Fred J. Hay
Member, Thesis Committee

Patricia D. Beaver
Director, Center for Appalachian Studies

Edelma D. Huntley
Dean, Cratis Williams Graduate School

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Abstract

A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY OF JOHNSON COUNTY, TENNESSEE'S GREEN BEAN INDUSTRY

Billy Dwight Ward II
B.S., East Tennessee State University
M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Patricia D. Beaver

In the years preceding World War II, farmers in Johnson County, Tennessee, began an experiment in commercial snap bean production. In 1934 county farmers planted 112 acres of snap beans. By 1943, the county was enveloped by 6,000 acres of beans and began proclaiming itself the “Green Bean Capital of the World.” Representative Dayton Phillips claimed “There are more beans raised in Johnson County, per acre, per 1,000 of population and per square mile, than any place else in the United States” (“Efforts Made”).

Snap beans evolved into the lens through which county residents viewed the world and their place in national and international modes of food production and distribution. This case study of Johnson County’s commercial bean industry is a snapshot into the evolution of rural economies in the twentieth century, revealing the economic, cultural, and agricultural vicissitudes experienced by agrarian communities in the United States and abroad.

Acknowledgments

This work would have been impossible without the support of several important people. First, I would like to say a special thank you to thesis committee chair Dr. Patricia Beaver, who has been my advocate, mentor, and friend throughout this sometimes arduous, but exciting project. I will always be grateful for her encouragement and guidance. Thesis committee members Dr. Fred Hay and Dr. Jefferson Boyer were not only astute and patient editors, but inspired me to look at this multi-faceted project as not just a good story, but an important one. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Elvin Hatch who took the time to read rough drafts of my entire manuscript, provided invaluable insight, and generously shared his knowledge, wisdom, and personal research material for my benefit. Jonathan Buchanan and Jordan Laney endured my many false starts at writing this thesis and provided perceptive observations and encouragement through the entire process. I would like to say a special thank you to Debbie Bauer who has patiently guided me through the bewildering trials, paperwork, and general confusion characteristic of my time as a graduate student. I owe Dean Williams a debt of gratitude for pointing me in the right direction during my initial research and later as I spent hours in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection looking for books and making copies of newspaper articles. Stacey Reece read my entire manuscript and her insight and suggestions were invaluable. Linda Icenhour and the staff of the Johnson County Public Library were extremely helpful, as was the staff of the Tri-State Growers, Inc. who graciously granted me access to several boxes full of old records and ledgers

I would like to thank the Center for Appalachian Studies for its financial support in the form of the Edward J. Cabbell Scholarship. I am grateful for funding provided by the Appalachian State University Office of Student Research and the Graduate Student Association Senate, which has allowed me to present my research at the 36th Annual Appalachian Studies Association Conference and the 2013 Meeting of Agricultural History Society in Banff, Canada.

Finally, I would like to thank my informants. Your stories and memories are county treasures, and I am honored you shared them with me. Unfortunately, space does not permit me to mention all in Johnson County who donated their personal treasures, time, or memories to this project, but I will be forever grateful for your kindness and generosity. You welcomed me with open arms into your homes, offices, and store rooms. You have entrusted me to tell your story, and I hope I have done it justice.

Dedication

First, I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Rosa Ward, whose wisdom and knowledge about life, farming, and beans continues to guide and shape my life. I would also like to dedicate this work to the former bean growers and pickers scattered from Johnson County to the Bahamas, the true authors of this work.

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Introduction

As the summer sun grew hot, our shadows shortened while rows of beans stretched endlessly before us. “Hamper!” my grandmother shouted. My younger brother and I instantly looked up to see the family matriarch standing and straightening her back far ahead of us with an overflowing bucket of beans at her feet. We laughed as I handed her an empty bucket, but took our chiding seriously for being out-picked by a seventy year old woman.

Growing up, my brother and I hated picking green beans. It was hot, uncomfortable work that often took the entire morning. Through many afternoons we trudged down what seemed unending rows of beans while our mother and grandmother began breaking and canning. Beginning in July, at least one day a week was spent picking and processing beans. This was preceded by a spring of planting and arduous weeding in our large garden. We battled insects, diseases, and weather in order to produce enough food for the winter. When school dismissed for summer break, hours of work on the farm and in the garden were waiting for us.

My family, like many of our neighbors, eats green beans virtually every day. Women pride themselves on the number of cans they put up for the winter, and large bowls of beans serve as mealtime cornerstones at church dinners and other social events. Trading favorite varieties such as Vernie Ethel, Cutshorts, Turkey Crawl, Pink Tip, and Sulphur keeps garden green bean cultivation interesting and diversifies meal times. Individuals and families have their preferred varieties, and good natured arguments about the “best” bean are frequent; however, as important as the green bean is to the food culture of the county, the role it played

in the economic, cultural, and social history of Johnson County, Tennessee, is unique and intriguing.

If you asked an older citizen for a brief overview of county history, that person would inevitably mention the time when the county was heralded as the “Green Bean Capital of the World.” The oral history is rich with stories about growing, picking, and selling millions of bushels of beans on the commodity market beginning about 1935. Growing up in Johnson County I heard the story over and over again, and though I never questioned it, I never entirely believed it. How did this little, mountainous county, whose population spent its time in factories through the week and tobacco fields, cattle pastures, and large gardens after hours and on weekends, earn such a reputation?

Theoretical Framework

Commercial bean production in Johnson County began in earnest during the pre-World War II years and increased exponentially throughout the war time era. Thanks in large part to federal price supports enacted to increase food production to supply the civilian and military population as well as America’s international allies, Johnson County rose to prominence as the national center of commercial bean production. Amidst the global turmoil of World War II and the revolutionary changes in food production and distribution that followed, the county discovered a niche market that catapulted local growers onto the national and international scene. It is therefore vital to place this period of the county’s history in its proper historical and contextual framework.

Utilizing Food Regime theory, developed by Phillip McMichael, we are able to analyze Johnson County’s commercial bean industry as it evolved between the first food regime (1870-1930s) and the second food regime (1950s-70s). The first food regime was

characterized by tropical goods, basic grains, and livestock from settler colonies which were exported to Europe. Great Britain, in particular, outsourced its staple food production to the New World where mass production reduced the price of labor and therefore food prices in industrializing Europe (McMichael, “A Food Regime Analysis,” 185). The second food regime funneled excess American commodity food crops to the United States’ “informal empire of postcolonial states,” such as South Korea, in an effort to simultaneously lower labor costs in those states while depressing labor costs in the Third World through selective industrialization and food aid subsided wages during the Cold War (McMichael, “A Food Regime Genealogy,” 141). Concurrently, agribusinesses forged transnational linkages between national farm sectors that were “subdivided into a series of specialised (sic) agricultures linked by global supply chains” (141).

The transition between the first and second food regime allowed innovative food production and distribution systems to surface, if only for a short, dynamic period, before the second food regime established its “rule governed structure of production and consumption on a world scale” (Friedman quoted in McMichael, “A Food Regime Genealogy,” 142). Johnson County bean growers, along with other small farmers in the First and Third World, prospered during the formative stages preceding the second food regime and for a short time afterwards. The fertile ground bred by the temporary fluctuation between regimes allowed Johnson County bean growers to manipulate, or conversely be manipulated by, the market system, propelling them into the market economy.

On the other hand, as McMichael argues, the post war “emphasis on commodity programs rather than American rural development *per se*, laid a foundation for the surplus export regime in the following decades” (143). Emphasizing surplus commodity food

production for export demanded low-cost production strategies. Harvesting is the single greatest expense in commercial bean production, accounting for 75% to 90% of total production costs and required man hours (Bonser et al. 55 and Al-Habib 19). Surrounded by a willing, low cost labor force, Johnson County farmers found commercial snap beans a profitable industry situated comfortably within the region's agricultural traditions and infrastructure. Unfortunately, increased mechanization following the war, particularly in the form of mechanical bean pickers, accelerated the development of large, specialized farms in the county and around the world. These large farms were better able to utilize technology not adapted to smaller growers who continued to plant relatively small acreages and perform the majority of the work by hand or with basic technology. While "surplus" human labor remained "cheap" for small farmers in Appalachia and elsewhere, mechanization proved to be cheaper, supplanting the human labor force and undermining the ability of county farmers to compete successfully in the global market system.

Labor is only one piece of the story, however. National and international modes of production, distribution, and consumption all played a role in the formation of the county's commercial agricultural pursuits, snap beans and otherwise. Thus, it is impossible to focus on beans solely as object, or as a simple commodity crop. To understand this story fully, beans must be viewed as *relation* (McMichael, "A Food Regime Genealogy," 163). It was the relations formed through commercial bean production that created Johnson County's social and economic organization and the county's role in the international market economy. Examples include the relation between bean growers and laborers and the relation between bean growers and bean buyers. Focusing on beans as relation rather than object amplifies the study of Johnson County's bean industry beyond a simple local history and into the

international debate on the effects of the capitalist market system on pre- and post-industrial agrarian communities.

Food regime theory frames the national and international context of the bean industry's rise and fall in Johnson County, but specific geographic and cultural concerns are also an important part of the story. Located in the far northeastern tip of Tennessee, bordering North Carolina and Virginia, Johnson County is a predominantly agricultural county. This mountainous county and its neighbors have often been overlooked in the study of Appalachia as they lack the coal deposits characteristic of the Appalachian portions of states such as Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia. Luckily, research on agriculture in Appalachia has come into its own of late, and several scholars have attempted to understand the role of agriculture in the region both socially and economically. One of the most important of these scholars is Wilma Dunaway in her book *The First American Frontier*.

Dunaway's work derides and successfully disproves the mythical image of Appalachia's self-sufficient, subsistent farming past. In her book, Dunaway reveals Appalachia's farm economy has been tied to the national and international economy since the early settlement period (20). The commercial bean industry was another step following the historical pattern of Appalachia's export farm economy (20). According to Dunaway, "Settler Appalachia was *born capitalist*," and she goes into great detail to prove that point, while noting the incorporation of Appalachia's local economies into the capitalist world system "entailed nearly 150 years of societal, politico-economic, and cultural change" (16).

The study of commercial bean production expands on Dunaway's work while revealing the multifaceted relationship of Appalachian/agrarian people and the global market system. Johnson County farmers were anxious to produce goods for the market but refused

to let the market system completely usurp their traditional economy. The tension between the local深深 agrarian economy and the market economy is evident in the county's diversified farmsteads, continued participation in the local barter economy, and subsistence gardens throughout this period of expanding commercial bean production. One specific example was the preference for heirloom bean varieties for local consumption in contrast to what residents termed "market beans," those raised exclusively for the commercial market. This hybrid economy, animated by the early agrarian economy, but co-existing in the international capitalist market economy, is one of the important features of this study.

Where Dunaway correctly identifies tension between two contrasting economic systems, anthropologist Rhoda Halperin recognizes that decision-making and personal actions are not determined solely by market economics, but also by the influences of personal/family security and identity. In her book *The Livelihood of Kin: Making Ends Meet "the Kentucky Way,"* Halperin discusses agrarian livelihood strategies, termed "multiple livelihood strategies," as they exist outside the capitalist market economy and the ways people navigate this complex system. Halperin describes people and communities simultaneously engaged in parallel market and nonmarket activities in order to maintain autonomy, rural culture and "commitments to kin, to hard work and self-sufficiency, to freedom and to the land, to generosity and reciprocity" (11). The themes Halperin describes are clearly visible in Johnson County during the period under examination. County residents attempted to "use the market (capitalist) economy without succumbing to it—that is without becoming completely dependent upon cash" (12). The patterns whereby farm diversification and subsistence gardens complement commercial agricultural pursuits serve again as an excellent example of the complexity of small scale agricultural production. The thrift and

subsistence-first orientation of mountain farmers that existed alongside the market economy parallels that of small holders and peasants around the globe, particularly in the Third World.¹

Susan Keefe's article "Theorizing Modernity in Appalachia" along with Elvin Hatch's article "Modernity with a Mountain Inflection" expand on the emerging and often contrasting changes rural communities experienced as they encountered modernity during the 1940s and beyond. Looking through the lens of modernity as it was accepted, rejected, and manipulated to co-exist with traditional life ways in the mountains provides insight into the response of Johnson County to modernity, historically and presently. The works of Keefe and Hatch permit a deeper understanding of the dynamics between Johnson County's progressive forces, including the county's extension agents, and the traditional elements including the barter economy and semi-egalitarian nature of the county's social structure, a topic developed in Chapter 1. The cash economy supplanted in part the traditional elements of the local economy, such as barter exchanges, and county farmers willingly adopted modern farming techniques in the desire "to be modern;" however, it was modernity unlike that of other regions in the country. It was still modern, as Hatch describes, "'being modern' involves the principle that there are others who are not, but rather they are backward, ignorant, uncouth—in a word, inferior—in relation to one's own group or society" (148). Johnson County residents desired to "be modern," as they had lived under the shadow of negative stereotypes since the early settlement period, and modernity coupled with

¹ See "From Peasant Economía to Capitalist Social Relations in Southern Honduras" by Jefferson Boyer, *Peasant Livelihood: Studies in Economic Anthropology and Cultural Ecology* by Rhoda Halperin and James Dow, eds., "Bringing the moral economy back in . . . to the study of 21st Century Transnational Peasant Movements" by Marc Edelman, *Peasants* by Eric Wolf, and *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* by James Scott.

commercial agriculture offered them a chance to rise above the stereotypical image of Appalachian people.

The final optic required in a study of Johnson County's bean industry is one of stereotypes. William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College from 1892-1920, conceded that "modern life has little patience with those who are, 'behind the times'" (5). In reference to his oft quoted description of Appalachian people as "our contemporary ancestors," Frost was among the first to promulgate the myth of isolation and the subsequent degenerate, though historically noble, character of Appalachia's people and economy. Unfortunately, as late as 1964, Johnson County Extension Agent John Walker not only believed these stereotypes, but employed them to justify the county's failing agricultural economy.² Dunaway's work deals with many of these stereotypes, but David Hsuing deconstructs the stereotypical image of Appalachian isolation, connectedness, lack of "development" and access to information and agricultural innovations. Johnson County residents repeatedly proved the inaccuracy of these stereotypes. Farmers provided farm and forest goods for sale and trade, quickly adapted to commercial agriculture, and succeeded in becoming "modern" Americans, but with an Appalachian twist.

The *History of Johnson County 1986* is a locally produced work detailing the county's history, featuring articles and genealogies contributed by county residents. Submitted articles were vetted by the Johnson County Historical Society. Freddie C. Morley, president of society during this time, along with Annie Atkinson, contributed an article titled "A Green Bean Capitol" (sic) along six photographs pertaining the commercial bean production. This brief article is one of two seminal works by local writers documenting the bean industry and is a useful resource, containing many facts verified by other sources.

² See Chapter 5.

However, it does have faults; in addition to a lack of citations, it neglects to note the important role migrant workers played in the bean harvest, and yearly acreage data are inaccurate.

Locating accurate data reflecting bean acreage is very difficult. The obvious source for number driven, quantitative data is the U.S. Census of Agriculture. The census contains an immense amount of data, including average farm size and acreage statistics for particular crops, including beans, in each state and county in the country. The census showed a dramatic increase in commercial bean acreage from 1919 to 1944, with an explosive 3,000% surge between 1934 and 1944. After what appears to be a peak year in 1944, bean acreage decreased gradually following a sharp 1,000 acre decline between 1945 and 1950.³ A quick increase followed by a steady decline mirrors the oral and written accounts, but the census records were particularly disappointing. If the census revealed the entire story, cropland dedicated to commercial beans and burley tobacco was virtually identical. Had the passing of time clouded the memory of local citizens? Where was this sea of beans that supposedly enveloped the county? It turns out that the years falling outside those recorded by the census told a much more dramatic story, one that was overlooked by previous researchers.

In 1942, University of Tennessee agricultural economists Howard J. Bonser, E. B. Fickel, and C. E. Allred conducted the first in-depth study of Johnson County's snap bean industry. Bonser and his associates gathered information from bean growers, U.S. census data, the extension agent, and the local paper the *Johnson County News*. Entitled *Costs, Returns, and Practices in Growing Snap Beans, Johnson County, Tennessee*, their study was published in 1945 and includes a brief overview of the industry's recent history and growth. The work focused on the practices, costs, and returns of commercial bean growers; however,

³ For an in-depth discussion of bean acreage see Chapter 4.

their comprehensive study left many questions unanswered. For example, in the conclusion, the authors state, “It was not feasible to study markets adequately, hence it is not known who were the processors purchasing in 1942, *nor is it possible to know why they came to Johnson County for beans*” (emphasis added) (57). Unfortunately, these questions remain unanswered.

Kamal Mustafa Al-Habib’s 1967 University of Tennessee master’s thesis *Costs of Producing and Marketing Snap Beans in Two Upper East Tennessee Counties* was a continuation of the 1945 report, but included neighboring Carter County, Tennessee. Conducted as an exercise in cost-benefit analysis for present and future bean growers, Al-Habib’s projections revealed small bean growers were becoming increasingly “inefficient,” and unprofitable when compared with larger growers. Al-Habib’s data rely heavily on census data and personal interviews. The studies conducted by Bonser and his colleagues and Al-Habib are vitally important; however, through their self-imposed limitations, they provide only an outline of this important period in the county’s history.

Copies of the *Johnson County News*, the *Johnson County Bulletin*, and the *Tomahawk* were an invaluable resource. The earliest papers date back to 1925, but a gap exists between 1925 and 1943; thus, this crucial time period in the county’s history may be lost forever. However, from 1943 onwards, articles, announcements, and advertisements referencing beans abound. Reviewing newspapers documenting the bean industry’s rise and fall on a weekly basis for over three decades was a crucial component of my research that had not been previously attempted.

The Value of Social Capital

The research process demonstrates the importance of social capital in the gathering of archival data and the discovery of knowledge (Keefe 27-32). As a county resident, and more importantly, descending from a long line of county natives, I was granted virtually unlimited access to a variety of resources, including informants and archival material. The following pages document the important role social capital played in this research.

On the morning of July 13, 2012, I met Joey Icenhour, whose Grandmother had learned I was conducting research on Johnson County's former green bean industry. Icenhour's grandmother, coincidentally a friend of my grandparents, offered to lend me a copy of the *1951 Souvenir Program Johnson County Bean Festival*. Johnson County held an annual bean festival from 1947-1955.⁴ The local paper printed commemorative souvenir programs, referred to locally as "Bean Books," that included, among other things, "The Green Bean Legend of Johnson County," or an article with a similar name. These articles document the industry's early years and current conditions. The "legends" were published anonymously and vary through the years, but provided an important source of information, both for what was included and what was not.⁵

After meeting with Icenhour, I visited the University of Tennessee's county extension office in Mountain City in hopes agent Rick Thomason would have some information. Thomason was out on business, but his assistant directed me to county Tax Assessor B.C. Stout, who earlier that day had been in the extension office displaying a book about green beans. Stout's book was a copy of the *1956 Soil Survey of Johnson County Tennessee*.

⁴ See Chapter 4.

⁵ See Chapters 3 and 4.

Stout, current president of the Johnson County Historical Society, was immensely helpful and lent me his copy of the soil survey.

The soil survey of 1956 is composed of two parts. The first part describes the county's geography, climate, agricultural practices, markets, land use, and soil descriptions. The second is comprised of soil maps detailing the topography and soil structure of the entire county. Published in 1956, research for the report was completed in 1946. Beans are mentioned frequently, and along with grain crops, hay crops, pasture, and tobacco, the report details crop management practices for the county's differing soil types and topography. The survey does not address the sharp swings in bean acreage before or after 1946, nor does it reflect the influence the bean economy had on the county's agricultural system at large. It does, however, contain pictures, one of which reveals a large number of black workers picking beans in the overwhelmingly white county, a surprising find.

Serendipitously, County Trustee Sue Hensley had recently shown Stout and the maintenance staff of the county courthouse a copy of the *Souvenir Program 1950 Johnson County Bean Festival*. Walking across the street to her office, I met Hensley and discussed Johnson County's former heyday as the green bean capital. Hensley graciously donated her "Bean Book" for my research. A few weeks later, I visited Hensley again, asking about period records from the extension office. When the extension office moved across the street from their former office space in the county courthouse, they did not take their old records. The courthouse basement housed a large coal fired boiler and doubled as storage space for many county offices, including the extension office. Unfortunately, an untold number of boxes were destroyed due to damage caused by long term exposure to coal dust, but Hensley

arranged for me to dig through the remaining boxes in the dark basement. Unfortunately, no relevant information was discovered, but their willing assistance was greatly appreciated.

Leaving my initial meetings with Stout and Hensley, and early for a meeting with County Historian Jack Swift, I stopped at the Johnson County Soil Conservation District office where I met local farmer Earl Davis. Davis became an important resource, offering suggestions for prospective informants and lending a digital copy of the 1991 *Soil Survey of Johnson County*, which was intended to replace the 1956 work. The 1991 survey was only marginally useful, as its data collection period was several decades after the county's bean industry. It did, however, prove beneficial in adding to the overall analysis of the county's agriculture and land use in the post-bean era discussed in Chapter 5.

Jack and wife Mary Swift are long-time members of the county's historical society. The Swifts provided copies of important pages gleaned from the 1953 and 1955 "Bean Books," displayed bean related pictures found in the historical society's 2011 *Pictorial History of Johnson County*, and identified a number of potential informants.

All these events occurred during one research day. I did not experience another day quite like that one, but my "insider" status and use of social capital proved to be an invaluable asset throughout my research. This was also important when I approached Terry Snyder, manager of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., in search of information.

Beginning as a bean market in 1943, the cooperative gradually shifted its emphasis away from commercial beans as the crop declined in profitability. I spent hours reliving the organization's early years while I sorted through boxes containing their charter, meeting minutes from 1943 to 1964, numerous memos, letters, sales records, and more. One of the most important discoveries was a document titled "Ledger: 1940's-1950's" which lists

average bean prices and the number of bushels the cooperative sold every day from 1943 through 1954. I worked in a high traffic area encountering not only employees, but customers and sales people passing through the store. Curious onlookers provided ample opportunities to explain my project and gladly recounted their own memories of Johnson County's former bean industry.

The county clings to memories of the "Bean Business." It is viewed as the pinnacle of its shared history, and I have been entrusted to tell this story, or at least part of it. It is an exciting opportunity and heavy responsibility. The interviews I collected over a period of seven months are filled with rich and personal stories, and my informants were overwhelmingly candid and helpful throughout this project.

One of these informants was Roby Howard, Jr., a bean auctioneer whose picture is found in the "Bean Book" of 1955. Howard is a former bean grower and the county's last surviving bean auctioneer. Employed by the Tri-State Growers, Inc., the cooperative his father helped organize in 1943,⁶ Howard worked as an auctioneer and bean grower until the 1960s. Lasting for almost two hours, Howard's interview both enlightened and intrigued me.

It is common to hear stories about the "Bohemians" bean pickers and their tent camp. My grandmother in particular mentioned the "Bohemian camp" located on property owned by the Mount Brothers.⁷ Through Howard I discovered it was not "Bohemians" but "Bahamians," migrant workers from the Bahaman Islands, an important distinction.

Tommy Walsh's father and grandfather raised several hundred acres of beans and continued raising beans long after many growers abandoned the crop for more profitable

⁶ See Chapter 1.

⁷ See Chapter 1.

ventures. Walsh's interview was particularly helpful, providing a wealth of information on the Bahamian laborers, markets, and mechanical bean pickers.

Bill Shull's family raised several acres of beans and provided an array of details documenting the agricultural practices and day-to-day requirements of raising and selling beans. Shull passed away not long after his interview, but I am very grateful for his friendship and the time we spent talking about farming and beans.

Wade Snyder was born in 1914, and is the oldest person I interviewed. Snyder provided a first-hand account of Johnson County before, during, and after the bean industry. At age 98, Snyder's acute memory and colorful narrative combined to create a priceless account of the county's agricultural history.

Alex Snyder and Bruce Simcox are lifelong friends and neighbors who not only raised beans, but were involved in many subsidiary facets of the industry. Snyder purchased a bus and contracted pickers to supply large growers while Simcox worked as a bean grader. Very few farmers raised beans exclusively, and many, like Snyder and Simcox, earned extra money working in different aspects of the bean industry (Halperin 1990).

While interviewing Lewis Wills, one of the county's former pole bean growers, I was directed to a book written by Boyd Ray. Ray was a local author and son of J.T. Ray who plays a pivotal role in Chapter 1 as one of the bean industry's early entrepreneurs. In fact, according to Boyd Ray's account, the story of Johnson County's bean industry began in J.T. Ray's family garden. Ray's book *Blue Mountains and Green Valleys* contains chapters entitled "The Green Bean Venture" and "Puttin' on a Little Weight," both considered by county residents to be the genesis narrative of the county's bean industry.⁸ Published in

⁸ See Chapter 1.

1996, Ray's stories were previously printed in the local paper the *Tomahawk* and in *Appalachian Heritage*, a publication of Berea College.

One of the most important features of the commercial bean industry was the impact it had on women, who formed the majority of the labor force. Superimposing traditional and historical gender roles, such as harvesting vegetables, onto the modern system of commercial, cash based economic opportunities, women successfully negotiated between two contrasting worlds. Informant Lynda Bunting represents this pattern.

Lynda Bunting is the youngest informant interviewed at 65 years old. Bunting has spent her life working on the farm, in factories, and in bean fields. Her lucid interview bespoke the tension between the modern and the traditional. Bunting presented her father Mack Reece's tax returns for the 1960s, and allowed me to borrow a stack of "bean tickets,"⁹ documenting her father's bean sales in 1963 and 1964. Along with her husband Harold, the Buntins continue to farm and raise a large garden.

The last formal interview was with Nelson Gray. Gray was the only non-local resident I interviewed, but has lived and worked in the county since 1953. As an employee and later the owner of Joe Blackburn's supermarket and dry goods store, Gray observed the county's bean industry from a retailer's perspective.

Soil surveys, census data, economic reports, efficiency studies, government publications, and typical repositories of information were unable to adequately document the full scope of the bean industry's dynamic history. Government and university sponsored studies from the period emphasize war time food production for example, but omit important details including yearly changes in acreage, long term farm profitability, and the impact new

⁹ These are sale receipts, not to be confused with tickets given to bean tickers for each bushel of beans they picked. See Chapter 3 and Figures 13 and 14.

food production and distribution systems would have on rural communities. The few detailed studies that were completed provide only a meager glimpse into the rise of fall of the “Bean Business.”

The story of beans is both a good story and an important story. The “Bean Business” left an indelible mark on county residents as it became the lens by which they viewed themselves and interpreted their place in an ever changing world. The process whereby Johnson County evolved into the “Green Bean Capital of the World” is an anomaly that demands thorough research and analysis. How did this rural mountainous county, geographically separated from national processing facilities and urban consumers, evolve into one of the largest and most important centers of snap bean¹⁰ production and distribution in the Southeast? What was life like for residents who depended on commercial beans as a major source of income? Moreover, what can this brief snapshot of the evolution of rural economies in the twentieth century reveal about the economic, cultural, and agricultural vicissitudes experienced by agrarian communities in the United States and beyond? Finally, can an analysis of the “Bean Business” shed light on why the county has been unable to create an economically and environmentally sustainable agricultural system?

¹⁰ Snap bean is the official/market term, while green bean is the local term. Through this work the two will be used interchangeably.

Chapter 1: A Beginning

Wade Snyder: Before [beans] it was hard... They weren't raising nothing, just what they had to eat. They'd raise plenty of vegetables to put up to eat but that was about it... You couldn't live. I asked my dad, they was a big family of us, I asked him after I had a kid or two I said "How did you keep clothes and shoes for all of us, and something to eat?" "Well," he said "we just all worked and had something to eat."

The U.S. Census of 1940 documented the average farm size in Johnson County in 1939 at 62.6 acres, one half of the total 1,740 farms were less than 33.5 acres and described as "of the small general type (self-sufficing)" (170; Bonser et al. 3). In 1956 the United States Department of Agriculture published a soil survey report of the county. The field work was completed in 1946 and supplemented by previous census data from the USDA. The soil survey reported that "Farms are small, crops are well diversified, and production on most of the farms is primarily for home use. Owners operate about 93% of the farms in the county" (10). The report noted that though field corn, raised primarily to feed livestock, was the single most important crop in the county, burley tobacco had risen in prominence as an important cash crop in recent years (11). However,

Snap beans, the most important cash crop in the county at present, have only been produced commercially for a few years...In general the crop is fertilized heavily, and

considerable effort is made to control insects and diseases. The crop is sold at auction in Mountain City and later trucked to distant markets. (11)

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, beans quickly surpassed its rival tobacco as the county's most important cash crop. The acreage Johnson County farmers dedicated to beans became legendary. The soil survey includes a table displaying acreage under cultivation for varying crops in ten year intervals from 1919 to 1949. Utilizing figures from the USDA, we see that snap bean production jumped from 116 acres in 1929 to 2,160 acres in 1949¹¹ while tobacco climbed at a much slower rate, only doubling from 530 to 1,182 acres for the same period (10).

Unfortunately, neither time nor space permits a point by point comparison of tobacco and snap bean production in Johnson County. Tobacco has the advantage and disadvantage of having entered the national conscience and has garnered the attention of historians, academics, and activists. Ann Kingsolver's *Tobacco Town Futures: Global Encounters in Rural Kentucky* is one of the latest anthropological studies of a tobacco farming community. Kingsolver documents the struggles facing Nicholas county residents as they adapt to an ever changing world socially, economically, and agriculturally. An excellent study of the tobacco industry in Bethel, North Carolina, was conducted by Jonathan Buchanan in his 2012 thesis *The Story of Burley Tobacco Farming in Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina: Cultural Meanings and Economic Impacts*. Kingsolver and Buchanan illustrate the complex economic history and cultural narratives that surround the development of the tobacco

¹¹ USDA Census data is not the most reliable source for reporting commercial snap bean acreage. See Chapter 4 for a discussion on yearly bean acreage.

industry and its subsequent loss in Appalachia. This analysis is lacking where Johnson County's commercial bean industry is concerned.

The Ground Prepared

So come,

Come to Johnson County, the land of the sky,

Where there is food for the stomach and beauty for the eye;

Where you can have joy and pleasure untold,

And fill your pockets with silver and gold.

Editor, Johnson County News: It is neither here nor there with me whether J.T. Ray, Arthur Potter, Tom Smythe, Joe Blackburn, the Mount Brothers, Ollie Craddock, George Long, or R. J. Howard are responsible for the bean situation in Johnson County (sic). All these men are my friends and I do not desire to take sides in the present mix-up. . . .Cattle and sheep have clothed and fed more families in Johnson County than beans ever will. . . .The bean industry has developed within the last decade, but it is only one of the many industries our county is adapted to: strawberries, peas, potatoes, cabbage, grapes—any small fruit, can be profitably cultivated. . . .

(signed)

Mrs. M. L. Shoun

On April 11, 1946, the *Johnson County News* printed a letter to the editor by Mrs. M. L. Shoun. A brief excerpt from that letter and the poem she included is reproduced above.

Shoun's letter references an article that appeared in the April 4, 1946 issue of the paper entitled "Co-op is a Fighting Word!" Written by Arthur Bartlett, the article was reprinted with permission from the April 1946 issue of *Country Gentleman*, a nationally syndicated popular farming magazine. According to the newspaper, permission to reprint the article was allowed only if certain short passages were omitted on "account of local objection" ("Co-op," *Johnson County News*). Two passages were omitted and marked by the editor as such within the article. Readers may not have known what the author's original words were, but they were well aware that they may have been offensive as the editor printed "(* * omitted at publisher's request "account local objection") * *" in place of where the offensive passages occurred within the original text ("Co-op," *Johnson County News*). Shoun's letter reveals one of the omitted passages. The edited version reads as follows:

The whole county is mountains, or at least good steep hills. Yet it is a farming country purely. (* * omitted at publisher's request "account local objection") * * Grass grows thick on the hillsides and the creek bottoms are rich and fertile. ("Co-op" *Johnson County News*)

Bartlett's original passage reads:

The whole county is mountains, or at least good steep hills. Yet it is a farming country purely. *The nearest thing it ever had to an industry was moonshining.* (emphasis added) ("Co-op" *Country Gentleman*)

Shoun either subscribed to the *Country Gentleman* or had access to an unedited version. In her letter she describes Bartlett as "a stranger come into our county and misrepresent[ed] facts" (sic) (Shoun "Letter"). Shoun continues her derision of the national

media and the extent to which citizens of Johnson County had been and continued to be “held up for ridicule to the world by these ‘newspaper reporters’” (Shoun “Letter”). Shoun’s letter is an excellent starting point for a discussion on Appalachian stereotypes, poverty, and perceived isolation, but the most important part is her list of men that may have inaugurated the county’s snap bean industry.

A Seed Planted

Roby Howard Jr.: I don’t remember when the beans first started, the year, but I remember a fellow from Florida, Homestead, Florida which is south of Miami. He was growing several acres of beans himself....Craddock was probably the forerunner of all the bean market in the county.

Prior to the 1930s small quantities of beans had been raised in the county and sold under contract to canneries in Tennessee and Virginia and to itinerant truckers passing through the area. Growing green beans on a commercial scale was not a widespread practice. County farmers reported only three acres of commercial beans in 1919, and only five of the 106 growers surveyed in 1942 reported raising beans commercially prior to 1933 (Bonser et al. 8,13). In 1934, only 112 acres of beans were grown for sale on 219 farms in the county (U.S. Census, 1940 623). However, by the early 1940s conflicting stories began to emerge regarding the origins of what Shoun refers to the “bean situation.” Unlike Shoun, many people in the county were interested in the birth of the industry and several attempted to take credit.

Bert Vincent’s “Bean Story,” appeared in the July 29, 1943 edition of the *Johnson County News*. Originally composed for the *Knoxville News Sentinel* in his entertaining

human interest column “Strolling,” the following is perhaps the earliest written documentation of the industry’s origins:

It is hard to learn just who started the bean business in this county and who should have the credit for rolling so much money this way. Emmett Ashley tells me he and Wiley Sutherland planted five acres ten years ago [1933]. “It was the biggest bean patch people had ever seen” said Emmett. “They came for miles to see. They thought we were fools, and I myself didn’t know why we planted so many beans.” Emmett says three years later [1936] Herman Jones, now dead, planted one and one half acres of snap beans and made money. Other early bean men were T.H. Smythe, Craddock and Neely, Mr. Potter, Mr. Robinson, Mr. Adams, and Mr. Mount.

A second article by Vincent was printed on August 11, 1943. In his “Sermon on Beans,” Vincent appears to have overlooked the information from his earlier column: Johnson County sort of stumbled into the bean business. As they tell it here, Herman Jones seven years ago [1936] planted one and a half acres in beans. He made some money. A few friends learned about it. Next year they planted some beans to market. They made some money. After that it was beans and more beans until this year [1943] it is a bonanza crop.

Vincent is best known as a colorful and entertaining writer. Is it a minor error that Vincent’s second column attributes the first large bean crop to Jones in 1936, rather than Ashley and Sutherland in 1933 as his first column claimed? To further complicate the story

Arthur Bartlett composed a counter narrative in his article for *Country Gentleman* magazine in 1946.

Bartlett asserts that young R.J. Howard, whose sons' narrative precedes this section, was a cashier at the local Farmers State Bank in 1925, and realized that in order to secure his position at the bank "to say nothing of advancing his more ambitious hopes," the county's population would need greater involvement within the cash economy ("Co-op," *Country Gentleman* 27). According to Howard, farmers in particular required a helping hand. Consequently, the "young banker got together some of the more progressive farmers in the county and made a suggestion" ("Co-op," *Country Gentleman* 27). What Howard proposed was the need for an educated agriculture extension agent to "help push progress along" ("Co-op," *Country Gentleman* 27). Thanks to Howard and his associates, the county soon acquired an extension agent who encouraged small scale commercial production of potatoes and cabbage along with advances in sheep husbandry. In 1937 the county was on its third agent and "as the years passed, they became more and more open to new ideas. They kept trying new crops" ("Co-op," *Country Gentleman* 27). It was 1937, according to Bartlett, that a few small acres of beans were grown for commercial purposes by Howard and few of those previously noted "progressive farmers." The Mount Brothers enter the narrative at this point and along with Howard play an important role in bean industry's growth and maturity. However, the genesis of the snap bean industry remains obscure.

Lewis Wills: You need to get that book written by Boyd Ray. He talks about his daddy finding out how much beans were bringing on the market up north so he, his daddy Joe Ray and Arthur Potter, started growing them. That was probably back in the thirties.

“Of course you probably have the account where Joe Ray rented the land and put out six or eight acres and made good on them” (Bruce Simcox). “Boyd’s daddy [Joe/ J.T. Ray] had that big farm down where the prison is, [and] used to grow beans. He’s the one that started it” (Tommy Walsh).

The creation narrative most prevalent in county attributes the origins of the bean industry to J.T. (Joe) Ray, Arthur Potter, and Arthur Nichols in July of 1935. This account has been recorded in the most detail and attests that Ray planted eight acres of beans in 1935, the largest field of beans in the county at that time, while Potter planted 40 pounds of overstocked seeds from his supply store (Ray, *Blue Mountains* 3; Morley and Atkinson 101).

In his book *Blue Mountains and Green Valleys*, Boyd Ray documents his father J.T. Ray’s early forays into large scale bean production. In the aptly named chapter “The Green Bean Venture,” Ray gives us his version of how this multimillion dollar industry began. Ray’s collection of stories about growing up in the county provides researchers with the primary account of the bean industry’s birth. Oral histories verify this narrative, and a majority of the locally produced supplemental material alludes to J.T. Ray and later Boyd Ray’s book. In short, upon learning that snap beans were selling for \$2.50 a bushel on the Cincinnati markets in June of 1935, J.T. Ray realized “We could get rich on just a few acres of beans!”(2). Ray was not a farmer, but according to son was “an entrepreneur of the old school, using common sense and a lot of guts to take a risk” (1). Ray had a distinguished business career that included owning and operating a nursery, a chewing gum factory, and a mail order patent medicine company that sold a treatment for rheumatism that he developed (Ray, “J.T. Ray Family” 348).

Owning no land, Ray rented eight acres from Will Chappell and quickly began the necessary preparations for planting a large field of beans. Ray hired Arthur Nichols to plow down the wheat stubble and complete the necessary cultivation. The next obstacle in Ray's path was a lack of seeds. We are not told the variety he planted, but only that he located them "down near where the vegetable canneries were located below Knoxville" (Ray, *Blue Mountains* 4). This statement reveals two important facts: 1. proof that commercial scale bean production already existed within the state, and 2. the existence of large scale vegetable processors, including Bush Brothers Canning Company, within 150 miles of Mountain City, the county seat. Bush Brothers Canning Company was in operation in Chestnut Hill, Clinton, and Oak Grove, Tennessee at this time and was not only processing beans, but raising several hundred acres of beans and other vegetables. Bush Brothers lost a large portion of their farm land in 1943 when the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) began construction of Douglas Lake, but concrete ties to fluctuations in bean production and market sales in Johnson and surrounding counties due this event are inconclusive (Douglas).

A Seed Sprouts

Ray was ready to take the next step in commercial bean production by the second week in July. Boyd Ray's account of temporarily converting a grain drill into a bean planter, and the subsequent magnificent growth of those beans which required neither weed nor pest control through the summer is an enjoyable read. Perhaps it was beginner's luck, but Ray's bean crop and ensuing profits were envied for generations. Ray began searching for market outlets soon after the beans were planted, and an unidentified buyer from Charlotte, North Carolina, made the drive to observe the field. The reaction from the buyer upon viewing the beans is notable:

This was the first ‘outsider’ to see the quality of beans grown in the fertile mountain land and high altitude. He was amazed. They were long, straight, clean, beautiful beans of excellent quality. The buyer assured Daddy he would buy the beans when they were ready to pick. (Ray 4)

An author’s prerogative to emphasize certain parts of a story may be at work in the preceding quote, and those points will receive their due attention. However, oral accounts and the existing literature regularly note the high quality of beans raised in the county.

The buyer returned when the beans were ready to pick, and Ray began negotiations for the sale of his beans. Boyd Ray relates a humorous anecdote that reveals his father, the grower, prevailing over the buyer and achieving his desired price. The story begins: “Now if you have never dealt with a produce buyer you have never seen the capitalist system operate at its worst” (Ray 6). The tension between buyers and growers, or more accurately between farmers and the capitalist market system is played out in myriad ways throughout this story. Ray’s business connections and market savvy proved beneficial, earning him a higher price for his beans than either Potter or Nichols. Averaging \$1.75 per bushel, Ray’s eight acres produced a net profit of \$1,050 in 55 days while the beans continued to produce throughout the summer averaging 175 bushels per acre (Ray 7; Morley and Atkinson 101). The record is silent about Nichols’ harvest or profit, but Potter earned \$1.50 per bushel selling his beans to the North Carolina based Smithey’s chain stores (101).

Ray and his partners doubled their snap bean acreage in 1936. Morley and Atkinson relate that bean acreage increased throughout the entire county due to the success of Ray, Potter, and Nichols; and that Potter was hired as a buyer for Bush Brothers Canning

Company. Bush Brothers paid growers \$0.50 a bushel while unidentified truckers and buyers “headed for the streets of Mountain City to buy beans” (101). Bartlett refers to the selling of snap beans on the streets of Mountain City in 1936 for \$0.45 cents a bushel, but “most of the first crops went at whatever price the buyers would pick them up at,” he also claims a major canning company contracted 100 acres to be raised in the county the next year [1937] for the same price (“Co-op” *Country Gentleman* 27). Five cents and one year are minor discrepancies when attempting to distill the facts about this early period. Unfortunately, none of these accounts parallel those of Bert Vincent. Nevertheless, what the genesis narratives have in common is the fact that amidst the Great Depression, local farm innovators discovered a way to earn a quick and substantial income. A feat county farmers had been unable to achieve previously.

A Leaf Emerges

The Johnson County Bean Growers Association was formed by local businessmen in 1937. Tom Smythe, in partnership with the association, constructed a bean shed in order to facilitate the growing quantity of beans being raised in the county, thereby providing the first central location for farmers to bring their beans. The organization is mentioned only briefly by Morley and Atkinson, and the *Souvenir Program 1950 Johnson County Bean Festival* notes the association went bankrupt at the end of the 1937 season (Johnson County Bean Festival Committee “Green Bean Legend”).

Despite the failed growers association and the low price farmers earned for their beans during those early years; the practice of raising commercial beans grew rapidly throughout the county. Prominent growers visualized the need for another market as they witnessed the expanding acreage farmers were dedicating to beans. This new market venture

was an outgrowth of the failed growers association, and proved to be one of the most important and contested developments in the county's history.

Two Bees Attracted to the Same Bloom

Bruce Simcox: The first bean house where they auctioned them off, Joe Blackburn had it. Joe was a controversial fellow. He helped people; he bought me the first cone of ice cream I ever ate. He disagreed with things that went on in the county to some extent and there was competition between him and the Tri-State market....[For] four or five years the competition was pretty heavy. In fact he fought some of the head men that were members of the Tri-State Growers.

An editorial in the *Johnson County News* dated September 4, 1947 claimed the tri-state growing area (Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina) contained five private and four cooperative bean markets in operation at the peak of the crop's success. In general, competition between markets was viewed as an advantage for farmers, but in Johnson County the contention between markets made the national press.

Joe Blackburn was an ambitious and dynamic businessman who opened the first bean auction market, the Johnson County Market, in 1938. Tri-State Growers, Inc., opened a second market in 1943, and auctioneer George Long formed Long's Auction Market in 1944 after a stint as the auctioneer for Blackburn's market. Blackburn enjoyed considerable success as a businessman, and according to long time employee Nelson Gray, Blackburn's motto was "take care of the country people and they will take care of you." Newspapers from the era are bursting with letters from Blackburn and his thoughts on a variety of controversial issues including politics, housing conditions, and the economy. As Gray can

also attest, Blackburn “would do anything he could do to draw attention to his store!” Along with newspaper columns and opinion pieces, Blackburn made sure everyone in the county was well aware of not only his weekly department store sales, but the occasional carnival attractions located on his property. Businessman, market manager, citizen, Blackburn had a flair for the dramatic and his hand on the pulse of the county’s farm economy.

In the spring of 1943 Blackburn ran several advertisements noting the arrival of seed beans and the good price his market was paying for seed potatoes (“To Buy Potatoes”). In the April 25 edition, Blackburn promised the farmers in the Butler community that his market would be open early in the season, and that they should begin planting beans May 1st “because of their climatical [sic] situation they will be able to plant ten days earlier than the farmers from around Mountain City” (“To the Butler Farmers”). In June, Blackburn reported “beans were sold Thursday at \$3.30, the highest price for beans ever given in Johnson County,” and he encouraged farmers to hamper their beans in the field as well as assist in providing “a fair sampling system,” in order to develop a “thorough understanding and cooperation,” between themselves and the buyers (“Bean Market Opens”). Blackburn’s intent was to “build a market second to none,” and he went to great lengths to do so (“Bean Market Opens”).

New Kid on the Block

Tommy Walsh: People [were] buying seed and fertilizer from Virginia and North Carolina so they formed [a cooperative] with growers [who] could buy stock in it. [The] big reason was because that gave [the farmers] buying power. Tri-State could get the price down on seed and fertilizer. It’s a good thing, it worked with the farmers and the farmers owned it.

On May 1, 1943, W.B. Mount, Homer Stalcup, Kent Adams, L.L. Forrester, F.E Robinson, J. B. Mount, Ed H. Wills, R. J. Howard, W. A. Potter, Burley Shoun, and E. G. Rainbolt met as incorporators of the non-profit cooperative association they named the Tri-State Growers, Inc. Within two days the articles of incorporation were signed and approved by Secretary of State Joe C. Carr, and a flurry of activity was underway in preparation for the upcoming bean season. The primary purpose of the Tri-State Growers, Inc. was marketing beans and providing farm supplies for farmers in Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina. The organization was founded on snap beans, but its broader purpose was to engage every level of the agricultural economy. Providing equipment, seed, fertilizer, and the necessary tools and supplies required to harvest, preserve, market, and ship all classes of agricultural goods; this new cooperative was unlike anything county farmers had previously encountered.

The men responsible for this organization are remembered by the literature and the oral history as a group of interested farmers. It is implied they were a representative sampling extracted from the greater farm community. This is not the case. As a whole the incorporators operated some of the largest farms in the county and were members of the local business elite. This fact does not detract from their interest in improving the overall economic condition of the county, but it does serve as an important backdrop for the conflict between not only the cooperative and Blackburn's market, but later accusations brought against the cooperative by farmers and other individuals.

According to Arthur Barlett's 1946 article in the *Country Gentleman*, C.E. Brehm, Dean of the University of Tennessee's College of Agriculture and head of Tennessee's extension service, invited R. J. Howard and W. B. Mount to a fruit and vegetable growers

meeting in February 1943. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss grading and marketing produce with a group of national chain store representatives interested in purchasing high quality, graded beans direct from local growers. During this meeting Howard and Mount learned that Johnson County beans were selling for \$3.50 to \$3.75 per bushel as fancy produce on the terminal markets while growers received only \$1.25 a bushel (“Co-op” *Country Gentleman* 66). Soon after hearing this news Howard, Mount, and the assistant county agent made a trip to Florida to learn about the bean grading process. They returned on a mission to convince growers to support the grading project. In the end they were to not simply begin grading local beans, but organize the Tri-State Growers Inc., one of the first and largest farmer cooperatives in the state.

The Battle of Mountain City

Open hostilities between Blackburn and Tri-State Growers, Inc., began during the cooperative’s inaugural year. Bartlett deemed it “The Battle of Mountain City” for good reason. Bean farmers were optimistic in 1943 after a February meeting where they were informed of the excellent market prospects for snap beans sold on the fresh market during the coming summer. According to Frank Kriesner, one of the primary speakers and Divisional Produce Operator for the A&P Commission Company, one of the largest grocery store chains in the county, consumers in 1943 faced a 60% reduction in canned products in comparison to 1942, and urban consumers would be dependent on fresh fruit and vegetables like never before (“Bean Outlook”). Kriesner also stated that before his company could purchase beans from county farmers the markets had to develop a grading and federal inspection system. Enter the Tri-State Growers, Inc.

Tri-State's Offensive

The first blow was dealt by E.G. Rainbolt, chairman of the Johnson County Agricultural Conservation Association, chairman of the County's USDA War Production Board, member of the draft board, and one of the incorporators of the Tri-State Growers, Inc. The cooperative was eager to make its first year successful, but in order to do that it had to convince bean growers that the Tri-State Growers, Inc., was the county's premier market. Aided by C.E. Brehm, Dean of the University of Tennessee's College of Agriculture and head of Tennessee's extension service, \$10,000 in subscribed stock, and a \$100,000 operating loan from the Bank for Cooperatives for purchasing hampers and other supplies, Tri-State Growers, Inc. had an impressive start before the first bushel of beans reached the sale bench.

The May 27th issue of the *Johnson County News* ran a front page headline that read: "Reputation of Johnson Beans To Be Extended To The Nation's Markets." In the ensuing article Rainbolt claimed between \$75,000 and \$100,000 was lost in 1942 due to the existing markets' lax in neglecting to install a grading system. However, the new Tri-State Growers Inc., had a grading system in place for the 1943 crop and would "make Johnson County beans a distinctive product on the market" and in marketplaces throughout the nation ("Reputation"). The paper ran a second article entitled "Truck Crop Growers Expand Planting of Commercial Crop," which quotes Rainbolt again in much the same manner.

In preparation for the upcoming July sale, the Tri-State, as it is locally known, began to place ads in local papers: the *Johnson County News* (Mountain City, TN), the *Watauga Democrat* (Boone, NC), the *Skyland Post* (West Jefferson, NC), and the *Johnson City Press* (Johnson City, TN). This is in addition to three weekly ads placed in the *Cincinnati Packer*,

a national publication aimed at industrial food processors. The large spread in the Mountain City paper laid out the primary benefit of not only selling beans at the new market, but purchasing stock in the cooperative.¹² One share of preferred stock cost \$10.00, but one share of common stock cost only \$5.00, an amount approximately equivalent to the average price of five bushels of beans calculated at 1942 values. Tri-State was more than willing to sell non-shareholder beans, but stock holders received monetary dividends at the end of the year. Tri-State Growers, Inc., charged \$0.05 a bushel to sell beans, but if at the end of the year it was realized that the cost amounted to only \$0.02 a bushel, stock holders received the \$0.03 balance for every bushel of beans they sold through the market (“Sell Your Beans”). A large supply of cheap hampers were available, the cooperative purchased 250,000, growers had the option of selling either graded or non-graded beans, and preferred stock holders received a 6% dividend at the end of the year. It appeared a win-win situation for farmers.

In late June beans began pouring into both Mountain City markets. The flood of beans peaked in August and due to either the frenzy of activity occurring at his market, or perhaps feeling the heat from the new Tri-State market, Blackburn began to place large quarter page ads in the paper. Tri-State did this as well, purchasing more and larger ads throughout the growing season. On August 3 Blackburn placed a large ad with a byline that read: “Beans, Cucumbers, Onions and All Other Kinds of Produce Available at the *South’s largest Tender Green Bean Market*” (emphasis added) (“Proper Distribution”). George Long was the auctioneer at the time and was not only the president of the Southern Produce Dealers Association but billed as “your friend and *nation wide (sic) promoter of Tennessee tender green beans – from the beginning*” (emphasis added)(“Proper Distribution”).

¹² See Figure 1.

Blackburn claimed the bulk of the year's crop passed through his market which had grown into the "Largest and Most Successful Bean Auction in the South!" ("We Wish"). He was also making plans to expand his market with the hopes of encouraging large acreages of cabbage, potatoes, peppers, turnips, squash, and other vegetables to be planted in the future. After all, "Millions of dollars have been brought to this section through the efforts of Mr. Blackburn and others from beans" ("Market to be Enlarged"). Were these statements true, or were they only intended to lure farmers away from the newly formed Tri-State Growers, Inc., market?

The "Damco-op" Almost Falters

The Tri-State Growers, Inc., was the first cooperative bean market in the Southeast, and as such its success or failure had far reaching implications. According to Bartlett, Joe Blackburn was not the only party interested in seeing the "Damco-op" fail. Pinhookers, buyers who purchase goods for immediate resell, were afraid official grading would force the price of beans upward, thus shrinking their profit margin. It was these pinhookers, more often referred to in the literature as broker-buyers, who comprised one of the major outlets for beans at that time. Banding together, they refused to pay more for the graded beans. Buyers such as the A&P Company were purchasing beans at the Tri-State market, but the cooperative was in trouble. Buyers canvased the county attempting to purchase beans straight from the farm, but cooperative members were urged to resist in the hopes they could force the buyers back to the auction floor. Tri-State Growers, Inc., purchased several railroad cars of beans from its members as a show of good faith, but the organization had extended itself to the limit.

Fortunately, a rail car of beans purchased by the cooperative was sold on the Kansas City Market for \$3.75 a bushel as “Fancy Tennessee Green Beans,” an incredibly high price for that time (“Co-op” *Country Gentleman* 68). So high, in fact, buyers were suddenly willing to pay a higher price for graded beans, as the unexpected high re-sale price allowed them to earn a handsome profit. A surge of buying occurred in the county, temporarily depressing the price in the county and the terminal market. The consistently higher price garnered by graded beans remained, giving the fledgling Tri-State Growers, Inc., the buoyancy it needed.

Counter Offensive by “Little Ragged Joe”

Blackburn often used the moniker “Little Ragged Joe” as a symbol of his solidarity with the common man.¹³ In fact, he often referred to the large population of small farmers as “little rugged Ivey Knob Farmers,” standing in direct contrast to the large growers and especially the men behind what he termed “the Damco-op” (“Co-op” *Country Gentleman* 27). As an independent businessman, Blackburn was unable to compete with Tri-State whose collective bargaining power, bank loans, and shareholder agreements gave the cooperative a level of freedom that a smaller, for-profit venture such as his, was unable to match. According to the Bartlett article, which is skewed towards the cooperative, Blackburn chided the Tri-State as a fool hardy ploy which operated at a high cost with little chance for profit. He also claimed the proceeds from stock in the cooperative filled the pockets of the already wealthy elite. More importantly, according to Blackburn, if the venture declared bankruptcy the shareholders, great and small, would be forced to pay back the loan.

In a May 1944 article, Blackburn alludes to the “ill-fated proposition” of the Johnson County Bean Growers Association, but no details are included, only that the majority of the

¹³ See Figure 2.

cooperative board were previously involved in the defunct association (“Mr. Farmer” 6 May 1944). The “Green Bean Legend of Johnson County,” notes at the end of the 1937 bean season the association was bankrupt with “considerable loss to the farmers,” inflicted by the “more experienced produce dealers in the large cities” (Johnson County Bean Festival Committee “Green Bean Legend”). If this were true, it would have provided Blackburn with fertile ground to sow doubt and misgivings into the minds of famers whom may have been interested in purchasing stock in the Tri-State Growers, Inc. Blackburn must have been successful, as Bartlett notes, “Many a small farmer, on the verge of joining the Co-op, suddenly had visions of losing not only his beans but his farm too, and changed his mind” (“Co-op” *Country Gentleman* 66). Blackburn didn’t stop there. The 1943 bean season over, the battle continued unabated. The race was tight, and the battle was soon to take some convoluted turns.

In the spring of 1944 and for several months afterwards, issues of the *Johnson County News* contained a bold print ad addressing stockholders of the Tri-State Growers, Inc. An unknown personage named S. Otis Sullivan claimed that he had appointed Joe Blackburn as his representative in charge of purchasing stock in the Tri-State Growers, Inc. Offering a price of 1%, stockholders owning a \$200 share received \$2.00 and a person in possession of a \$5.00 share earned \$0.05 (“To Owners”). Sullivan encouraged stockholders to sell quickly, claiming he would be unable to extend his generous offer for long. His goal was plainly stated: “I can place your market on a profitable basis, provided I can get a controlling interest in it” (“To Owners”). Sullivan’s true identity remained a mystery, but the majority of the population assumed that Sullivan and Blackburn were one in the same. In fact, not only was Sullivan/Blackburn attempting to purchase stock in the Tri-State Growers, Inc., but

Blackburn had unobtrusively purchased one fourth of the stock in Farmers State Bank, the only bank in the county at that time, and whose board of directors was made up predominately of men also on the board of the Tri-State Growers, Inc. It is unknown how many shares Sullivan/Blackburn purchased, but presumably it was very few. The bank's board of directors eventually wrested controlling interest away from Blackburn, but he was not out of the race yet ("Co-op" *Country Gentleman*; Blackburn "Mr. Farmer" 18 May 1944).

Blackburn submitted an article in the form of a letter to the paper in May 1944, entitled "Mr. Farmer." In his article Blackburn derides the "large farmers" for not only circulating rumors about the expected low price of beans in 1944, but attempting to rent a considerable amount of farmland, presumably for bean production. The price for beans was always a hot topic. Blackburn went on record noting the average price for beans in 1943 was more akin to \$1.35, rather than the cooperative's claim of \$1.75. In 1942 beans averaged \$1.20 per bushel, per Blackburn, and a \$0.55 cent jump in one year, as claimed by the Tri-State Growers, Inc., was impossible ("Mr. Farmer" 6 May 1944).

Tri-State sold 220, 339 bushels of bean in 1943; however, records show that rather than averaging \$1.75 per bushel, as noted in the newspaper, beans sold through the cooperative averaged \$1.88 per bushel (Tri-State Growers "Ledger").¹⁴ Blackburn's figures are unavailable, but as noted previously, he claimed his market sold more beans than Tri-State (Blackburn "Mr. Farmer" 18 May 1944).

Inconsistencies and market tendencies aside, the 1943 bean crop was extremely profitable for the county, and Blackburn takes credit for this. During a trip to Florida in

¹⁴ This figure comes from the Tri-State Growers, Inc. ledger, documenting yearly bean sales for the years 1943-1954. Along with the ledger is a short "History of the Tri-State Growers" noting bean sales and average prices. This document states the organization sold 220,329 bushels of beans for \$382,671.13, averaging of \$1.73 per bushel in 1943. Similar discrepancies between these documents exist for every recorded year.

1943, he claimed prospective and current buyers noted that a Western Union telegraph service in Mountain City would allow them to deal directly with government military camps. Blackburn returned to Mountain City and immediately established this service which according to him “was the biggest single contributing factor in securing the higher prices” (“Mr. Farmer” 6 May 1944).

None of Blackburn’s claims can be proven, but it is safe to assume he sold a quantity of beans similar to his competitor and enjoyed a profitable bean season. It is also worthy of note that he followed Tri-State’s lead by installing a grading belt for the 1944 bean season and a cucumber washing and waxing station that could be utilized by pepper and rutabaga growers (“Mr. Farmer” 6 May 1944).

An Open Confrontation

After a second article again denouncing the rule of “little clicks” composed of men representing the cooperative and other prominent county organizations, it appeared an uneasy truce was on the horizon (“Mr. Farmer” 18 May 1944). Mike Tager and Paul Long of Tager Produce Company, Tampa, Florida, assumed management duties of Blackburn’s market in 1944. Long time business associate George Long opened a third bean market in Mountain City, but one last public skirmish was to be fought.

On June, 24 the Tri-State Growers, Inc., held an informational meeting in the high school auditorium.¹⁵ The high school band marched a circuit around Mountain City before the meeting and entertained the crowd for the remainder of the afternoon. According to the newspaper report, approximately 1,350 people packed into the auditorium while many more listened to the speeches from the school lawn. Among the guests were Dean of the University of Tennessee’s College of Agriculture and head of Tennessee’s extension service

¹⁵ See Figure 4.

Dr. C.E. Brehm, W.G. Wysor general manager of the Southern States Cooperative, and M.L. Corey agricultural counsel for the cooperative. These men lauded the cooperative system as a way to level the playing field. Wysor noted: “farmers as manufacturers are the only business men who buy at retail and sell at wholesale,” and that the present “hardships which retail buying have worked on the farmer would be much relieved by purchasing cooperatives.” According to Brehm, the ability to pool produce afforded the farmer more bargaining power earning farmers “50 cents a bushel more for their 600,000 bushels of beans last year than they did the year before.” A Farm Home Advisory committee for the town of Mountain City was formed during the meeting, facilitating cooperation among the women of the county in order to “be beneficial to farm homes and the community.” Contestants competing in events such as greasy pig catching and bean pole climbing were awarded prizes including bean seeds, pesticide dust, fertilizer, and cash prizes (“Co-op Meeting”).

Not to be outdone, Blackburn hosted a grand opening of his market the same day. The newspaper covered both events. After all, Blackburn’s market and the high school stood not 100 yards apart. Roughly 1,500 people jammed the market floor for free lemonade and ice cream. Entertainers from the popular “Barrel of Fun” radio show based in Elizabethton, Tennessee, entertained the crowd. Blackburn offered cash prizes and a variety of attractions including a customary bean auction that garnered a local church project \$31.00 from one bushel of beans (“Opening Day”). As Bartlett described the scene thousands of people descended into Mountain City and “Joe’s henchmen were right there with vivid green handbills to push into their hands” (“Co-op,” *Country Gentleman* 69).

There, in the big auction market just behind Joe Blackburn’s store, was the hill-billy band playing lickety-split; and the big tables were there for all to see, loaded with

soda pop. And Joe himself was there, better than a side-show barker, urging one and all to come in and have a good time.” (“Co-op,” *Country Gentleman* 69)

Blackburn stepped out of the limelight in August, leasing his market to James Waters of Charleston, South Carolina. After a quick plug asserting his market as “one of the biggest and best of its kind in the south,” it appeared Blackburn would quietly withdraw from the battle as an active combatant (Blackburn “Letter”). However, the war was far from over and soon evolved into a conflict that took a 180 degree turn from the seemingly good natured sideshow of 1944.

The Last Battle

On February 15, 1945, the *Johnson County News* published a legal affidavit by John Lee McElyea. In this affidavit McElyea accused the Mount Brothers of numerous offenses. His charges include inadequate housing for workers, inequitable pay, and holding the threat of the draft over the heads of disgruntled employees and county citizens. McElyea claimed that two days after leaving the Mount’s employment he received his draft card, just as chairman of the local Draft Board, Wiley Mount, had threatened. Appearing before the draft board McElyea found that Mount and E.G. Rainbolt refused his request for deferment labeling him a “job jumper.” McElyea also claimed that R.J. Howard offered to arrange his deferment if he would agree to work for him for \$1.00 a day, but McElyea refused claiming “there is something rotten in Johnson County” (“An Affadavit”).

This was only one of the letters published in the spring of 1945, but it spawned a tirade that eventually landed one letter writer in jail, and severed the cooperative’s ties with the *Johnson County News*. R.T. Robinson seized McElyea’s banner and carried it for several

months, claiming that the offenses McElyea noted were but a fraction of the illegal and unethical practices conducted within the county by the “Great Triumphant” [sic] (“R. T. Robinson Arrested”). The Great Triumvirate to which he was referring was composed of W. B. Mount, E.G. Rainbolt, and R.J. Howard, all of whom have been mentioned previously, and who would find the preceding moniker the most flattering of those that followed. Robinson was relentless in his attacks, accusing the men of a variety of crimes and indecencies. Tri-State Growers, Inc., took center stage in a number of these diatribes. Among the charges against the cooperative Robinson stated the organization, or more accurately its board, was attempting to monopolize the snap bean market in a manner similar to what had occurred “in the phosphate business as everybody knows,” and that through coercion “this organization and said others have forced the farmers of our county to comply with their demands” (“R. T. Robinson Speaks”). It did not stop there. Robinson listed charge after charge, including, but not limited to, accusations that the cooperative’s influence in the county was supported by the powerful draft board that “compelled” farmers to market their beans at the Tri-State for fear of being drafted. He also protested the higher price of beans sold by the “Howard-Mount Machine” whose influence at the bank allowed them to exert considerable pressure on the bean buyers (“Robinson Attacks”).

Robinson was soon arrested and sued for libel by a number of the men he continued to vilify, but he continued his campaign in the county jail. He was later joined in his incarceration by newspaper editor Charles Spurgeon, and whom he thanked on more than one occasion for allowing him a venue to disseminate his views. In no existing issue of the paper can it be construed that editor Spurgeon took obvious sides in the encounter, and as such his name was cleared of any charges; however, after his arrest Spurgeon drew considerable attention to the

conflict utilizing the paper as his weapon. His outrage that a handful of prominent citizens would attempt to quell the freedom of the press was evident through his vicious editorials and large quarter page spreads.

End of an Era

Spurgeon cleared and Robinson eventually released, the battle had reached its apex, but the confrontation dissipated so rapidly that very few citizens recall the details of those contentious years. No firm proof exists that blatantly indict Joe Blackburn as an active participant in this distasteful chapter of the feud, but members of the cooperative regularly alluded to his activities behind the scenes. He is further incriminated by the fact that the newspaper office was located in his building. Throughout 1945 and for a period of several years Tri-State Growers, Inc., refused to advertise or include market updates in the *Johnson County News*, which was duly noted by the editor on a number of occasions. The bean industry continued to expand and contract in response to the national market, but remained profitable for several years. Bartlett summarized his 1946 article with a glowing depiction of Johnson County's prosperous economy and an affirmative prediction for the future:

That is just a sample of how things are in Johnson County. Nobody claims that it is all because of the co-op, nor even all because of the beans. But most people think they are both here to stay. ("Co-op" *Country Gentleman* 69)

The fluctuations of the war and the transition towards a new post war national and international economy began to take its toll on the industry as markets throughout the region and within the town of Mountain City opened and closed with semi-regularity. Tri-State Growers, Inc., flourished and matured into the area's premier bean market. Joe Blackburn's

Johnson County Bean Market survived into the late 1960s. As commercial bean production shifted to Middle Tennessee and other areas in the mid-1960s, the Johnson County Bean Market finally closed its doors and the Tri-State Growers, Inc., began to transition away from commercial beans thereby ending a dramatic and colorful chapter in Johnson County's history.

Chapter 2: Growers, Buyers, and Beans

Growers

Wade Snyder: It's just hard work. Everything you do is pretty hard. You get out there to dust, that's hard work; get to picking, that's hard work. . . [You] stay right there with it all day long.

Spring in Johnson and surrounding counties was a busy time of year. Aside from regular chores and livestock care, raising vegetable gardens, planning corn and tobacco crops, and planting the innumerable “bean patches” that blanketed the county through the summer months, the labor demands placed upon the farming community was high. The majority of county farms operated under a mixed husbandry system requiring not only diversity among classes of livestock, but field crops as well. Cattle, horses, poultry, and hogs were found on the majority of county farms and composed an integral component of the countywide agricultural infrastructure. The most important field crop utilized in the county for animal feed was field corn. Corn could be planted somewhat earlier than snap beans, but the two were often planted concurrently during the month of May.

Alex Snyder: Some [farmers] planted [beans] too late [in the summer and] they got frost bit [in the fall], and some planted early trying to get ahead. The early crop would generally bring good. I liked [to] plant in May, sometimes in June. You could plant about three different months and they'd still come on and make beans.

“Daddy didn’t like to plant until after the tenth of May and used to count about 58 days under normal weather conditions [to] harvest” (Tommy Walsh).

In contrast to other agricultural zones in the state of Tennessee, Johnson County has a relatively short growing season, and an unexpected early spring frost could potentially devastate the immature bean plants, as well as the early bean sales. Similarly, an early fall frost, as noted by Alex Snyder above, could wipe out the late bean harvest. The average price farmers earned for their beans in late June through the middle of July was typically higher than those sold in late July and August. A small price increase towards the end of the bean season was not uncommon. Many farmers coordinated multiple plantings throughout the growing season as insurance against early spring or fall frosts, to distribute the summer workload, and provide a regular, if variable, source of income.

Wade Snyder: Put them [beans] out early and then have them coming on all along [through the summer]. [I] generally had [one] crop come off early and then one between, and then one late just before frost. You’d get more for them then than any time, just before frost. I’d plant three or four acres at a time and have about three different crops.

“We [would] start planting in May most of the time. Maybe two or three weeks later plant some [more]; that way you have beans coming on most of the time” (Bruce Simcox). “I guess we had about five or six plantings. Used to try to plant about six acres [at a time] which [would] yield a truck load [and] then some” (Tommy Walsh).

A short growing season and a ready market were not the only aspects of commercial snap bean production that appealed to local farmers. The ease with which large scale bean production evolved alongside pre-existing crops and farming practices, while taking advantage of the endogenous knowledge and tools possessed by farmers in the area, played a major role in the crop's expansion. Distinct contrasts between "market" or "commercial" beans and those favored by locals will be discussed later, but differences aside, farming methods associated with commercial snap bean production varied little from those practiced in common kitchen or subsistence gardens.

The majority of farmers raising snap beans during the crop's heyday in the immediate pre- and post-World War II era utilized horse-drawn farm equipment. Farmers reported using horses on 952 acres and tractors on 855 acres in 1942 while three farms utilized oxen as their primary source of farm power (Bonser et al. 30). Unfortunately, Bonser and his colleagues did not compare horse versus tractor use at the per farm level. The 1956 soil survey does, however, and notes that out of 1,791 farms in the county in 1950, only 136 tractors were reported on 121 farms (13; 14). The small percentage of tractors per number of farms in 1950 compared with the 1942 data reveal that though tractors and horses cultivated a similar amount of land per acre for beans, horses fulfilled the labor requirements for the vast majority of county farmers.

Alex Snyder: Roy McElyea was an old fellow. He worked for them [the Mount Brothers] for years and all of his children worked for the Mount Brothers. He planted by horses, two horses and a planter in those big fields. It took him a long time, but he'd finally get it.

As acreage dedicated to snap beans increased, the use of horses for primary tillage practices began to decrease. Bean fields in 1942 were subjected to an average of five procedures, including disking, harrowing, dragging, and cultipacking¹⁶ before planting (Bonser et al. 15; 16). Beginning with spring plowing and continuing through fall disking in preparation for a winter cover crop, farmers using horses as their sole power source averaged 22.9 hours per acre of snap beans. Farmers using tractors required only 3.9 hours per acre to accomplish the same tasks (30). When the combined labor requirements of corn and tobacco crops are taken into account, along with haymaking and myriad farm chores throughout the summer, it is little wonder tractors eventually replaced horses on many county farms.

Bruce Simcox: I can remember when Tom McQueen had a tractor. I don't know, Jim Shull might have had a tractor and Mount's had a tractor. That was really before the bean business began to pick up. The Grindstaff's [Bob and Don], I doubt they had a tractor till the bean business was going pretty good. Jaybin [Simcox] got a tractor, Hawkins' got a tractor primarily . . . because of the bean business. Then we bought one and then other people. Up till the bean business, [there] just wasn't many tractors around. People bought farm equipment, you know when they [were] making money they'd spend money.

Despite the savings in time that tractors provided, and earnings from commercial bean production, farmers faced great difficulty in mechanizing their farming operations. The soil survey noted that horses provided the vast majority of the field work on the "hilly and steep areas and on the small farms," while "tractors have replaced many draft animals . . . on

¹⁶ Cultipacking firms the soil and follows disking in the soil preparation process. Cultipackers were often used immediately preceding planting.

the larger smoother farms of the valleys" (12; 14). The contrast between the large, "smoother" farms and those in the marginal or "hilly and steep areas" is important to note. In general it was the larger farmers in the valley sections of the county, including the Mount Brothers, who were among the first to embrace commercial bean production. They also quickly adopted the latest, read most expensive, farming technology as they possessed land suitable for mechanization and sufficient capital to purchase it.

The shift from horses to tractors was occurring all across the country, but the benefits Johnson County farmers accrued with increased mechanization was lost within a relatively short period. Innovations in farm equipment developed rapidly with the widespread adoption of tractors as manufacturers became increasingly focused on larger and more specialized pieces of machinery. Operating under a mixed farming system where beans contributed only a portion of farm income, most local growers were unable to utilize or afford this new technology, most notably the mechanical bean picker. Large farms on Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau, however, embraced greater mechanization for commercial bean production, and thereby, out produced hundreds of small growers who found themselves viewed in much the same way as the horse in years past: slow and inefficient when compared with the latest technology. The horse, however, continued to have an important role on county farms for many years.

Driving horses or tractors, once the ground was thoroughly prepared, and conditions were appropriate, it was time to plant beans. Planting was accomplished a number of different ways: by hand, one row planters pulled by a single horse, and two or four row planters pulled by either a team of horses or a tractor.

Bruce Simcox: [We planted beans] by hand with a hand drill, [and] with a horse. One year Hawkins' had a two row horse planter that you used two horses in. I planted some with that. We later bought a tractor and got [bean] planters and planted with a tractor, two rows at a time.

"I got my first tractor when I was in the bean business. I could plow the ground and fix it, plant them with a tractor" (Wade Snyder).

Seven to ten days after planting, orderly rows of bean seedlings began to emerge from the ground. Soon after, a host of adversaries descended upon the immature plants, and the first rivals that young bean plants encountered were weeds. Men, women, children, horses, and tractors were employed to keep weeds at bay during the early stages of the crop's development. Farmers and their families spent hours walking between rows with a hoe and behind a cultivator breaking the soil and uprooting weeds between rows. Cultivating is typically referred to as plowing in the county, and the tool took a variety of forms. A few large farms employed two-horse cultivators which operated astride the row and were equipped with a seat for the driver. The majority of farmers used a single animal and walked behind the cultivator between the rows. Long after tractors replaced draft animals for heavy farm work, the horse continued to be a valuable tool in the battle against weeds.

Roby Howard, Jr.: We'd cultivate them with a horse . . . because most of your tractors were getting two [rows] at a time and if you go to cultivate with a horse you're in one. If you get too steep with a tractor and it wants to do this [slide downhill] then you're trying to get two [rows], but if you're not careful you're going to dig that one row below you completely.

“I never did plow my beans with a tractor . . . I plowed them up too bad, get in too big a hurry!” (Wade Snyder). “My granddaddy had those ten teams of mules and they were all lined up to go across that field [cultivating]” (Tommy Walsh). “We plowed them once or twice, we had to use hoes once in a while to keep the weeds out. It was pretty important . . . if you had a lot of weeds and grass in your beans your quality of beans wasn’t good” (Bruce Simcox).

The second threat to the growing crop was beetles. The Mexican bean beetle was the primary assailant, and the voracious habits of the larvae inflicted tremendous damage in a matter of days. Larvae and adults feed on the entire plant including the flowers and growing bean pods, but they wreak the greatest damage on the leaves. Consuming the leaf from the underside, major infestations of beetle larvae can rapidly defoliate entire plants, thereby destroying the plant’s ability to produce. Damage to young bean pods was also a major concern. Bean buyers refused to bid, docked the price, or outright rejected beans that exhibited beetle damage. According to local history, before large scale commercial bean production the beetle was unknown in the county, but spread rapidly throughout region, causing havoc on bean fields and costing growers thousands of dollars in lost sales.

“Bugs were not a big problem to start with [but] got worse and worse so we had to dust more and more” (Bruce Simcox). “Those Mexicans beetles [are] hard to kill. . . .They multiply overnight” (Tommy Walsh). “Yeah there were a lot of bugs. If they found a bug bite they docked [the price]” (Bill Shull). “Once in a while they [the buyers] would turn them down, claim . . . they found bug bites” (Bruce Simcox). “When they get up and have

two leave on them you'd have to dust them. They'd get them old bugs on them and I'd get out there and dust" (Wade Snyder).

Bean and produce growers relied primarily on rotenone, a naturally occurring insecticide found in the seeds and on the roots of certain plants. The primary sources of rotenone roots prior to World War II were Asia and South America, but the war drastically curtailed the supply of this familiar insecticide. In 1942 rotenone, a copper-sulfur and rotenone combination, and lead arsenate were the most commonly used insecticides (Bonser et al. 26). The nationwide emphasis on increased food production taxed supplies of customary insecticides prompting chemists to formulate products that were not only effective, but also conducive to large scale production and distribution. The development of synthetic cryolite compounds during the war period proved to be highly effective against Mexican bean beetles and several types of destructive insects. Classified as a fluorine insecticide whose use is strictly regulated in current food production, the product was heavily advertised in the local paper and popular among bean growers.

Claims that farmers applied DDT to eradicate bean beetles are widespread throughout the county, and DDT's use was discussed in the county newspaper as late as 1954; however, little evidence has been uncovered that can substantiate this claim. The table compiled for the 1945 study documenting insecticide use makes no mention of DDT, but a large percentage of farmers reported applying an "unknown" pesticide or name a brand product, i.e., Watkins, whose active chemical compounds were not noted (26). DDT was revered for its ability to combat a variety of insects, but its effectiveness against the Mexican bean beetle was limited. The chemical was used extensively to combat the emergent Japanese beetle infestation, however.

Similar to the Mexican bean beetle, the Japanese beetle posed a serious threat to the county's bean crop. In 1944 the Tennessee Division of Insect and Plant Disease Control placed Japanese beetle traps around the county in an attempt to confirm the beetles' presence in the area and "aid in determining what control measures might be advisable" ("Beetle Traps"). Along with direct application of insecticide to plants and fields infested with the pest, airplanes encircled the county releasing massive quantities of the chemical in an attempt to curtail the beetles' march towards the county's primary cash crop: snap beans.

"We didn't have the Japanese beetle, that came in on the last of the bean business I'd say. They sprayed some around the mountain tops to try to head them off" (Bruce Simcox). "Later they got these Japanese beetles, and they say they came in here through these burlap sacks. They'll just eat everything. We never had those while I was into it and helping Daddy; they came right about the end I got out of that farming business" (Tommy Walsh).

Growers applied insecticide in dust form. Purchased from Tri-State Growers, Inc., Joe Blackburn, or another farm supply, growers utilized a broad range of technology to apply the thousands of pounds of bean dust the crop required every year. The basic method was simply a bucket or bag of dust workers carried with one hand while directly applying the chemical to the plants with the other hand. The most common tool for small growers was the use of a crank duster. Fashioned with a hopper to hold the dust, a hand crank, and a long tube, the operator walked between the rows applying the chemicals to one row or two rows simultaneously.

Tommy Walsh: "Used to have these little dusters go around your neck and [you would] go out through the field cranking, spraying that dust on the bean bugs. I mean

I've dusted many a bean field, guess it's a wonder I lived . . . course I'd try to catch that wind just right.

"Lot of people had these crank bean dusters [and] you were the motor of it. . . . You had to stay after those beans, dust them at night when the dew [had set] or real early of a morning" (Bill Shull). "[I] had a little old shoulder sprayer [that could] dust two rows at a time. That old dust would stink worse than cow manure!" (Wade Snyder).

With the advent of the tractor, mechanical dusting equipment was developed and put to use on many county farms. Mechanical dusting had the advantage of increasing the rate of application, and removing the laborer from direct contact with the chemicals.

Alex Snyder: It [the duster] had a pretty good sized hopper on the back of it [and] you just mounted it on the tractor. It did eight or ten, at least eight rows at a time. Had spouts back there and set them right over the bean row and when you took off and turned it on it put dust right down on the beans. I dusted many an acre for me and other people.

"[We] had hand dusters, then got a tractor duster that we dusted with" (Bruce Simcox). "Granddad bought a rooter duster and it worked better than any I saw around anywhere. You had nozzles run to each row and then they forked and that blew that dust direct in on the beans and vines" (Bill Shull).

Growers such as the Mount Brothers and the Walsh family required even more elaborate bean dusting technology. Tractor mounted dusters could not keep pace with the rapid proliferation of bean beetles and their insatiable appetite, but airplanes could. Raising

several hundred acres of beans every summer, the largest growers in the county hired crop dusters to conduct an aerial assault against the beetles.

Roby Howard, Jr.: Some of the bigger operators hired a plane to come through. He'd go overhead, turn, go line up with the field over here, go down just fairly close to the ground, and turn that thing loose. It looked like it'd cover 12, 15, to 18 feet. He'd just zoom through there and cut it out, come up turn around, circle around, and come back right below where he'd been. He knew exactly where to go to get them all. I remember the Mounts had that down there, down by Roan Creek.

Growers able to successfully rebuff the onslaught of weeds and pests had yet another adversary to battle. Beans exposed to prolonged periods of cool, humid weather conditions were susceptible to an outbreak of fungal disease. The most common infection was christened “nail head rust” due to the color and shape of the lesions that formed on the leaves and pods. Copper-sulfur dust was applied as both a preventative and a treatment against outbreaks, but once the disease gained a foothold it spread rapidly (Bonser et al. 26). Growers whose fields developed the disease during the latter part of the season were fortunate as they were often able to salvage a portion of their crop. Plants infected during the pre-flowering and flowering stage, however, experienced up to 100% crop failure (Hagedorn and Inglis 10). Crop residue is the primary source of fungal spores and recurrent planting in the same field amplifies the likelihood of an outbreak.

Tommy Walsh: Daddy used to rent the Chelsea Gentry farm out there in Laurel Bloomery. It was beautiful bottomland and I guess we had about five or six plantings. [We] raised beans out there a few times and they were pretty. We got to

noticing [as we were] picking beans [that] they were breaking out in rust, nail head rust they called it. All of those beans, I mean they were pretty out there on the vines, it was hot that day too and I think that brought on a lot of it, [but] they all broke out with that rust on them. . . . I ran into this guy he was from over at Bristol and he had a good route and he sold [to] a lot of these produce places along the road. I said "I have these beans out here and Daddy wanted me to bring them down here, see if anybody would buy them." He said "How much you want for them?" I said "I would like to get \$1.50 he said I'll give you a \$1.00." "You got them!" I said, "But I want my sacks back." I didn't see him for about a week or so and he came in and I went up to him I said "Dave you bring my sacks back?" He says "Hell no!" "Those sacks are up there at the foot of Holston Mountain. I had to dump all those beans. You can forget about your sacks, you got your money." He said they broke out worse by the time they got to Bristol!

USDA soil and disease specialists Lonnie Strickland and Russell Hyre visited the county in July 1944 identifying another malady, root rot, infiltrating bean fields. Similar to rust, root rot is a soil borne fungi that survives in crop residue and thrives in humid environments. The researchers recommended systematic four year crop rotations insisting "the county cut down tremendously on its bean crop for next year" (Mount). W. B. Mount representing the Tri-State Growers, Inc., quickly composed a letter to C. E. Brehm, Director of the Tennessee Extension Service, noting the researchers findings and asking for assistance in identifying alternative crops for county farmers. The county had emphasized snap bean production to the point "there is very little land in Johnson County that has not been in beans

in the last two or three years" (Mount). According to Mount, Tri-State Growers, Inc., handled "two thirds to three fourths" of the county's beans by the third week of July; if by necessity bean acreage was to be scaled back after two of the most profitable and prolific years on record, the cooperative needed to be prepared (Mount).

Wiley Mount's letter was explicit in noting the outbreak of root rot was attributed to contaminated seeds. Similar to rust and root rot, anthracnose is a fungal disease generating dark lesions on vines, leaves, and pods resembling those exhibited by rust infections, but existing in seeds. Along with crop rotations, purchasing disease-free seed gave growers an important measure of disease control. Seeds produced in wet conditions are often infected with anthracnose, which explains why the majority of commercial bean seeds are produced in the drier western states. In 1942 "all but a few bushels" of seed planted for commercial use was purchased from farm supply stores. The majority of those seeds were introduced from Idaho and Wyoming (Bonser et al. 17). The primary purpose of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., was marketing beans, but selling seed beans was an important sideline. The cooperative began purchasing seed for resale in 1944 and contracted two railroad cars of bean seeds for the 1945 crop year. Thousands of acres of beans provided an important source of revenue not only for Tri-State Growers, Inc., but other farm supply stores in the area, including Joe Blackburn's. It is doubtful the fledgling organization would have survived the fallout from selling diseased seeds.

Buyers

Mr. Ollie Craddock, Lord Salisbury, Park Jones, Runt Stephens, Bill Wade and Henry Poe, arrived in good shape last Thursday, with farm machinery, mules and plenty of seed beans. They report a real good business this season down in Florida. We are all

glad to see the boys again and learn of their great success. They seem to believe that this will be the greatest season we have ever had in this section. Mr. Craddock tells us that his partner Mr. Neely has retired from business and is enjoying life by hunting and fishing at his home in Florida. The boys report that Mr. Wade has taken on a life partner, and we hope Lord wont (sic) have so much competition this year. ("Florida Produce Men")

Virtually every spring throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the *Johnson County News* heralded the arrival of bean buyers from the Deep South to the county. It is hardly an exaggeration to compare their annual migration to that of the robin as an undisputable sign of spring. The earliest noted buyers in the county purchased beans for Bush Brothers Canning Company circa 1936. Independent truck drivers roamed the countryside buying directly from farmers at the same time (Morley and Atkinson 101). Despite the quantity, quality, or variety of beans local growers produced, without buyers to purchase and distribute those beans to markets across the country it would have been impossible for the county's bean crop to reach urban consumers. As the middlemen between growers and consumers, or more accurately growers and industrial food processors, the realm of the bean buyers extended further than simply purchasing produce. Along with promoting certain types of beans, buyers worked closely with growers calculating planting and harvesting schedules that benefited both parties.

Buyers such as Ollie Craddock developed a close relationship with growers and market managers. As noted in Chapter 1, the relationship between buyers and individual growers was called into question on at least one occasion when disgruntled small farmers

accused large growers and prominent business men of exerting influence on buyers in order to gain higher prices for their own beans (“An Affadavit”). In an another episode recorded by Boyd Ray, bean auctioneer and market manager Greg Short was accused of collaborating with bean buyers in suppressing the price of beans in order to increase the buyer’s profit margin (Ray 12). A particularly hostile exchange occurred between Short and J.T. Ray. Ray accused Short of “collusion between the auctioneer and the buyers” when he discovered the buyers were grossly underpaying farmers for their beans (*Blue Mountains* 10). Emotions escalated to the point that weapons were drawn and threats were issued against Ray. No further violence occurred, however, and it is not known if there was an immediate increase in bean prices. What did surface was a colorful phrase coined by J. T. Ray: “All sons-of-bitches are not bean buyers, but, all bean buyers are sons-of-bitches” (10).

The relationship between buyers and growers was predominately amicable, however. In order for the system to work to the benefit of all participants, both parties needed to cooperate. Buyers required a particular product, and in order for growers to profit they had to meet those demands.

Roby Howard, Jr.: Ollie Craddock was from Homestead Florida which is south of Miami . . . and he was growing several acres of beans himself. He’s the first buyer that I ever remember coming into Mountain City. . . .He was probably the forerunner of all the bean market in the county. He’d come and stay all summer. He [would] have them [the growers] plant an acre of beans or two acres of beans today or tomorrow, tell them to get lined up to plant them tomorrow and then a few days later he’d work with somebody else and tell them to plant an acre or two, whatever he could handle. Some of the other fellows [buyers] got into the same thing.

Craddock was one of the first large scale bean buyers to frequent the Mountain City markets. He operated a large snap bean and produce operation in Florida during the winter months and moved to Johnson County for the summer bean season. Unlike the majority of his fellow buyers, Craddock was actively involved in raising beans in the county. It is difficult to calculate exactly how many acres of beans Craddock raised, but records from the Tri-State Growers, Inc. indicate he required 100 pickers to harvest his beans in 1943, the same year Bert Vincent in the *Johnson County News* claimed he was growing 275 acres (“Bean Story”). In 1944 Craddock purchased a home and 37.5 acres in the county and reportedly planted large tracts in beans, cucumbers, and peppers (“Craddock Buys”; “Craddock Farm”).

“We had a fellow [buyer] V. L. Walker, we called him “Beanie” (Roby Howard, Jr.). W.V. “Beanie” Walker was originally from Crystal Springs, Mississippi, and worked for Craddock for several years. Walker first visited Johnson County during his stint with Craddock. Walker married a local woman, purchased a home, and raised a family in the county. “They lived in Homestead, Florida, in the winter time and here in the summer. He came every year for years” (Nelson Gray). “I used to go down there about every winter and stay for 30 days with “Beanie” Walker. He had a house and a produce place there” (Lewis Wills). Walker purchased beans for Winter Garden, a quick freeze company based in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Roby Howard, Jr.: His beans [Walker’s] had to be about the highest quality of any of them. He’d usually pay the best price and he’d get the best quality bean. It’d take

more beans to make a bushel of his order because they were smaller and prettier. He had to have the quality because they just had to [be] top grade to go into the freezer.

Walker organized the V.L. Walker Co. Inc. in 1945, and though the company does not currently purchase beans in the county it continues to raise and distribute beans and produce from its Homestead, Florida, and Crossville, Tennessee, locations.

Producing high quality beans through the entire summer was impossible for local growers. Damage from pests and weather combined with over-mature beans left farmers with thousands of bushels of edible, but visually unappealing beans. These unattractive beans did not meet the strict requirements of buyers such as Craddock or Walker. The limited shelf life of fresh beans coupled with fluctuations in availability and consumer purchasing habits also limited the amount of produce fresh market buyers were willing to purchase. The sheer quantity of beans produced by local growers far surpassed what buyers for the fresh market or quick freeze companies were able to absorb.

Bruce Simcox: We were going to have so many [beans] . . . I went to town [and] ran across one of the buyers—Al Beverly. I asked him to go to the field and look at them, see what he would give for them, and send a truck down and just let us load the truck there. So he did, and he gave us a good price. We had right at 500 bushels that day. That almost loaded his truck. It didn't load it full, he had to go to the bean house and get a few to finish out his load.

Al Beverly and his brother Max were from Pahokee, Florida, and purchased canning beans for Stokley Van Camp for several years. "They raised beans in Florida and came up

here [in the summer]" (Bruce Simcox). "Al was from Florida but a different place than Ollie [Craddock], I'm not even sure that he knew Craddock until he got here, but he might have. They were two of the main buyers there early on" (Roby Howard, Jr.).

Bush Brothers Canning Company employed local man Dick Wagner for several years until he succumbed to a fatal heart attack. He was quickly replaced by another local man, Jake Fritts, who continued to purchase beans for Bush Brothers until the market closed in the 1960s.

Alex Snyder: My brother-in-law, Dick Wagner, had worked for Ben Bush enough so that after Ben died, [Ben] was the one that bought most of Bush's beans, they put him [Dick Wagner] to buying beans. He'd buy a load about every day, a truck load, 500 bushels. . . . I finally told [Al Beverly] one day I said "Beverly you won't buy none of my beans" he said "Well, you've got a brother-in-law to take care of you!" He knew you know. [laughter]

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed rapid technological innovations in commercial food processing and distribution, providing consumers access to a wide variety of inexpensive, conveniently packaged fruits and vegetables. This is strongly demonstrated in the commercial bean industry as brokers from canneries such as Bush Brothers and Stokley Van Camp became dominant players in local bean markets.

Produce sold to canneries was not held to the same standards as that for the fresh market. Commercial processing, especially canning, masked the appearance of beans, providing an outlet for beans that did not meet the strict requirements of the fresh market or quick freeze companies. Unlike their fresh or frozen counterparts, canned beans can linger

in warehouses and sit on grocery shelves for years while retaining their edibility. This was a beneficial attribute for canning companies who stockpiled beans when they were able to purchase large quantities cheaply, but detrimental for growers who regularly glutted the market with low quality beans. In 1942, 60% to 72% of the beans raised in the county were sold to processors, predominantly canneries, and according to the souvenir program for the 1953 bean festival, canneries purchased 85% of the beans raised in the county (Bonser et al. 29; "Snap Bean Production").

Roby Howard, Jr.: Bush's cannery would take a bigger bean . . . would take them with bullets¹⁷ in them. The fresh market wanted just a good decent bean with a small bullet and just a nice shaped bean. To the farmer it was usually a cheaper bean because they didn't have the buying power of the one that was buying for the fresh market. He [the farmer] would let them go to the cannery and they were always a little cheaper. To the farmer there's more weight there. A lot of times that older bigger bean would weigh twice as much as that one they were taking to the quick freeze . . . [or] going to the fresh market.

Bruce Simcox: A lot of the time, more [were] going to the cannery. There was one, Bush Brothers that we sort of counted on if the beans looked a little full or [had] little bug bites or something. He would usually buy them. . . . You hoped to go to the fresh market and get the higher price, but if you didn't, you hoped the cannery would take them at a cheaper price.

¹⁷ A bullet is the local term for the immature, edible seed found in the bean pods.

Despite the comparatively low price, large growers such as the Walsh family established direct marketing contracts with canning companies which purchased large quantities of beans on a regular basis.

Tommy Walsh: We were selling our beans more to the canneries. . . .The way we were growing beans you had to have a market, you had to have a buyer because you can't keep beans. . . .The best set up was with Bush's [you] didn't get the top price, but didn't get the bottom price.

Beans were also sold to independent buyers who scouted the county purchasing beans through the markets or directly from farmers.

Bruce Simcox: There was an old gentleman, had sort of an older truck and he bought for [the] Bush cannery. He'd buy a truck load about it, nearly every day. Drove his truck himself, bought beans and drove his truck.

“Tough old Johnson County Beans!”
John Moore

John Moore was raised in neighboring Carter County, Tennessee, and according to his daughter Meredith Moore, possessed an extreme dislike for commercially produced and processed green beans. Well aware of Johnson County's history of large scale bean production, Moore often derided the lack of flavor and texture found in commercially processed beans deeming them: “Tough old Johnson County beans!” Moore was not alone. Locals not only exhibited a marked disdain for commercial beans, but refused to eat them.

Tommy Walsh: They come out with the Wade variety. Wade's seemed to adapt better to our temperature and everything and the bean vines stayed greener. They were dark green and the Tendergreens were lighter.

“There were three or four different kinds of beans back then. They had what they called Tendergreen” (Wade Snyder). “The Tendergreen was the most popular (Bruce Simcox). “They had a Blue Lake bean that was a good marketable bean that any of them could handle, the cannery could handle it [and]the ones who were [selling] to supermarkets” (Roby Howard, Jr.).

The commercial bean crop in Johnson County consisted of a small selection of bean varieties favored by urban consumers and processors. Tendergreen and Wade were the most popular. In 1942, 89% of the studied acreage, or 1,169 acres, were Tendergreen beans while the Giant Stringless Green Pod variety ranked second with only 74 acres reported in the county (Bonser et al. 17). Al-Habib’s 1967 master’s thesis entitled *Costs of Producing and Marketing Snap Beans in Two Upper East Tennessee Counties*, notes that twenty years later in 1963 Wadex (sic) was the favored variety grown by 83 of the farmers interviewed, but only 41 farms planted the Harvester variety (26). Varieties such as Tender Best, Extender, White, Kanala, Cornelius, Black Valentine, Sulfur, Plentiful, Horticultural Dwarf, Homestead or Kentucky Wonder (pole type), Top Crop, and Tenderlong were raised in the county, but on a much smaller scale (Al-Habib 26; Bonser et al. 17; and “Snap Bean Production”). Plentiful, White, Kanala, and Cornelius for example were raised on one acre each for reported crop years (Al-Habib 26; Bonser et al. 17).

“Ain’t got no string on them now, those market beans (Wade Snyder). “Those Tendergreen’s they didn’t have a string” (Tommy Walsh). “They were just long green beans with no bullet in them” (Lynda Bunting).

Commodity food production requires a class of produce that is able to withstand a moderate to high level of abuse and is easy to process, while retaining its visual appeal and edibility. The many steps involved in bean production (picking, trucking to the auction market, grading, and hauling to processors) made beans an ideal choice for farmers living in remote areas beyond the reach of urban consumers. More importantly, one of the defining features of the commercial bean varieties was their lack of a string and a small or nonexistent bullet.

The common bean evolved out of two independent domestication events approximately 7,000 to 8,000 BC, one in Central America and another in the Southern Andes. A possible third event or intermediary stage may have occurred in Columbia. Native people groups afforded the bean an important place in their diet and began selecting individual plants exhibiting particularly desirable qualities, i.e., larger pods and seeds and a compact growth habit with a stout stem (van Schoonhoen and Voyest ch. 1). Early plant breeders also practiced selective breeding to minimize unwanted characteristics. Reaching maturity, pods on the wild common bean separate and twist suddenly, projecting seeds several feet. Breeding for reduced fiber pod content alleviated the problem, and pointed the way for future plant breeder C.N. Keeney.

The stringless green bean was developed by C.N. Keeney in the early part of the twentieth century (Barnes). Keeney's success in eradicating the string from the bean pod allowed the bean to enter commercial processing systems that no longer had to contend with the bothersome fibrous string running the length of the pod. Plant breeders such as Keeney developed new varieties of stringless beans specifically intended for urban consumers and processors, rural populations continued to favor older, traditional varieties of beans.

Tommy Walsh: Back then they were just growing [commercially] what they call Tendergreens. God those are the sorriest beans! I couldn't eat them, but the canneries loved them. They'd be little old skinny things, slender with fuzz on them, but that's what the cannery wanted. I love green beans. . . .The ones I liked best were Cutshorts, gosh they were the best beans. They were like a Half-Runner except better, and I like Pink Tips.

"I like a little bullet in my bean. We raised the White Hull [variety]. We'd raise Birdeyes, Octobers . . . but we didn't raise the market beans in the garden" (Bruce Simcox). "You had different beans. The beans that you had at home were the old fashioned Cornfield bean that grew up with the corn" (Bill Shull). "Yeah they were different. . . .Blue Lake's, I raised them one time they are a straight long [market-type] bean. . . .I don't care for them myself" (Wade Snyder).

Not all beans produced and purchased in the county were intended for canneries or the fresh market.

Roby Howard, Jr.: A lot of the green beans [at the market] had no string or little string on them, but the ones that the peddlers liked and the people liked had a strong string on them. They had [a string on] both ends. You had to get that string off of there. You had a good string to pull I mean it wasn't just something you'd start and then it'd pull off on you. [It was a variety] the peddler could sell to individuals that liked their good flavor.

Purchasing a comparatively small quantity of beans, peddlers, as Howard calls them, traveled around the region selling beans by the bushel to independent country stores. The Sulphur bean was a regional favorite often found at the auction markets along with the Half-Runner and the Cutshort (Bonser et al. 28).

Indigenous bean varieties are still popular in the county and gardeners continue to save seed from these and several additional heirloom beans. While the memory of bean buyers and commercial beans fade, the county's bean raising tradition endures; however, don't expect to find Tendergreens or Wades.

Wade Snyder: I can eat a few strings easier than I can eat those old Blue Lakes and [market beans] like that! I don't like them, [but] I guess that's all a lot of people away from, where they have to buy [beans] have to eat, that's all they have to eat.

Chapter 3: Labor

Local Labor

Wade Snyder: I've worked a many a day for \$0.75 or a \$1.00 a day. [I] had a team of horses, [and] I'd charge \$3.00 for me and the team a day, and that was for ten hours. When Charlotte was just a baby, hell, I couldn't make it. I went to the mines and worked in the mines about 15 years. It was in the early 1930s I went out there and stayed till the early 1950s. I came back here to take care of my mom and dad or I would have been out there yet I guess. You couldn't make nothing [here]. . . . You could buy a whole lot with a little money if you could get a hold of it, but it was hard to come by.

Johnson County's pre-bean economy relied heavily on the barter system. Operating on a subsistence-first basis, farmers spent the majority of their time and energy providing food and shelter for their families. Rural citizens regularly traded chickens, eggs, cream, and other farm and forest products for items they were unable to produce. "I've carried many a chicken down to the store and traded for sugar or coffee, or something we couldn't raise" (Rosa Ward). The county's farm and non-farm population existed in a region geographically, economically, and culturally distinct from urban centers and their respective markets. Large atypical commercial farm operations existed in the valley sections of the county, but the majority of county farmers labored on small tracts averaging less than 34

acres in size where terrain and soil fertility limited productivity (“Maymead”; “History of Maymead”; U.S. Census, 1940; *Soil Survey*, 1956 13). Lacking capital, market access, and sufficient land area required for commercial agriculture, county farms survived on multiple, but meager streams of income, and the security provided by raising an adequate food supply.¹⁸ As such they existed by and large outside the greater cash economy.

Commercial snap bean production quickly encroached upon this system. Beginning with the first large field of beans, circa 1935, and the subsequent sale of those beans, money began to trickle through the breadth of the county’s population. The flow of money into the county eventually turned into a deluge that not only infected the population with “Bean Fever,” but ushered them into the market/capitalist economy as producers of export commodities. The first and most dramatic example of this transformation occurred among the county’s small farm and rural population, most notably women and children who emerged as the system’s primary labor force. While growers worked through the spring and summer in order to raise a marketable crop of beans and buyers established marketing networks, the bean industry rested on one group of people: pickers.

Bill Shull: I can remember back there in the 1930s people walking all the way from Midway to Little Dry Run [approximately eight miles]. Old man Henry Fletcher and his family, they would come up here and they would pick beans all day for \$0.10 a bushel, carry them to the scales, and then walk back home that night.

Memories of picking bushel after bushel of beans through the summer are ingrained in the county’s collective conscious. Few individuals escaped the task, and indeed few

¹⁸See *The Livelihood of Kin: Making Ends Meet "the Kentucky Way* by Rhoda Halperin, *Peasant Livelihood: Studies in Economic Anthropology and Cultural Ecology* by Rhoda Halperin and James Dow, eds., and *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* by James Scott.

desired to do so. The county's cash poor population was anxious for the opportunity to earn a cash wage, and pickers came from all walks of life encompassing the spectrum of age, gender, and race.

Wade Snyder: Anybody would pick: men, boys, women, they'd all pick back then.

Just everybody would pick. I had one old big feller, Ed Bunton down here, [and] he'd weigh about 300 pounds. He'd lay down and pick and just scoot along. If he could get two or three bushels a day that was that much for him.

"It astounded me really to find the quality of workers they had just picking beans because there was nothing else here to do. . . .Everybody picked beans if they needed to work and they wanted to" (Nelson Gray). "There was one old lady named Fanny Forrester. . . .She wouldn't pick but about on average seven bushels [a day]. . . .She was a widow woman and didn't have any way of making much money" (Alex Snyder).

Local entrepreneur J.T. Ray is remembered as the first man in the county to hire a large number of individuals for the sole purpose of picking beans. Paying \$0.10 a bushel, men, women, and children were trucked to the fields for the rare chance to earn a cash wage, at least for the day (Ray 6 and Morley and Atkinson 101). A dime does not seem an adequate sum for such a labor intensive job, but, "One dollar was considered a fair day's wage and a good picker could pick ten bushels a day" (Ray 6). Beans were sold by the bushel. A bushel basket, referred to as a hamper, holds eight gallons by volume, but beans and other produce is sold by weight. A full bean hamper was required to have a net weight of 30 pounds. Growers raised the price they paid pickers throughout the industry's tenure.

During the industry's formative years, pickers earned \$0.10 per bushel, by 1943 the average price was \$0.40, and \$0.50 to \$0.75 before the industry lost its economic footing in the county in the 1960s. Paid by the bushel, pickers filled their hampers, and each of those hampers was weighed. This system provided the grower a running total of the field's output, and guaranteed a fair wage for each picker.

Bean picking is hard work. The body is forced to remain in an awkward position for hours, while the hands work nonstop: moving vines, picking ripe beans, dropping beans into the hamper, and moving the hamper down the row. For anyone who has never spent hours in a bean field Ray's description gives us a brief glimpse into what pickers experienced: "It was hard work. You got wet and muddy, hot and tired. Your back ached and your knees hurt" (6).

Rosa Ward: I've picked many a bushel for \$0.10. You'd start early, before it would get hot. You'd start about 8[a.m.] and get done about 5 or 6[p.m.]. I'd stand on my head all day and get the swimmy headache every time.

"[Picking is] just hard work . . . when they [are] ready to pick you've got to pick, mud or whatever. You get out there and wade that mud and carry beans about 10 hours . . . your feet get heavy and you can't carry them!" (Wade Snyder) "How they stood that hot sun I'll never understand but they got used to it I reckon" (Alex Snyder). "I know it was hard on backs" (Bruce Simcox). "It's no wonder our poor old knees and backs hurt– [we] crawled over acres and acres" (Lynda Bunting).

Bean pickers employed a variety of techniques and methods in order to fill their hampers. "I just took one row when I was learning to pick" (Lynda Bunting). The basic

method required the picker to straddle one row at a time, concentrating on the beans in the row immediately beneath them. More advanced pickers picked two rows at a time.

Lynda Bunting: Well, I got a little bigger and a little more gung hoe about me I went to taking two rows. Now man you could go to town then. . . . You'd go so far in that one, [and] you'd reach over here and you'd go to picking that one. [It] didn't take too long to get a bushel of beans.

Even more innovative pickers worked together, taking three rows at a time. “Margaret [Snyder] and Larry my boy . . . they'd get about three rows and just pick along together and I swear . . . he'd ‘hamper’ every few minutes” (Wade Snyder). Utilizing this method, the two pickers positioned themselves astraddle or alongside the outer rows and placed the hamper within easy reach of both, typically near the middle row. Working down the rows each picker was responsible for his or her outside row while they alternated picking the middle row, advancing the hamper as needed. Utilizing this system pickers were able to pick more beans per day, and earn more money than picking alone.

Not all pickers could endure a full day of stooping in the bean fields. The goal was to pick as many beans as possible, and growers were generally not concerned about how pickers accomplished the task. Ed Bunton, for instance laid down and “scooted” through the field. “I always had to get down and crawl, I could not bend over. I crawled through two rows picking” (Lynda Bunting). “Ida Brown . . . used to lay on that ground picking them beans” (Tommy Walsh).

Standing, scooting, or crawling pickers labored to pick as many beans as possible. Particularly fast pickers were coveted by growers. Once beans passed their peak in quality

their visual appeal and thus marketability deteriorated rapidly. In order for growers to realize a profit, they had to get their beans to the market as quickly as possible. “One day makes a whole lot of difference in a bean when the ground is wet. They grow and they get big and fuzzy they won’t bring much” (Wade Snyder). “Carson [Trivette], I don’t know how many fields he had out, and they were getting too big for him. He was getting everybody he could to pick beans . . . [the bean buyers] didn’t want them too big and fat” (Lynda Bunting).

The urgency of growers and a cash wage inspired pickers to work as fast they could. Just as importantly, pickers took pride in the amount of beans they pulled from the vines in the course of a day, and they remember their achievements vividly.

Bruce Simcox: Martha Tester Brown and Lizzie Rhymer were the two fastest pickers and they tried to beat each other. They really worked at it. One day we were paying \$0.50 cents a bushel for the pickers and they both had right around twenty bushels of beans. [A] lot of the pickers if they got eight or ten bushels they were doing pretty good.

“[I would] only get seven or eight bushels, while my sister Ruth could pick twelve or fifteen. Judy Arnold’s momma she was fast, she would keep saying, ‘Come on, baby girl, come on!', but I just couldn’t keep up” (Rosa Ward). “Ida Brown . . . boy, she could pick beans, she’d average about fifteen bushels a day” (Tommy Walsh). “I’d probably pick 12 bushels or so, but some of them would pick 19 or 20 in the pole beans” (Lewis Wills). “Now a good bean picker in good beans would pick somewhere from 20 and 25 bushels of beans a day” (Bill Shull).

Wade Snyder: I picked with Larry one day over here at Paul's [and] at 1:00 we had 21 bushels picked. The ones that picked the most were Margaret and Larry. . . . I bet you'd put them out there and let them just pick all day [and] they'd pick thirty bushels. That's a whole lot of beans.

Pickers spent the majority of the summer laboring in bush type beans, i.e., Tendergreen and Wade. Low growing plants with a compact growth habit that took up little space, bush beans produced abundantly and required little extra effort on the part of growers. A small percentage of growers raised pole type beans. Referred to simply as "pole beans," this type required a sturdy support structure that provided a string or wire for the bean vines to climb. Exhibiting an upright growth habit, pole beans were picked while standing. "Now a lot of them raised pole beans but daddy never would let me go pick pole beans . . . and they were high, I mean they'd run up [the wires]" (Lynda Bunting). "Those bean pickers always loved to go to the pole bean patch to pick the beans. It didn't take long to get a bushel" (Bill Shull). "Boy you could pull them boogers off there [and] you could soon fill a hamper" (Alex Snyder).

Pole beans or bush beans, it was women and children who ensured the bean crop was harvested. As noted, many men did pick beans, but fields were predominately filled with women. Picking commercial beans merged easily with the traditional roles of women. Responsible for home food production and preservation, their chores included harvesting a variety of garden products, including beans. Transferring skills and accepted gender roles derived from the home farm to a commercial enterprise was a comparatively easy, though in retrospect dramatic transition that women employed to their advantage. "I'd say 80% of

them were women" (Alex Snyder). "Women and children could pick more beans than men because they could bend over, they weren't as big, they could get down [there]" (Nelson Gray). "Of all of us in there picking [it was] mostly women and young'uns, there [was] few men that would pick" (Lynda Bunting).

It may have appeared a minor step for women to leave the home farm to spend a day picking beans, but the economic ramifications were enormous. Income from picking beans provided women an access point into the greater cash economy. Previously confined to the home, women were dependent upon the income men were able to scratch from their meager hillside farms. County farmers did participate in the cash economy previously, but only marginally. Existing in a local economy that operated less on cash and more on the barter system, providing items such as clothes and books for children often proved extremely difficult. While large bean growers began purchasing tractors, women labored in the fields to provide necessities for themselves, and more importantly their children.

Roby Howard, Jr.: In the 1940s and 1950s we didn't have any plants and women would take their children and go to the bean fields and pick beans all day. Put their kids under a shade tree over on the edge of the field so they could know where they were, and they would pick beans. They had no plants and the women couldn't work anywhere so they'd come to the bean field and buy clothes and books and stuff for their kids when school started.

Picking was a family affair with mothers, children, and extended family working together to supplement household income. Children were expected to work alongside their

parents from a young age, and days spent picking developed a healthy work ethic while contributing to the family's financial welfare.

Bill Shull: Our people back yonder in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s they'd take their children to the bean fields, [and] they would pick beans. Those young'uns would pick beans right beside of their parents. They knew how to work.

Children old enough to pick formed an important portion of the labor required for the annual bean harvests. Though strenuous, it was a job most farm children were accustomed to and growers did not discriminate on the basis of age. "Even small children [would] go pick a bushel or two of beans and . . . get their pay" (Bruce Simcox). "I wasn't big enough really to be out there, but I'd pick a few. . .[I was] probably six or seven years old. After that I went to getting big enough to pick" (Lynda Bunting). "[When] I was 11 or 12 years old I was picking for \$0.10 or \$0.15 a bushel" (Lewis Wills).

Children filled such a crucial role in the bean industry the local school board was forced to tailor the academic year to the bean crop. On several occasions county schools closed for a period of one to two weeks, allowing students a temporary reprieve from the classroom, but expecting them to assist in the bean harvest. In 1953 and 1961 Tri-State Growers, Inc., along with the employment office petitioned the school board to delay the start of the school year until after the middle of September in order to have sufficient labor available to harvest the final bean crop (*Meeting Minutes* 8 Aug. 1961; 12 May 1953). The 1943 bean crop was so expansive the school board anticipated they would have to delay the start of the school year until the first of October ("Schools Start").

The opportunity to earn money was not lost on the county's young people. Perhaps more keenly aware than their parents of the ever increasing role money was playing in the local and national economy, children, teenagers, and young adults found myriad uses for their "bean picking money."

Evalina Idol: By the end of the summer I would have \$200 to \$300 from bean picking. Uncle Dave would bring us back through Mountain City, Tennessee, and we would wash up and go shopping for school clothes. I bought mostly clothes with the money, but any I did not spend I saved. When Bob and I married, I had bean picking money saved up.

"That's how I got extra stuff for high school, picking beans and strawberries because Mom and Dad didn't have it. That's how I put myself through school— took a lot of beans" (Lynda Bunting). Not everyone spent their money as wisely. With the opportunity to earn money came the added responsibility of how to spend it. "Small children [would] go pick a bushel or two of beans and when they got their pay they were ready to go to the store and spend it, get them something" (Bruce Simcox). "A lot of the kids, and some that were not good financial planners, would spend their money every day" (Nelson Gray).

Pickers such as Lynda Bunting learned the hard way; it was much easier to spend money than it was to make it.

Lynda Bunting: Usually they took us to the store to get us some dinner, we bought our own dinner. I had made \$1.00 that morning. I had picked two bushels [of beans]. They took us over to Arthur and Hazel Gregory's store that day for lunch. A banana was something that we didn't see much of, we just didn't see them. There was the

prettiest bunch of bananas lying on the counter and I thought I've got to have me one of those. So I got me a banana, an RC Cola, and cheese and crackers and it took my whole dollar. Every bean that I had picked that morning – it took it! Honey it taught me right then and there to pack me a cold biscuit for my dinner. I ate up my profit that day so from there on I fixed a cold biscuit with brown sugar or whatever to eat.

Large and small growers depended on the local community to supply the majority of their pickers. The number of pickers needed, however, required growers to do more than simply spread word through the county's informal communication networks. County residents lacked extensive telephone service during the bean industry's heyday; thus, in late June bean growers canvassed the county contracting pickers to harvest their crops.

Wade Snyder: Used to I get out this evening if I was going to pick tomorrow [and] go around and contract, see who would come help me. I could get a truck load in a half hour. People wanted to work. . . .I could get 25 or 30 people just in a few minutes. [The] next morning [I would] jump in the truck go around and bring them in.

“If Dad didn't have any out somebody else had beans ready to pick. I'd get on the bean truck when it came through. All the old farmers had an old pickup truck and would drive around and if you wanted to go pick beans for them you was up there at the road” (Lynda Bunting). “I used to go out to Sawmill Creek, take a pickup and make a round there, go out Sugar Creek, up in Shingle Town and get a load of pickers” (Lewis Wills). “We had an old 1937 model Chevrolet pickup truck and I'd have that loaded plum down with pickers.

Sometimes have one sitting out on each fender in front and one or two on the running boards besides what was in the bed" (Bruce Simcox).

The local employment office also aided farmers in locating pickers.

Nelson Gray: We had an employment office here and we had two men working down there with at least one woman and some other help. If you were a farmer and raising beans and you knew about when these beans had to be picked. The day before, or as soon as you knew, you checked with these people down at the employment office and they would line up a group of pickers to come and pick your beans. They would find them for you and send them to your place which was a big thing.

Exhausting the immediate labor supply growers were forced to turn elsewhere to find pickers as bean acreage expanded. Enterprising truck drivers soon saw an opportunity to profit from growers who agreed to pay drivers for every picker they delivered. This practice greatly expanded the labor pool as men, women, and children from neighboring counties in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia began pouring into the bean fields. Local history relates that at least one woman hauled pickers. Driving her own pickup truck, Ruth Thomas averaged 30 pickers per load and earned \$0.50 per person. How many other women may have done the same is unknown, but Thomas' case is a unique example of women positioning themselves within a male dominated workforce and culture.

Dave Main: I was working the bean market over in Mountain City for about 20 years all put together. I'd take people so they could pick beans. . . .I believe the highest I ever had in a ton-and-a-half truck was 78 people on that truck at one time. 78 people!

I hauled over to bean picking back up in the edge of Virginia, to Tommy Walsh's dad's fields.

Roby Howard, Jr.: They would take them out in truck loads and they had their big banisters up you know they'd take these pickers out standing. They'd fill a truck full of them just standing. Some would always be hanging off the back with their feet hanging down. . . . We would haul them out here.

Bill Shull: People would come in, facts is there'd be someone one that hauled bean pickers, and you'd tell them that you'd like to have so many pickers for the next [day] or two days or whatever. They would try to have you the bean pickers here.

"I did [contracted pickers] a year or two [because] it got to [where] you couldn't get them [pickers] hardly. . . . He [the truck driver] charged \$0.50 to bring them" (Wade Snyder). "I did for several years . . . I hauled them on that old church bus. Mount Brothers paid me \$0.70 a bushel to pick them, but I'd have to pay my pickers \$0.50" (Alex Snyder).

Generally this arrangement worked well. However, as the labor force expanded, the relationship between growers and pickers became more impersonal and problems were not uncommon.

Wade Snyder: He [the truck driver] charged \$0.50 to bring them in, and a lot of them wouldn't pick a bushel in a day. You're in the hole there. A lot of them wouldn't pick at all, go back home some of them would. I just got mad about that I told him I said "If you don't keep them here I ain't going to pay them now. If you can't keep

them here in the field don't bring them." He wouldn't stay he would just go back and come back late in the evening and get them.

"Once and a while they'd put a handle full of vines or something to fill their basket a little quicker" (Roby Howard, Jr.). "There were people that would put rocks down in the hamper so they would weigh more, so they could get a bushel and a half for just a bushel of beans, stuff like that went on. Dad never had any trouble . . . when he traded labor [with neighbors]" (Lynda Bunting).

Wade Snyder: [I] had one woman [who] picked for me she would jip me out of a hamper of beans every time she picked, every day she picked. Pick five days a week she'd jip you out of a bushel. I don't know, she'd just claim she picked a bushel more than that and I'd have to pay her. You couldn't make one mad, why if you did that would ruin everything.

Truck drivers not only made money delivering pickers, their obvious function was hauling beans to the market, or sometimes their final destination such as the canneries in Dandridge, Tennessee.

Tommy Walsh: Local people, the Stalcup's, and the Lowe's, and a bunch of them all had trucks. They had little mesh wire around inside the slats that was on the truck where the beans wouldn't slide on out. Here they'd go out in the evening, be just a stream of them going to Bush and Stokely's, the canneries down there at Dandridge. Dandridge is next to Knoxville and Wintergarden's getting the others. I mean there

were thousands of bushels of beans went across that market a day. I've seen just truck load after truck load.

Bruce Simcox: There was truck load after truck load went out. [My wife] Belva came from Greene County, [Tennessee, and] they saw bean trucks going through every day just about it. Bob Grindstaff had a truck . . . and came to Ohio when I was up there. They were going to Cincinnati, [Ohio] with beans.

Alex Snyder: Sometimes they'd send a truck out to the field and just load them there and take them in and take our word for it that we had 500 bushels or 400 or whatever on that truck. That saved picking them up and hauling them to the market. As long as we could load them on that truck we had it made pretty well.

Enterprising truck drivers found still more ways to supplement their income by providing services to growers and pickers throughout the day. A large field of pickers required at least one individual to manage the scales. As noted earlier, each bushel of beans had to be weighed, and truck drivers delivering pickers and hauling beans found this an amenable job. Ruth Thomas managed the field scales for \$0.50 an hour as did Dave Mains. Alex Snyder paid his "weighman" \$0.05 a bushel. Managing the scales also meant keeping track of the number of bushels each picker picked, an important job described later.

Aside from jobs directly related to beans, truck drivers also had the freedom to pursue other money making ventures.

Evalina Idol: Uncle Dave managed the scales and served food at lunch. I helped Uncle Dave by making the sandwiches, which were just two pieces of bread and a slice of bologna, and he would give me my lunch for free. He also sold watermelon for \$0.10 a slice.

“Dave Mains, on his little truck, had a little cabinet on the back of it. He’d go in Blackburn’s meat market there and get him to slice up bologna and cheese, I’ve eat many a sandwich off that old truck he made” (Tommy Walsh). “These truck drivers that hauled bean pickers they would come to my store, the ones I knew, they would buy things like bologna and bread and watermelons, they would sell those sandwiches to bean pickers at noon” (Nelson Gray). “I would have them come down there and bring the pickers and sell them ice cream, drinks, and candy and stuff to all the pickers” (Lewis Wills).

If the bean industry depended on pickers, bean pickers relied on another group of laborers. Bill Shull remembered the period when pickers carried their full hampers to the scales, but as bean production increased another group of laborers was needed in the fields. A distinct labor force responsible for carrying full hampers to the scales and providing empty hampers to pickers allowed pickers to focus on their specialized task, increasing the amount of beans picked per day. Men and boys composed the “carrying out” labor force and were oftentimes referred to as “luggers.”

Roby Howard Jr.: There would always be enough men to come and carry the beans out in the hampers. If they had any more than that [thirty pounds] I’d always instruct the ones that were bringing them out to take an empty basket back and put their extra in that, let them start their next bushel with some of their own beans because we’re

paying by the bushel. You've got your bushel here so send them their extras back and let them go for the second. . . . They'd bring the beans out, take them an empty back and it just helped them get along and keep moving you see.

“The ones that picked the beans, they didn’t have to carry their beans” (Bill Shull)
“You’d pick your full basket, stand up and yell ‘hamper’ and they’d be right there with another one” (Rosa Ward).

Workers carrying beans to the scales and supplying pickers with empty hampers were paid by the bushel, but at a much lower rate than pickers.

Alex Snyder: [The] helpers, lugging they called , carrying them out of the field, they got \$0.05 a bushel and sometimes they'd carry 100 bushels out of the field and he'd make \$5.00 a day.

“We paid \$0.05 a bushel to get them carried out of the field to the scales (Tommy Walsh). “I could always make more money carrying the beans to the scales then I could picking so I always chose to carry the beans” (Bill Shull).

The luggers also had the task of issuing tickets to pickers documenting the number of beans they picked.

Bill Shull: They would pick the beans and you would give them a ticket for every bushel of beans that was brought to the scales. Then at the end of the day they would bring their tickets in, each person, and you'd redeem the tickets and pay them cash.

"I got to giving them a little slip every time I'd pick their hamper up. I'd have one and she'd [the picker would] have one" (Wade Snyder).

In order to receive credit for a full bushel of beans, a picker's hamper had to weigh a full thirty pounds. Field scales were often suspended from a truck and as luggers carried in each bushel the weighman (or woman) noted the pickers name and added another bushel to the day's tally. Beans destined for the market were typically dumped into burlap sacks or crates holding two bushels each. They were easier to transport than hampers and were reusable.

The exact number of truck drivers, luggers, and pickers that labored in bean fields is unknown, but it is possible to calculate a rough estimate utilizing various sources. One of the most difficult figures in this calculation is determining the number of bushels pickers were able to pick per day. Oral accounts suggest most pickers averaged twelve bushels a day, but that is twice the amount some pickers note, and only half the total claimed by others. Such drastic discrepancies make generalizations difficult if not impossible. Utilizing data from agricultural economists and Tri-State Growers, Inc., estimating a reasonably accurate figure is possible.

University of Tennessee agricultural economists Bonser, Fickel, and Allred conducted the most in-depth study of Johnson County's snap bean industry. The data was compiled from 106 bean growers, approximately 6% of the county's 1,740 farms (1; 30). Growers reported the majority of pickers averaged .8 bushels per hour, totaling 6.4 bushels in an eight hour day while good pickers were expected to pick one bushel per hour (27). This is similar to Boyd Ray's claim that pickers in 1935 harvested ten bushels a day, but the length of the working day is not noted (6). The researchers estimated most bean pickers did not

work a full eight hour day as working in damp beans easily spread rust and anthracnose (27).¹⁹ Growers were advised to delay picking until the dew had evaporated, shortening the workday. Workdays, however, were not governed by the clock, but by the amount of beans to be picked.

Tri-State Growers Inc., recorded the number of bushels sold and the average price on a daily basis as thousands upon thousands of beans flooded the Mountain City markets six days a week. For example, on September 6, 1943, Tri-State Growers, Inc., sold 5,971 bushels of beans, their biggest day that year (Tri-State Growers "Ledger"). Estimating a picking rate of eight bushels a day, growers required 746 pickers that day alone (Bonser et al. 27). If the average was closer to oral accounts asserting ten bushels a day, 597 pickers were needed. Joe Blackburn's market was also selling beans that day as were growers fulfilling direct market contracts with canneries and other buyers. With that in mind it can be safely assumed that a minimum of 1,200 to 1,400 pickers were laboring in bean fields on September 6, 1943. As Tri-State Growers Inc., developed into the county's dominant bean market, it was not uncommon for 11,000 to 15,000 bushels of beans to cross the auction floor during the course of a day, equating to between 1,100 and 1,500 daily pickers using the ten bushel a day figure.

As acreage continued to increase, the number of pickers bean growers required quickly surpassed not only the county's available labor force, but that of the immediate area. Despite the large number of pickers trucked in daily from neighboring counties, growers clamored for more. Assistant county agent William Carter estimated the county required between 2,600 and 3,000 *additional* laborers in 1943 to supplement the local labor supply ("Reputation"). Journalist Bert Vincent claimed Johnson County alone required 6,000

¹⁹ See Chapter 2.

pickers that same year; a figure neither the county nor tri-state area (Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia) could supply (“Bean Story”). If growers wished to continue producing commercial beans, they had to find a solution to the labor shortage.

“Momma, he’s been drinking coffee!”

Steve Snyder (age 5)

Part 2

Tommy Walsh: World War II came in and it reduced the labor supply. I had an uncle, Clarence Greever, nicknamed Pete Greever, [who] worked in the employment office there with Gaines Butler. They worked up a deal with the USDA to get these black folks from the Bahaman Islands to fill that gap there because everybody was growing green beans.

Maintaining an adequate supply of farm labor during World War II and the early post war period was problematic throughout the nation. Increased demand for food coupled with enlistments, the draft, and the pull of the booming wartime industries left farmers in a precarious position. Bean growers in Johnson and surrounding counties were no exception. High quality beans commanded the best price at the market, and growers could lose several cents per bushel every day ripe beans remained unpicked on the vines. A few days could mean the difference in earning a profit or facing a loss for the year. Faced with perennial labor shortages, Tri-State Growers, Inc., and the local University of Tennessee extension agent petitioned the Office of Labor. This office managed the placement of domestic laborers for agricultural purposes and administered the foreign labor program.

The Farm Security Administration operated migratory labor camps in regions experiencing high labor demands as early as 1936. Labeled a “social reform” agency for

mandating sanitary living conditions and establishing standards in regards to wages, working conditions, and periods of employment, the FSA lost congressional support (Wilcox 89-90). The task of appropriating and placing an adequate supply of agricultural laborers was then assumed by the Office of Labor in 1943 (89-90). Foreign governments demanded workers receive “minimum wages, housing, and health facilities,” and the Office of Labor coordinated with local farmers and communities to satisfy these requirements. The office successfully navigated between congress, social reform advocates, and several foreign governments to successfully provide an adequate solution to the farm labor problem, reporting over 65,000 foreign labors employed in 1943, and over 176,000 in 1945, including prisoners of war (95).

Agricultural historian Wayne Rasmussen’s definitive 1951 *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program 1943-1947* documents the number of workers, their country of origin, and the states in which they were employed. Unfortunately, Rasmussen’s work does not mention Johnson County, and in fact references the labor surplus found on “subsistence and submarginal farms in . . . the Ozarks . . . the Appalachian Mountain region . . . part of the Great Lakes . . . and the Southeast” (22). The War Manpower Commission and the Office of Agricultural Defense Relations during the early war years believed “the surplus could be distributed to the scarcity areas,” and according to the report the labor surplus exceeded two million farm operators who were not “fully or effectively employed” (22, 21). This figure does not include individuals listed as farm laborers. The justifications for not being “fully or effectively employed” are not stated, but the description of the county’s pre-bean economy found in Chapter 1 in conjunction with the national push for

“modernity” and integration into the market economy may be partly to blame.²⁰

Nevertheless, the war time boom in food production encouraged growers to dedicate more acres to beans than ever before, and placed the county with a labor deficit that received national attention.

The acres of beans raised by individual farmers vary greatly, and few verifiable records exist. The *Johnson County News* reported 6,000 acres of beans were grown on 1,264 farms in 1943, ranging from one to 300 acres in size (“Reputation”). Newspaper columnist Bert Vincent in his 1943 “Bean Story” relates that: “Beans are grown by little folks and big folks. Some growers have not more than a quarter of an acre.” Simple math reveals that on average, farmers in Johnson County raised 4.75 acres of beans per farm in 1943. However, large growers including Ollie Craddock with 275 acres, the Mount Brothers with 200 acres, and Arthur Potter with 300, skew the average (“Bean Story”). Raising several hundred acres of beans during the summer, large growers such as Craddock and the Mount Brothers were instrumental in acquiring migrant labor for the county.

Roby Howard, Jr.: We brought them in from the Bahaman Islands [and] even built a place for them to live down on the Mount’s property. . . . It was just different. I’m sure the county officials were the ones that would make the arrangements, county agents would know how many beans were being planted. The earlier times we could take care of the labor ourselves with our wives, sisters, and all that, but the time came when they had to start bringing in the Bahamians.

²⁰ For an excellent study on conventional economists concept of “underemployment” see “The Myth of the Idle Peasant: Employment in a Subsistence Economy” by Stepehn Rush found in Halperin and Dow’s *Peasant Livelihood: Studies in Economic Anthropology and Cultural Ecology*.

According to oral accounts, the majority of the migrant labor force employed in Johnson County was from the Bahamas. Bahamian workers were only a fraction of the total migrant labor force imported by the U.S. government during World War II which included Mexicans, Jamaicans, Barbadians, and Newfoundlanders among others (Wilcox 95). The first year Johnson County bean growers utilized foreign workers is unknown. Bert Vincent and agricultural economists from the University of Tennessee note growers were using migrant laborers as early as 1942, but do not note how many were employed or their country of origin ("Bean Story"; Bonser et al. 31; 55). Rasmussen states that prior to 1942 Florida growers had regularly contracted Bahamian workers to harvest vegetables (234).

Acknowledging that early Johnson County bean buyers and growers such as Ollie Craddock and Al Beverly raised beans in Florida through the winter and Johnson County during the summer, it can be assumed a pre-war labor arrangement existed between these men, local growers, and Bahamian workers. Unfortunately, private contracts and documentation that could corroborate this theory and the number of pickers that labored in the county before 1943 are not available. What do exist are records of the Emergency Farm Labor Program documenting the migrant labor population beginning in 1943 and oral accounts from county residents.

"There would be at least 500, maybe between 500 and 1,000" (Roby Howard Jr.).

"I'd say there were probably up to 1,000, maybe more" (Tommy Walsh).

County residents vividly remember bean fields filled with migrant workers, but how many labored in the county is debatable. Minutes from the board meeting of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., May 22, 1943, note ten bean growers requested 650 Bahamian laborers, ranging from fifteen to 150 workers per grower. Among the growers listed are: E. G.

Rainbolt who requested twenty, Ollie Craddock who requested 100, the Mount Brothers (Barton and Wiley) petitioned for 150, and partners Robinson and Adams required 175 (*Meeting Minutes* 22 May 1943).

Rasmussen only lists 301 Bahamian workers in the entire state of Tennessee on July 31, 1943 (245). The July 30, 1943 edition of the local paper, however, announced 400 Bahamian workers were expected to assist the local pickers, and the issue dated August 19, 1943 claimed “400 negroes from the Bahamas, are on the scene” (“Bean Pickers are Available”; “Bean Picking Will”). Migrant laborers advanced across the country as needed, harvesting a variety of crops. Perhaps the 99 pickers not accounted for by the Emergency Farm Labor Program on July 31 entered the county later as the bean season progressed. Again, according to the *Johnson County News*, approximately 650 Bahamian workers labored over a three week period in 1944, but if the oral accounts are correct, the county provided work for twice that amount (“Colored Pickers”).

There is at least one possible explanation for discrepancies in the number of migrant workers. The most plausible is found in the newspaper. The previously cited July 30, 1943 edition mentions that along with 400 Bahamians, 600 African Americans from West Tennessee were employed as laborers in the bean fields (“Bean Pickers Are Available”). The oral accounts are silent on this matter. Growers including Tommy Walsh, Roby Howard, Jr., and Lewis Wills hired migrant laborers to harvest their beans, and individuals such as Alex Snyder and Bruce Simcox lived close to the migrant labor camp; all note familiarity with the Bahamian workers and their families. None of these men recall African Americans from West Tennessee. In fact one grower, Lewis Wills, remembered laborers from Bermuda speaking with a British accent. Rasmussen is silent on the topic of possible Bermudan

migrants, and details such as the country of origin and the accents of migrant workers may have been distorted by the intervening years.

Despite the country of origin, per federal regulations, migrant workers were provided housing and sanitary living conditions. In Johnson County, the Tri-State Growers, Inc., in cooperation with the Mount Brothers constructed a labor camp in the Maymead section of the county; this is the camp referred to by Simcox and Snyder. Situated on fifteen acres, the 1,200 person camp was constructed on land owned by the Mount Brothers and featured two units, consisting of 300 tents, some of which were large sidewall tents for families, a kitchen, a mess hall, and a store (*Meeting Minutes* 17 Sept. 1943; "Labor Camp"). No information citing actual living conditions of the labor camp have been uncovered.

In April 1943 the county court authorized the construction of a labor camp on the county home property in the Cold Springs area of the county ("Labor Camp"). Did the construction of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., camp usurp the need for this camp? If it did exist was it used to house the African-American laborers introduced from West Tennessee? If not, did the native born African-American population co-exist with the Bahamian workers?

The migrant labor force primarily benefitted the largest growers raising several hundred acres of beans. Coordinating with the county agent in the spring, growers estimated their labor requirements through the summer, in anticipation for an adequate work force during the harvest season. The labor camp was operated by the Tri-State Growers, Inc., and managed by local man John Bellamy; a college educated African American. One of Bellamy's primary duties was allocating workers to growers.

Bill Shull: If you were a pretty good sized operator, you'd sign up for so many bean pickers. You were responsible for those pickers. You might have 50 pickers and you

had to see they had work every day, every day except Sunday. I know one man used to keep fifteen and that's all he kept.

Under federal and international agreements migrant laborers were under strict employment and welfare contracts. The emergency farm labor program stipulated migrant laborers had to be employed six days out of every seven and 75% of their contract period. Otherwise, employers were required to provide a minimum subsistence allowance of \$3.00 a day (Rasmussen 235). Unable to provide the necessary work to justify official migrant labor requests, small growers were at a disadvantage during the peak bean harvest.

Alex Snyder: Mount Brothers raised hundreds of acres and they were the ones that got the [migrant workers] brought in here. They had priority over them. If they had beans to pick they [the migrant workers] had to go with them but if they didn't they could go anywhere they wanted

The largest growers raised beans in fields that sometimes encompassed more land than the average farm in the county. Requiring a vast labor pool six days a week, large growers by default held a monopoly on the migrant labor force. Small to average growers acquired pickers as best they could, but when labor demands exceeded supply resourceful growers could lure away pickers from the camp for a foray into their own bean fields.

Alex Snyder: Well the bean camp, you could slip in the back of it and talk to one of them [migrant workers] and he might get you four or five pickers to go with you. [My brother] Sanford was just acting a fool one day more or less and he had a little patch of beans on the upper end of our farm. He broke off a part of a Laurel bush

[and] put it over his head acting monkey like, but it worked, and he walked out the road. The people in the camp couldn't see him but he got the attention of one or two of them and he said 3 or 4 of them went with him to pick his beans that day!

[laughter]

Migrant workers were utilized as pickers and luggers. Growers lauded the productivity of the migrants, and the agricultural economists note that growers claimed they were faster pickers than the local population (Bonser et al. 31). Fast pickers of both races were often derided, however, for being hard on bean vines, but growers note that migrant workers were especially destructive.

Alex Snyder: They'd make a path look like it'd been rolled over with a log. When they went through [the bean rows] they'd pull them towards them, picking with both hands. Some of them would pick 18 or 19 bushels in a day.

"You'd be surprised how many beans those people would pick" (Bill Shull). "They could really pick them, but they would get a lot of leaves, limbs, and trash in them" (Lewis Wills).

Working as luggers, some migrant laborers achieved legendary status.

Tommy Walsh: I was young, but I remember Daddy had this one; gosh that guy was about seven foot tall, named Churchill. God, he used to walk just as straight and he could carry beans on both shoulders, one [full hamper] on each shoulder, it's true. I've seen him walking through the bean fields, [and] I never saw him spill a bean.

Like I say they were good workers and they spent their money back in Johnson County.

Growers were required by law to document the names and hours worked for every migrant laborer they employed. This was simple task for bean growers whose daily routine included keeping track of workers and the number of beans they picked, regardless of race. This system benefitted growers and pickers but on occasion, white pickers, black pickers, and growers attempted to defraud one another.

Tommy Walsh: Dave [Mains] had a book, [and he] had everybody's name in there that picked beans, [of] those Bahamians, because you had to check them off every day. You had to check them off when you picked them up, list their names, and check them off when you took them back. I was helping Dave there on the scales, weighing the beans and it was just all blacks in the field, Bahamians. [A carrier or lugger] came in [Dave] says "Whose beans are these?" carrier says "Annie May Green," (pseudonym) another one came to bring beans in, "Whose beans are these?" "Annie May Green," next carrier came in, "Whose beans are these?" "Miss Annie May Green." That just kept going on all day, I said "Lord have mercy that's around 25 bushels!" My daddy showed up and Dave said "Look here, this woman's got all these beans she's getting picked." Daddy said "You better get out there and see what's going." Turns out she was screwing those boys and they were paying her off in beans! I'll never forget that. [laughter]

Opportunities for cultural exchanges between whites, African Americans, and Bahamians, occurred outside the sphere of the bean fields and left a lasting impression on the local population. The county's predominately white inhabitants remained socially insulated from the migrant population, but found their culture a fascinating contribution to the county's social calendar, formally and informally.

Roby Howard, Jr.: We used to go down at night. They'd have parties on Saturday night and the workers would come out there and you'd think they hadn't worked a lick in a week. [They were] so active you know. They were dancing and singing and just having a ball. A bunch of us white boys, that was even before I was married, we'd go down there just to watch them dance and sing and do their thing. We'd just pull our car up along the fence and just get out wherever they were. We'd get to where we could watch them. They'd have a time just partying and just had a good time dancing and singing.

"Of a night they played a juke box and had dancing and so forth in the camp. We could hear them up here" (Bruce Simcox). "They had fires, they'd cook big ole pots of stuff" (Tommy Walsh). "They'd work all week. If they could find enough stuff to cook on the weekend [they would] have a big to do. They had one big main tent, just to frolic in [and] had a nickelodeon in it. I could hear it playing of a night" (Alex Snyder).

County citizens not living in such close proximity to the labor camp, or uncomfortable watching them from a distance, had at least two occasions to experience Bahamian culture in a formal setting. The Parent Teacher Association and the Johnson Chapel Methodist Church in August 1944 both held fundraising programs featuring workers

from the Bahamian labor camp (“Bahamians”; “Notice”). Unfortunately, no details are given as to the content of these programs, and the Parent Teacher Association had to cancel their program due to the labor demands of the bean harvest.

Mutually beneficial economic relationships developed between the migrant laborers, county merchants, and the community located near the labor camp. Similar to white workers, migrant workers willingly spent money in the county for a variety of goods. Tommy Walsh recollects a line of black workers surrounding the dentist’s office waiting for gold fillings, and how they “loved to shop” in Mountain City. “They’d walk up through here and buy some vegetables and things from people. I sold them a hog one time” (Bruce Simcox). “I raised chickens for fryers at that time. They found out we had those chickens, and they’d come down here part of the time on Sunday morning, before Sunday school and other times, and get them a chicken while we had those fryers; boy they liked that” (Alex Snyder).

It was during a visit to the Snyder farm by a black woman and her son to purchase a chicken that Alex Snyder’s son, Steve, first encountered a black boy of a similar age. Upon seeing his Bahamian counterpart Steve exclaimed: “Momma, he’s been drinking coffee!” In no way was this intended as a racial slur, but it greatly embarrassed the Snyder family at the time.

Neither the paper nor oral accounts relate incidences of racial tensions between the native white population and African-American or Bahamian workers. Bert Vincent notes that black pickers and white pickers rode in separate trucks to the bean fields, but is otherwise silent on the matter (“Bean Story”). Growers such as Alex Snyder and Bruce Simcox utilized migrant labors to supplement local pickers, and recalled white and black

pickers working together without incident. Local woman Ina Bellamy, whose father John Bellamy managed the labor camp, is currently Mountain City's only African-American city council member and remembers picking beans alongside her white neighbors. The need for labor in Johnson County bean fields superseded social norms regarding class, gender, age, race, and nationality.

As pickers, luggers, truck drivers, and other day labors traveled home or to the labor camp at the end of the day with cash in their pockets, growers had one more obstacle to face. It was a hurdle that was more menacing than pests, the weather, and the labor supply, and in the course of a few moments could swing wildly between prosperity and poverty: the market.

Chapter 4: The Green Bean Capital of the World

The Local Market

Nelson Gray: They opened the bean market every day. As soon as the beans that were picked that day started coming into town they opened the bean market. They had an auctioneer that sold beans until they sold all the beans that were picked that day. Sometimes it would be 8:00 p.m. sometimes 10:00 p.m., but they were open every day except Sunday. It was such a big business Mountain City was known, I guess people here gave us that name their selves, but they called it the “Green Bean Capital of the World,” because of amount of beans that were raised here.

In 1947 the tri-state bean growing area (Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina) boasted five private and four cooperative bean markets with locations in Mountain City, Tennessee; West Jefferson, North Carolina; Spruce Pine, North Carolina; Abingdon, Virginia; and Independence, Virginia (“Bean Growers”; Bowman). Generally situated in geographic center of Johnson County and hosting several markets simultaneously, Mountain City was the hub of the area’s green bean industry as thousands of bushels of beans poured into the markets six days a week from not only Tennessee, but North Carolina, and Virginia.

A large staff of men and women were employed by the bean markets in various positions. The minutes of the board of directors for the Tri-State Growers, Inc., for the upcoming 1944 season document a labor force consisting of a manager, a sales manager, a

public relations director, a bookkeeper, a stenographer, a labor camp secretary, three night watchmen, a general office clerk, an auctioneer, a weighman, an auction shed clerk, and common laborers including bean graders and hamper handlers (*Meeting Minutes* 20 May 1944). This group of men and women were primarily recruited from within the county, with notable exceptions such as sales manager John Dulaney of Pahokee, Florida.

The Tri-State Growers, Inc., evolved into the area's dominant bean market, and the majority of Johnson County bean growers vividly remember the hustle and bustle found in bean fields mirrored at this particular market.

Roby Howard, Jr.: The first sale was at 1:00 p.m. I've had 11:00 p.m. and midnight sales early on when I first started because people would bring their beans in sometimes and it would be dark or nearly dark by the time they'd get there: 7:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m., or 9:00 p.m. maybe. They found out that if they could get there, even bring a sample in early and sell on the 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. sale, and the buyer would agree with them, then they could go home and bring the rest of them in, pick on down to 5:00 p.m. and bring the rest of them in. It finally got [to where] I used to have a 5:00 p.m. sale, I'd eat supper and get back for the 6:00 p.m. sale. A lot of times that would be the last one. Sometimes they'd have a 7:00 p.m. sale, but not many. . . . We'd have a sale there every hour from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Pickers filled hampers, hampers filled sacks, and sacks filled trucks. As soon as a farmer's field was picked or his truck was full, truckloads of beans began their trip to Mountain City on their way to processors and tables around the country and in some

instances around the world. During the peak of the bean harvest truckloads of beans inundated the city's streets as farmers swarmed the town delivering their produce.

"It wasn't nothing of a night to go up there and have to fall in line and trucks would be lined up . . . you'd just have to sit there" (Bruce Simcox). "Oh God, it was awful²¹ I'll tell you! You could go up there at times and you'd get in line as far as from here up to this next house to try to get in" [approx. ½ mile] (Wade Snyder).

Transporting several thousand bushels a day to the market, farmers had to wait in line sometimes for hours to unload their beans. Luckily, to expedite the process growers could place samples of their beans on the auction line for buyers to bid on while they waited in line with the bulk of their crop. A sample was comprised of a half or full bean hamper representing an accurate example of the grower's beans.

Bruce Simcox: If you got very close to the building at all you could go ahead and get you a sample to put on the line. If it sold why you could come back, watch to get you a place to unload, and then you had to get a spot on the bean house floor to hamper.

You could be several trucks back and put the sample on you see. If they were having a sale at 4:00 p.m. then it might be 5:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. before you got to where you could unload.

The sampling process was crucial to buyers who were unable to individually evaluate every bushel of beans a farmer brought to the market. Beans of a similar age, grown in a similar manner, and exposed to similar fluctuations in weather develop in a remarkably consistent manner. This consistency allowed buyers to purchase several hundred bushels of beans based on their observation of just a few pounds.

²¹ Awful in this sense does not have negative connotations, but is used to express awe, i.e. awe inspiring

Growers placed their samples on a low bench, and used phases including: “putting them on the line” or “putting them on the bench” interchangeably to denote the act of offering their beans for sale. Along with the sample, the grower’s name and the total number of bushels he had for sale was displayed. The auctioneer stood on one side of the bench while buyers stood on the other visually and manually inspecting the sample.

Roby Howard, Jr.: I went to eastern North Carolina to a tobacco auctioneering school to learn the auctioneering chant. The produce chant was quicker [than the tobacco chant] and I thought a little easier to administer. . . . We could take a nickel, we had a \$0.05 change on the bids, we take it \$0.05 each time up and when we were doing tobacco it was just one penny up. We were selling bushels of beans and sometimes those bushels turned into truck loads. The line [of buyers] was on the one side of the bench and I was on the other with the man that was doing the hand work: taking the bids down, who it was, filling the tickets out for them.

Former bean growers remember only a handful of prominent bean buyers, but at the close of the 1943 season Joe Blackburn purchased a half page spread in the *Johnson County News* thanking growers for their support and identifying 52 buyers who had patronized his Johnson County Market (“We Wish”).²² Tri-State Growers, Inc., does not place a similar ad, but it can be assumed that the new co-op averaged a similar number. Buyers frequented both markets, and as the “Green Gold” started flowing, “it was a pretty rushing time around that bean market” (Wade Snyder).

Buyers purchased beans based on the quality and quantity offered by the growers and the dictates of the current market. The sample system saved growers and buyers an

²² See Figure 3.

enormous amount of time, but this arrangement only worked if the two parties agreed on the definition of “representative.” Growers reserved the right to refuse a bid, and could place their sample on the next sale in hopes of earning a higher price.

Wade Snyder: I sold mine up there three times one day. [I] started unloading them and he [the buyer] saw I had a few rotten ends in here and he said “I can’t handle them beans set them back on the board, I won’t let you lose no money.” Well I set them back on and he got them again. I set them on the third time and I said “Now if you get them this time you’re going to take them,” and sure enough he got them. He cussed right big and said “Take them over there and dump them in.” [laughter]

Buyers reserved the right to cancel a sale if they felt the sample they bid on was not an accurate representation of the grower’s crop. “Once and a while they would turn them down, claim they wasn’t as good as the sample” (Bruce Simcox). Competition between growers and buyers created a dynamic atmosphere as growers attempted to earn the most for the beans, and buyers endeavored to pay as little as possible. “Some of them I could pull just a little bit on. Like the tobacco market you’d be pulling coat tails and telling them those were your beans and everything!” [laughter] (Wade Snyder). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the two groups were on familiar terms with one another, and as long as transactions between them remained visible the system worked to the benefit of both.

Alex Snyder: I went up there [the market] one day. My helper Millard Tester got a hamper off the truck and filled it up with pole beans. They were pretty. Oh man; I mean they were pretty. Dick Wagner came by and being my brother-in-law he’d try to buy them. Millard set them on the bench to auction them off and Dick says “What

do you want for them?" I said "\$7.00 a bushel," Millard's eyes got big and he turned around, looked at me said "Golly, what do you mean?!" Dick went on looking and after a while he come back and said "I'll take them." I said "Just leave them on [the line] and let them bring what they will." "No," he said "Take them off and hamper them."

On more than one occasion growers were castigated for not following market rules. For instance, sometimes growers not only provided an inaccurate sample, but went so far as to offer an attractive sample for buyers to bid on but quickly replaced it with a sample more indicative of their lower quality beans after the sale. If a buyer questioned the quality of the grower's full load of beans the "sample" on the line served as proof the buyer was well aware of what he had purchased. Another trick growers attempted was placing numerous samples of the same beans on the line under different names. As the auctioneer moved down the row of samples buyers bid and purchased beans unaware they were often competing against themselves for the same beans. Selling a grower's beans multiple times increased his chances of earning a high price. However, each sample was accompanied by the grower's name and the amount of beans he was offering for sale. If a grower brought 100 bushels of beans to the market and placed four samples on the bench each representing his 100 bushels, and buyers purchased each of those 100 bushels in good faith their tally daily would be 300 bushels short as the grower only had 100 bushels total to sell. The problem was so severe Joe Blackburn contributed a lengthy article to the *Johnson County News* pleading with farmers to abandon this unscrupulous practice ("Honesty"). Blackburn notes in his article

that certain unnamed bean buyers were guilty of other unethical actions, but does not state who these buyers were or what they committed.

Barring deception by growers and buyers, once an agreeable price was reached the beans were unloaded and weighed. Large trucks were weighed full, unloaded, and weighed again to determine the number of bushels they held. Smaller quantities were unloaded and weighed by hand. After weighing growers either hampered their beans or loaded the beans loose into the back of trucks. In order to safely transport high quality beans, fresh market and quick freeze representatives such as Ollie Craddock and "Beanie" Walker required buyers to hamper their beans at the market. High quality beans earned a farmer more money per bushel than cannery beans, but they required additional time and expense.

Wade Snyder: You had to pull in, unload them, weigh them, and a lot of time you had to hamper them. It took a long time to hamper those darn things. I always liked to dump them out in the truck . . . back up that buggy to the truck, and dump them in the truck pretty quick, but it took a right smart while to hamper 200 or 300 bushels of beans.

"We called it hampering, filling thirty pound bean baskets, put[ting] lids on them, and tacking [the lids] them up there. Sometimes we'd have to hamper our field beans too if they were pretty enough to sell at grocery stores and different places" (Alex Snyder). "You had to get a spot on the bean house floor to hamper them. . . . You'd be up there at midnight hampering beans when you had to hamper them" (Bruce Simcox). Markets such as the Tri-State Growers, Inc., supplied hampers for re-sale to growers. In 1943 the cooperative borrowed \$100,000 from the Bank of Cooperatives to purchase hampers, and in 1944 it

purchased thirty railroad cars of hampers for \$0.25 including shipping and estimated their retail worth at \$0.30 each (*Meeting Minutes* 3 June 1943; 11 March 1944; 25 March 1944).

The Mount Brothers graded and hampered a large percentage of their beans before they arrived at the market. Grading and hampering their own beans, they were able to provide a quality product that sold for more money.

Bruce Simcox: I was boss over the grading down here at Mount Brothers. . . .The Mount's fixed this old Mill at Maymead to [use as] the grading house. They had two or three grading belts. There was so many on each side picking out the trash and bad beans and the others went over here in hampers. I was the foreman over that for two years. We handled a lot of beans.

Bruce Simcox also worked at Tri-State Growers, Inc., "letting out" hampers. Farmers with beans to be hampered in the field or at the market paid for their hampers out of the proceeds from those beans. Payment was calculated based on weight. The tare²³ on hampers with lids was four pounds, and three pounds without lids. Similarly, the tare on burlap sacks was a half-pound. Rather than purchasing hampers outright, the cost was translated to weight and deducted from the grower's check.

Beans destined for canneries were not hampered but dumped loose in a buggy, wheeled to the loading dock, and loaded by hand or belt onto waiting trucks. An unknown percentage of cannery beans were sold via direct marketing contracts to companies such as Bush Brothers Canning Company. Large growers such as Tommy Walsh's family primarily marketed their beans in this fashion, and though they bypassed the auction the agreement was orchestrated through the Tri-State Growers, Inc.

²³ Tare is the allowance for packaging deducted from the total weight, in this case bean hampers and sacks.

The National Market

Nelson Gray: At the end of that day they would put the beans on trucks and ship them out of here late that day, immediately. Those beans went to places like Baltimore, Maryland; Atlanta, Georgia; Little Rock, Arkansas, and at times other large cities around the Southeast area. They would go on the market there. I know later on there were [markets] in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Columbia, South Carolina. They would have people there from stores and places to buy these hampers of fresh beans that were just delivered. There was an outlet for every bean that was picked.

Johnson County beans found their way to plates across the nation and beyond. Farmers and food processors profited from the immediate pre-war, and post-war years as consumer incomes increased, fueling marked surges in fresh and frozen food sales. Stimulated by the war, farmers across the nation dramatically increased production, particularly vegetables for processing which increased 91% between 1939 and 1945 (Wilcox 51). The fresh markets expanded rapidly as did the frozen food industry which increased output from 235 million pounds of frozen products in 1940 to 620 million pounds in 1944-45 (76). Compared to 1935-39 levels, farm prices for food products doubled during the war as farmers received 54% of the retail cost in 1944 after earning only 40% in 1940 (81). While farm income improved so did that of food handling corporations whose net profits increased from 405 million dollars in 1940 to 630 million dollars in 1945 (82).

World War II increased the demand for fresh, frozen, and canned beans which served as the catalyst for the county's acreage explosion. However, bean growers depended on

government imposed floor²⁴ and ceiling²⁵ prices to remain profitable. In 1943 rumors circulated that bean growers faced a drastic reduction in the ceiling price for beans compared to the 1942 level. This was not the case, and in fact after a discussion with the Office of Price Administration, Wiley Mount reported the \$1.15 and \$1.25 rumored ceiling price was actually the floor price and as of June 11, 1943, no ceiling price had been set, prompting Mount to envision “the price of beans could go as high as around \$5.00” (“O.P.A.”). Floor and ceiling prices for agricultural products during World War II attempted to quell inflation while simultaneously encouraging production of necessary commodities. Joe Blackburn and the Tri-State Growers, Inc., both claimed responsibility for the county’s profitable bean industry and particularly the remarkable price increase in 1943 over 1942’s average.²⁶ Neither party publicly admitted the dramatic rise in bean prices in 1943 was in large part due to price control legislation enacted on October 2, 1942. This legislation artificially propped up bean prices through the war and until 1947 when price supports for basic and war time commodities expired.

Until the expiration of those price supports, bean acreage in Johnson and surrounding counties expanded exponentially. Studies of the county’s commercial bean industry such as Al-Habib’s 1967 master’s thesis: *Costs of Producing and Marketing Snap Beans In Two Upper East Tennessee Counties*, base their findings and draw conclusions primarily on statistics compiled from the USDA. The following table notes bean acreage for Johnson County per the USDA Census of Agriculture.

²⁴ Floor Price: government imposed limit on the lowest price charged for a product

²⁵ Ceiling Price: government imposed limit on the highest price charged for a product

²⁶ For more details see Chapter 1.

Table 1. Commercial Snap Bean Acreage, Census of Agriculture data²⁷

Year	1920	1930	1935	1940	1945	1950
Acres	3	73	112	1023	3518	2141

Initially it appears census data reveal the entire story of snap bean acreage in the county, especially considering the dramatic increase from 1919 to 1944 and the explosive 3,000% surge between 1934 and 1944. After what appears to be a peak year in 1944, the numbers begin to taper off gradually behind a sharp 1,377 acre decline between 1944 and 1949. A quick increase followed by a steady decline mirrors the oral and written accounts, including Al-Habib's 1967 thesis. Years not recorded by the census reveal significant variations in snap bean acreage. The following table is extracted from sources currently available: U.S. Census data, agricultural economists, information gleaned from the *Johnson County News*, and souvenir programs from the yearly bean festivals held from 1947 through 1955.

Table 2. Commercial Snap Bean Acreage for Selected Years 1919-1949

Year	1919	1929	1934	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944 ²⁸	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
Acres	3	73	112	1023	1500	2000	4200	6000	5500	3500	4700	5000	3500	2141

²⁷ Census data report crop information for the preceding year, i.e. the census of 1945 reports farm statistics for 1944.

²⁸ Determining crop acreage for 1944 is particularly difficult. The 3518 acre figure is found in the 1945 census of agriculture which records the acreage of fresh market beans only for the 1944 crop year. Beans and other produce sold to canneries or to freezer companies are listed under "all other vegetables," and crop acreages were not recorded. In an article published in *The Johnson County News* July 6, 1944, Volume 30, No. 11, the writer states there were 7500 acres of beans planted "in this territory" in 1944 compared to "6000 acres last year," referencing 1943. The phrasing is unclear, but myriad references to 6000 acres in 1943 can be found in the *Johnson County News*. A 1945 study conducted by the Tennessee Extension Service notes profitable production for Johnson County's bean acreage peaked in 1944, but no exact figures are given. The report does note Johnson, Carter, and Unicoi Counties were expected to see a combined crop total of 7300 acres of beans in 1944. The 5500 acre number comes from county agent Hugh Russell and is found in the February 7, 1946 edition of *The Johnson County News*, Volume 30, No. 42.

Assuming these numbers are correct, Johnson County was enveloped within a sea of green beans throughout the 1940s. According to journalist Bert Vincent, in 1943 farmers in neighboring Carter County, Tennessee, planted 1,500 acres of beans while Watauga County, North Carolina, boasted 1,200, and Ashe County, North Carolina, claimed 2,000 acres (“Bean Story”). When combined with Johnson County’s 6,000 acres these four mountain counties contained approximately 11,000 acres of beans planted within a 50 mile radius around Mountain City, making the area “one of the biggest bean patches in the country” (“Bean Story”). In 1949 Victor Bowman, an agricultural research analyst for the USDA, conducted a study on the mountain tri-state bean area (five counties in Southwest Virginia, ten in Western North Carolina, and two in East Tennessee). Bowman found Johnson County, Tennessee, Ashe County, North Carolina, and Henderson County, North Carolina contributed 70% of the 22,000 acres of snap beans produced in the region (Bowman).

Throughout the 1940s, Johnson County alone contributed 20% of Tennessee’s total bean crop beginning in 1939 (Bonser et al. 1). According to the U.S. Census of 1945, in 1944 the county’s 3,518 acres²⁹ composed 35% of Tennessee’s fresh market bean crop which is especially noteworthy when the second largest bean producing county that year was Monroe County with only 771 acres (7; 94; 97).

Commercial bean production was an economic boon not only to Johnson County and Mountain City, but to the entire tri-state bean growing region. Thanks to archival records of the local paper and the Tri-State Growers, Inc., the years 1943 through 1954 are well documented, noting the average daily price for beans along with buyer and grower reactions

²⁹ See footnote 8.

to changes in the national markets. Two years in particular, 1943 and 1947 (the first and last years' war time legislative price controls impacted the bean industry), are particularly dramatic illustrating the economic and agricultural fluctuations experienced by growers selling commodity beans.

"Green Gold" was a popular moniker for snap beans during the war period and the term first appears in the local paper in 1943. Though Wiley Mount reported and may have anticipated selling beans for \$5.00 a bushel in 1943, the highest recorded price that year was \$3.55 sold during the last week of June as part of the early summer crop ("Green Gold"). Tri-State Growers, Inc., one of at least two bean markets in Mountain City in 1943, sold 220,339 bushels of beans for an average of \$1.88, which amounted to \$414,000 returned to bean growers.³⁰ Figures documenting sales from other markets or direct contracts between growers and buyers are absent. County extension agent Earl Darter estimated the total 1943 crop to be worth 1.5 and 2 million dollars while estimates as high as 2.5 million dollars circulated within the paper ("Reputation"; "Bean Story"). In 1943 "Green Gold" flowed into the county like never before.

Alex Snyder: Dexter Stevens lived on what they called the Vaught Place. They put the [Vaught Place] up for sale and Joe Wilson bought the farm. He [Joe Wilson] didn't want the hill land so Dexter Stevens bought all that back in the hollow. When you go back far enough it's a mountain woodland. . . .Mr. Stevens and his family put beans on it, just so many, not a whole lot. They picked them their selves and his son Ernest Stevens told me they picked enough beans [in] one year to pay for the place.

³⁰ This figure comes from the Tri-State Growers ledger documenting yearly bean sales for the years 1943-1954. However, along with the ledger is a short "History of the Tri-State Growers" noting bean sales and average prices. This document states the organization sold 220,329 bushels of beans for \$382,671.13, averaging of \$1.73 per bushel in 1943. Similar discrepancies between these documents exist for every recorded year.

Boy, they had to work though, he had four children [and the] two girls worked just like the boys. They just used horses with a one man planter and a one man cultivator. . . .My dad rented corn [ground] to him.

The story of the Stevens family is just one example illustrating the convoluted bean economy. As journalist Bert Vincent observed, the entire populace was infected with “Bean Fever” as money from the bean markets spread throughout the count. Large bean growers began to mechanize, replaced horses with tractors, and later adopted mechanical bean pickers. Small farmers purchased land and transitioned into the social, cultural, and economic life of the county as land owners. The 1945 U.S. Census reports that of the county’s 2,222 farms in 1944, full owners operated 1,979 and the farm tenancy rate was 6.4%; in 1939, full owners operated 1,361 of the county’s total 1,740 farms and the tenancy rate was 13.6% (137). In five years full farm ownership increased from 78% to 84%, roughly one percentage point each year while the tenancy rate dropped by almost half. During this period average farm size decreased from 62.6 to 52.4 acres, but remained higher than neighboring Tennessee counties including Carter, Washington, and Unicoi (28).

Despite falling below Tennessee’s average farm size in 1940 (74.7 acres) and 1945 (75.9 acres), Johnson County farmers enjoyed an increasing standard of living through this period by combining the county’s subsistence first nature with commercial agriculture. Nevertheless, agricultural systems based on extensive production necessitate large land holdings. Subdividing farms into smaller and smaller parcels, families could expect to encounter difficulties providing themselves with adequate food, shelter, and economic returns afforded larger landholders over the long term. This condition has plagued

Appalachian farmers for centuries as Appalachian farms shrank in average size due to inheritance as children received shares of their parent's estate, for example.

Why the Vaught Place was sold is not remembered, but the farm was divided into at least two parcels, one of which considered inferior by the new owner possibly due to its topography. The Stevens family acquired this inferior parcel in the hopes of converting it into a profitable farm. It is impossible to estimate how many acres of beans the Stevens family raised. The fact this industrious family attempted to raise any crop at all on their steep hillside farm is remarkable, but typical of farmers throughout the greater Appalachian region. What is unique about the Stevens family is the fact they cultivated their steep hillsides for commercial purposes while renting land to grow corn to feed their livestock and themselves. Commercial beans allowed the family to purchase a farm and pay for it within one year, but only by compromising the capacity to raise its own food directly and indirectly. Not taken into account is the ecological damage caused by erosion that invariably occurred as the family cultivated the hillsides in order to plant beans and other crops. In retrospect the gamble may have paid off in the short term, but today Dexter Stevens' farm is a subdivision occupied by attractive modern homes perched on hills and knolls framing a narrow dead end road. The thriving farm that once existed there is gone forever, much like the county's commercial bean industry.

County farmers' total crop production in 1945 equaled almost \$4,000,000 with an estimated \$2,558,500 of farm products sold that year, \$620,000 of which remained on county farms. Snap beans remained the county's number one cash crop totaling \$1,080,000 in sales, but tobacco was beginning to close the gap, earning farmers approximately \$700,000 ("County Crop"). As noted in Table 2, bean acreage climbed rapidly through the first half of

the 1940s along with the average price farmers earned per bushel. Records from the Tri-State Growers, Inc., show beans averaged \$1.73 in 1943³¹, \$1.77 in 1944, and \$2.44 in 1945 (“History of the Tri-State Growers” 1).³² Growers realized a substantially higher average price in 1945 and farmers selling through the Tri-State Growers, Inc., collectively earned over \$780,000 (1).

Bean acreage peaked in 1943 with 6,000 acres. In 1945 county farmers planted only 3,500 acres, a hefty reduction within two years. There are several key reasons for 1945’s dramatic reduction.³³ Representatives from the University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, the War Food Administration, and others published the “Tennessee State Report on Wartime Adjustments in Agriculture 1945,” noting Johnson County had reached its limit in snap bean profitability primarily due to disease and insects “because of much too intensive cropping practices” (10). At the time of printing, July 25, 1944, the most pressing threat to the county’s bean crop was disease with little mention of insect damage. On December 1, 1944 a second report entitled “Proposed Postwar Pattern of Agricultural Production in Tennessee” was published by the same body. This report contended war-time bean acreage for the Eastern Mountain Area (Johnson, Carter, and Unicoi Counties) had to be reduced by ½ if farmers hoped to maintain “economical long-time production” (8). Rotations were encouraged as was selection of land more conducive to raising beans in an attempt to increase soil conservation and halt the spread of diseases. The report chastised bean growers whose “present density of production and failure to adopt necessary control measures has made control of the Mexican bean beetle

³¹ This figure was disputed by Joe Blackburn who noted the average price in 1943 was \$1.35 rather than the cooperatives claims of \$1.75. See Chapter 1.

³² See Figure 16.

³³ See Chapter 2.

almost impossible” (8). Surprisingly, the report notes “the poor practices” of bean growers had not been reflected in lower yields in 1943 (8). In fact, county agent Hugh Russell claimed county farmers produced more and higher quality beans on 3,500 acres in 1945 than the previous year’s 5,500 acres (Russell, 1946). According to Russell, growers had selected land more conducive to bean production, used disease free seed, improved insect control measures, and “properly handle[d] the crop” (Russell 1946).

In 1944, perhaps due to both the success of snap beans and the subsequent complications of increasing bean acreage, Tri-State Growers, Inc., and county extension agent Hugh Russell began searching for alternative cash crops. The previously cited postwar report cited increased strawberry production as an alternative to snap beans, and in 1944 the *Johnson County News* reported that commercial scale strawberry production was to be started in the county for the first time. During this period Russell also promoted increased vegetable diversification including cucumbers, peppers, lima beans, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and cabbage (Russell 1944).

In January 1945, the board of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., officially approved a plan recommending farmers plant a combined total of 300 acres of strawberries in the county. This was a daunting task as the 1945 U.S. Census only noted one farm raising less than a half-acre of strawberries in 1944 (94).³⁴ An interesting experiment, possibly directed by the extension office, was conducted in the county in 1944. One hundred acres of strawberries were planted on three county farms: one field was planted “in the flat,” one on a hill, and the third on top of a hill (“Strawberries”). According to the paper the berries appeared healthy with little difference between them (“Strawberries”). Strawberries did become an important

³⁴ The census only records bearing acreage of small fruits. Strawberries are harvested beginning in their second year, thus, the county did have a larger acreage of strawberries than recorded.

cash crop, and I.C. Blevins, a farmer from the Shady Valley section of the county, was named Tennessee's top strawberry producer for three years beginning in 1957, producing 600, 24 quart cases per acre in 1959 ("Blevins").

In 1943, Lyle Moore, representing Stockley Brothers Cannery based in Newport, Tennessee, toured the county advocating peas as a profitable addition to the county's bean industry ("Stokely Bros."). According to Moore, "very little labor is required in the growing of peas" as the vines are mowed and hauled to a vining machine, eliminating hand picking. One hundred and five acres were planted in 1943, and during the December 16, 1944 meeting of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., Mr. Baker representing Stokely Brothers Cannery lead a discussion on growing 200 acres of peas in Johnson County during the upcoming year, an idea the cooperative readily endorsed. Commercial peas never caught on in the county and few farmers attempted large plantings. Local residents recall only the Mount Brothers and Arthur Potter raising large fields of peas.

Bruce Simcox: Some people tried different things. Mount Brothers got to raising some peas. They went in there and mowed them and took them up with forks, hand forks I believe it was, and put them through a machine, sort of like a thrashing machine. They had that machine setting in a shed. . .I believe Arthur Potter raised some peas. They tried several different things but nothing came up with the beans as far as helping people.

After 1945's sharp decline, bean acreage began creeping up again. In 1946 growers planted 4,700 acres. Mountain City bean markets were swamped with beans as "large trucks, pickups, sedans, coupes, trailers, wheelbarrows . . . in fact every known means of

transportation, is being used to get the beans to the markets” (“Influx”). Tri-State Growers, Inc., sold 42,000 more bushels in 1946 than in 1945, but with an average price of \$2.12 per bushel, \$0.30 cents short of 1945’s average, growers netted \$10,000 less than the previous year (“History of the Tri-State Growers” 1).

Growers reading the newspaper in 1945 may have expected this downturn in the bean market. With the end of hostilities in Europe and Asia, peace time adjustments in food production began to impact bean growers. War time legislative price controls were set to expire in 1947, but as early as November 1945, bean growers were warned to expect lower prices in 1946 “unless dramatic reduction in production occurs” (“Bean Forecast”). Processors such as Bush Brothers Canning Company were scaling down production and if growers continued to increase production researchers predicted “a disastrous quantity of beans originally intended for processing may seek an outlet in fresh market channels” (“Bean Forecast”). Farmers unable to sell their beans to processors could potentially sell to the fresh market, but flooding the fresh market with low quality beans depressed prices for all bean grades.

Johnson County bean growers adapted slowly to the emerging post-World War II world. For example, Tri-State Growers, Inc., contracted 60,000 pounds of seed beans in 1946 in anticipation of 1947s acreage expansion, despite the low average price in 1946 and continued warnings about over-production (*Meeting Minutes* 6 June 1946). Farmers continued to find snap bean production either profitable enough to warrant an increase in production in 1947, or more likely, the acreage expansion was a response to counter their deteriorating profitability. Despite official calls to reduce bean acreage and diversify farm production, snap beans claimed 5,000 acres in 1947 (“Green Bean Legend” 1950).

Bean growers anticipated a record season in 1947. The *Johnson County News* claimed beans contributed \$6,000,000 to the county's economy in 1946, and with increased acreage, "unusually successful" markets, sales "expected to be good all during the season," and the fresh market expected to take the bulk of the bean crop, the entire county anxiously awaited the opening of the bean markets ("Record Season").

While beans ripened on the vine, the county made preparations for its first bean festival. Organizers created the event in part "to interest more outside people and money in Johnson county(sic) activities and interests, and to advertise Johnson county(sic) both to people living here and to people of other communities and states" ("Auto Here"). Community organizations and clubs representing the entire populous ranging from the Boy Scouts and the Spanish-American War Veterans to the Pine Grove Community Club and Farm Bureau banded together to celebrate the prosperity this simple vegetable had bestowed upon the county. A display featuring different bean varieties was exhibited during the festival and a competition featuring various ways of preserving beans drew large crowds. Schools were dismissed in order for children to attend the festival and enjoy the parade, carnival attractions, the queen contest, parachute jump, and other exciting events. Adults listened to speeches by Senator Tom Stewart and Representative Dayton Phillips; purchased tickets in hopes of winning a 1947 Kaiser automobile, washing machine, or ten tube radio; and concluded the event with a square dance that evening. As the newspaper proclaimed, "all roads lead to Mountain City" for the first annual bean festival ("Crack Bands").³⁵

The county's festive demeanor was quickly dashed in July as bean prices plummeted to their lowest levels since the late 1930s. Refusing to heed repeated calls for a reduction in bean acreage, beans from the county's 5,000 acres poured into Mountain City.

³⁵ See Figures 6 and 7.

Overproduction coupled with decreased demand for processing beans and termination of wartime price controls combined to financially devastate bean growers. Approximately half of the 1947 crop went unpicked as market prices dropped below picking costs ("History of the Tri-State Growers"; "Bean Growers"). The situation grew so severe Representative Dayton Phillips pleaded the bean growers' case before the Food Surplus Administration which enacted a temporary support price of \$1.35 through August, netting "the fortunate growers from \$0.95 to \$1.10 a bushel" ("Efforts Made").

Fortunes were either made or lost at the bean market. After several profitable years the unexpected collapse of 1947 shook the county's agricultural core. Auctioneer Roby Howard, Jr. witnessed farmer reactions to bean prices. While the date of the following story cannot be definitively established as 1947, the events he describes began occurring with alarming regularity in 1947, and continued until the end of commercial bean production in the county.

Roby Howard, Jr.: I've seen them [beans] sell when they couldn't even get [enough money] to pay the picking bill. When the market was flooded with them the buyers couldn't buy. They'd buy one sale and say "We can't handle any more." I've seen them [bean prices] drop from \$3.00 to \$0.50 in one day. That \$0.50, they couldn't even pay the picking bill you see. I'd tell those fellows that brought them in I said "If you can, if you have a cool place you can keep the beans for another day or so, and shade to get them out of the sun, just hold on to them a day or two. This glut may be over, maybe some of these buyers can turn loose again. Maybe they can go out and sell what they've got and come back and start and try to help you." Old man Frank Buchanan had a farm down Doe Valley. He had a whole load, 500 and something

bushels of beans on his truck. He brought them in and the fellow said "Well, Mr. Buchanan, I haven't got a home for them. I'm over super saturated, I just haven't got any place at all to put them for the next three or four days. I'll try to give you \$0.50 a bushel for them and I know that you probably paid that or maybe more to pick them, but that's all. I can't do it." He [Buchanan] took two men with him and went to the top of Iron Mountain between Mountain City and Shady Valley, pulled in, found a place, and dumped 500 bushels of beans down off the hill there one night. [He] didn't even get a bid on them. He was offered \$0.50 and he wouldn't take it. "If you can't do any better than that" he said, "just throw them out. Nobody needs them, nobody wants them."

Dumping occurred frequently. Oral accounts note the creek behind the Tri-State Growers, Inc., market was often filled with beans, sometimes obstructing the water's flow completely as farmer's dumped bushels and bushels of unsold beans into the creek as they left the market. Growers had options including canning companies and the fresh market, but in their haste to increase acreage a large percentage of 1947's bean crop did not meet the standards required by the fresh market and quick freeze companies.

Bruce Simcox: You hoped to go to the fresh market and get the higher price, but if you didn't, why you hoped the canners would take them at a cheaper price. One time I remember us having [beans] that we couldn't sell at all . . . we poured them out, there wasn't anything else to do.

Representative Phillips' victory in obtaining temporary federal price supports in 1947 was only marginally successful. The federal government required all beans qualifying for the price guarantee of \$1.35 to meet or exceed 85 % U.S. number 1 grade standards ("Efforts Made"). This standard is similar to that required by the fresh market, but unobtainable for most growers who predominately produced lower quality cannery beans. As an unnamed columnist stated, "this fact denies the average and small growers, who furnish the major number of total bushels of beans of any benefit from federal buying and price guarantee" ("Efforts Made"). Advocates for local bean growers, including Representative Phillips, attempted unsuccessfully to change the requirements from 85% No. 1 to 85% edible as the stricter standard excluded the majority of county farmers. An article in August 14, 1947 edition of the *Johnson County News* concludes this way:

It seems that some people in Washington have the opinion that bean growers elsewhere raise more beans and need more help than Johnson county (sic). The fact is, as Mr. Phillips has repeatedly informed these people, privately and in committee , and in the Congressional Record, there are more beans raised in Johnson county (sic), per acre, per 1,000 of population and per square mile, than any place else in the United States. ("Efforts Made")

Johnson County farmers may have raised more beans than any other region in the nation, but as 1947 demonstrated, the world was changing rapidly. Bean acreage was reduced by 1,500 acres in 1948 and growers averaged \$2.67 per bushel, the second highest average price logged by the Tri-State Growers, Inc.,³⁶ ("History of the Tri-State Growers 1-2). Bean prices dived again in 1949, reached their highest recorded average of \$2.78 in 1952,

³⁶ 1957 is the last year Tri-State Grower's, Inc., documented bean sales.

and continued to fluctuate dramatically until the 1960s. The popular bean festival was held every year through 1955, but commercial dairy production and tobacco usurped snap beans as the county's primary commercial enterprises beginning in the 1950s.

Though acreage decreased annually after 1947, county farmers continued to depend on commercial beans for 1/3 to 1/4 of their total yearly income as late as 1962.³⁷ The weekly newspaper which previously contained regular articles about beans, i.e. growing, market reports, crop outlook, etc., shifted its focus to other farming ventures as commercial bean production began to wane. Beans may have lost their place as the county's premier cash crop, but they continued to fulfill an important role on county farms for the next one and a half decades.

Bruce Simcox: Joe Shull had a fairly new Ford pickup truck and we had a few beans up there [at the market]. Joe must have had a pretty good patch, he brought a load in and sold them and they brought \$0 .90 a bushel. Joe told them he was going back to get some more, said he would be back and he wanted to know if they would give him \$0.90 for them. They told him they would. He said "I can raise them for that!" he jumped in the truck and took off out through there burning rubber, the wheels squealing. Some of them said he might get back and he might not! [Laughter]

³⁷This information was compiled using tax returns of the Ward and Reece families and is validated by Al-Habib's work.

Chapter 5: “Farming is the biggest gamble in the world”

Lynda Bunting

John Walker: One of the greatest problems of the small farmers is the gross inefficiency and slowness to adapt and utilize efficient methods that are necessary to increase the size of the total farm business and increase farm income. There are numerous instances in the county where technology has been applied and incomes have been materially increased. The most important thing is the willingness and desire to help ones self (sic) with more know-how. (“Now Time”)

John Walker was Johnson County’s extension agent for 20 years and penned regular articles for the *Tomahawk*³⁸ during that time. The above quote is extracted from a January 1, 1964 article in which Walker attempts a brief overview of the county’s agricultural history encompassing the early settlement period through the present. Launching a nostalgic interpretation of the county’s early frontier period Walker claimed “in those early days our small mountain farms provided a degree of comfort and good living to generations of hard working families,” he concludes by chastising county famers for their “gross inefficiency and slowness to adapt” (Walker “Now Time”). Intentionally sidestepping the county’s snap bean industry, Walker skips from the iconic, but fictitious, independent, subsistence farmer image of yesteryear to a stereotypical interpretation of the county’s farm population (Dunaway

³⁸ The county’s weekly paper underwent several name changes from 1943-1964.

1996; Hsiung 1997). Employed as the county's extension agent responsible for agricultural education and outreach from 1952 to 1972, Walker witnessed the important role commercial agriculture, particularly the snap bean industry, played in county life. Yet, he refused to admit the rapid decline in bean profitability, among other farm products, was due less to farmer's willingness to adapt than to national and international market polices emphasizing monocultures and surplus exports. These policies also ran counter to the small scale, diversified farm systems prevalent in the county, the greater Appalachian region, and the Third World (McMichael, "A Food Regime Genealogy," 146).

Following the price collapse of 1947, farmers reduced bean acreage rapidly, planting only 2,000 acres of beans each year during the 1950s³⁹ (U.S Census 1955; 1960). In 1964 the county's bean crop totaled a respectable 1,240 acres, but growers planted a mere 241 acres in 1969, an 80% decrease in five years (U.S. Census 1964; 1969). This dramatic decline was preceded by a meager 26% reduction between 1959 and 1964 as farmers witnessed their market share diminish during the 1950s and 1960s (U.S. Census 1959; 1964). The Tri-State Growers, Inc., bean market began operating at a net loss in 1961, the first year since its inception in 1943 ("History of the Tri-State Growers" 2). In the ten year period between 1959 and 1969 average bean acreage per farm increased from four to fourteen acres, while total acreage decreased by 1,440 acres as small farmers began abandoning commercial bean production (U.S. Census 1959; 1969).

Bean prices fluctuated erratically,⁴⁰ and farmers, the board of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., and the agricultural extension office began searching for alternative cash crops. Extension agent John Walker began emphasizing tobacco, small dairies, and other vegetable

³⁹ 2,000 is an average figure only as total acreage fluctuated by several hundred acres throughout the decade.

⁴⁰ See Figure 16.

crops as potential replacements for farms looking to not only transition away from commercial snap beans, but to also rebuff the overall trend of diminishing farm profitability.

On December 30, 1959, Walker claimed “Tobacco accounts for over ½ of farm income. . . . Our two year average yield for 1957 and 1958 was 2,148 pounds per acre which shows that most growers are getting close to the maximum poundage yields” (“Farm Notes” 30 Dec. 1959). Tobacco covered 1,110 acres of farmland in 1959, only 500 acres less than beans that year as it began to usurp beans as the county’s primary cash crop (“Tobacco Market”; U.S. Census 1960). Thanks in large part to acreage restrictions defined by the allotment system, tobacco remained profitable for several decades,⁴¹ a record beans were unable to match. The broad impact of the tobacco allotment system on Appalachian farms is beyond the scope of this work, but the acreage restrictions that maintained tobacco’s profitability were viewed as an impediment to increasing total farm income by growers. County farmers and extension agent Walker lamented acreage restrictions which they felt “greatly limits farm income on many farms” (“Now Time”). Walker neglects to admit depressed bean prices were often triggered by farmers in Johnson County and other bean producing regions producing more beans than the market could absorb, a problem negated by the tobacco allotment system.

John Walker: Many farmers are looking for a source of income to replace the declining snap bean enterprise. Our climate, soil, and abundant water supply offer a great opportunity to make Johnson County a good dairy county. (“Farm Notes” 20 Jan. 1960)

⁴¹ See Kingsolver 2011 and Buchanan 2012.

Small dairies began sprouting up in the county during the 1950s, in direct relation to the diminishing snap bean market. The majority of county farmers established Grade C dairies. Milked by hand, stored raw in cans, and chilled in specially designed coolers, Grade C milk was used exclusively for processing, particularly in the cheese industry. Farms built concrete "milk houses" to milk cows, store feed, and hold cans awaiting pick up. Large Grade A dairy farms were developed and expanded during this period as well. In 1955 J. T. Wilson established a cow-to-bottle operation pasteurizing, homogenizing, bottling, and selling milk from his dairy herd (Morely "Wilson's Dairy").

Refusing to completely abandon vegetable production, other crops and innovations were attempted but with limited success. County farmers raised mushrooms, peppers, tomatoes, broccoli, strawberries, apples, and peas for the market, and on at least two occasions raspberries and huckleberries (Morely "Other Cash Crops"; Tri-State Growers "Ledgers"). In 1959 Tri-State Growers, Inc., invited Jack Leaver, a representative of the Gerber Product Company, to discuss growing vegetables for baby food, but the record does not state the board's reactions or if local farmers were made aware of the meeting (*Meeting Minutes 14 Apr. 1959*).

Bill Shull: County agent Johnny Walker came in trying to encourage people [in a] market for tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, cauliflower and all that stuff. Very few made a little money on it. Don Grindstaff had out broccoli and I think he lost his shirt on that. . . .The old county agent had my dad put out an acre of peppers and an acre of tomatoes, and [he] couldn't even give tomatoes away, couldn't give the peppers away.

Grasping at Straws

During the economic prosperity surrounding the World War II era, the “Bean Business” blossomed and growers viewed other cash crops as an addition to the lucrative snap bean industry. Throughout the following two decades farmers scrambled for an unattainable substitute. Where beans once dominated, the landscape evolved into a diverse mix of tobacco fields, silos, corn fields, and pastures. A variety of livestock and vegetable crops emerged in the county as farmers transitioned away from commercial beans.⁴² “They tried several different things, but nothing came up with the beans as far as helping people” (Bruce Simcox).

Walker’s comments in 1964 flagrantly ignore the willingness and adaptability farmers demonstrated by embracing commercial snap bean production twenty years earlier and later advances in tobacco cultivation and dairy farming. Echoing conventional agricultural and economic thought, Walker’s derision of the county’s farm population contributes to the stereotypical image of mountain agriculture, scoffing mountain farms as unproductive, tradition bound relics languishing in the modern age (Frost 1899; Hsiung 1997). Walker claims social and economic changes necessitating farmers substitute capital for labor within the last twenty years (circa 1944-1964) have proven “the small hill farmer . . . cannot continue to raise a big family like grandfather did on a rough mountain farm by back-breaking work” (Walker “Now Time”). Walker informed farmers they faced four choices: retire, sell out and “seek a better livelihood in some other part of the nation,” seek outside employment, or “stay with the farm, enlarge it and certainly make his efforts more efficient by utilizing all the available technology” (Walker “Now Time”). All told, poor choices for a

⁴² It is important to note county farms remained diversified throughout the years of commercial bean production.

population that spent the last three decades striving to acclimate into the modern world, and for the most part succeeding.

Agricultural prophets in the post-World War II world preached salvation through the gospels of technology and modernity. Technology in particular played a tremendous role in farm development and food systems both during and after the war. Advances in pest control, for example, allowed bean growers to combat the emerging bean beetle infestation.⁴³ However, technology had and continues to have its limitations, and one particular innovation became the curse of small bean growers: the mechanical bean picker.

The greatest expense in commercial bean production is accrued in the picking process (Bonser et al. 1945; Goble and Erwin 1966; Al-Habib 1967). Pickers were the cornerstone of the county's bean industry, and acquiring enough pickers to harvest the county's bean crop was an unending concern for growers. From the industry's earliest recorded period, bean growers, the newspaper, Tri-State Growers, Inc., the state extension office, and even the federal government spent considerable time and energy attempting to solve the county's annual labor problem.

On August 19, 1948, the *Johnson County News* republished an article originally appearing in the *Produce Packer*, entitled: "New Mechanical Bean Picker Makes Its Debut in New York" ("New"). The article describes the development of the innovative machine and according the editor, "a machine of this sort would work the same miracle in our Johnson county (sic) bean industry as the combine did in the West's astounding wheat production" ("New"). Obviously, the editor had forgotten the bean market collapse of 1947 was due in large part to overproduction that year and in years previous stimulated by war time price

⁴³ See Chapters 2 and 4.

supports. How could such a harsh lesson be so quickly dismissed in favor of technological innovation? Mechanical pickers did come to Johnson County, but only a few.

Tommy Walsh: They started getting those mechanical pickers. We had a couple of them. Our land just wasn't adapted to those mechanical pickers because they were picking up rocks and everything. They were growing [beans] on the Cumberland Plateau and up in Maryland and Wisconsin because they didn't have any rock, [their land] was more level. [We] couldn't run those pickers on the side of a hill.

Goble and Erwin's 1966 analysis of hand versus machine picking reveal the comparative advantage enjoyed by large growers who employed mechanical pickers over hand pickers. Mechanical pickers picked a minimum of two rows at a time, harvesting between 31.9 and 95.8 bushels per hour, a rate far surpassing hand pickers who averaged only 1.06 bushels per hour (Goble and Erwin 25). In one extreme example growers employing hand pickers netted \$7.80 per acre after labor expenses while growers under identical conditions using mechanical pickers averaged \$61.00 per acre (29). Goble and Erwin's study was based on 100 acre samples, an important footnote as only a minute fraction of Johnson County farmers raised 100 acres of beans. In fact, in 1964, two years before the Goble and Erwin study, the average farmer planted only 6.33 acres (Al-Habib 2). Goble and Erwin's study show the low profit margin of commercial snap beans necessitated large acreages harvested mechanically. The researchers do discuss smaller acreages and note that given certain variables growers raising between 17 and 38 acres of beans could potentially maintain their overall profitability employing hand pickers. However, their

projections reveal that regardless of acreage mechanical pickers outperformed their human counterparts in efficiency, productivity, and profitability (24).

Roby Howard, Jr.: We lost the market because when the bean pickers came in we didn't have enough level land to use them. We had a few . . . but if you're just going to plant four or five acres of beans you can't afford to go buy a bean picker. You could pick your beans for \$0.05 a bushel with a [mechanical] bean picker, and it'd cost you anything from \$0.50 to \$1.00 to get them picked by hand.

Johnson County bean growers who operated mechanical pickers unanimously agree the machines were poorly suited to the county's topography. Picking up rocks, destroying bean vines, and general dissatisfaction in the way the machine worked contributed to their negative assessment. Yet, they continued to employ them in attempt to prop up the struggling bean economy. Farmers faced increasing competition for labor from new textile plants moving into the county that not only reduced the available labor supply, but offered wages they were unable to match. In 1964, the average bushel of beans earned farmers \$1.85, twenty years earlier in 1944 beans averaged \$1.77, an average increase of \$0.08 over a twenty year period (Al-Habib 54; "History of the Tri-State Growers" 1).

Nelson Gray: They tried some mechanical pickers, but they didn't work well here in Johnson County because the terrain was too hilly for big machinery and things like that. Big machinery could only pick a field of beans once and it would almost destroy the beans that were left. Here before when we had bean pickers riding the trucks they would pick the beans that were ready to be picked off of each vine to sell that day. Then they would come back in maybe two or three weeks and more of those

beans would have grown and matured to the point they would pick three, four [times] maybe. I don't remember five times but they probably did. They would pick that same patch of beans four or five times during the summer and they couldn't do that with this heavy machinery.

Snap beans produce continually through the growing season. Mature beans hang alongside blooms and ripening pods. The first harvest, or "First Picking," was typically the largest crop, composed of the highest quality beans. Hand pickers scouted individual vines picking only the mature beans, allowing young beans the chance to mature for a later harvest. Mechanical pickers ripped off mature beans, immature beans, leaves, and vines leaving little more than barren stems in their wake. Mechanically picked beans required laborers to grade and sort beans, discarding trash and immature beans. Bean buyers' preferred "first picking" beans due to their consistent high quality, but small growers in particular regularly picked bean fields multiple times throughout the season. Subsequent harvests were typically not as profitable. Each time pickers harvested field they encountered a greater percentage of beans suffering from increased exposure to insects and disease, they displayed varying stages of maturity, and were fewer in number. However, they continued to provide an important source of income.

The price for the typical mechanical picker operating in Tennessee in 1964 was \$14,769.60, an impossible amount for small farmers whose average income from total farm sales amounted to \$2,212.00 that same year (Goble and Erwin 6; Al-Habib 16). In 1959 over 500 mechanical pickers were in operation around the country, many in Maryland, New York, and Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau (Walker "Farm Notes" 30 Dec. 1959). Extension agent

John Walker warned remaining bean growers: “The mechanization of snap bean production in northern producing states means cheap beans. Processors in our area must meet this competition. . . .More and better machines will no doubt continue to be made” (Walker “Farm Notes” 30 Dec. 1959). In a last ditch effort to salvage the county’s snap bean industry, Walker encouraged farmers to emphasize production of high quality beans, a historical advantage he hoped would work in their favor. Unfortunately, economics ruled the day and local growers were unable to compete.

The last bushel of beans sold in Johnson County was a lackluster affair. Unable to pin a definitive date on the event, oral narratives and written records lean towards a date circa 1969-1970. In 1969 there were 241 acres of commercial beans grown on 17 farms, sold predominately through direct marketing contracts to canneries such as Bush Brothers Canning Company (U.S. Census 1969). That same year 24 Cumberland County, Tennessee, farmers grew 4,562 acres.⁴⁴ The bean industry limped along for several years and rather than ending in a manner befitting its former grandeur, it passed quietly away. “One year they were buying [beans] and the next year there was no market” (Wade Snyder).

“Mountain Philosophy: We must keep in step”

Mountain City Mayor F. E Robinson, quoted in:
Johnson County Tennessee: The New and Strategic Locations for Industries with “The New Forward Look”

Johnson County experienced innumerable regional, national, and international changes between 1935 and 2013. Looking at the county’s history, particularly its agricultural history, important overarching themes bind the intervening years together. Recalling Chapter 1, both entrepreneurs J.T. Ray and banker Roby Howard lived in the county during a time of

⁴⁴ In 1969, the remaining bean growers in Johnson County raised an average of 14 acres of commercial beans per farm. In Cumberland County, farmers raised an average of 190 acres per farm.

economic distress. These men and their likeminded friends believed the solution to the county's economic woes was to fully integrate the county's entire social order into the greater national economy.

Persisting in a vigorous system of subsistence-first agriculture and barter exchanges, county farmers provided themselves with basic necessities and goods for sale or trade. In contrast, during the immediate pre- and particularly post-World War II world, the county found itself stricken with "Bean Fever," an ailment fueled by the ever greater movement of cash into the local economy. This affliction penetrated the entire population as bean acreage increased, growers produced record breaking yields, and laborers were hired by the thousands. "Bean Fever" evolved into "Bean Frenzy." Bean fields enveloped the county as men, women, children, and migrant workers from West Tennessee and the Bahamas labored amid literally untold millions of bushels of beans. From 1943 to 1960 Tri-State Growers, Inc., the county's primary bean market, sold 5,930,159 bushels of beans for a total of \$11,353,627.85 (*Meeting Minutes* 12 Feb. 1960).

Money garnered from commercial agriculture impacted the entire county's social organization as farms, tractors, school supplies, and countless other items were purchased with "Bean Money."⁴⁵ For several decades county residents held on to fragments of their old economy while enjoying the benefits offered by their budding success and nascent economic muscle. However, commercial bean production evolved into a proverbial double edged sword. Traditional economic, cultural, and agricultural systems were viewed with increasing disdain as the new economic model ushered in by "Bean Fever" usurped the traditional system. The deep agrarian economy operated on a foundation of resourcefulness and

⁴⁵ "Bean Money" was used to describe profits earned from bean sales. In a similar vein locals refer to "Tobacco Money," "Strawberry Money," "Milk Money," and etc.

practicality existing by and large outside the national cash economy.⁴⁶ For a newly emergent “modern” population, this was an unpardonable sin. As county extension agent John Walker explicitly stated in 1964, “Hardships were easier to endure when we did not have television and other modern communications” (Walker “Now Time”).

Residents did not thoughtlessly shrug off the end of the “Bean Business.” By the mid-1960s farmers were preoccupied milking cows, working in tobacco fields, raising beef cattle, and myriad other farm ventures. Former pickers found employment in the emerging textile industry as several plants began locating in the county in search of favorable tax incentives and cheap labor. Many small and medium sized farmers found regular employment a welcome source of income. Second shift, typically 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., was highly coveted, providing farmers several hours in the morning and early afternoon for farm work before clocking in to their factory job. The decades encompassing the mid-1960s through the late 1980s offered the county’s population opportunities not unlike the peak bean years, namely, the prospect of a cash income.

The increasing role of women as wage earners in the county transferred from the bean fields to the emergent textile industry. A high percentage of the county’s male population was employed in industrial work, but similar to the bean industry, women constituted the majority of the labor force. The prospect of full time rather than seasonal farm work allowed women and entire families to remain in the county and keep their farms as overall farm profitability diminished rapidly, particularly towards the latter part of the 1980s. Buttressed by industrialization, the short term prosperity Johnson County’s population enjoyed was fleeting, lasting only three decades.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 1, footnote 3.

The textile industry and other manufacturing firms left the county virtually en-masse by the late 1990s. Predominately relocating to the global south, these industries continue their search for ever cheaper labor, natural resources, and amenable trade and environmental regulations. Wage earners were forced to relocate, commute to jobs in adjoining counties and cities, or await new industries willing to locate in the county. Few new factories have moved into the county in recent years, and those that do have a short life expectancy. Repeatedly classified as “Distressed” by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the county’s poverty and unemployment rates continue to be some of the highest in Tennessee and in the Appalachian region (Appalachian Regional Commission “County Economic Status in Appalachia, FY 2013”).

Arguably, the county’s current economic plight is not unlike that of the pre-bean era, but with important exceptions. For instance, in 2007 the Census of Agriculture counted 513 farms averaging 85 acres, approximately half were less than 49 acres in size (340). In comparison, the average farm size in Johnson County per the USDA census of 1940 was 62.6 acres, and one half of the total 1,740 farms were less than 33.5 acres (170). There is currently only one dairy operating in the county and following the federal tobacco buyout in 2004; only 136 acres of tobacco were grown on 22 farms in 2007, a staggering decrease from 1997 when the census documented 451 farmers raising 1,078 acres (483; 479).

Despite the loss of historically important sources of farm revenue the county maintains strong ties to its agrarian past. Farmers increasing rely on beef cattle and hay as their primary source of farm income. Several small flocks of sheep and goats graze hillside pastures, weekly livestock auctions sell literally hundreds of chickens and small animals, and families continue to raise large gardens where green beans remain a permanent fixture. The

Tri-State Growers Inc., no longer operates an auction market, but continues to sell seeds, farm machinery, and household supplies. Their current slogan claims the cooperative is “1,000 stores in one.”

Interestingly, within the last decade the county has been presented with a wide range of proposals as means to preserve the county’s agricultural infrastructure and keep families on their land. These proposals range from conventional agribusiness models to the creation of a farmer’s market. All have received support from the farming community. Two in particular are worth noting.

In 2003 Wiley Roark, grandson of Wiley Barton (W.B.) Mount,⁴⁷ and business partner Jerry Anderson began preparations for locating a Class II⁴⁸ concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) in the county. Housing 699⁴⁹ mature dairy cows, High Mountain Holsteins was slated to be the first modern dairy CAFO not only in the region but in the state (von Mangan “Mountain City CAFO”; Hughes “TDEC”). A number of local farmers supported the project and were interested in raising feed for the operation while partaking of the facility’s waste as a source of fertilizer. Boasting the largest proposed manure lagoons in the state capable of holding approximately 12 million gallons of manure and other animal waste annually, there would have been plenty to go around (Thompson “Johnson river”(sic)). Extension agent Rick Thomason was a vocal proponent of the project. In a statement made at a public meeting in 2004, Thomason claimed rural areas “struggle to provide new innovative methods” and “sound agricultural practices are necessary to our survival” (Tager

⁴⁷ Mount played a leading role in the development of Johnson County’s green bean industry and the organization of the Tri-State Growers, Inc., see Chapter 1.

⁴⁸ CAFOs are classified based on the number of livestock they contain. In the case of dairy CAFOs, Class II operations manage 200-699 cows while Class I operations manage 700+. Regulations, particularly those pertaining to the Clean Air and Water Act, differ according to the size of the CAFO. Class I operations undergo a strict permitting process and face rigid waste regulations while Class II operations are allowed to discharge pollutants directly into “waters of the state” (Hill 1).

⁴⁹ According to newspaper reports, the total number was between 690 and 699, with 699 reported most often.

“Meeting”). The “survival” Thomason referred to resonated with many in the farming community. Former dairy farmers were particularly anxious to raise the millions of bushels of corn and thousands of tons of hay the facility required. Not only would they profit from the CAFO, thereby bolstering their own farms, but they would be contributing to the next stage of agriculture’s evolutionary history, thereby maintaining the county’s farming legacy. However, this “innovative method” was vehemently opposed by a large percentage of the population.

Residents living near the proposed site, including the county’s sole veterinarian, environmental advocates, and concerned citizens, banded together in opposition to the project forming Watauga Watershed Alliance.⁵⁰ The alliance was a dynamic organization publishing articles in the local paper and distributing stark “No CAFO” yard signs that appeared across the county. They also filed a lawsuit against the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), alleging the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) refused to consider legitimate local concerns during the permitting and appeals process (von Mangan “Mountain City CAFO”; Shekinak⁵¹ “Johnson City (sic)⁵² Sierra Residents”). Both sides fought for public opinion between 2003 and 2007, and both instigated legislative action from the local to federal level. The protracted struggle ended with the horrific death of Jerry Anderson’s wife Emily. Charged with his wife’s murder, Anderson spent a year and half in jail, but was acquitted in 2007 after a jury failed to reach a verdict (“Murder Charges”). The partnership between Anderson and Roark dissolved. Roark renamed the company Dairy Operations Inc., and attempted to

⁵⁰ Johnson County Citizens Committee for Clean Air and Water was the group’s original name.

⁵¹ This article is attributed to Dennis Shekinak, but the author’s real name is Dennis Shekinah and is listed in the Works Cited under Shekinak.

⁵² Johnson County is often mistakenly referred to as Johnson City.

transfer the permit, but to date no further action has been taken to establish the CAFO (von Mangan “Proposed CAFO”).

One year later, in 2008, the Johnson County Community Foundation hosted a “Local Food Lunch” to discuss marketing avenues for local farmers. Many attendees indicated their concern about the county’s food security⁵³and were interested in possible steps to increase the region’s “food self-sufficiency” (McNaughton et al. 3). Representatives from the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) presented on local markets, local food systems, and how their organization supported small farmers. A small task force volunteered to begin collecting food security data, and in May 2009 the group applied for a United States Department of Agriculture National Institute for Food and Agriculture grant to fund an official community food assessment.

In February 2009, a local businessman offered to provide a location for a farmer’s market. In March a well-attended meeting revealed wide support for establishing a farmer’s market, and after concentrated effort by the market’s new board of directors, on May 30 the Johnson County Farmers Market held its first market day. Several vendors attended this first market selling local produce, plants, and crafts while enjoying music provided by community members and fellow vendors. The market organized monthly mini-festivals as a way to draw in customers as well as vendors. In August they held their first “Tomato/ Bean Festival.” Offering free tomato biscuits and bowls of beans for market goers, a table lined with crockpots brimming with green beans was the day’s centerpiece. Curious shoppers sampled a wide variety of predominately heirloom bean varieties prepared by vendors, and enjoyed a

⁵³ The term food security has largely been replaced by food sovereignty. Traditional definitions of food security relate primarily to food availability, regardless of type and distribution. Food sovereignty, on the other hand, is concerned with a people group or community’s right to define its food system in regards to production, land use, land distribution, and social and ecological concerns.

display of newspaper clippings and pictures documenting the county's heyday as the "Green Bean Capital of the World."

The community food assessment project received funding to conduct an in-depth review of the county's food economy in September 2009. Buoyed by a successful first season, the farmer's market board agreed to administer the project. Following an exhaustive year of community meetings and research conducted by principal investigator Tamara McNaughton and volunteers from the community, the Johnson County Food Security Counsel, students from Appalachian State University in neighboring Boone, North Carolina, and East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee, the study was completed in 2010. The project's findings were presented to the Mountain City Town Council and the Johnson County Commission in hopes both groups would adopt the plan as part of their community economic strategies.

Entitled "Community Food Security in Johnson County, Tennessee, A Local Food Strategy for Self-Sufficiency, Economic Development, and Community Engagement" the study found "The extent to which Johnson County families struggle with the cost of food, hunger, and household food insecurity is distressing" (78). Ironically, the former "Green Bean Capital of the World" has difficulty feeding its population.

An important aspect of the food security assessment was participant responses to questions regarding their vision for the county's future. What residents wanted were "good jobs, no more hunger, a sense of community, and self-sufficiency," sentiments eerily similar to those of county residents during the 1930s and people around the world today (78). Unfortunately the county's historical emphasis on export commodities including beans, tobacco, and textiles, has not proved sufficient to address these issues in the long term.

The study's primary focus was food accessibility but included strategies to meet that need while simultaneously improving the county's overall economic outlook, particularly its agricultural infrastructure. Some of the action plans included encouraging community gardens; establishing educational programs on gardening, food preservation, and nutrition; encouraging new agripreneurs; and providing financial and marketing assistance to farmers and the newly created farmer's market (64, 78-79).

The farmer's market is a welcome addition to the county and regular vendors continue to earn a modest profit. Beginning with less than a dozen vendors, the market has weathered apathy, a change in location, and many obstacles emergent nonprofit organizations face. It is currently preparing for its fifth season and a number of community gardens continue to be grown. According the market's website low income shoppers are able to use SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) to purchase fresh produce, and thanks to a grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation, EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) transactions are doubled through the market's double dollars program⁵⁴ (*Johnson County Farmers Market*). This has not been without controversy and the market's potential to fortify the county's agricultural economy is limited.⁵⁵ The market is heralded as the great success it is, but unfortunately the county's current agricultural outlook is virtually identical to the years prior to the assessment.

Farmers' markets are an attempt to recreate a fragment of an entire system that no longer exists, and in some cases never existed. The shift from traditional livelihood patterns to those obtainable through modernity and free market capitalism destroyed the traditional

⁵⁴ For example if a person receiving SNAP food stamp assistance charges \$10.00 on their SNAP card the market gives that person another \$10.00 in tokens to spend at the market. At the end of the day vendors turn in their tokens and are reimbursed in cash.

⁵⁵ McNaughton et al. addresses this issue throughout the 2010 community food security assessment.

economic and social structures existing prior to and during the early bean industry. Informants cited in the community food assessment often refer to the farmer's market as something akin to the old bean market, though the two systems are diametrically opposed.

High Mountain Holsteins, the Johnson County Farmers Market, and the community food assessment presented the county with conflicting routes towards their agricultural future. It is hard to envision the dairy CAFO's positive contributions outweighing its untold negative repercussions on the county's ecosystem and social, agricultural, and economic organization. The facility would have provided some economic benefits to the county, not unlike that of an industrial complex, but it is impossible to estimate its total positive contribution. The farmers market, on the other hand, attempts something similar but in a drastically divergent manner. Both reveal the county's longing to re-create its agrarian past garnished with the adornments of the twenty-first century, while employing the historic flexibility of the farming community.

Net losses in farm numbers, rising median farm size, increasing specialization, subsistence gardens, and tensions between corporate and local food production systems (the CAFO and the farmer's market) are indicative of the third food regime (1980s-present), often referred to as the corporate food regime. Increasing centralization of food production, manipulation of production (subsidies) and distribution (food aid), coupled with global sourcing of high value food stuffs driven by the capitalist market economy co-exist with "various forms of localism," making the third food regime a junction of contradictory principles (McMichael, "A Food Regime Genealogy,"142). Johnson County residents and farmers struggle to mitigate the tensions between these principles and "'a world agriculture' (food from nowhere) [CAFO's] and a placed-based form of agro-ecology (food from

somewhere) [farmer's markets]" (147). This pattern is repeated across the globe as rural people navigate between opposing economic systems and livelihood strategies. Unlike the transitional period between the first and second food regimes when local farmers profited from relatively small scale niche commercial bean production, small growers producing agricultural products in the current corporate food regime are increasingly marginalized (146). This marginalization not only affects the farming population, but also communities, regions, and nations.⁵⁶

County residents remain flexible, resilient, and eager to make their mark on the world, but what will that mark be? If the farming community continues to search externally for the next export commodity, the next "Green Gold," will it find it? If residents continue their course of export commodity production it is unlikely the county's economy will improve. As has been demonstrated first by the bean industry, and later by the dairy and tobacco industries, small, mountain farms cannot survive as models of conventional agricultural systems in the corporate food regime. Waiting for a repeat of the "Bean Business" will not only delay the county's economic recovery but it will curtail opportunities for establishing a sustainable agricultural system.

If the farming population is to survive they must begin to look internally. The county possesses many assets. Residents must find ways to sustainably utilize those resources while preserving its environment, its communities, and cultural capital in the twenty-first century. The current generation needs to discover a path future generations can build upon, not only look back at with nostalgia. "Johnson County was the 'Bean Capital of the World,' and [that] makes you feel proud about the way you were brought up" (Bill Shull). If the county starts today what can it accomplish that future generations can be proud of?

⁵⁶ See Boyer, Halperin, Scott, and Edelman.

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Figures:
Remembering the “Green Bean Capital of the World”

THURSDAY, JUNE 24, 1943

SELL YOUR BEANS WITH NEIGHBORS

AT . . .

TRI - STATE GROWERS, INCORPORATED

A FARMERS COOPERATIVE MARKET

Our market is your market in that you can own an interest by buying one share of common stock at \$5 and then you share in the profits. For example, if we charge you 5c to sell your beans and it costs only 2 cents, you get back 3 cents at the end of the year. So, if you have any beans to sell, you no doubt will profit to trade with us.

Should You Not Be Interested In Sharing In The Profits, We Will Sell Your Beans At Auction Like Any Other Market.

Visit Our Shed And Look Over Our Setup Before You Sell.

MARKET OPENS ON FRIDAY, JUNE 25

WE CAN GRADE AND HAMPER YOUR BEANS READY FOR THE MARKET AT A VERY SMALL COST, AND BY SO DOING YOU CAN REALIZE VERY TOP PRICES FOR YOUR BEANS.

WE WILL HAVE STATE AND FEDERAL INSPECTORS SO THERE WILL BE NO QUESTION AS TO GRADE OF BEANS YOU WILL HAVE TO SELL.

THE FARMERS OF THIS SECTION OWN THIS MARKET, SO HELP YOUR NEIGHBOR AND YOURSELF BY

BRINGING YOUR BEANS TO THE

TRI-STATE GROWERS, INC.

MOUNTAIN CITY, TENN.

WM. B. CARTER, Mgr.

R. J. HOWARD President	E. E. ROBINSON Vice-President	W. B. MOUNT Secy-Treas.
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Figure 1: Advertisement for the Tri-State Growers, Inc. Originally printed in the *Johnson County News* 24 June 1943.

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"LITTLE RAGGED JOE STILL HANGIN' - ON!"

The Johnson County Auction Market is now open for the 1943 bean season. We assure a sincere welcome to all buyers who see fit to work with our market. We have appreciated their cooperation in previous years, and it is our hope that we have convinced them that their confidence in us is merited. Bean growers all know that only fair methods exist on this market, and will bring their beans here knowing that they will get highest market prices for their grades. We appreciate our growers, and are anticipating seeing them all and renewing their acquaintance.

LET'S LIVE AND LET LIVE!

We urge that all samples be representative, that prices be in proportion to value, and that we have no lobbying of any sort on our market.

YOU HAVE NO MEMBERSHIP FEES TO PAY
TO SELL ON THIS MARKET

JOHNSON COUNTY AUCTION MARKET

J. N. BLACKBURN, *Mgr.* G. M. LONG, *Auct.*

Figure 2: Advertisement for Joe Blackburn's Johnson County Auction Market. Originally printed in the *Johnson County News* 30 June 1943.

THE JOHNSON COUNTY NEWS
THURS., OCT. 8, 1943

WE WISH TO THANK

* * *

THE GROWERS

FOR THEIR LOYAL SUPPORT
AND PATRONAGE

For The Many Years We Have
Been Working Together In Build-
ing Up The

LARGEST AND MOST SUCCESSFUL BEAN AUCTION MARKET IN THE SOUTH!

The Johnson County Market Has
Handled The Bulk Of The 1943
Crop, And We Hope
To Your Satisfaction.

"Though Our Trials Have Been
Many" - Our Services Are Yours
To Command

Again We Say
Thanks!

* * *

THE BUYERS

* * *

Max E. Beverly, Inc.	Vernon Stinchcomb
Ollie Craddock	L. R. Morris
S. Otis Sullivan Co.	Clifford Rhea
Pete Scuran	E. L. Moore
Paul Long	Frank Shirley
S. B. McFadden	David Bennett
Ruby Canning Co.	I. M. Harris
Frozen Products Corp.	C. C. Thomas
Sloan and White	I. M. Bennett
Stokley Canning Co.	Hanes & Co.
Bush Bros. Canning Co.	S. F. Ringley
Grey Henson	W. N. Vandylke
R. S. Kent	Johnson Motley
O. E. Brown	Basel Shores
Dedmon Produce Co.	Miller Curb Market
Horton Produce Co.	J. B. Whitter
Fred Graybeal	George Mickel
R. Keziah	J. A. Steele
Allen Cook	J. B. Saxon
W. T. Shepherd	Denver Collins
L. Peterson	Roy Riddle
D. C. Case	Winner Produce Co.
E. C. Russell	William Hooks
Cash Produce Co.	E. A. Miller
Glenn McCay	C. C. Bennett

Here's Hoping You Can All Be With Us Again Next Season

* * *

THE JOHNSON COUNTY MARKET

JOE BLACKBURN, OWNER-MANAGER

"The Market That Never Closes"

ATTEND THE GREAT
DANIEL GRAHAM MEETING
Now Being Held In One of Our Sheds

Mountain City, Tennessee

COUPON

Do Not Sign Our Coupon — Just Bring In The Beans For The High Dollar

Figure 3: Advertisement from Joe Blackburn's Johnson County Market. Originally printed in the *Johnson County News* 8 Oct. 1943.

PUBLIC FARMERS' MEETING

SPONSORED BY
TRI-STATE GROWERS, Inc.

AND
SOUTHERN STATES COOPERATIVE

Saturday, June 24, 1944 -- 2 p. m.

Johnson County High School, Mountain City, Tenn.

MUSIC BY JOHNSON COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL BAND

GUEST SPEAKERS

DR. C. E. BREHM, Director, Tennessee Extension Service

W. G. WYSOR, General Manager, Southern States Cooperative

JOHN A. DULANEY, Tri-State Growers, Inc.

J. B. MOUNT, Manager, Tri-State Growers,

Will Conduct an Open Forum

Contests : Free Prizes : Fun

CONTESTS: Lucky Number, Catching Greasy Pig, Climbing Bean Pole.

PRIZES: 500 lbs. Open Formula Fertilizer, Tendergreen Beans, \$5.00 Bill, 50 lbs. Cryo-talc Dust, 25 lbs. 75 Dust, 10 lbs. 620 Dust.

\$100.00 CASH PRIZES DONATED BY BUSINESSMEN
OF JOHNSON COUNTY

ALL FARM FOLKS INVITED

THE BAND WILL START PLAYING AT 1:45 P. M. BE ON TIME!

Figure 4: Advertisement for the public farmers' meetings sponsored by the Tri-State Growers, Inc. Originally printed in the *Johnson County News* 24 June 1944.

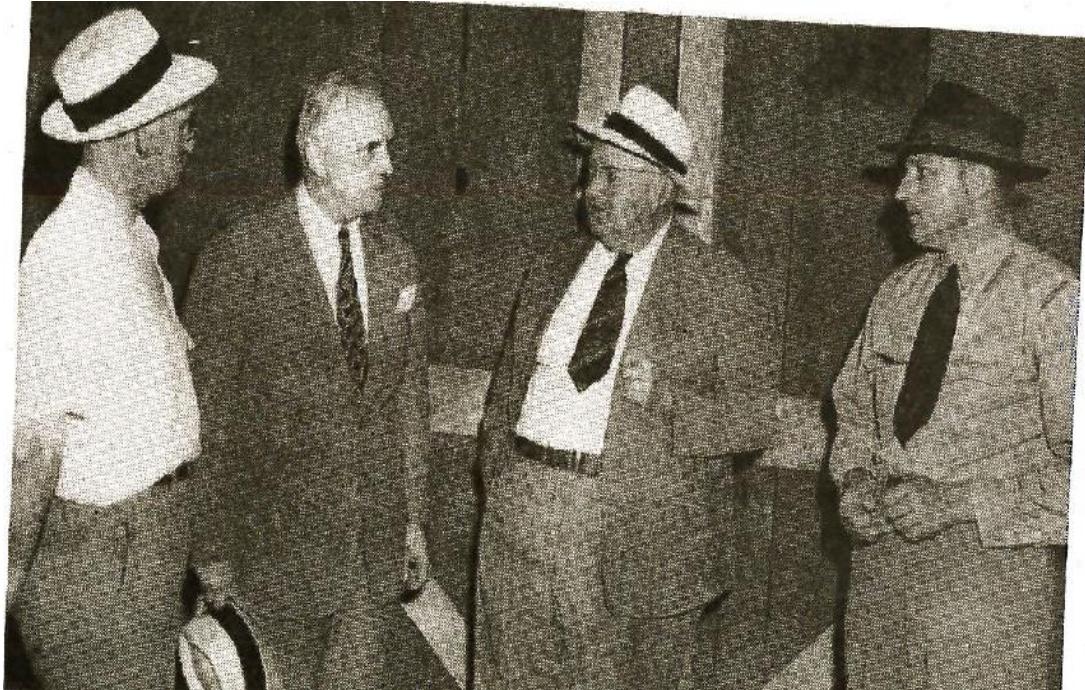


Figure 5: From left are Barton (J.B.) Mount, Merton Corey, Wiley (W.B.) Mount, and county agent H.A. Russell. Original photograph by R. Pugh, Jr., and printed in *Country Gentleman* magazine Apr. 1946.

Attend The Great

JOHNSON COUNTY FESTIVAL

To Be Held In

_MOUNTAIN CITY, TENNESSEE

WORLD'S GREEN BEAN CENTER . . . ONE BIG DAY

WED., SEPT. 3

<p>★ BEAN EXHIBITS</p> <p>★ MAMMOTH PARADE</p> <p>★ BEAUTY CONTEST</p>	<p>★ PARACHUTE JUMP</p> <p>★ BIG CARNIVAL</p> <p>★ MANY OTHER FEATURES</p>
--	--

... TO BE GIVEN AWAY ...

NEW KAISER AUTOMOBILE

NEW FIRESTONE RADIO

NEW BENDIX WASHING MACHINE

SEN. TOM STEWART AND REP. DAYTON PHILLIPS

WILL MAKE ADDRESSES

Meals Served By Johnson County Parent-Teacher Council

Figure 6: Advertisement for the first Johnson County Green Bean Festival. Originally printed in the *Johnson County News* 28 Aug. 1947.



PRIZE WINNING FLOAT—Sponsored by the Mountain City Junior Chamber of Commerce, this float (above) was awarded first prize in a contest for the best and most original float. Miss Mary Jo Stout, Jaycee queen candidate, is pictured on top of the world (on the float), which depicts Johnson county as the bean center of the world. (Photo courtesy of the Johnson City Press-Chronicle.)

Figure 7: Photograph and caption originally printed in the *Johnson County News* 11 Sept. 1947.

BEANS FROM THE FIELD TO THE MARKET



PICKING

Figure 8: Migrant workers picking beans. Originally printed in the *Souvenir Program 1951 Johnson County Bean Festival*.

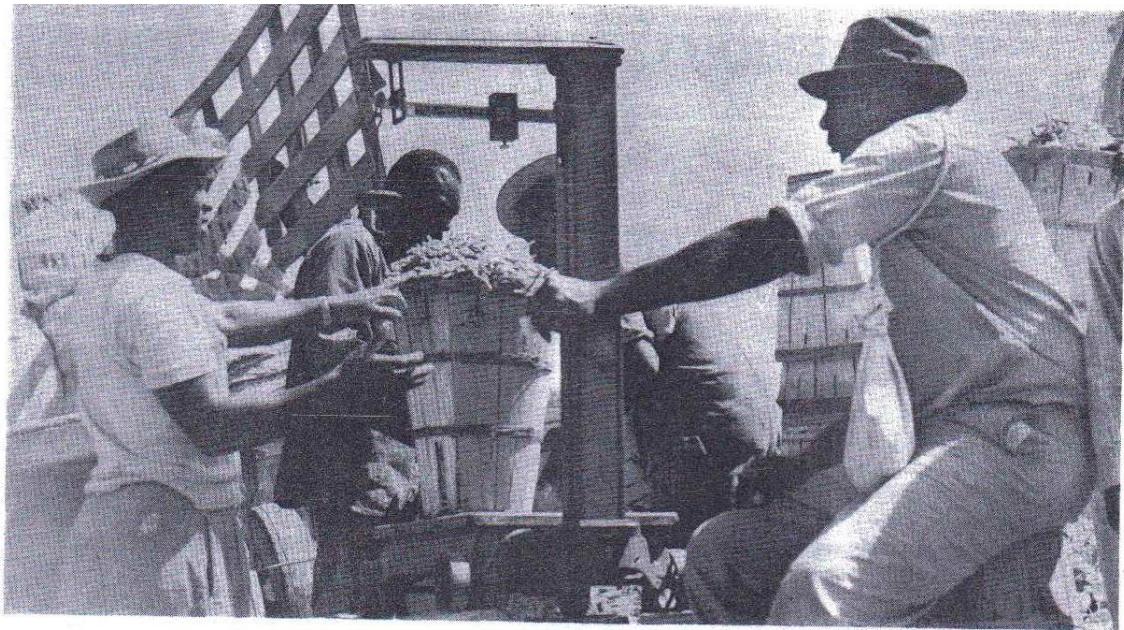
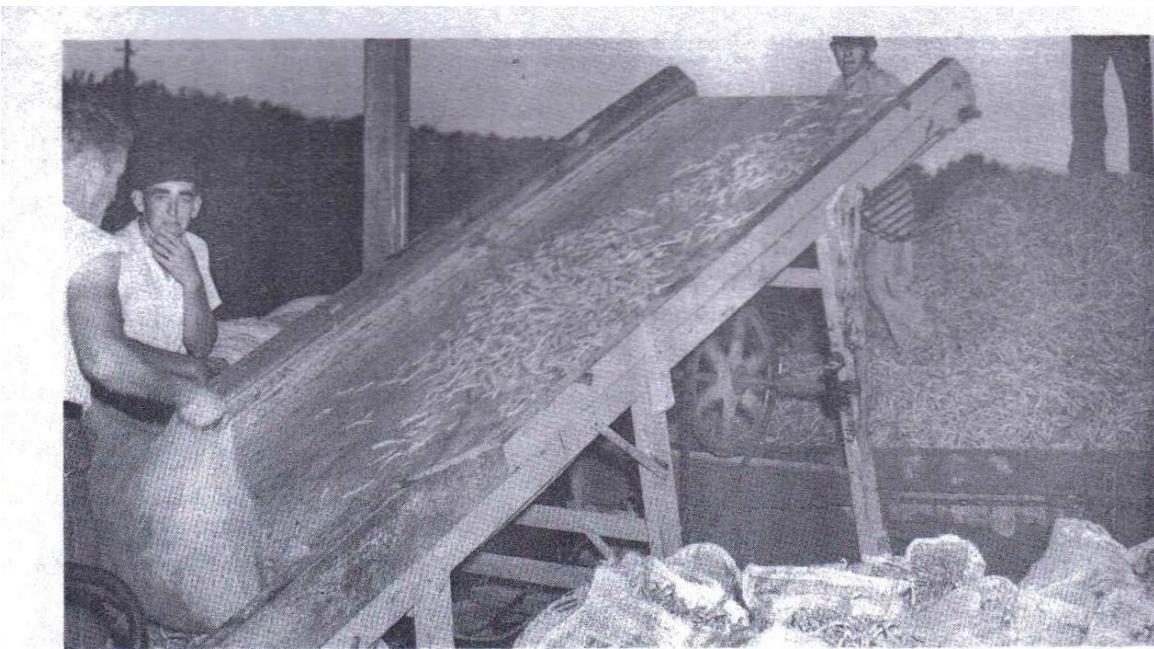


Figure 9: Migrant workers weighing beans. Originally printed in the *Souvenir Program 1951 Johnson County Bean Festival*.



SCENE AT THE BEAN MARKET

Figure 10: Scene at the bean market. Originally printed in the *Souvenir Program 1950 Johnson County Bean Festival*.



LOADING

Figure 11: Loading beans at the market. Originally printed in the *Souvenir Program 1951 Johnson County Bean Festival*.

Figure 12: Farm income of R.V. Ward for 1957. Snap bean sales accounted for all vegetable income. Courtesy of Rosa Ward.

TRI-STATE GROWERS, Inc.
MOUNTAIN CITY, TENN.
"Accounting to Members for Sales"

Nº 9509 Date 8-19 1963

Name Mack Reece
 Address Avenue
 Commodity Shelly Variety _____
 Approx. Bu. 42 Graded _____ Ungraded _____
 Price 125
 Buyer D. F. Fowler
 Gross Weight _____
 Tare _____
 Net Pounds 42 Bu. 25 lbs
 Bushels _____
 Gross amount due grower \$ 75.00
 LESS 74.95
 Comm. Bu. \$ _____
 Grading _____
 No. Hampers \$ _____ 3.75
 Total deductions \$ 3.66
 Net amount due grower \$ 69.84
 Paid by Check No. 71-20
 Buyer's Okay D. F. Fowler

IMPORTANT

You must present your copy of this statement to secure hampers.
 KEEP THIS COPY, as you must turn it into the OFFICE together
 with the Weighman's sheet to get paid.
 NOTICE: Tare on hampers with lids 4 pounds.
 Tare on hampers without lids 3 pounds.
 Tare on sacks one-half pound each.
 FOR FASTER SERVICE COUNT YOUR SACKS AND TELL THE
 WEIGHMAN HOW MANY YOU HAVE.

THE KING PRINTING CO., BRISTOL, TENN.—63684

Figure 13: Sales receipt from the Tri-State Growers, Inc., 1963, showing sale of shelly beans.
 Courtesy of Lynda Bunting, daughter of Mack Reece.

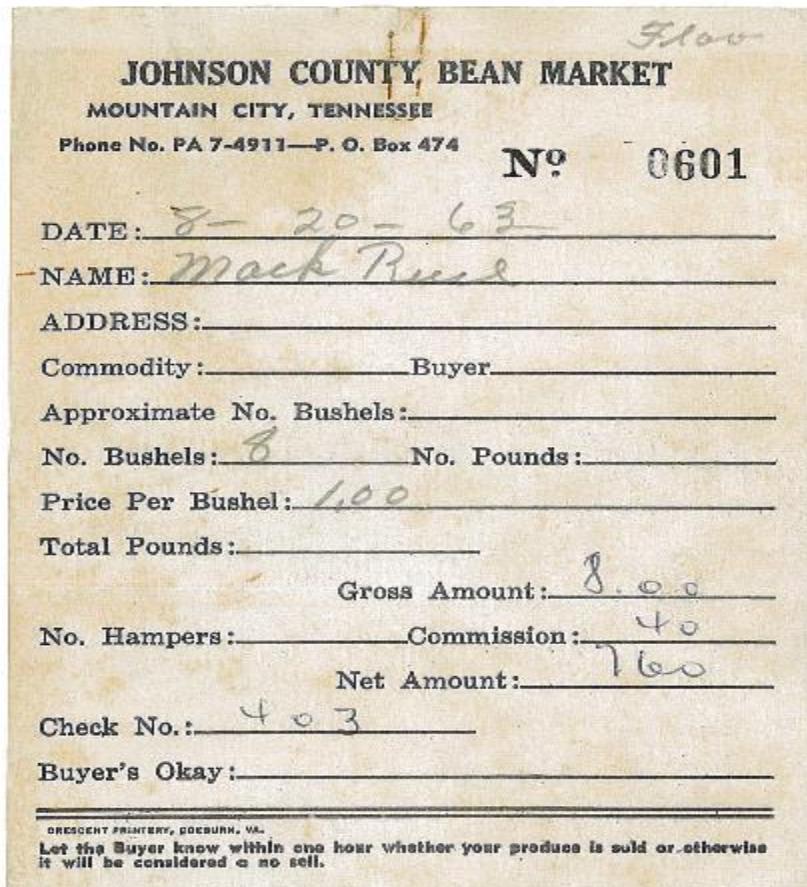
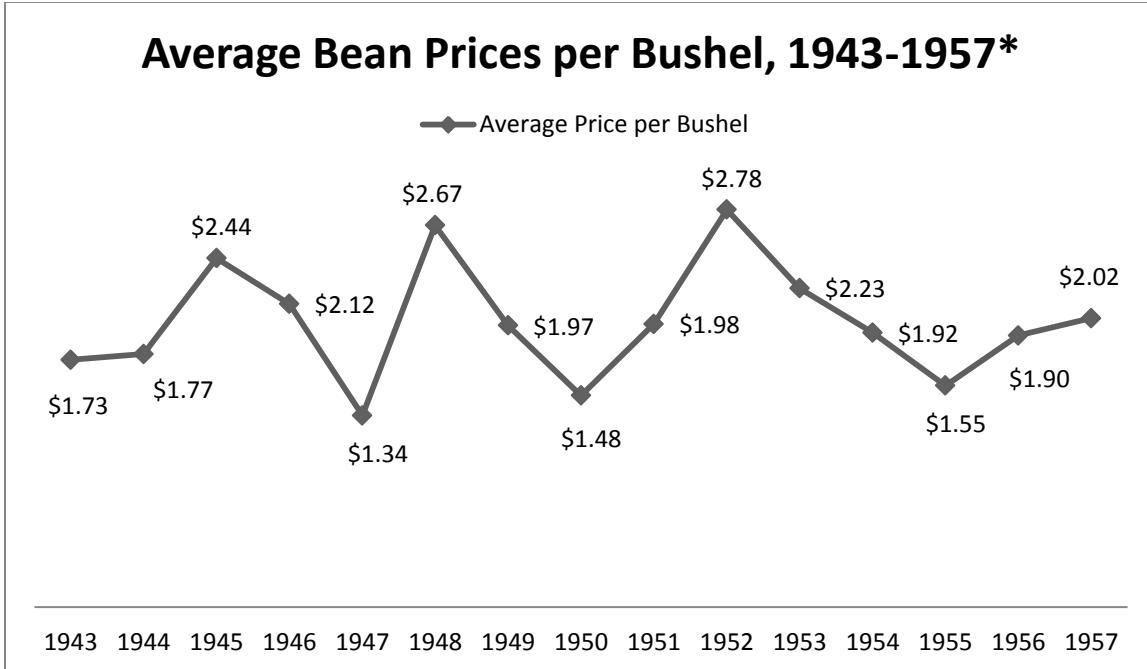


Figure 14: Sales receipt from the Johnson County Bean Market 1963, showing sale of snap beans. Courtesy of Lynda Bunting, daughter of Mack Reece.



Figure 15: Two unidentified children pictured with bean hamper. Photograph originally printed in *Souvenir Program 1951 Johnson County Bean Festival*.



*Data extrapolated from the “History of the Tri-State Growers, Inc.”

Figure 16: Average Bean Prices per Bushel, 1943-1957

Vita

Billy Ward II is a native of Johnson County, TN. He earned his Bachelor's degree from East Tennessee State University and a Master's degree in Appalachian Studies from Appalachian State University. He currently manages his family farm where he raises sheep and operates a raw milk cow share program. Academic interests include Appalachian Studies, Agrarian Studies, sustainable agriculture, and old time music.