

ABSTRACT

John Craft Taylor, "Depression and New Deal in Pendleton: A History of a West Virginia County from the Great Crash to Pearl Harbor, 1929-1941." Ph.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1980, 890 pages.

The Great Depression represented the collapse of a complex and interdependent national economy, but in 1929 important elements of the economy, society, and culture of Pendleton County were those of a quasi frontier. Occupying the Ridge and Valley physiographic province, sparsely peopled and ruggedly mountainous Pendleton lacked coal deposits and permanent railroads. She exhibited many characteristics common to the isolated Southern Appalachians, especially the Region's highly self-sufficient agricultural sections. Over four-fifths of county farms were unmortgaged, though these were two and one-half times larger and somewhat more commercialized than the Southern Mountain average. Unlike the Highlands generally, where the original timber had been largely exhausted, logging and sawmilling in Pendleton's vast expanses of virgin forest provided supplemental cash incomes to part-time and subsistence farm families. Most inhabitants could avail themselves of the merchantable products of nearby forest and bald, such as furs, ginseng, walnuts, and berries. The lively social life of country neighborhoods afforded a sense of community and psychological support to the participants.

Instead of a single emergency, the 1930s introduced the triple calamity of plummeting farm prices, the failure of all three county banks late in 1931, and severe drought, particularly in 1930. Bereft of local banking facilities for more than five years, countians revived and expanded the institution of barter. Most resorted to even greater self-sufficiency. The depression prompted a back-to-the-farm movement, contracted the stream of youth emigrating to urban employment, and temporarily increased the county's population. Easing the crisis considerably were New Deal farm mortgage moratoria and RA-FSA rehabilitation loans and debt adjustment efforts. Forced sales of farms were proportionately less than one-sixth of the national average in the nadir of 1932-33. At that time almost a third of Pendleton families were labeled as destitute, compared to about ninety percent in the hardest hit Southern Mountain counties.

The myriad of New Deal projects had a revolutionary impact on Pendleton, an isolated county poor in taxable resources and physical assets. Among the advances sponsored by the alphabetical agencies were the beginnings of rural

electrification, conservation work by the CCC in the county's two national forests, achievement of longstanding Extension Service soil conservation goals under AAA-ACP auspices, and construction or renovation of numerous public properties. The RFC, CWA, FERA, and WPA built over 300 miles of roads. All-weather secondary routes penetrated remote hollows for the first time. FERA work and direct relief benefits immediately raised the pre-depression living standards of many families. The local example and effort of the New Deal, in close collaboration with the Extension Service, contributed to an efflorescence of social organization and activity and modernized the outlook of many persons rooted in the archaic folk culture. Without the stimulus of a national emergency, these improvements might have been delayed for additional decades.

At the state level, constitutional tax limitation forced an extreme centralization in Charleston of financial responsibility for secondary roads, schools, and welfare in 1933, hitherto areas almost wholly under local administration, and compelled a shift from primary reliance on local direct property levies to statewide indirect taxation. Massive infusions of state subsidies upgraded enormously the quality of governmental services delivered to Pendletonians while their realty taxes were cut by sixty percent. State aid to county schools tripled over the decade, and a modern welfare system replaced a pitifully inadequate poor law dating from colonial times.

In brief, the experience of the 1930s hastened the breakdown of Pendleton's physical and cultural isolation and accelerated her integration into the mainstream of American life.