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Uneasy Waters: The Night Riders at Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee, 1908

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Jama McMurtery Grove
December 2012

Dr. Tom D. Lee, Chair
Dr. Steven E. Nash
Dr. Emmett M. Essin III

Keywords: Reelfoot Lake, night riders, agriculture, Progressivism, Tennessee

ABSTRACT

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On October 19, 1908, night riders at Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee kidnapped and murdered Captain Quentin Rankin, an attorney and shareholder in the West Tennessee Land Company. The murder made national news, with coverage emphasizing the night riders' demand for fishing rights. In response, Governor Malcolm Patterson called out the militia to suppress the uprising and advocated for state acquisition of the lake as a means to prevent further violence. In the accepted historical narrative, the uprising at Reelfoot Lake represents an example of rural resistance to the threat that modernization posed to traditional access rights but ignores much of the violence that preceded Rankin's murder. When contextualized within local conditions and Tennessee's political climate, the night riders' crimes reveal a targeted attack on the exploding cotton economy in which the lake became the arena where farmers contested the agricultural, social, and political changes that accompanied this new economic system.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Today, the languid waters and unyielding cypress trees of Reelfoot Lake State Park belie both the violence that created the lake and the violence that occurred in the region surrounding it nearly a century later, but the park's very existence owes much to its violent past. On October 19, 1908, after months of escalating violence in the region of Tennessee and Kentucky surrounding Reelfoot Lake, night riders kidnapped two prominent, white attorneys, murdered one, and allowed the other to escape. Accounts of the attack filled the front pages of state and national papers. In response, Tennessee Governor Malcolm Rice Patterson suspended his re-election campaign, called out the state militia, and traveled to Reelfoot to oversee the investigation into the kidnapping and murder. By the conclusion of the inquiry, over 300 West Tennesseans had been detained for questioning regarding night riding and six had been found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. Moreover, Governor Patterson had begun actively seeking to bring the lake under state control in order to squelch the conflict over lake access and fishing rights that had seemingly motivated the violence. The purchase of the lake became an act of Progressive Era conservation and a first step toward the creation of state parks in Tennessee, but underlying the narrative remained the claim that the violence Patterson sought to quell related directly to the lake. Recent historical scholarship on similarly violent episodes and new interpretations of acts of environmental conservation suggest that a reconsideration of events at Reelfoot is in order. More than merely a matter of lake access and fishing rights, the events at Reelfoot Lake resulted from the complex interaction of economic, social, and cultural forces specific to the Reelfoot Lake area and to the early twentieth century. These events reflect in

microcosm the relationships of race, class, and culture in the Progressive Era and complicate the notion of conservation by challenging the roots of conservation at Reelfoot.

Reelfoot Lake was created between December 1811 and February 1812, when a series of powerful earthquakes jolted the region with sufficient force to disrupt the flow of the Mississippi River. When the tremors quieted, the shallow waters of newly created Reelfoot Lake submerged over 25,000 acres of land. For decades, residents treated the lake as a shared natural resource, but the earlier titles issued by North Carolina and Tennessee remained in effect, changing hands through sale and inheritance. A landowner first attempted to claim Reelfoot Lake as private property during the 1860s, but he dropped the claim when residents resisted. Between 1898 and 1905, residents blocked efforts to claim private ownership of Reelfoot Lake through a series of successful court challenges.¹

In 1908, the West Tennessee Land Company overcame the legal objections to private ownership of the lake, announced the company's private control of the lake, and initiated legal action against locals who disregarded or disobeyed the company's restrictions on public access to lake resources. Locals organized into a band of night riders and, on April 12, 1908, destroyed John Carlos Burdick's fish docks. Between April and October of 1908, the night riders committed numerous crimes, but when the night riders murdered Quentin Rankin, Tennessee Governor Malcolm Patterson responded quickly. Backed by the force of the state militia, Patterson quelled the uprising and began advocating for state ownership of Reelfoot Lake. In 1909, the state legislature approved the purchase of Reelfoot Lake in order to prevent future conflicts and preserve the lake for all Tennesseans, but landowners delayed state acquisition by

¹ Paul Vanderwood, *Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1969), 7-10.

mounting court challenges that contested the state’s right to condemn the property under the lake. In 1914, the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled that the state could acquire the property through condemnation and purchase; the state of Tennessee purchased all land below the “ordinary low-water mark” of Reelfoot Lake.²

The state acquired the lakebed, but court contests between the state and landholders persisted. As the level of the lake rose and fell without regard to the state’s designated low-water mark, property owners challenged the state boundary through court cases and physical encroachment. For years, the state struggled to contain the lake inside the boundary lines drawn by the state surveyor. In 1917, the Tennessee Department of Highways and Public Works and the Tennessee Department of Game and Fish began three years of levee construction aimed at regulating the water level. The state legislature instructed the state game warden, who administered state land at Reelfoot, to keep the water at a consistent level. Levees, spillways, and the game warden failed to contain the lake.³

Eleven years later, Tennessee governor Austin Peay attributed ongoing land disputes to the state’s “vague and uncertain boundary” and argued that “there [was] no proper course except for the State to acquire a sufficient area surrounding this lake and end all agitation with its absolute ownership.”⁴ Peay tasked the Tennessee State Park and Forestry Commission with establishing precise boundaries at Reelfoot Lake and with managing and controlling all potential parklands within the state. These political solutions proved almost as ineffective as earlier efforts to stabilize the waters. Although both Patterson and Peay conceived of Reelfoot Lake as

² Vanderwood, 11-12, 144-147; Jim Johnson, *Rivers Under Siege: The Troubled Saga of West Tennessee's Wetlands* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 90.

³ Johnson, 89-91.

⁴ Tennessee, *House Journal of the Sixty-Fourth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, (Nashville: n.p.), 33.

a park, the legislature disbanded the Tennessee State Park and Forestry Commission in 1931 and delegated their powers to the Department of Game and Fish.⁵ During the New Deal, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) developed recreational lands across Tennessee. Between 1934 and 1937, a CCC camp at Reelfoot Lake cleared trees, built picnic areas, and erected check-in stations for hunters and fishermen.⁶ In 1937, the state established the Tennessee Department of Conservation to oversee several new parks, but the lake remained under the administration of the Game and Fish Commission. The lake did not officially enter Tennessee's park system until 1956, when the Game and Fish Commission transferred 60 acres of land to the Department of Conservation.⁷

Paul Vanderwood, the only historian to offer a monograph on the night riding at Reelfoot Lake, credited the night riders for compelling the conservation of the lake because their efforts to “free Reelfoot Lake from the land company's monopoly” forced the state's acquisition and management of the lake.⁸ Vanderwood assumed that the state of Tennessee acted as a neutral arbiter in the dispute; once Governor Malcolm Patterson decided to intervene, the mechanisms of state authority mediated on behalf of both the West Tennessee Land Company and the local residents. Vanderwood saw the night riders as isolated from and bewildered by an increasingly modern world. Their violent actions represented the desperate, reflexive response of simple, uneducated “people reacting to modernization, [as a result of] the movement from a rural to an

⁵James Don Milton, “A History of the Reelfoot Lake Biological Station” (MS thesis, University of Tennessee at Martin, 1969), 5, http://scholarship.utm.edu/69/1/LD5300_M29K_0008.pdf (accessed October 1, 2012).

⁶Carol van West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 179.

⁷Bevley R. Coleman, “A History of State Parks in Tennessee” (PhD dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1963; reprint, [Nashville]: Tennessee Department of Conservation, Educational Service, 1967), 386.

⁸Vanderwood, 17.

urban mentality.”⁹ The night riders were unable to restore lake access directly, but after the state of Tennessee prosecuted their crimes, the government acted on their behalf and freed the lake from private control.

Vanderwood focused on the night riders’ demands for lake access and fishing rights, but the night riders’ spree of property destruction, beatings, and murders included many crimes unrelated to lake access or commercial fishing rights. In October, before they attacked Quentin Rankin and Robert Z. Taylor, the night riders massacred an entire African American family. Between April and October, the night riders committed a number of other crimes that also targeted African Americans or whites who profited from African American farm labor, but Vanderwood dismissed race as a motivating factor in the uprising. The night riders’ first and last attacks, the burning of J. C. Burdick’s fish docks in April and the murder of Quentin Rankin in October, targeted white men involved in restricting fishing access to Reelfoot Lake. Attacks on African Americans were neither notable nor new, but newspaper editors and politicians noticed violence targeted at whites. News reports of the violence at Reelfoot Lake emphasized the night riders’ unique demand for lake access; Malcolm Patterson’s advocacy for state ownership of the lake reinforced the perception of the night rider violence as a battle for lake access and fishing rights.

The press and the state gave rhetorical primacy to fishing rights, and this perspective influenced Vanderwood’s analysis, which leaned heavily on news accounts of the uprising. Although his own meticulously reconstructed chronicle included crimes that suggest the night riders were concerned with racial and economic conditions beyond lake access, Vanderwood

⁹ Kathy Krone, “Author Says Night Riders’ Struggle for Social Justice Now Mirrored in Iraq,” *State Gazette*, November 18, 2003, <http://www.stategazette.com/story/1057873.html> (accessed February 22, 2012); Vanderwood, 20.

argued that the night riders were incapable of mounting an assault against complex social or political structures. He wrote, “[The night riders] were neither administrators nor innovators. Few, if any, could even write a legible letter.”¹⁰ Decades of state action to solidify Tennessee’s claim to Reelfoot Lake and contemporary news reports of the violence suggested that the night riders sought nothing more than the restoration of fishing rights at Reelfoot Lake. Vanderwood confirmed this narrative and created a scholarly foundation for the mythology of the night riders as simple people who went too far in an effort to save Reelfoot Lake.

Vanderwood uncritically accepted early governmental conservation efforts as democratic and universally beneficial, an assumption which many historians shared during the 1950s and 1960s. Whitney Cross believed that both Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s land policies pursued the fundamentally democratic goal of preserving the character-building aspects of wilderness for all Americans.¹¹ J. Leonard Bates and Freeman Tilden agreed that conservationists were altruistic progressives motivated by an overwhelming democratic impulse and intent on preserving nature from corporate exploitation.¹²

In 1959, Samuel P. Hays refuted the interpretative tradition that framed conservation as an idealistic, democratic return to nature and launched a historical re-examination of the conservation movement. In *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, Hays argued that the conservation movement was primarily concerned with efficient production, rather than lofty intangible ideals. For Hays, conservation was not an attempt to go back to nature but an effort to put technicians in control of nature. Conservationists relied on technicians to achieve “rational

¹⁰ Vanderwood, 30.

¹¹ Whitney Cross, “Ideas in Politics: The Conservation Policies of the Two Roosevelts,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14, no. 3 (June 1953): 421-438.

¹² J. Leonard Bates, “Fulfilling American Democracy: The Conservation Movement, 1907-1921,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44, no. 1 (June 1957): 29-57.

planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources.”¹³

A subsequent analysis by Roderick Nash revealed that urban ideology and economic considerations, not democratic ideals, typically determined which lands were marked for national conservation. Nash argued that the creation of national parks revealed tensions between urban conservationists and rural inhabitants of the land. Nature tourists and the preservation movement from “the East and civilized islands in the West, like San Francisco”¹⁴ pushed for the conservation of remote ‘wilderness’ areas. These supposedly wild areas, however, provided the homes and livelihoods of local residents, who often responded to urban conservation efforts with indifference or hostility.

In *The Roots of Southern Populism*, Steven Hahn incorporated agricultural, environmental, and social conditions into his analysis of upcountry Georgia between 1850 and 1890. Hahn argued that small, independent landowners regarded traditional access to land as an inherited right and recognized the importance of that right in maintaining their economic position. Consequentially, farmers regarded that right as more legitimate than new legal restrictions based on the sovereignty of private property. Hahn argued that the transition of southern plantation owners from labor lords to landlords resulted in the elevation of private property rights over traditional access and the spread of market production and the mechanisms of credit and debt, all of which pushed former smallholders toward tenancy. For Hahn, southern Populism found widespread support among Georgia’s upcountry farmers because of these post-

¹³ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959; reprint Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1999), 1 (page citations are to the reprint edition), 2.

¹⁴ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 345.

Civil War economic changes.¹⁵

More recently, William Cronon and Karl Jacoby revealed that conservationist rhetoric and traditional interpretations of the conservation movement depended on the denigration of rural people. Cronon argued that urban-industrial capitalism enabled people to imagine an ahistorical and unnatural nature that existed separate and apart from humans. Rural people continued to depend on the productive capacities of rural landscapes for their livelihoods, but urbanites imagined an unpeopled landscape as a panacea against the failures of urban living and increasingly perceived the lives of rural people as polluting the imaginary wilderness they sought to create.¹⁶ Karl Jacoby reconstructed the sparsely documented lives of the people who conservationists disdained by reading the primary sources created by conservationists. Interpreting these documents without the assumption that everyone except a few outliers benefited from governmental conservation efforts, Jacoby found that, when distant politicians passed conservation laws, rural residents who derived their living from the land transformed overnight from productive citizens to outlaws and poachers.¹⁷

The mythology of the Reelfoot Lake uprising relies on the assumptions that early conservation efforts were fundamentally fair, democratic, and universally beneficial, but environmental historians have consistently undermined these fundamental assumptions. When considered within this interpretative tradition, the microhistory of Reelfoot Lake belies the myth contained within the prevailing historical narrative. Farmers, fishermen, and landowners alike

¹⁵ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹⁶ William Cronon, ed., "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90.

¹⁷ Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, and Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

derived their livelihoods from the lake, the fields that the lake nourished, or the bluffs that contained the waters. In the rural economy around Reelfoot Lake, the lake set environmental conditions that limited or expanded almost everyone's productive capacity. Consequentially, lake access played a dominant role in the conflict between the night riders and the land company, but a close analysis of the Reelfoot Lake uprising reveals that the night riders were responding to agricultural, social, and political pressures that extended far beyond fishing rights. When contextualized within these broader themes, the Reelfoot Lake uprising also reveals the economic, racial, and political conditions that fueled political will toward an early act of unintentional conservation in Tennessee. The lake exerted a heavy influence on the lives of people who lived on its shores, but it did not isolate people from the national trends of Populism and Progressivism that swept across the state during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although the first analysis of the Populist movement, John D. Hicks' 1931 *The Populist Revolt*, emphasized the Midwest and ignored the South, subsequent historians have demonstrated that iterations of agrarian reform, Populism, and Progressivism exerted significant influence on the direction of the national reform impulse.¹⁸ C. Vann Woodward established the strength of the southern reform impulse in *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*. For Woodward, the South played a central role in the Populists' efforts to enact economically rational solutions to systemic problems, but appeals to white supremacy and conservative resistance undermined moderate support and contributed to Populism's collapse.¹⁹ In *Origins of the New South*, Woodward connected nineteenth-century agrarian reform to southern Progressivism: "It [southern

¹⁸ John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt, a History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1931).

¹⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1938).

Progressivism] sprouted in the soil that had nourished Populism, but it lacked the agrarian cast and the radical edge that had frightened the middle class away from the earlier movement.”²⁰

Woodward established connections between southern Populism and Progressivism, but Arthur Link believed that many historians continued to subscribe to the “popular notion that such a thing as progressive democracy in the South was non-existent during the period 1870-1914.”²¹

Link called on other historians to step beyond the perception of the South as backward and mired in apolitical institutions to examine how iterations of southern Progressivism achieved political change within the boundaries imposed by racial prejudice and southern political institutions.

Woodward saw dissatisfied agrarians and the Progressive reformers who they influenced as pursuing economically rational reforms, but Richard Hofstadter established an alternative interpretive tradition. Hofstadter perceived both Populists and Progressives as struggling to regain societal status that had been lost when the acquisitive values of business replaced the traditional agrarian ideal. Hofstadter proposed that a status revolution begun after the Civil War created a gap between farmers and the businessmen who profited economically and socially from the accompanying social changes. In Populism, Hofstadter saw the contradictory impulses of a “soft” devotion to the agrarian myth, which led Populists to attempt to re-create a Utopian past, and a “hard” recognition of the need to adopt modern business practices. Although unable to overcome these contradictory tendencies themselves, Populists influenced the next generation of reformers. In the 1890s, the first generation raised in the new status economy came of age. The prospect of drastic societal reorganization during a time of economic crisis threatened people

²⁰C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913*, ([Baton Rouge]: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 371.

²¹ Arthur Link, “Progressive Movement in the South, 1870-1914,” in *Myth and Southern History*, vol. 2, ed. Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 60.

who had an investment in the existing system. Consequently, the economic depression of the 1890s frightened the new middle class into timidity, but they embraced the reform effort as economic conditions improved during the early twentieth century. Hofstadter argued that, for Progressives, increased governmental power was a necessary counterbalance against the dangerous and potentially destabilizing concentrations of wealth and power. Ultimately, Progressives succeeded “in fending off the battle of social extremes.”²²

Gabriel Kolko argued that businessmen, not middle-class progressives, benefited most from Progressive Era reforms. Through a close analysis of business conditions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kolko argued that, for the majority of businesses, mergers failed to produce monopoly control or increased profits. With mergers failing to eliminate competition and reformers pressuring state politicians to enact sweeping reforms aimed at dismantling the existing structure of wealth and power, businessmen turned to federal regulation as a way to sate the popular demand for oversight while implementing reforms that buttressed the status quo. In Kolko’s analysis, middle-class reformers did not compel the government to restrict corporations. Instead, businessmen harnessed the rhetoric of reform and colluded with government officials to enact regulations that solidified their own wealth and power.²³

Scholars analyzing the Progressive Era uncovered a shifting and often contradictory range of reformers, rhetoric, and programs that made it increasingly difficult to define a unified, national Progressive movement. Facing this fractured, issue-focused mass of reform movements, Peter Filene questioned the value of the term “Progressivism” itself, arguing that without unified

²² Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 243.

²³ Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism; A Re-Interpretation of American History, 1900-1916* ([New York]: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 302.

members or goals the term was meaningless.²⁴ Jack Temple Kirby recognized that southern Progressivism was more of a pervasive sentiment than a unified movement but argued that southern Progressives saw racial and electoral controls as prerequisites for all other social improvement programs. The threat of radical racial alliances disappeared as voters united behind a program of black disfranchisement that joined rural anti-trust sentiments with the urban drive for organization. As a result, “most ‘progressive’ reform came about ultimately at the sufferance of shrewd men interested mainly in their own continued control.”²⁵ Anti-trust sentiment pervaded the South, but with the focus of southern reform directed at the separation of the races, conservative southern reforms reinforced the existing social order.

Although historical analyses of Populism and Progressivism usually emphasized either the nineteenth or twentieth century reform movements, most historians recognized Populist influences on the later Progressive movement. Lawrence Goodwyn drew a firm line at the 1896 nomination of William Jennings Bryan. For Goodwyn, Populism derived its strength from a movement culture developed during earlier agrarian reform efforts. In *Democratic Promise*, the first national study of Populism since Hicks’ *The Populist Revolt*, Goodwyn positioned Populism as a rational, admirable attempt to imagine a democratic society built on cooperative values. Goodwyn argued that racism lay outside the movement culture, which he perceived as the core of Populism. For Goodwyn, twentieth century reforms sought only to tweak systems that the movement culture of Populism had promised to remake.²⁶

²⁴Peter G. Filene, “An Obituary for ‘The Progressive Movement,’” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring, 1970): 20-34.

²⁵Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), 43.

²⁶Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

For Charles Postel, Goodwyn's analysis represented a compelling historical tragedy that "fits within the larger narrative of the defeat of traditional society by modernity," but revealed little about Populists' lives, motivations, or aspirations.²⁷ Postel argued that Populists envisioned a future in which science, technology, economies of scale, and progress worked in favor of the producer class. Postel also rejected Hofstadter's argument that Populist devotion to a "soft" agrarian ideal limited the movement's ability to formulate effective business solutions. Postel's analysis revealed that Populists were deeply modern and highly committed to influencing business practices in ways that served their self-interest. Almost every aspect of the Populist movement hinged on faith in science and modernity. Agrarian reformers, nonconformists, and dissatisfied producers found Populism's message appealing. The Farmers' Alliance offered business-focused educational programs, encouraged farmers to defy stereotypes that cast rural people as ignorant, and welcomed women into leadership positions. Populist reformers targeted railroads, banks, and the monetary system because they viewed these systems "as antiquated, premodern obstacles to progress."²⁸ Postel recognized that Populist support for Chinese exclusion in California and the hardening of segregation in the South revealed a faith in modern improvements, not a devotion to tradition. Southern Populists were not stuck in the quagmire of deeply entrenched, traditional racism. Along with other white southerners, they saw "white supremacy and racial separatism as cornerstones of modern, scientific, and progressive race relations."²⁹ Unlike Goodwyn, Postel saw continuities between Populism and Progressivism, but he argued that Progressive reformers reduced the broad and widely democratic reforms proposed by Populists to narrow changes implemented by a small group of experts.

²⁷ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 270.

²⁸ Postel, 150.

²⁹ Postel, 202.

Historians looking at political trends have addressed the role race played within the Populist and Progressive movements, but other scholars have directly examined the dramatic escalation of racial violence that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. Richard Maxwell Brown and Ted Robert Gurr saw violence as a persistent theme in American history. Brown saw violence as a basic tool of class and ethnic conflicts. He argued that frontier lynching often served as a stabilizing force in a community where effective mechanisms of law and order did not exist, but that whites used extralegal violence like lynching as a mechanism for social control following the end of slavery. Gurr drew categorical distinctions between different forms of violence. In his analysis, “the perception that other groups or circumstances prevent people from realizing their value expectations [was] a necessary condition for political protest and rebellion.”³⁰ For Gurr, violence represented a risky, but rational, political action which groups deployed to achieve either conservative or reformist goals. The most common form of terrorism in the United States, vigilante terrorism as exemplified by lynching and the Ku Klux Klan, used intimidation and violence to achieve conservative social goals, elicited widespread popular support, and often achieved significant success.³¹

In *Lynching in the New South*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage uncovered changes to the patterns of lynching over time by examining lynching in Georgia and Virginia between 1880 and 1930. To track these changes, Brundage divided lynch mobs into three groups: terrorist, mass, and private. Unlike mass mobs, which dispersed after a lynching, and private mobs, which were typically the friends and family of the reported victim, terrorist mobs did not form spontaneously

³⁰ Ted Robert Gurr, “The History of Protest, Rebellion, and Reform in America: An Overview,” in *Violence in America*, vol. 2, ed. Ted Robert Gurr (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989), 14.

³¹ Ted Robert Gurr, “Political Terrorism: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Trends,” in *Violence in America*, vol. 2, ed. Ted Robert Gurr (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989), 204-206.

in response to a specific incident and they often maintained organization over long periods. Mobs lynched most victims following accusations of murder, rape, or serious physical attacks, but occasionally mobs lynched victims for minor offenses. Terrorist mobs committed fewer than twelve percent of the lynchings that Brundage analyzed, but between 1890 and 1910, they committed the majority of lynchings for minor offenses. Brundage argued that terrorist mobs used violence as a weapon for social control, moral regulation, or as a means to “shore up their increasingly vulnerable economic status.”³² Most lynching victims were black, but the few white victims in Brundage’s analysis revealed that “even in the act of lynching, whites drew a line separating the races.”³³ In both Georgia and Virginia, mobs lynched white victims occasionally during the 1880s and 1890s, but with each passing decade, whites increasingly reserved lynching as a punishment for African Americans. Unlike violence against African Americans, violence against white victims carried a high likelihood of reprisal. All the white victims whom Brundage analyzed stood accused of particularly heinous crimes. The mobs involved were smaller and calmer than the mobs that attacked black victims and the mobs killed white victims swiftly.

Although the bulk of historical literature focuses on national or regional trends, historians have also provided secondary literature that describes the unique conditions within Tennessee during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians writing in both the Hofstadter and Woodward traditions have examined the Populist revolt in Tennessee. Writing in the Hofstadter tradition, Richard Hart examined Tennessee politics between 1870 and 1896. Hart determined that wealthier farmers occupied leadership positions within the Alliance, and that

³²W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 24.

³³ Brundage, 92.

after they won political offices in 1891, these Alliancemen voted with the Democrats.

Ultimately, Hart argued that the nineteenth century farmers' movements offered little more than rhetoric, which restored the diminished social status of wealthier farmers and propelled them into office. He argued that Tennessee's agrarian reformers were consistently weak and never posed a significant threat to the existing political structure. Consequentially, Hart ended his analysis with the defeat of the national People's Party in 1896.

Hart's examination of Populism in Tennessee relied on a strict political analysis, an approach that Connie Lester argued artificially isolated political reform efforts from the broader pattern of agrarian unrest. In her book, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell*, Lester united political, agricultural, and environmental approaches to argue that the unified political action of the Populists was only one of the many forms that agrarian reform took during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Tennessee, agrarian political action arose from farmers' desire to effect substantial change on their material conditions, not as a way to achieve political power itself. Despite the impression conveyed by pure political analyses, "the agrarian movement did not begin with the Farmers' Alliance in 1886 and end with the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in 1896."³⁴ Lester extended her analysis from 1870 to 1915 to examine the various approaches adopted by farmers who "recognized the changing economy of the period and demanded the tools to participate in that change as independent producers, not hired hands."³⁵ By extending her vision beyond the narrow focus of politics, Lester revealed that Tennessee's agrarian reformers posed consistent threats to entrenched hierarchies of power. For Lester, when the broadly based Populist Party collapsed, the agrarian movement splintered but did not disappear.

³⁴Connie L. Lester, *The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870-1915* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 4.

³⁵ Lester, 249.

Lester identified two divergent branches of agrarian reform that emerged after the collapse of Populism. Some agrarian reformers joined the Farmers' Union, which aimed to provide tangible benefits to members through a business-oriented approach to farming. Many of these reformers entered the developing agricultural bureaucracy and "added their voices to the Progressive reshaping of American life."³⁶ Other farmers responded by creating narrow, local groups that focused on a specific location or commodity. Lester argued that, in both the Black Patch region of Tennessee and Kentucky and around Reelfoot Lake, these sorts of organizations blended "older forms of community vigilantism and newer judicial and bureaucratic pressures" to achieve their goals.³⁷

Although the night riders at Reelfoot Lake shared many characteristics with the Black Patch night riders, the organizations were distinct. Christopher Waldrep demonstrated that the Black Patch night riders formed with the sanction and guidance of the elite leadership who controlled the Planter's Protective Association (PPA). In 1907, the elite planters lost control of the night riders. While guided by the planters, the Black Patch night riders had enacted violence that Waldrep characterized as traditional. They initiated restrained attacks against specific people who were obstructing their goals in an effort to terrorize or coerce the offender into line. After the night riders shook free of the planters' guidance, they initiated violence that Waldrep characterized as modern. In these attacks, the night riders launched vicious, deadly attacks against African Americans in an effort to terrorize all African Americans.³⁸ As Brundage revealed, the lynching of white men was very rare after 1900 and always carried a heavy risk of

³⁶ Lester, 249.

³⁷ Lester, 247.

³⁸ Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890-1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

reprisal, even when the victim was relatively unknown and accused of a heinous crime. When the Black Patch night riders selected their own victims, they minimized the likelihood of reprisals by targeting African Americans. No official authorities or powerful elites sanctioned the actions of the night riders at Reelfoot Lake or protected the members of the band, but the violence that they enacted was much more dangerous than the violence that the Black Patch night riders committed while operating on their own authority. In 1908, the night riders of Reelfoot Lake lynched a white lawyer of prominence and influence and riddled his body with bullets. Taken within the existing narrative, and considering the high risk of reprisal associated with this type of crime, their actions seem inexplicable.

In a brief review of the Cross Timbers fence cutting war that erupted in Texas during the 1880s, Charles Postel revealed how dramatically interpretations of events can change when historians consider distinct, local conditions. Postel offered his summary of historian Robert McMath's portrayal of the Cross Timbers conflict, which McMath compared to the English enclosure movement: "The precapitalist farmers of Cross Timbers, as with their English peasant counterparts, fought to defend a traditional culture based on mutuality, limited property rights in land, and self-sufficiency."³⁹ Next, Postel revealed that, during the conflict, farmers in Cross Timbers were working to increase settlement, raise real estate values, and strengthen market connections in an effort to incite a land boom and improve their environment. Conflicts flared between ranchers and farmers when settlement encroached on land claimed by corporate land syndicates, which farmers perceived as obstacles to progressive agricultural development. Postel concluded, "Such was the context of the fence wars across the farmers' frontier, where two

³⁹ Postel, 27.

patterns of private property rights overlapped, one favoring the rancher, the other the farmer.”⁴⁰

Recently, David Correia proposed a similar reinterpretation of *Los Gorras Blancas* (the white caps) of New Mexico. Correia contextualized Los Gorras Blancas’ fence cutting campaign using the framework of political ecology, which examines environmental issues through conflict. Scholars developed political ecology as a method for accounting for the roles that local history, political power relationships, and social conditions exert in resource conflicts. In political ecology, the environment acts as “an arena of contested entitlements, a theater in which conflicts or claims over property, assets, labor and the politics of recognition play themselves out.”⁴¹

The prevailing historical narrative of Los Gorras Blancas portrayed the violence as an effort to preserve traditional rights. In 1889, Los Gorras Blancas initiated a violent fence cutting campaign against Anglo settlers and commercial interests who enclosed land within the Town of Las Vegas Land Grant, which Mexico issued to settlers during the 1830s. Under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, the United States was obligated to respect Mexican land grants, but the residents of Las Vegas and the United States government interpreted the terms of that agreement differently.⁴²

Correia revealed that the arrival of the railroad in Las Vegas accelerated economic changes, including the expansion of timber and grazing operations, which had been occurring for years. These dramatic changes remade the economy, transforming Hispano smallholders into wage laborers. Although the actions and rhetoric of Los Gorras Blancas expressed an “explicit challenge to the... newly emerging economic order,” newspapers and territorial officials, both of

⁴⁰ Postel, 28.

⁴¹ Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts, “Violent Environments,” in *Violent Environments*, ed. Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 25.

⁴²Robert W. Larson “The White Caps of New Mexico: A Study of Ethnic Militancy in the Southwest,” *Pacific Historical Review* 44, no. 2 (May 1975): 171-185.

whom shared an interest in the emerging economic order, portrayed Los Gorras Blancas' as ignorant and dismissed their larger goals. Los Gorras Blancas were overtly political. Leaders in the organization created chapters of the Knights of Labor throughout San Miguel County and secured the support of the local Populist Party; voters elected a known leader of the group to territorial government during the fence cutting campaign. Despite their political successes, interpretations of Los Gorras Blancas emphasized their interest in preserving tradition instead of their critique of "the social upheaval that followed the arrival of barbed wire fencing, railroad development, and large-scale commercial ranching."⁴³

Historians have revealed the erroneous assumptions that permeated uncritical histories of the conservation movement, uncovered the central role that race played in the southern iterations of both Populism and Progressivism, revealed the fundamentally conservative nature of Progressive Era reforms, and questioned the motives that led reformers to denigrate local people. The uprising at Reelfoot Lake represents a narrow slice of time, but the events surrounding the night riders' campaign touch on each of these themes. Although they chose tactics similar to other terrorist organizations of the time, the night riders at Reelfoot Lake responded to intensely local conditions. Charles Postel's analysis of the Cross Timbers fence cutting war and David Correia's examination of Los Gorras Blancas suggest that even in their intense focus on local conditions, the night riders at Reelfoot Lake were not unique.

The violence that erupted around Reelfoot Lake in 1908 was neither an inexplicable anomaly nor the reflexive backlash of traditionalists against modernization. Instead, the lake became the arena where farmers contested the cotton economy, which excluded them from

⁴³David Correia, "Retribution Will Be Their Reward: New Mexico's Las Gorras Blancas and the Fight for the Las Vegas Land Grant Commons" *Radical History Review* no. 108 (Fall 2010): 67.

participation, and the agricultural, social, and political changes that accompanied the new economic system. The night rider's broad critique of the cotton economy threatened a system that served landlords, local elites, and politicians, but locals seeking fishing access posed little threat of dismantling the existing power of wealth and authority. State acquisition legitimized the portrayal of the uprising as an effort to save the lake rather than a critique of the cotton economy. In this context, state acquisition of Reelfoot Lake protected and perpetuated the cotton economy by diverting attention away from the night riders' actual critique.

Connie Lester wrote that "the Reelfoot Lake uprising invites us to re-evaluate our assumptions about the resistance to modernity that infuses rural historiography."⁴⁴ The chapters that follow respond to that invitation by providing a microhistory of the Reelfoot Lake uprising aimed at uncovering the conditions that informed the night rider violence and state's response. The first chapter establishes the agricultural and economic changes that the area around Reelfoot Lake experienced between 1870 and 1910, when cotton cultivation, and the African American laborers who increasingly farmed that cotton for large landlords, moved into the region. The second chapter situates the actual outbreak of violence in 1908 alongside agricultural conditions and details the night rider attacks. The final chapter explores the political conditions that informed Governor Malcolm Patterson's intervention at Reelfoot Lake. Although the majority of his political support arose from his urban Progressive base, during his campaigns Patterson positioned himself as the inheritor of the agrarian reform impulse. Patterson risked alienating carefully cultivated rural voters by intervening in the night riders' attacks on African Americans and the expanding cotton economy, but neither Patterson nor his urban voter base would allow

⁴⁴ Connie Lester, "Lester's Response to Walker on Lester,_Up From the Mudsills of Hell_," message to H-Net List Editor Derek W. Frisby, March 21, 2007, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-tennessee> (accessed February 3, 2012).

poor whites to vent their frustrations on prominent white men.

Patterson's urban Progressive base operated from assumptions that necessarily denigrated rural life as backward and ignorant. These assumptions, not the actual conditions around Reelfoot Lake, established a narrative that portrayed the murder of Captain Rankin as an exceptionally violent response by locals attempting to protect traditional fishing rights. Just four days after Rankin's death, northern Episcopal minister Charles F. Scofield explained "the viewpoint of the poor outlaws" to readers of *The New York Times*. "The poor natives have enjoyed the privilege of hunting and fishing on the lake without hindrance ... [and] had come to regard the privilege as a right," Scofield wrote. These privileges fell outside the law, but Scofield asked readers, "Yet could you expect the crude, illiterate fishermen to see the matter in the legal light?" Despite the natives' lawless actions, the reverend exhorted readers that the "primitive people" at Reelfoot Lake were "not outlaws in the ordinary sense of the word. They are native-born Americans of pure Anglo-Saxon blood and act as their ancestors would." Scofield admonished readers to respond to the violence committed by their living ancestors not with condemnation but with missionaries and teachers to hone their "keen native sense of justice" and rectify their "condition of ignorance."⁴⁵

Scofield saw all rural productive activities as primitive, but he particularly emphasized fishing as evidence that lake residents were mired in an ancestral state. In positioning lake residents as the living ancestors of his urban audience, he dismissed rural life as a relic of a bygone era while preserving the possibility of rural uplift; teachers and ministers who shared the positive qualities that Scofield attributed to a pure Anglo-Saxon bloodline could harness those

⁴⁵ Scofield, Charles F., "Reelfoot Lake: A Plea For the Inhabitants of That Region," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1908.

traits and lead rural people into the modern era through education and outreach programs. In later years, Scofield performed this type of rural missionary work himself, conducting sociological surveys of the rural northeast in an effort to modernize and increase the efficiency of country congregations.⁴⁶ Without the intervention of educated outsiders, the living ancestors of Scofield's depiction were incapable of understanding, much less attacking, the complex mechanisms of the modern economy. Mythological depictions of the night riders at Reelfoot Lake such as Scofield's account resonated with the expectations of urban Progressives and eventually informed the prevailing historical analysis of the uprising, but this narrative contradicted the modern economic realities that confronted the residents of Reelfoot Lake and obscured their participation in the new cotton economy.

⁴⁶ *The American Church Almanac and Yearbook for 1917*, vol. 87 (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, 1916), 308; Interchurch World Movement of North America, *Speakers' Manual*, abridged ed. (New York: Interchurch Movement of America, 1920), 123; Interchurch World Movement of North America, *World Survey* (New York: Interchurch Press, 1920), 170.

CHAPTER 2

GROUNDING DISCONTENT

Reelfoot Lake lies in the northwestern corner of Tennessee, with a small portion extending into Fulton County, in southern Kentucky. In Tennessee, Lake and Obion Counties lie on opposite sides of Reelfoot Lake, meeting along the southern shore (Figure 1). Residents in both counties derived their livelihoods from the land, but they were hardly simple, self-sufficient precapitalists. As early as the 1870s, both counties produced goods for markets, adjusted production in light of market conditions, and maintained ties to distant urban markets by shipping goods via railroads or the Mississippi River. Farmers on both sides of the lake adopted cotton when it first arrived in the region but quickly learned that environmental conditions in Lake County were uniquely suited to cotton production. As a result, large landowners in Lake

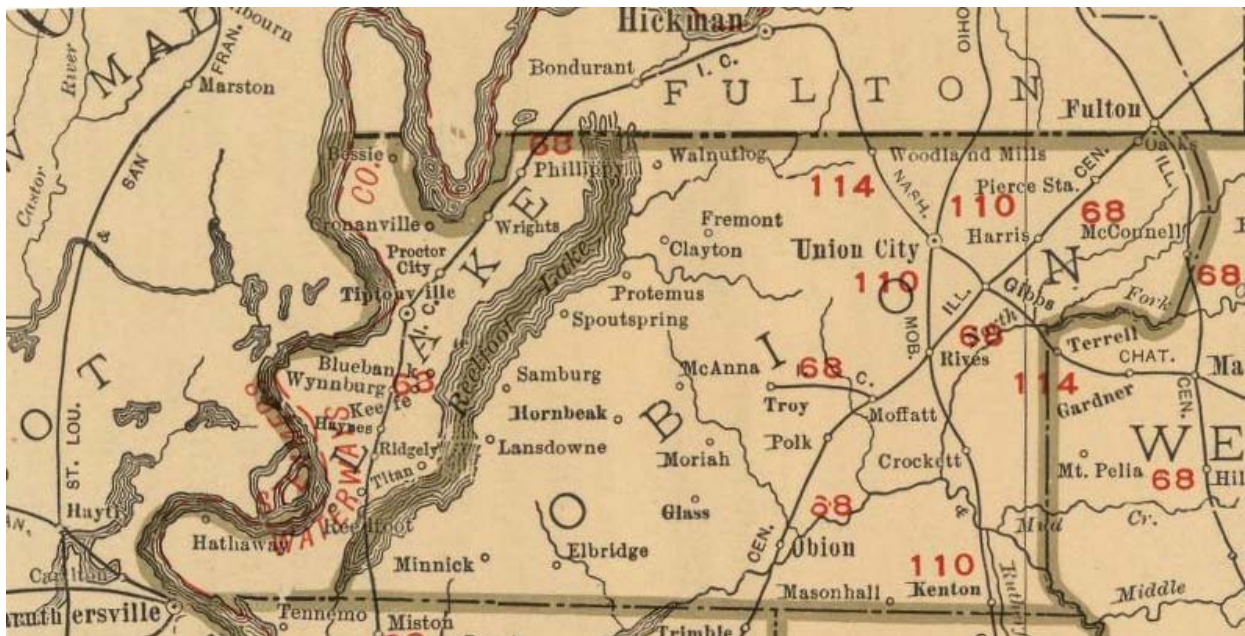


Figure 1. Map of Reelfoot Lake and the surrounding area.

Source: Rand McNally and Company, "Standard Map of Tennessee," in *The Commercial Atlas of America*, (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1924), 246.

County profited from the new cotton economy while Obion County's small farmers struggled against falling prices and rising debt. Accustomed to exerting significant influence over state politics, hard-pressed farmers joined agrarian reform movements and elected agrarian representatives. Despite their vigorous participation in markets, reform trends, and politics, at the turn of the twentieth century, Obion County farmers found themselves increasingly blocked from participation in the new economy. For farmers on Reelfoot Lake's eastern shore, the lake functioned as a physical barrier against the further expansion of the cotton economy. Obion farmers recognized Reelfoot Lake as a crucial resource, not because of their deep devotion to traditional fishing rights, but because the cotton economy had already eroded their economic, social, and political protections. By 1908, only the physical barrier remained.

During the earthquakes of 1811 and 1812, water from the Mississippi drainage flowed backwards into a shallow depression, creating Reelfoot Lake. Before Mississippi River backflow covered the land, both North Carolina and Tennessee had apportioned out the area under Reelfoot Lake in a series of overlapping land grants. Tucked into the far corner of the state, Reelfoot Lake lies as far from Tennessee's urban centers as one can get without leaving the state. Cypress trees thrive in Reelfoot Lake, rising in thick stands in seemingly open water and crowding the shore. Small boats can maneuver sections of Reelfoot, but large boats cannot manage the plants, logs, and trees that lie in thick snarls just under the surface.

Tiny Lake County occupies less than 200 square miles between the western shore of Reelfoot Lake and the Mississippi River. Originally part of Obion County, Lake County was created because high water marooned residents on the western shore between the lake and the river, making it difficult for them to reach the county seat in eastern Obion County. In 1870, the Tennessee state legislature recognized the problem and carved Lake County out of Obion

County. Given Lake County's geographic isolation, even J. B. Killebrew, Tennessee's first Commissioner of Agriculture, believed that Lake County offered "fewer advantages" to its residents than other counties and that the farmers there were "not as progressive nor as well educated" as elsewhere.¹ Nonetheless, the waters that prevented travel also nourished the fields. All of Lake County boasted a thick covering of flat, rich bottomland, in some areas amounting to deposits of black alluvial soil reaching ten feet in depth. Soil types varied throughout the county and flooding posed a problem in many areas, but corn grew well in even the poorest Lake County soil.²

East of Reelfoot Lake, Obion County's high bluffs rise along the shore. Obion County land varies more than Lake County's uniform bottomland. On the eastern side of the county, near Union City, large farmers took advantage of flat expanses. Along the shores of Reelfoot Lake, sharp bluffs, rolling hills, and dense woodlands made clearing land for farming more difficult than in eastern Obion County or in pancake-flat Lake County. In 1874, J. B. Killebrew reported that the lands nearest the lake were not preferred for farming because it was "difficult to get enough level or arable land in a body to make a respectable farm."³ Once cleared, however, the soil was productive. Farmers who were willing to cultivate crops suited to various soil types could piece together productive farms. The steep hillsides provided excellent soil for cultivating fruit or vines, while the lake bottoms between Reelfoot Lake and the bluffs offered rich cropland.

¹ J. B. Killebrew, *First and Second Reports of the Bureau of Agriculture for the State of Tennessee. Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee* (Nashville: Tavel, Eastman and Howell, 1874), 1123.

² J. B. Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, "Lake County" and "Obion County;" Eugene W. Hilgard, *Report on Cotton Production in the United States: Also Embracing Agricultural and Physico-Geographical Description of the Several Cotton States and of California*, (Washington: GPO, 1884), 48.

³ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 1150.

Corn flourished in the areas subject to overflow from the lake, and strips of land above the high water mark provided fertile ground for crops sensitive to flooding.⁴

Although the majority of men who became night riders were farmers, tenants, or farm laborers rather than fishermen, some residents around Reelfoot Lake earned their living directly from the lake or used fishing to supplement their agricultural earnings.⁵ A committee investigating conditions at Reelfoot after the uprising reported that five hundred families relied on fishing, but only 72 men were identified as fishermen or hunters in the 1900 census, and 69 in the 1910 census. While incomplete, this sample suggests that fishing offered an entry point into the lake economy. Few fishermen owned land and a large number, 46 percent in 1900 and 28 percent in 1910, were not native to Tennessee. Very few owned property. In 1900, 64 out of 72 fishermen were boarders, renters, secondary earners, or dependents in other households. Of the other eight, six owned a home, one owned a farm, and one rented a farm. The situation was not much different in 1910, when 63 out of 69 fishermen were dependents or secondary earners. Only eleven men, all married, appeared as fishermen in both the 1900 and 1910 census.⁶

As a group, the fishermen were educated. In 1900, only seven fishermen, less than 10 percent, were illiterate. Even the fishermen who could not read themselves were not resistant to education. A. H. Johnson, himself illiterate, had three children, all of whom could read and write. All of the Johnson children attended eight months of school during 1900, including 16-

⁴ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, "Lake County" and "Obion County."

⁵ Paul J. Vanderwood, *Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake*, (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1969), 27.

⁶ Vanderwood, 18; Ancestry.com, *1900 and 1910 United States Federal Census: Population: Tennessee: Obion and Lake Counties* ([database on-line]: Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004), <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed January 1, 2012).

year-old Luther and 13-year-old Arch, either of whom was old enough to leave school in order to supplement household income through fishing or farm labor.⁷

Overall, the fishermen at Reelfoot Lake were mobile white men on the lower rung of the economic ladder. For the substantial minority of fishermen who were born outside of Tennessee, lake fishing provided a livelihood, but it could not have represented a revered family tradition. Few men who had access to farmland identified as fishermen. Small farmers and farm laborers may have relied on fishing income to supplement farm earnings but, farming, not fishing, drove the economy. Around Reelfoot, if men could farm, they did.

After the Civil War, farmers in both Lake and Obion Counties shifted agricultural production in reaction to market forces. In 1871 and 1872, cotton cultivation spread north into both counties. “Prior to the war no cotton was raised in the county,” wrote a Lake County farmer in 1872, but “since the war... the price of corn has got so low that we have been compelled to quit it and go to raising cotton, which is paying us finely.”⁸ In both counties, a scarcity of agricultural labor dating back to the Civil War ensured high wages for good hands and white farm laborers dominated the market. In fact, Lake County boasted a lower “proportion of colored to white than any other of the richer counties” in the state, with only 393 African Americans in a population of 2,428.⁹ Throughout the decade, farm hands in both counties commanded wages between \$18 and \$25 a month, plus board.¹⁰ As a result, agricultural employers in both counties sought anxiously for ways to recruit new laborers. In Lake County,

⁷ Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census: Population: Tennessee: Obion County: Civil District 3: District 97*, 3, <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed January 22, 2012).

⁸ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 1121.

⁹ Joseph B. Killebrew, *West Tennessee: Its Resources and Advantages. Cheap Homes for Immigrants*, (Nashville, TN: Tavel, Eastman and Howell, 1879), 43, <http://www.hathitrust.org/>, s.v. “West Tennessee: Its Resources” (accessed January 20, 2012).

¹⁰ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 1122; J. B. Killebrew, *West Tennessee*, 43.

farmers and farm laborers quickly learned that cotton paid; by 1873, cotton covered one-fourth of Lake County's improved lands.¹¹

For farmers, the challenge to planting some crops in Lake County's dark soil proved to be getting them to stop growing rather than getting them to grow. Perched on an island of Mississippi fertilizer, farmers voiced the unusual agricultural complaint that the land was too productive. A Lake County farmer explained, "The land is too fertile for oats, causing them to grow so high that they fall down before ripening and are destroyed."¹² Cotton posed a similar problem. On newly cleared fields where previous plantings had not depleted the soil, cotton often performed poorly. Farmer R. M. Darnall complained, "On fresh land, unless the season is dry, the plant goes to weed."¹³ Even on previously cultivated land, cotton threatened to run to weed before harvest whenever there was ample rainfall. To get ripe bolls, farmers learned to plow shallow furrows and to turn the ground less often.¹⁴

Even when wheat shared a planting cycle with cotton, as was often the case in Lake County, the growing season for these crops provided farmers a slack period between planting and harvest. A farmer or farm hand could plant far more cotton than he could harvest in fall. Everywhere cotton was planted, the success of the crop depended on a large pool of workers performing backbreaking labor for a few weeks, but for much of the year cotton required little attention. Lake County's fertile soil exaggerated this seasonal imbalance. In Lake County, farmers did less work during planting than cotton farmers in other areas, turning shallow crop beds in the loose earth, applying no fertilizer, and minimizing plowing.

¹¹ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 967.

¹² Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 1121.

¹³ Hilgard, 49.

¹⁴ Hilgard, 49, 98.

During the 1870s, Lake and Obion Counties entered the cotton economy, but farmers in both counties maintained diversified market production. Taking advantage of the natural resources around Reelfoot Lake, Lake County shipped fish and timber to markets in Nashville, St. Louis, Mobile, and New Orleans. Obion County farmers shared in the fish and timber markets but also cultivated a fine variety of silky and mild tobacco and ranked second in the state for the production of orchard products.¹⁵

Farmers in Lake County depended on the Mississippi River for shipping goods to market, but Obion County boasted two railroads, the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and the Nashville and Northwestern Railroad, which joined at Union City. From Union City, the Nashville and Northwestern continued to Hickman, Kentucky, just north of Reelfoot Lake.¹⁶ For many residents near the lake, Hickman offered a more accessible market and rail line than the cities in eastern Obion County. By 1880, *The Hickman Courier* bragged, “Cotton seed this year is attracting very considerable trade to this place, for [Hickman] is the only point this side of Nashville or Memphis which offers a real market.”¹⁷ As the cotton economy flourished in Lake County, Hickman grew and the labor shortage shrank.

During the 1880s, farmers in both Obion and Lake Counties increased the number of acres planted in cotton, with acreage rising by 12 percent in Obion and 19 percent in Lake. Farmers in Lake County never grew tobacco in any significant amount, but farmers in Obion County did. As Obion’s farmers increased cotton acreage, they reduced tobacco acreage by 10 percent. In Lake County, the increase in cotton acreage paid off, producing a 60 percent increase

¹⁵ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 98-102, 967, 1119-1123; 1154.

¹⁶ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 1159.

¹⁷ Untitled, *The Hickman Courier*, December 17, 1880, 4.

over 1880 levels by 1890. Meanwhile, Obion County farmers experienced an 83 percent drop in cotton production between 1880 and 1890 despite their tentative expansion of cotton acreage.

After 1880, Lake County permanently surpassed much larger Obion County in cotton production. During the 1890s, Obion County farmers followed a statewide trend, turning away from cotton and toward tobacco. Farmers in Obion County responded to their losing gamble on cotton cultivation by reducing cotton acreage by 79 percent and increasing tobacco acreage by 84 percent. Obion farmers continued to grow cotton, but they planted the crop in significantly smaller amounts than they had before 1890. Cotton acreage finally surpassed 1880s levels in 1910, but even then, Obion's farmers hedged their bets against the hope of rising cotton prices by also increasing tobacco acreage during the period.¹⁸ Obion farmers remained tied to cotton, but they reduced their reliance on the crop.¹⁹

Tobacco offered Obion farmers an escape from the cotton market, but unlike cotton, tobacco was year-round work. At least two months before spring planting, farmers sprouted seeds in small, carefully prepared and protected seedbeds. Tobacco plants demanded individual attention from the time the seeds sprouted until the mature plants were cut. Individual plants were topped to prevent flowering and channel the plant's resources into leaf production. After topping, plants produced suckers (secondary roots), which farmers removed to promote necessary leaf growth. Repeated weeding and the hand removal of worms protected the all-important leaves of each plant. When farmers finally cut the mature tobacco, they began the

¹⁸ U.S. Bureau of Census. *Census of Agriculture 1870-1910*. Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/Historical_Publications/index.asp (accessed January 22, 1912).

¹⁹ U.S. Bureau of Census. *Censuses of Agriculture, 1870-1910*. Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/Historical_Publications/index.asp (accessed January 22, 2012). Percentages are rounded from tenths to the nearest whole percentage point.

curing process, which stretched well into the next planting cycle. In moving from cotton to tobacco, growers committed to overlapping seasons of constant work.²⁰

As Obion County farmers attempted to navigate the shifting agricultural conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by reducing cotton acreage and increasing tobacco production, Lake County's large landholders embraced cotton. By 1889, Lake County had the second highest cotton yield per acre of any county in the state and the second highest concentration of cotton production.²¹ Between 1890 and 1900, the turn to cotton in Lake County was startling, with cotton acreage ballooning by 374 percent in just ten years. During the early years of the twentieth century, landlords covered even more acreage in cotton. In the twenty years between 1890 and 1910, Lake County went from planting 3,850 acres of cotton to 30,234 acres.²² For Lake County's landlords, the expansion was profitable. Between 1900 and 1910, the crop value per farm in Lake County was high enough to skew the state average.²³

The growth of the cotton economy brought a number of related changes to the area around Reelfoot Lake, including a rapid demographic shift in the racial mix of the counties. In 1870, before Lake County entered the cotton economy, the racial demographics of Lake and Obion Counties were approximately equal, with African Americans comprising 16 percent of the population in Lake County and 14 percent in Obion. Although the population in Obion County grew throughout the period, the percentage of African Americans as a proportion of the total population experienced only a modest increase between 1870 and 1910. In Lake County, black tenant farmers provided the necessary labor for expanding cotton production and, as cotton

²⁰ T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 47-51.

²¹ D. G. Godwin, "Tennessee Crop Map of Cotton," (Nashville: Tennessee Department of Agriculture, 1892), <http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/u/?/agricult,112>. (accessed January 22, 2012).

²² U.S. Bureau of Census. *Censuses of Agriculture, 1890-1910*.

²³ Connie Lester, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell*, (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), 216.

acreage increased, so did the percentage of African Americans in the overall population. Between 1890 and 1910, the black population of Lake County grew from 1,075 people to 3,268. By 1910, African Americans comprised 39 percent of Lake County's total population.²⁴

The growing tide of African American laborers displaced the white farm workers who had previously dominated the market and commanded high prices for their labor. The labor shortage that had plagued the area since the Civil War disappeared and agricultural wages sank as landlords freed themselves from the high cost of local white laborers. The drop in wages revealed a schism between the perceptions of small farmers around Reelfoot and the mentality of the cotton economy. By 1885, *The Hickman Courier* reported that "an increased supply of labor" had lowered farm prices and created a localized depression around Hickman.²⁵ The 1884 *Report on Cotton Production in the United States*, reported that cotton wages in Tennessee were "about \$10 per month, including board." However, the extreme western section of the state fell outside the norm by offering wages that averaged twelve dollars a month.²⁶ To a local newspaper, a drop in wages from around twenty dollars a month to approximately twelve dollars a month looked like an economic depression; from the perspective of the national cotton market, twelve dollars a month was two dollars too much.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, small farmers throughout Tennessee struggled to remain economically viable as market conditions and the recession of 1893-1897 pressed farmers toward indebtedness and tenancy.²⁷ Obion's farmers increasingly relied on

²⁴ U.S. Bureau of Census, *Census of Population and Housing: Population: Tennessee: Obion and Lake Counties: 1870-1910* (Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census, 1913), <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1910.html> (accessed January 22, 2012).

²⁵ "Cost of Farm Labor," *The Hickman Courier*, May 22, 1885, 4.

²⁶ Hilgard, 43.

²⁷ Lester, 211-216.

labor-intensive tobacco to fund their struggle against tenancy, but at the turn of the twentieth century, it was not enough. Between 1880 and 1890, tenancy rates in Obion County dropped, falling from 37 percent to 25 percent in 1890, but the last decade of the nineteenth century was devastating. Earlier gains disappeared as tenancy rates in Obion County rose to 52 percent by 1900. Across the state, the average farm size declined between 1880 and 1910, dropping from 124.8 acres to 81.5.²⁸ In Obion County, remaining above the state average required farm ownership, not tenancy. In 1900, tenant farms in Obion County averaged just over 54 acres.²⁹

On the other side of Reelfoot, Lake County's tenancy rate was already 75 percent in 1880. During the 1880s, counties statewide experienced a drop in tenancy similar to the reduction in Obion County. The tenancy rate in Lake County defied this trend, rising along with cotton production. Tenants made up 80 percent of Lake County's farmers in 1890 and 83 percent in 1900.³⁰ On both sides of Reelfoot Lake, tenancy became the reality of farm life for an increasing number of farmers, with neither cotton nor tobacco offering economic security.

Obion's farmers faced exacerbated versions of the poor agricultural conditions experienced by small farmers throughout the south and Tennessee during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1870 and 1900 cotton production rose by 170 percent as landowners opened new cotton lands, tenant farms stressed "cotton at the expense of food crops and the behest of landlords," and small farmers across the South entered the cotton market.³¹ Southern farmers faced a "lack of capital in a growing capitalistic society" that trapped them in a

²⁸ Lester, 29.

²⁹ U.S. Bureau of Census, *Census of Agriculture 1900*.

³⁰ U.S. Bureau of Census, *Census of Agriculture 1880-1900*.

³¹ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 126.

cycle of tenancy, indebtedness, and market production.³² As southern farmers found their path to economic prosperity blocked, nineteenth century agrarian reform movements took root.

Steven Hahn detailed how the deteriorating conditions and spreading poverty that accompanied the expansion of the cotton economy into Upcountry Georgia transformed the relationship between white owners of small farms and large landowners. In the years immediately following the Civil War, Georgia's small farmers viewed increased participation in the cotton economy as a way to escape accumulated debt. As in Lake County, Upcountry Georgian farmers had principally produced corn prior to the Civil War but turned to cotton as the primary market crop in the last decades of the nineteenth century.³³ The cycle of debt, capital shortfalls, and market production that plagued farmers as cotton prices fell altered traditional community relationships. The mechanisms of tenancy and debt that tied laborers to the land and insured the profitability of landlords and merchants simultaneously devastated small farmers and threatened their economic independence. The new agricultural order, wrote Hahn, "arrayed the values of the free market against the republicanism of petty producers."³⁴ As tenancy and debt replaced the bonds of mutual dependency, which had previously connected farmers to wealthier neighbors, small farmers lost social and political influence along with their economic independence. In an ideological conflict that pitted small farmers against large landowners aligned with urban citizens, landowners "began a process of redefining use rights, a process of enlarging absolute and exclusive property."³⁵

³² Gilbert C. Fite, "The Agricultural Trap in the South," *Agricultural History* 60, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 50.

³³ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 147.

³⁴ Hahn, 10.

³⁵ Hahn, 243.

In Georgia, the years following the Civil War brought numerous forces to bear against the economic aspirations of Upcountry farmers. Most small farmers had little capital investment in slavery, but they shared planters' ideological investment in the institution. In the antebellum period, the rolling hills and short growing season of northern Georgia insulated Upcountry farmers from the physical spread of cotton cultivation while the institution of slavery protected whites from planters' demands for cheap, ready labor. In the aftermath of the Civil War, both the physical and ideological barriers collapsed. New fertilizers enabled farmers to grow cotton in northern Georgia despite the shortened season. Lured into the cotton economy by the high price of cotton relative to corn, small white farmers found themselves trapped along with freedmen in a cycle of debt and market production.

Farmers in Tennessee were not uniformly bound to cotton, but they were caught in the same trap. During the late nineteenth century, the small and medium farmers in the Ninth Congressional District, which included Obion and Lake Counties, "appeared as the state's most significant problem" when measured by farm size, tenancy, or mortgage indebtedness.³⁶ Despite excellent soil, a long tradition of independent farmers, and ready access to markets, Obion's farmers struggled. In the 1880s, the Agricultural Wheel and the Farmers' Alliance spread quickly throughout the Ninth Congressional District and reinforced existing community connections between independent producers. In Obion County, these associations joined large and small farmers on issues of agrarian uplift and reform.³⁷

³⁶ Lester, 37.

³⁷ Lester, 75 and 89. Lester argues that religion and location connected J. M. Glasgow, president of the Obion County Alliance in 1890 and eventual delegate to the Populist Congressional Nominating Convention, to more substantial farmers, although he owned only ten acres of land.

During the 1880s, small farmers looking to better their situation could wield significant political influence in Tennessee due to the disparate voting patterns within the state's three grand divisions. During the 1880s, the white Republican stronghold in East Tennessee and the concentration of black voters in urban centers made "Tennessee's the most competitive politics" in the south.³⁸ White, Republican East Tennessee prevented the Democrats from achieving the statewide dominance that the party typically exerted in the Solid South. During the late nineteenth century, the Republican Party posed a real and vibrant threat to Democratic power across the state. J. Morgan Kousser found that prior to disfranchisement "white wealth correlated very strongly (+.72) with the proportion of Negroes in the population." Coupled with Republican strength in Tennessee's "poor mountain and hill counties," strong African American support in the middle and western sections of the state made the Republican Party a persistent threat to Democratic rule.³⁹

In this competitive political environment, Obion County's small farmers retained significant influence on local politics. James C. Harris arrived in Lake County shortly after the Civil War and gradually began clearing timber, draining swamps, cultivating cotton on the cleared land, and reinvesting his earnings in additional land purchases. Harris' landholdings grew rapidly and by 1890, he was one of the largest landholders in the region.⁴⁰ By the late nineteenth century, Harris "epitomized the forward-looking, community-minded man of the day" among "progressive merchants and professionals in the nearby towns of Union City and Troy."

³⁸ J. Morgan Kousser, "Post-Reconstruction Suffrage Restrictions in Tennessee: A New Look at the V.O. Keys Thesis," *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (December 1973): 658, 670

³⁹ Kousser, "Post-Reconstruction," 660.

⁴⁰ Vanderwood, 8-9.

Small farmers, however, viewed him as an exploitive landlord and “grasping wealth seeker.”⁴¹ When James C. Harris ran for the general assembly, Obion County farmers defeated his bid by organizing support around “a traditional yardstick of community expectations within a network of exchange relations.”⁴² During the 1880s, the united small farmers of Obion County could organize sufficient political resistance to defeat a large planter who had become rich on the backs of his tenants.

In a viable two party system, rural Democrats commanded significant power, but in 1888, the Democratic Party launched an offensive that reshaped Tennessee’s political environment. By the late 1880s, African American voters in Memphis and Shelby County had helped Republicans maintain dominance in the Tenth Congressional District since the Civil War. In the 1888 elections, Democrats seized control of previously Republican districts through blatant fraud. Some areas in Memphis reported Democratic majorities that exceeded the number of available voters.⁴³

In 1890, the Alliance turned to state politics, with Obion and the surrounding counties leading “other Tennessee farmers into what became an agrarian revolt.”⁴⁴ John H. McDowell returned to Tennessee after living in Arkansas around 1877 and settled in Obion County. From 1883 to 1889, he served as a representative of Obion County in the Tennessee General Assembly, serving one term in the house and two in the senate. Between 1884 and 1887, the Agricultural Wheel and the Farmers’ Alliance formed in Tennessee; the organizations merged in 1889 under the name of the Farmers’ Alliance. McDowell served as the state secretary of the

⁴¹ Lester, 225.

⁴² Lester, 235 and 231.

⁴³ Kousser, “Post-Reconstruction,” 661-663.

⁴⁴ Lester, 48.

Wheel and later, the Alliance. He also served as editor of the state Alliance publication, the *Weekly Toiler*. In 1890, when the Alliance sought to “capture the Democratic party in the southern states and, through it, to place their members or friends” in office, McDowell was instrumental in the effort to elect John Price Buchanan, president of the state Alliance, to the governorship.⁴⁵

The Alliance succeeded in seizing control of the Democratic Party and electing Buchanan. Newly elected agrarian representatives joined the Democratic representatives of areas like the Tenth Congressional District in establishing election laws that restricted the elective franchise and ensured the ongoing dominance of the Democratic Party in Tennessee. Although these laws were subtler in their language than later laws enacted in many other southern states, they were equally concerned with limiting the African American vote. The Myers Law required voter registration at least 20 days prior to elections in towns with more than 500 voters. The Dortch Law, which required a single, secret ballot rather than a party ballot, required voters to select a candidate from a series organized by office, not by party. Representatives from poorer areas were wary of the Dortch Law, fearing that the new system would disfranchise many white voters as well as African Americans because it “demanded not merely literacy, but fluency in reading English.”⁴⁶ The legislature also passed a poll tax despite concerns among some representatives that the measure would eliminate many white voters.

Although V. O. Key argued that the disfranchising laws erected across the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries largely codified a disfranchising process that fraud, intimidation, and violence had already accomplished, Kousser found that, in Tennessee,

⁴⁵ Daniel Robinson, “Tennessee Politics and the Agrarian Revolt, 1886-1896,” *The Mississippi Historical Review* 20, no. 3, (December 1933): 370-1, 367.

⁴⁶ Kousser, “Post-Reconstruction,” 667.

the process of disfranchisement leaned heavily on the formidable barriers erected through these election laws. Black voter participation plummeted in 1890. After the institution of the poll tax, Union City in Obion County attributed a very small voter turnout among blacks to the new law. Without African American voters, the Republican strength in Shelby County evaporated. By 1896, African American voter participation in Tennessee fell to almost zero.⁴⁷

To avoid catching poor whites in a snare intended for urban blacks, the initial legislation limited the secret ballot to Tennessee's four urban centers. This accommodation likely mitigated but did not erase the effect of the new laws on poor whites. Over the next decade, the new voting laws expanded across the state. By 1901, the secret ballot requirement applied to over 80 percent of the state's population. The effects of the new legislation were particularly potent in Middle and West Tennessee. Between 1884 and 1906, the Democratic margin in gubernatorial elections rose from 15 percent to a high of 46 percent.⁴⁸ By 1890, "the new qualifications for eligibility to vote – registration and the poll tax – were mowing down thousands of white voters all over the state."⁴⁹ Statewide, voter participation fell by 100,000 between the election of 1888 and 1890. President of the state Farmers' Alliance and Democratic candidate John P. Buchanan received 43,400 fewer votes than the previous governor, agrarian-friendly Robert Love Taylor, received in 1888. Tennessee Populists claimed that the poll tax provision eliminated 50,000 voters.⁵⁰ By 1895, Harris no longer needed traditional exchange networks or the approval of

⁴⁷ Kousser, "Post-Reconstruction," 676-680.

⁴⁸ Kousser, "Post-Reconstruction," 678, 680.

⁴⁹ Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 59.

⁵⁰ Kousser, "Post-Reconstruction," 677.

small landowners. J. C. Harris succeeded in his bid for the Tennessee General Assembly, representing Obion, Lake, and Dyer Counties.⁵¹

Although some historians have argued that Buchanan and the other Alliance representatives were nothing more than Bourbon Democrats with a farmer's tan, Connie Lester argued that the agrarians posed a direct threat to the power structure of the Democratic Party.⁵² The new agrarian representatives largely voted along Democratic Party lines, but the Democratic establishment recognized the threat that rural insurgency posed to existing party interests and they responded with vehemence. Democratic opponents of the new agrarian political movement turned on John H. McDowell, who succeeded Buchanan as the president of the state Alliance, as the power behind the movement and "the symbol of agrarian radicalism" in Tennessee.⁵³ When Governor Buchanan, under pressure from the Democratic establishment, refused to break with McDowell, Democratic newspapers launched "violent attacks upon [Buchanan] as McDowell's 'tool,' and upon McDowell himself as the arch-enemy of the Democratic party."⁵⁴ In the pages of the Democratic press, McDowell "was credited with being the brains in the effort to disrupt the party and to destroy white supremacy in the state."⁵⁵

McDowell became a lightning rod for Democratic resistance to the agrarian political movement, but he was not the only reform-minded politician to emerge from Obion County. As a member of the Farmers' Alliance and the congressional representative from the Ninth

⁵¹ Tennessee, *House Journal of the Forty-Ninth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee* (Nashville: 1895), 4.

⁵² Roger L. Hart, *Redeemers, Bourbons, and Populists: Tennessee, 1870-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975); William R. Majors, *Change and Continuity: Tennessee Politics Since the Civil War* (Macon: Mercer, 1986).

⁵³ William R. Majors, *Editorial Wild Oats: Edward Ward Carmack and Tennessee Politics* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 43.

⁵⁴ Robinson, 375.

⁵⁵ Robinson, 376.

Congressional District, Democrat Rice A. Pierce supported antitrust measures, a farm mortgage bill, and a graduated income tax. An open supporter of the subtreasury plan, Pierce left the Democratic Party in 1892 and ran as an Independent Populist. He was defeated by Democrat James C. McDearmon.

Both McDowell and Pierce were reluctant to leave the Democratic Party, but both men felt that Democratic resistance and the national Alliance's support for the new People's Party forced their hands. Pierce bolted from the Democratic Party but readily returned when the Democrats moved to free silver. Once departed, McDowell resisted the move back to the Democrats, but the mass of agrarian reform voters did not. When the Populists endorsed William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 presidential campaign and Edward W. Carmack bellowed the new commitment of Tennessee Democrats to agrarian reform, Pierce joined the rush of voters returning to Tennessee's Democratic Party. Running as a Silver Democrat, Pierce defeated his former ally in agrarian reform, John H. McDowell.⁵⁶

As small farmers' lost the powerful influence that they had previously held in state politics, their ability to exert influence over local issues also declined. Steven Hahn identified the debate over fence laws as particularly illustrative of the schism between large landowners and small farmers in Georgia's expanding cotton economy. Traditional land use rights required farmers to fence crops against livestock and permitted farmers to graze stock freely on undeveloped land. Free-range stock provided vital supplemental income for farmers struggling to raise capital in uncertain market conditions. Under this system, farmers did not have to choose between raising crops or livestock for market. Poor farmers and tenants could devote

⁵⁶ Lester, *Mudsills*, 167-8, 195, 204.

their small farms to the production of market crops, while market stock grazed the open range. Even animals not sold for market, like mules and cows, required less of an investment under free-range laws, since farmers needed to grow only enough fodder to maintain them over the winter, not year-round. In the fight over fencing laws, both sides understood what was at stake.

In his study of the patterns of stock laws in the south, J. Crawford King Jr. found that “areas made up mainly of white independent farmers who owned their own land and were not tied exclusively to cotton production remained open range longer than more populous areas with a higher percentage of blacks, tenancy, and cotton production.”⁵⁷ This pattern was not accidental. In areas where the cotton harvest required rapid access to a ready labor force, landholders’ greatest fear was that black tenants would acquire sufficient resources to drop out of the labor pool.⁵⁸ Both small farmers and landowners knew that a mule or the income from hogs could allow tenants the economic freedom to negotiate a better deal. Restricting access to open range and limiting the size of tenant farms allowed landowners to convert more of their land to cotton production while denying tenants’ access to the additional income provided by open range stock. In areas with a high population of small white farmers, opponents of fence laws were able to forestall the closure of the open range, but their power was slipping.⁵⁹

Unlike in Georgia, stock laws in Tennessee never became a statewide political issue. In Georgia, fence laws were decided by local option voting, while in Tennessee the state legislature first had to approve a local vote on fencing. As a result, the state of Tennessee officially retained its open range until 1947. Although there was no large-scale political fight over fencing in

⁵⁷ J. Crawford King Jr., "The Closing of the Southern Range: an Exploratory Study," *The Journal of Southern History* 48, no. 1 (February 1982): 53-70.

⁵⁸ Robert Tracy McKenzie, "Freedmen and the Soil in the Upper South: The Reorganization of Tennessee Agriculture, 1865 – 1880," *The Journal of Southern History* 59, no. 1, (February 1993): 69.

⁵⁹ Hahn, 248.

Tennessee, enclosure was occurring on a county level throughout the early twentieth century as urban residents and landowners sought rules and regulations that elevated the primacy of private property rights and infringed on traditional rights and activities. In 1907, Tennessee's state legislature considered bills enabling seven counties to vote on stock laws.⁶⁰

For twenty years, small farmers on Reelfoot Lake's eastern shore struggled to maintain economic independence amid Lake County's rapidly expanding cotton economy, and that independence relied, in part, on traditional land rights. Around Reelfoot Lake, farmers pastured their livestock on undeveloped land and the grassy peninsulas that stretched into the lake, but by the early twentieth century local enclosure efforts threatened farmer access to traditional public spaces and resources. In early 1909, a "municipal squabble" over fence laws in Hickman was resolved when citizens on both sides of the issue consented to a compromise. Animals would be fenced in the central town district, but allowed to roam freely in other areas. During times of high water, when the outlying areas flooded, unfenced livestock would be allowed to wander into the central district unmolested.⁶¹ While farmers near Hickman retained sufficient leverage to force compromise, Obion County farmers, economically and socially reduced by agricultural changes, faced the consequences of a far different outcome. The free range finally closed throughout Obion County in 1913, when local authorities enacted \$2 to \$5 fines for any stock running at large.⁶²

In Hickman, small farmers still commanded enough respect to demand a compromise on issues of private property that threatened their economic well-being, but in Lake County

⁶⁰ Tennessee, *Senate Journal of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, (Nashville:McQuiddy Printing Company, 1907), 1036-1070.

⁶¹ "A Happy Medium," *The Hickman Courier*, March 18, 1909, 7.

⁶² Tennessee, *Public Acts of Tennessee* (Nashville: n.p., 1913), chap. 63, 257.

landlords had already succeeded in elevating private property rights over the farmers' philosophy of common rights. In the mid-1870s, agricultural leaders, including Tennessee Commissioner of Agriculture, J. B. Killebrew, advocated raising sheep as an alternative to cotton or tobacco. Proponents of the sheep industry and supporters of strong private property rights argued that roaming dogs caused losses to flocks and that people who owned large numbers of dogs generally did not own property. In the ensuing debate, property owners supported dog laws while small farmers and poor renters, who relied on working and hunting dogs, argued that the laws were burdensome and unfair. The state law initially passed in the General Assembly, but voter opposition forced repeal of the state tax.⁶³ Statewide, private property owners lost the political fight against farmers and renters, but in Lake County, where the tenancy rate was high even before the explosion of the cotton economy, landowners had more power. Lake County residents paid a \$2 local tax for the privilege of owning a dog.⁶⁴

In Obion County, the cotton economy and its accompanying changes had altered the physical, economic, and social landscape. In 1874, when the cotton economy was just gaining a toehold in the region, Tennessee's Commissioner of Agriculture portrayed Lake County's farmers as isolated and unprogressive. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the urban residents of Union City and the white landowners of Lake County believed that the farmers on the Obion side of the lake were coarse, uneducated, and backward.⁶⁵

The strength of the agrarian reform movement in Obion County was so strong that Obion County's reformers continued to strive for political inclusion despite the collapse of the agrarian revolt on the state and national level in 1896, the continual loss of their influence on local

⁶³ Lester, *Mudsills*, 150-152.

⁶⁴ Killebrew, *First and Second Reports*, 379-380.

⁶⁵ Vanderwood, 37.

concerns, and the accompanying loss of their social status. Both Roger Hart and William Majors stressed that, even between the Republicans and Democrats, local affiliations and loyalties influenced Tennessee politics more heavily than other factors. In Tennessee, political affiliations formed and reformed as politicians united and separated around specific issues. Agrarian dissenters in Tennessee may not have embraced the overthrow of the Democratic Party, but they wanted representatives to address rural concerns. Tennesseans adopted portions of the national agrarian reform movement that resonated with the struggles they faced. Some aspects of the national movement, like railroad reform, garnered little support in Tennessee. Meanwhile, the invocation of trusts became a mnemonic for the political, social, and economic forces that agrarian reformers opposed. During the late nineteenth century, “the fear of the loss of individual freedom to the power of money and monopoly resonated through the social, political, and economic language like the strains of a familiar hymn.”⁶⁶ In Tennessee, the extreme hostility toward trusts was sufficient to arouse suspicions about corporations in general.⁶⁷

By 1906, Democrats across the south had enacted election laws that disfranchised political opposition and positioned the Democratic Party primaries as the principle battleground for most elected positions.⁶⁸ Although William Majors argued that “the upstart farmer organization...was crushed...with relative ease” during Tennessee’s 1892 election, the political fortunes of Pierce and McDowell reveal that, even after election reforms, the political impulse for agrarian reform survived among Obion County voters into the twentieth century.⁶⁹ Although Pierce lost his bid as an Independent to McDearmon in 1892, he was re-elected to Congress in

⁶⁶ Lester, *Mudsills*, 109.

⁶⁷ Robinson, 370-1.

⁶⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. ([Baton Rouge]: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 348.

⁶⁹ Majors, *Change and Continuity*, 30.

1896 and served from 1897 until 1905. In 1904, the voters of Obion County also returned McDowell to political office, where he served in the Tennessee General Assembly from 1905 to 1907. Both McDowell and Pierce were well-known advocates of agrarian reform, and neither man's views changed substantially during the period. In Tennessee and across the south, when Democrats raised the specter of "Negro domination" and extended the olive branch of free silver, voters returned to the Democratic fold, but their original concerns persisted after Populism's collapse. In Obion County, voters returned vocal agrarian advocates to office well after the national collapse of the Populist Party as a political threat to the Democrats.

Obion farmers' continuing faith in Populist politicians likely suggests the strength of local loyalties in Tennessee politics instead of the expectation among farmers that agrarian representatives would enact real improvements on their behalf. At the height of the agrarian revolt, Obion voters re-elected agrarian representatives, but agricultural conditions continued to decline. At the turn of the twentieth century, farmers' ability to rise from tenancy to land ownership had stagnated across the South.⁷⁰ In the new cotton economy, once a farmer fell into tenancy declining agricultural conditions, shrinking tenant farms, and the cotton economy's cycle of debt and dependency virtually ensured that he would remain a tenant. As a result, land ownership was vital for economic success.

Even more importantly for Obion County farmers, Lake County landlords derived their wealth and authority from Lake County's rich, productive soil and James C. Harris's process of land acquisition had created the dramatic wealth disparity that separated Obion's farmers from Lake County's landlords. James Harris built his fortune by buying land, selling the timber,

⁷⁰ William L Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), 70.

draining the swamps and marshes, and leasing the newly created farm to tenants. As the cotton economy grew, Harris' model for converting swamps to farms became increasingly profitable. Successful replication of this pattern required available capital and swampland that offered soil characteristics like those of Lake County's existing farms. The cotton economy provided Harris and other landlords with ample capital, but tiny Lake County offered limited land. For James C. Harris, the solution lay underneath Reelfoot Lake. He began buying deeds to the land under the lake in the 1800s. In 1899, he announced ownership of Reelfoot Lake and began preparations to drain the lake and expose the rich bottomland for cotton cultivation, but lake residents blocked his effort through court challenges.⁷¹

In nearby Arkansas, similar efforts to drain areas flooded by the Mississippi uncovered some of the richest farmland in the South. Between 1880 and 1930, Arkansas' drainage projects transformed the sparsely settled Arkansas Delta into one of the most densely settled agricultural regions in the South. In the Arkansas Delta, these newly uncovered swamps provided rich cotton fields, establishing cotton as a more important crop in the decades after the Civil War than the staple had been before the war. Large landowners benefited from these rich farmlands even as cotton prices slid during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As farmland emerged from Arkansas' swamps, the demand for tenant farmers and sharecroppers increased.⁷² Historian Donald Holley wrote that, "Thus land clearing and drainage projects coincided with a spectacular

⁷¹ Vanderwood, 10-12.

⁷² John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880-1930: Settling the Southern Bottomlands* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999).

increase in landless farmers.”⁷³ In draining Reelfoot Lake, Harris likely hoped to duplicate the successes of landowners on the other side of the Mississippi.

James C. Harris never solidified his claim to the lake. He died in 1903 and his son, Judge Harris, inherited his father’s land, including the titles to the lake. In 1908, Judge Harris, the largest landlord in Lake County, also owned the majority of the land beneath Reelfoot Lake.

In the spring of 1908, after years of legal battles in which lake residents contended that the lake was public, not private property, the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled that Reelfoot Lake was subject to private ownership. John Shaw and Walter Pleasant, local merchants who had fought private ownership of the lake, and their lawyers, Captain Quentin Rankin and Colonel Robert Z. Taylor, acquired the outstanding deeds and forced Judge Harris into a land corporation, the West Tennessee Land Company. The new corporation leased commercial fishing rights on Reelfoot Lake to John Carlos Burdick.

In an interview with Paul Vanderwood, a former night rider claimed that the band formed shortly after the West Tennessee Land Company leased fishing rights on the lake to J. C. Burdick, drawing their inspiration from tobacco night riders.⁷⁴ Obion’s small farmers sat at the edge of the Black Patch, a tobacco-growing region between Paducah, Kentucky and Nashville, Tennessee. In the early years of the twentieth century, the purchasing tactics of urban tobacco trusts transformed traditional tobacco markets. The American Tobacco Company and the Italian Regie, which purchased tobacco for the Italian government, instituted purchasing practices that forced tobacco planters to accept low prices for their crops. The companies divided the region

⁷³ Donald Holley, “The Plantation Heritage: Agriculture in the Arkansas Delta,” in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, ed. Jeannie M. Whyne and Willard B. Gatewood (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 257.

⁷⁴ Vanderwood, 21.

into districts and assigned a single purchaser to each area. Rather than purchasing through local buyers who graded the crop, the buyer within each district graded the crop and set the price he was willing to pay. These buyers were accountable to the tobacco companies, not the local communities, and because no buyer would cross into another buyer's district, farmers had little recourse when the buyer judged fine tobacco poor or set an unreasonably low price. Local elites, merchants, and planters united to confront the monopolistic practices that had destroyed the local tobacco markets. In a partnership that arranged the local town and country against the tobacco trusts, "planters would fashion a modern organization to preserve a traditional structure."⁷⁵

In 1904, wealthy Tennessee planter Felix Grundy Ewing organized the Planters Protective Association (PPA). "Propagandized as an agrarian response to the monopolistic practices of the tobacco trusts," the PPA attempted to raise the prices offered by the tobacco trusts through collective bargaining.⁷⁶ Planters descended from Tennessee's slaveholding aristocracy controlled the PPA, but the organization's success depended on the widespread participation of tobacco growers of all sizes. Ewing provoked violence by inciting members with appeals to traditional prejudices and female honor. When members formed bands to coerce participation in the PPA, Ewing apparently believed he could harness community-based violence in support of the regional organization. For a time, he was right. Violence by members of the PPA began as community coercion in 1905 and gradually escalated to property destruction and personal attacks. Initially, it appeared that the wealthy, influential planters of the PPA could direct the night riding and property destruction. Between 1905 and 1907, local members of the

⁷⁵ Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890-1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), chap. 2-3, 36.

⁷⁶ Christopher Waldrep, "Planters and the Planter Protective Association in Kentucky and Tennessee," *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 4 (November 1986): 566.

PPA launched night riding attacks against farmers in their communities who criticized the association and warehouses containing trust tobacco. The attacks were violent but targeted. No one died. Even when night riders blew up tobacco warehouses, the public sympathized with the planters' efforts to protect their communities from exploitative monopolies, rather than with the tobacco companies. With the PPA "convulsed in discord and violence," vigilantism escalated.⁷⁷

In 1907, Ewing lost control of the PPA's enforcement wing. According to Christopher Waldrep, the tobacco night riders "shattered their carefully cultivated image as defenders of community life" when 500 men from widely dispersed communities raided Hopkinsville, Kentucky.⁷⁸ Hundreds of men traveling to a distant community to exact vengeance no longer seemed like community-supportive coercion. After the Hopkinsville raid, the night riders looked more like a modern, uncontrollable mob. With the planter elite no longer in control of the vigilante violence, lower class racism began to permeate the night riders' attacks.

Large planters saw black labor as a resource, but "white workers prospered when blacks were scarce" and many lower class whites viewed African Americans as economic competition.⁷⁹ In 1908, night riders launched a series of violent, racial attacks. They attacked African Americans in Eddyville, Kentucky, shooting haphazardly into homes, whipping numerous people, and ordering blacks to leave town. In March, they murdered two people, including a two-year-old, in Birmingham, Kentucky. During the spring and summer of 1908, the night rider attacks became "less massive but more vicious."⁸⁰ The vicious attacks worked. After the Birmingham murders, seventeen black families left Kentucky for Tennessee on a single

⁷⁷ Tracy Campbell, *The Politics of Despair: Power and Resistance in the Tobacco Wars* ([Lexington]: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 115.

⁷⁸ Waldrep, *Night Riders*, 97.

⁷⁹ Waldrep, *Night Riders*, 141.

⁸⁰ Waldrep, *Night Riders*, 151.

riverboat. Felix Ewing believed he could use traditional vigilante violence to serve the PPA's modern organizational goals, but by 1908 the night riders had wrenched free of the planter elites' leadership.

In 1908, no tobacco night riding was occurring in Hickman, but the editors of *The Hickman Courier* were sympathetic to the night riders' efforts to support the Planters' Protective Association through force. The newspaper regularly reported incidents of night riding associated with the tobacco dispute.⁸¹ In March, the editor defined a night rider as "a good citizen, who for years has been robbed of his honest sweat and toil by the heartless tobacco trust. He has submitted to this robbery patiently until the wolf of want is now staring his wife and children in the face, and as laws of our country have failed to furnish him relief. ... [He] has taken the law into his own hands."⁸² According to the editor, the tobacco night riders were not simply protecting their interests, they were saving southern women and children from predators.

When the representatives from Obion County traveled to the Black Patch, the tobacco night riders had swerved away from controlled violence and were conducting violent, racist attacks aimed at driving away black laborers. Reelfoot's night riders reflected this influence. From the beginning, they conducted concurrent campaigns of community coercion and violent, racist attacks against African Americans.

Reelfoot Lake's night riders organized in response to a threat to the lake, but their actions were not the knee-jerk response of startled traditionalists. The night riders responded to thirty years of agricultural, social, and political changes wrought by the cotton economy. Like Steven Hahn's yeoman farmers, the forces accompanying the explosion of the cotton economy had

⁸¹ "Night Riders at Fulton," March 8, 1909, 8; "Get Rid of Negroes," March 27, 1909, 4; "No Night Riders," March 27, 1909, 4; all in *The Hickman Courier*.

⁸² Untitled, *The Hickman Courier* March 13, 1908, 1.

“pushed them to the wall.”⁸³ Unlike Georgia’s smallholders, for the men who turned to night riding at Reelfoot Lake, Populism’s promise of dramatic reform had come and gone. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conditions were bad for farmers across Tennessee, but in Obion County, conditions were worse. The remarkably sudden development of a cotton empire brought a swift increase of black laborers, a dramatic reduction in wages, and a spike in tenancy and indebtedness. Economically, socially, and politically Obion’s small farmers failed to hold their ground against the expanding cotton economy. Lake County landlords’ patterns of land acquisition and property ownership funded the cotton economy and fueled the widening wealth disparities between Lake County landlords and Obion farmers. When the West Tennessee Land Company threatened to impose these property patterns onto the lake itself, western Obion’s small farmers and farm laborers answered with violence.

⁸³ Hahn, 152.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIMITS OF COMMUNITY COERCION

Analyses of the Reelfoot Lake uprising lean heavily on the destruction of John Carlos Burdick's fish docks in April 1908 and the murder of Captain Quentin Rankin in October 1908, the first and last crimes committed by the night riders. These attacks targeted white men who were directly involved in the conflict over control of Reelfoot Lake, and the episodes support Paul Vanderwood's conclusion that, in "reacting to modernization," the night riders resisted private control of the lake through traditional methods of community coercion.¹ Traditional resistance certainly played a role in the property destruction at Burdick's fish docks, but a number of the other crimes that the night riders committed between April and October, were unrelated to lake access. Racism and shifting agricultural conditions motivated these other crimes, which culminated in the brutal massacre of Dave Walker and his family. Although some crimes reflect efforts by the night riders to protect traditional rights through community coercion, the night riders also attacked the white representatives of the cotton economy and threatened the cotton economy's labor force with vicious, terroristic attacks aimed at threatening all African Americans.

From the beginning of the uprising, the night rider attacks at Reelfoot Lake interlaced different forms of violence. Their initial attacks against whites contained elements of the type of violence that Christopher Waldrep characterized as traditional in that the attacks were targeted, restrained, and aimed at coercing the target to acquiesce to a specific demand. The night rider attacks against African Americans look more like the type of violence that Christopher Waldrep

¹ Kathy Krone, "Author Says Night Riders' Struggle for Social Justice Now Mirrored in Iraq," *State Gazette*, November 18, 2003, <http://www.stategazette.com/story/1057873.html> (accessed February 22, 2012).

characterized as modern and that Ted Robert Gurr categorized as vigilante terrorism. The night rider attacks against African Americans were vicious, infused with racism, and often deadly.²

By 1908, locals had contested private ownership of Reelfoot Lake for decades. During the 1860s, W. M. Wilson of Obion County, one of the largest landholders in the region, held title to land under the lake. Although Wilson did not attempt to restrict local access to the lake, he leased commercial fishing rights to J. C. Burdick and the right to draw logs from the lake to John Ratliff. Burdick and Ratliff paid the leases, but other residents continued to fish and draw logs from the lake as well. When Wilson opposed residents removing the valuable walnut logs that Ratliff had leased the right to sale, locals threatened to “make fish bait of him.”³ Eventually both Burdick and Ratliff refused to pay further on contracts that did not insure exclusive commercial access. Wilson, unsure of the soundness of his claim, refused to press the issue and eventually sold the titles to the lake.⁴

After Wilson’s attempt to lease commercial logging and fishing rights, the debate over access to the lake ebbed and flowed in Obion and Lake Counties. In 1897, sportsmen from Louisville, Kentucky purchased tracts around Reelfoot with the intention of restricting access to members of their urban sporting club. Locals threatened the surveyors hired to establish precise boundaries for the club. When the company attempted to prevent locals from removing timber from the lake, a group of vigilantes threatened the sportsmen. In 1898, after only a year of local

²² Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890-1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 2-4; Ted Robert Gurr, “Political Terrorism: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Trends,” in *Violence in America*, vol. 2, ed. Ted Robert Gurr (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989), 204.

³ Hillsman Taylor letter to Harris Rankin with manuscript attachment, December 24, 1951, Betty Wood Papers, Obion County Public Library, Union City, TN, 4.

⁴ Paul J. Vanderwood, *Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1969), 7-8; Hillsman Taylor, “The Night Riders of West Tennessee,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 6 (1952): 79.

resistance, the sporting company sold its holdings to James C. Harris, who attempted to drain the lake.⁵

In 1902, J. C. Burdick led an effort among Obion County's smallholders to prevent Harris from draining the lake. Although the chancery court initially ruled that Reelfoot Lake was not subject to private control and enjoined Harris from draining the lake, Harris hired lawyers James Deason, Quentin Rankin, and Seid Waddell to appeal his claim to the Tennessee Supreme Court. The court ruled that Reelfoot Lake was subject to private ownership but upheld the injunction preventing Harris from draining the lake, arguing that Harris had not conclusively proven ownership of all the necessary titles.⁶

Judge Harris inherited the lake deeds on his father's death in 1903. In 1905, Judge Harris purchased the outstanding deeds to Reelfoot Lake and sought to have the chancery court enjoin anyone from using the lake without permission. John Shaw and Walter Pleasant, partners in a fish business on the Obion County side of Reelfoot Lake, hired James Deason, Quentin Rankin, and Robert Z. Taylor to contest Harris' claim. They argued that Harris could not assert ownership of the lake because the Galloway grants, which Harris did not own, included portions of land underneath the water. The court agreed that Harris could not assert control of the lake without these additional grants.⁷

In 1907, James Deason, Quentin Rankin, and Robert Z. Taylor purchased the remaining grants to Reelfoot Lake and forced Harris into a land corporation that also included John Shaw

⁵ Vanderwood, 9-10; Connie Lester, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell*, (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), 225-226.

⁶ Vanderwood, 11.

⁷ Vanderwood, 12.

and Walter Pleasant.⁸ The decision issued by the Tennessee Supreme Court and upheld during the subsequent case in chancery court held that the West Tennessee Land Company had full control over Reelfoot Lake and its resources. According to Vanderwood, the locals at Reelfoot were “baffled by legal intransigence” and felt “bewildered,” “cheated” and “betrayed” when the lawyers purchased the remaining land grants and forced Harris into a land partnership.⁹

Taylor and Rankin were not simply distant lawyers who turned against the residents of Reelfoot Lake for profit; they were the lawyers who represented Shaw and Pleasant. Shaw and Pleasant hired Deason, Taylor, and Rankin, two of whom had represented Harris before the state supreme court, to oppose Harris’ ownership claim in chancery court. After the court agreed that only one set of grants prevented Harris from claiming full ownership of the lake, the lawyers “quietly purchased the grants in question, paying \$300 for the valuable land to the Galloway heirs, two elderly ladies in Columbia, Tennessee.”¹⁰ The lawyers may have purchased the outstanding grants and organized the effort to press Harris into a land company, but when the West Tennessee Land Company organized, their most recent clients, Shaw and Pleasant, each owned 75 shares of the new company.¹¹ It seems that two local fish dealers, working through lawyers familiar with both sides of the Reelfoot case, removed the final obstacle to the private ownership of Reelfoot Lake.

Unlike most of the men who became night riders, Shaw and Pleasant were not farmers; both men relied on fishing income for their livelihood. Locals were anxious that Judge Harris,

⁸ Vanderwood, 12-13; Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Directors of the West Tennessee Land Company, Betty Wood Papers, Folder “JME,” Obion County Public Library, Union City, TN.

⁹ Vanderwood, 13-15.

¹⁰ Vanderwood, 12.

¹¹ Vanderwood, 12-13; Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Directors of the West Tennessee Land Company.

like his father James, intended to drain Reelfoot Lake for expanded cotton cultivation.¹² By forcing Harris into a partnership, Shaw and Pleasant restrained Harris' ability to claim unilateral control of the lake. Locals may have perceived the partnership as a betrayal, but the creation of the land company was, in many ways, the obvious resolution to the ongoing dispute. Given Harris' wealth, his land claims, his desire to control the lake, and the Tennessee Supreme Court's ruling that a private entity could own and control Reelfoot Lake, Shaw and Pleasant likely assumed Harris would eventually acquire the remaining deeds. Rather than waiting for Harris to purchase the grants, Shaw and Pleasant's lawyers bought the property and forced Harris into a corporation.

If Shaw and Pleasant's intent was to protect the lake that provided their livelihood, they succeeded. The injunction against draining the lake remained in effect, but the newly formed West Tennessee Land Company displayed a distinct interest in maintaining the lake. On October 29, 1907, Harris, Taylor, Pleasant, and Rankin submitted a joint letter to the Board of Directors recommending, "It would be manifestly to the best interest of the company as well as to the best interest of the surrounding country to preserve at all seasons of the year a uniform state of water in Reelfoot Lake."¹³ To maintain a standard water level, they recommended removing obstructions blocking the lake's natural outlets. When the land company began clearing the outlets, *The Hickman Courier* assured readers that the company was not draining the lake. The improved drainage would open many acres of land for cultivation by exposing flooded areas that dried during late summer but were flooded during planting season while improving fishing by allowing the fish a "better chance to run into the lake out of the Mississippi River."¹⁴ With an

¹² Vanderwood, 11-12.

¹³ Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Directors of the West Tennessee Land Company, 8.

¹⁴ "Not Draining the Lake," *The Hickman Courier*, February 28, 1908, 6.

injunction preventing the company from draining the lake and shareholders with a distinct interest in fishing on Reelfoot Lake, the West Tennessee Land Company pursued a compromise between existing lake resources and expanded cotton cultivation.

On October 18, 1907, J. C. Burdick leased fishing rights from the West Tennessee Land Company. Burdick's involvement with the company arose from motivations similar to Shaw's and Pleasant's. In 1880, J. C. Burdick was one of only a handful of men who were identified as fishermen around Reelfoot Lake.¹⁵ As early as 1887, *The Hickman Courier* reported "the fish trade of the lake, which Mr. Burdick controls, all comes to Hickman for shipment."¹⁶ By 1899, Burdick was shipping fish to market through Union City as well.¹⁷ Although Burdick led the earlier effort to resist private ownership of the lake through the courts, he had also spent 30 years building a livelihood that required commercial fishing access to Reelfoot Lake. When the West Tennessee Land Company overcame the legal obstacles preventing private ownership of the lake, Burdick contracted with them for fishing rights and pressed his claim through the courts.¹⁸ In February and March of 1908, the chancery court upheld injunctions preventing fishermen from selling fish for profit through merchants other than Burdick.¹⁹

When the night riders formed at Reelfoot Lake, John Shaw, Walter Pleasant, J. C. Burdick, Quentin Rankin, and James Deason were natural targets for their ire. All of these men had fought for public access to the lake before partnering with Judge Harris to exert private control over Reelfoot. Quentin Rankin and James Deason were not local, but Shaw, Pleasant, and Burdick were. Around the last week of March, the local men began receiving threats. J. C.

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of Census, *Census of Population and Housing: Population: Tennessee: Obion County: 1880* (Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census, 1880).

¹⁶ Untitled, *The Hickman Courier*, March 18, 1887, 3.

¹⁷ Weekly Statement, J. C. Burdick and W. E. Webster, Betty Wood Papers, Obion County Public Library, Union City, TN.

¹⁸ Vanderwood, 12-15.

¹⁹ "Reelfoot Lake Fishing," *The Hickman Courier*, March 27, 1908, 4.

Burdick reported receiving a letter in Union City: “On the front side of the envelope there was a coffin and [the] words, “In Hell he lifted up his eyes.””²⁰ Despite the threats, Shaw, Pleasant, and Burdick continued operations. On April 11, 1908, night riders kidnapped John Shaw, forced him to provide kerosene from his general store, and marched him to Burdick’s fish docks where they used Shaw as a human shield and burned Burdick’s docks with the fuel from Shaw’s store.²¹

Shaw and Pleasant abandoned the legal fight only after the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled on the matter. Guided by that seemingly final decision, they successfully navigated the legal and bureaucratic obstacles that frustrated many smallholders but failed to account for the power of local pressure. Unlike Judge Harris, Shaw and Pleasant lived among Obion’s other smallholders and lacked the wealth necessary to erect buffers between themselves and their neighbors. Just days after the burning of Burdick’s fish docks, John Shaw sold his interest in the West Tennessee Land Company to Quentin Rankin. Walter Pleasant sold his shares to Robert Z. Taylor.²²

Unlike Shaw and Pleasant, if Tennessee had an aristocracy, it included Quentin Rankin and Robert Z. Taylor. Captain Rankin was a veteran of the Spanish-American War, a Vanderbilt graduate, and a respected attorney. Sixty-year-old Robert Z. Taylor was a veteran of the Civil War and a respected attorney. In the fall of 1907, Robert Z. Taylor’s son, Vanderbilt football star Hillsman Taylor, had married Senator Robert L. Taylor’s daughter, Katherine.²³ Neither

²⁰ J. C. Burdick Deposition (partial), Betty Wood Papers, “Misc. Articles on Reelfoot,” Obion County Public Library, Union City, TN.

²¹ Vanderwood, 34-35.

²² “Night Riders Cause Hickman Firm to Quit Business,” *The Hickman Courier*, April 24, 1908, 1.

²³ “A Kappa Sigma Victim of Night Riders,” *Caduceus of Kappa Sigma* 23, no. 2 (November 1908): 101; “Night Riders Slay Victims,” *The Bee* (Earlington, KY), October 22, 1908, 1.

man lived near Reelfoot Lake. Shaw, Pleasant, Rankin, and Taylor believed that wealth, status, and distance insulated Rankin and Taylor from community coercion.²⁴

Although the burning of Burdick's docks convinced Shaw and Pleasant to withdraw from involvement in the West Tennessee Land Company, Burdick persisted. In April, local vigilantes visited the building owner who rented Burdick commercial space in Hickman and threatened arson unless Burdick's business closed. Although the property owner claimed that both he and Burdick knew the vigilantes, he would not name them. Unable to maintain property insurance on a building specifically targeted for arson, the building owner forced Burdick to close.²⁵

In May, the night riders threatened P. C. Ward for selling fish caught in Reelfoot Lake and warned that, as long as there were fees associated with commercial fishing, "no one [could] fish for profit on Reelfoot Lake."²⁶ Burdick reopened his business in Hickman, claiming that he would not buy any fish from the lake.²⁷ By August, Burdick attempted a permanent solution to his difficulties obtaining fish from Reelfoot Lake. Burdick and Sheriff J. E. Finch partnered to lease the commercial fishing rights on the lake. Sheriff Finch undoubtedly appreciated the potential economic benefits of a partnership with Burdick, while Burdick expected that the sheriff's involvement would provide protection and reduce the threat of violence. When Burdick and Finch launched their partnership, the editor at *The Hickman Courier* reported that people generally anticipated the partnership to end the unrest over fishing rights at Reelfoot.²⁸ By October, T. J. Easterwood had replaced John Finch as Sheriff of Obion County, but Finch

²⁴ "Sold Interest in Land," *The Hickman Courier*, April 24, 1908, 1.

²⁵ J. C. Burdick Deposition

²⁶ "Hickmanites Get Their First View of Night Riders," *The Hickman Courier*, May 15, 1908, 1.

²⁷ Untitled, *The Hickman Courier*, May 15, 1908, 6.

²⁸ "Reelfoot Troubles End," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, August 29, 1908, 4.

remained confident that the residents around Reelfoot Lake remained “well pleased with his incumbency” in the fishing business.²⁹

In spite of burning Burdick’s docks, the night riders failed to end the property claims of the West Tennessee Land Company, but they did drive local representatives from the organization, leaving it completely controlled by Judge Harris and a group of lawyer partners. Burdick persevered, enacting tactics aimed at reducing the threat of coercive violence. According to *The Hickman Courier*, fishermen largely appreciated Burdick’s efforts to restore commercial fishing. In August, the newspaper reported, “The fishermen greeted the announcement that fish would be bought right away with pleasure. They have practically been without means of making a livelihood for several months past...They are glad to get back to work.”³⁰ Many of the men who directly depended on fishing income from Reelfoot Lake compromised and accommodated the shift to private ownership of the lake. The night riders’ attacks, however, were not limited to men involved in commercial fishing.

On April 24, night rider activities dominated the front page of *The Hickman Courier*. In addition to the closure of J. C. Burdick’s fish business, the paper reported that numerous citizens received threatening letters warning them to dismiss black laborers. A public notice was also posted in Hickman: “To the Nigros of Hickman You are expected to Be absent May the 1st 1908...We are the 800 mounted. Well armed. Fare Warning.”³¹ Although the editor assured readers that the threats were “tommy-rot” and there was “little or no danger of such threats being put into execution,” the night riders had caused considerable concern.³²

²⁹ Untitled, *The Hickman Courier*, October 15, 1908, 12.

³⁰ “To Buy Fish,” *The Hickman Courier*, August 20, 1908, 6.

³¹ “Posted in Hickman,” *The Hickman Courier*, April 24, 1908, 1.

³² “In Our Opinion,” *The Hickman Courier*, April 24, 1908, 1.

That night, the night riders gave Lake County even more to worry about. A prominent citizen of Lake County, George Wynne, said publicly that Negroes were better than the night riders. On April 24, the night riders crossed into Lake County and beat Wynne so severely that he died ten months later without ever recovering completely.³³ In response, the Lake County Court offered a \$1,000 reward for the arrest of anyone “threatening and intimidating the people” and “going about the county at night in disguise.” A private group called the Law and Order League of Lake County Tennessee offered an additional \$1,000 for the arrest of two or more of the night riders who maltreated their “best citizens,” on April 24.³⁴

Between April and October, night riders attacked numerous people for petty violations of community standards. For small offenses, the night riders typically whipped their victims, but occasionally they enacted punishments that sent deliberate messages to the community. For instance, the night riders believed that John Shaw and J. C. Burdick had betrayed them. When they burned Burdick’s dock, the night riders compelled Shaw and Burdick to betray each other by forcing Shaw to provide and carry the fuel that they used to destroy Burdick’s property. Similarly, when Harvey Fagan refused to work, the night riders harnessed him, forced him to plow a field, locked him in a stable with hay and corn, and then whipped him.³⁵ The night riders literally forced Fagan to work like a mule. Through these contrived attacks, the night riders embedded their accusations against their victims within the attack itself. By describing the night riders’ crime to the community, victims indicted themselves.

On May 21, officials in Lake County arrested four night riders when an African American man they abducted escaped and sought help. The night riders intended to force the

³³ Vanderwood, 37.

³⁴ Untitled, *Paducah Evening Sun*, October 21, 1908, 7.

³⁵ Vanderwood, 27.

black man to whip John Burnett, a local merchant.³⁶ Like the attacks on Burdick and Fagan, the thwarted attack on Burnett included a symbolic message. Had the night riders succeeded, they would have forced a black man to injure a white merchant who was prospering from the cotton economy. Obion's struggling small farmers would have understood this message as an inversion of their own suffering at the hands of cotton merchants who profited from cheap black labor.

As the summer proceeded, the night riders warned and whipped a number of community members but conducted no major raids. Although little evidence points to this type of violence against African Americans, officials and newspaper editors were uninterested in petty violence against blacks. In the few news articles that recorded threats to African Americans, writers treated the incidents as amusing. When *The Hickman Courier* reported that a local black man received a scare from night riders, the author noted, "He did not consider the whizzing of bullets especially good music."³⁷ When the night riders warned blacks to leave Hickman, the editor asserted that "law-abiding citizens [would] not tolerate" threats but jokingly invited the night riders to "help us get rid of the negro loafers who hang around the depot and some of the negro dives."³⁸ During the general violence and intimidation, night riders stopped a black man on the road, shot him through both arms, and ran him off.³⁹

By August 10, 1908, Lake County citizens were sufficiently concerned about the night rider violence to seek help from outside the region. Nineteen Lake County citizens and officials, including the sheriff of Lake County, the mayor of Tiptonville, and John Burnett (who had narrowly escaped a whipping himself) appealed to Governor Malcolm Rice Patterson for help. The petitioners emphasized the threats the night riders posed to their black labor force, not the

³⁶ "Night Riders Arrested," *The Hickman Courier*, May 22, 1908, 5.

³⁷ "State Line," *The Hickman Courier*, April 3, 1908, 7.

³⁸ "In Our Opinion" and "Posted in Hickman" *The Hickman Courier*, April 24, 1908, 1.

³⁹ Vanderwood, 27.

debate over fishing rights. According to the petitioners, the night riders had “threatened and intimidated our citizens, none of whom had any interest whatever in the Reelfoot Lake controversy” and continued to threaten to come to Lake County and “destroy by fire the farm buildings of our citizens.” The petitioners were anxious for the governor to send aid. They wrote, “This county is a cotton raising County; our citizens depend almost entirely on negros for the labor to pick out their cotton, a great part of which labor is brought in from outside Counties and from other States; that the night riders mentioned above living in the Western portion of Obion County openly threat that they will come into this County when the cotton picking begins and drive every negro from our county.”⁴⁰

Circuit Court Judge Joseph E. Jones and District Attorney D. J. Caldwell sent letters to Governor Patterson supporting the petitioners. Caldwell confirmed that an “organized band” was “whipping respectable citizens of Lake County and threatening the Negroe [sic] laborers.”⁴¹ Jones wrote, “An extraordinary situation prevails in Lake County – and I would be glad that some aid be given... in accordance with their request.”⁴² Governor Patterson took no action.

Then, on the night of October 4, 1908, a group of night riders rode to African American farmer Dave Walker’s farm just across in the state line near Hickman, Kentucky and demanded that Walker come out. When he refused, they set fire to the house. As the family attempted to escape their burning home, the night riders shot them all. Dave Walker, the only member of the family who was armed, was shot as he emerged from the house. When his wife Annie ran into the yard, clutching her two-year-old infant, Ransey, the night riders killed them both. Dave and

⁴⁰ Lake County Petition to Governor Patterson, August 10, 1908, Governor Malcolm R Patterson Papers, GP 35, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁴¹ D. J. Caldwell to Patterson, n.d., Governor Malcolm R Patterson Papers, GP 35, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁴² Joseph E Jones to Governor Patterson, August 13, 1908, Governor Malcolm R Patterson Papers, GP 35, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

Annie's sixteen-year-old daughter Susan was also killed. Three other children were shot but survived the initial attack. Reports indicated that their 14-year-old son, shot in the head and the abdomen, would die from his wounds. The town of Hickman provided coffins, and white residents returned the Walker's bodies to Tennessee for burial. No one was arrested.⁴³

News reports indicated that the band attacked Dave Walker because he was a "bad negro" who had "recently" been accused of verbally abusing Joe Williams' wife, but the events leading up to the massacre fail to support even this slim rationalization. When the night riders attacked the Walker home at midnight, the shots roused Tom Bone, a white neighbor. Bone thought that the Walkers were sending out a fire alarm and hurried to assist the family. On the road, two night riders intercepted him and warned him to turn back.⁴⁴ In the event of an accidental late night fire, a black man with a poor reputation could hardly expect such a prompt response from a white neighbor. Further, the incident between the Williams family and Dave Walker that purportedly provoked the night riders was resolved months before the attack. At the beginning of June, Dave Walker paid a \$10 fine and court costs for using abusive language in a dispute with Williams and his wife.⁴⁵ Although Joe Williams went with the night riders to the Walker farm, he was not involved in planning the attack and did not want to go. The night riders compelled him to accompany them. Once there, he stayed back and held the horses.⁴⁶ A court-settled verbal altercation from June, which the offended white family was no longer pursuing, hardly explained the wholesale massacre of an entire family.

Likely, Dave Walker was not a "bad Negro," but in the minds of the night riders, he was uppity. Both Dave and Annie Walker could read and write. They moved their family from

⁴³ "Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family—4 Dead, 4 Wounded," *The Hickman Courier*, October 8, 1908, 4.

⁴⁴ "Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family—4 Dead, 4 Wounded," 4.

⁴⁵ Untitled, *The Hickman Courier*, June 5, 1908, 4.

⁴⁶ "Massacre By Night Riders," *The Bee* (Earlington, KY), October 8, 1908, 1.

Tennessee to Kentucky sometime between 1890 and 1892. By 1900, they owned their farm in Fulton County free and clear. This placed them in a stronger economic position than many white farmers in their mixed race community. Among their immediate neighbors, one black man and one white widow owned farms, while five white men farmed rented land. At the time of his murder, Dave Walker owned six horses and mules, six head of cattle, 22 hogs, two wagons, a buggy, and the family's farming equipment. The community believed the Walkers were even more prosperous; after the massacre, a rumor circulated that \$800 in cash burned inside the Walker home.⁴⁷

In August, the prominent citizens of Lake County expressed concern that the night riders would attack and run off their black labor force during the height of cotton-picking season. Prosperous and frightened, Lake County offered \$2,000 in rewards for the arrest and conviction of people involved in night riding, assembled posses, mounted patrols on the road that connected Obion and Lake Counties,⁴⁸ and threatened to use dynamite if night riders ventured into the community.⁴⁹ In Tennessee, cotton harvest can fall anywhere between September and the end of November; in 1908, cotton picking fell in October.⁵⁰ By October 31, picking and marketing were making rapid progress and Tennesseans had ginned over half of the year's total crop.⁵¹ With four members arrested and Lake County alert and armed, night riders did not cross the

⁴⁷ Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census: Population: Hickman, Kentucky* ([database on-line]: Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004), <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed January 1, 2012); "Sheriff's Tax Sale," *The Hickman Courier*, February 22, 1901, 1; "Public Sale," *The Hickman Courier*, October 22, 1908, 4; and "Night Riders Wipe Out Negro Family," *The Hickman Courier*, October 8, 1908, 4.

⁴⁸ "Tennessee Tobacco Growers Also Hang Night Rider in Effigy – Citizens of Lake County Promise to Set Off Dynamite if Fields are Attacked," *Washington Herald*, July 13, 1908.

⁴⁹ "Tennessee Tobacco Growers Also Hang Night Rider in Effigy – Citizens of Lake County Promise to Set Off Dynamite if Field Are Attacked;" "Judge Harris Drowned at Reelfoot," *The Hickman Courier*, June 14, 1910, 6.

⁵⁰ National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, "Usual Planting and Harvesting Dates for US Field Crops," (Washington D.C: GPO, 1997), 8.
www.nass.usda.gov/Publication/Usual_Planting_and_Harvesting_Dates/uph97.pdf (accessed January 22, 2012).

⁵¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Statistics, *Crop Reporter*, vol. 8-11, (Washington DC:GPO, 1913), 79; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Commercial and Financial Chronicle*, vol. 87, part 2, (Washington DC: GPO, Oct 1908), 1184.

county line to run off black laborers during cotton season. Instead, they massacred a black family who dared to prosper.

The ferocity of the Walker attack shocked even whites sympathetic to the night riders. An admitted night rider later suggested that the group “had not intended to go that far with the blacks” and that, after the Walker murders, even some members of the band questioned the night riders’ actions.⁵² Newspapers across the country and of every political leaning covered the attack, classifying it as a massacre, a slaughter, and mob rule. One Kentucky paper blared, “Kentucky Weep! – For Your Children of Hell Have Broken Loose Again. Wholesale Murder of Negro Family.”⁵³ By October 15, *The Hickman Courier* had had enough and declared that the media had blown the Walker incident out of proportion.⁵⁴ No arrests were made or expected in either Tennessee or Kentucky, although Governor Willson of Kentucky ordered troops to Fulton County, where Hickman was located, when “rumors that an outbreak on the part of the negroes ... was imminent” alarmed county officials.⁵⁵

The night riders’ attack on the Walkers was simple terrorism not community coercion. In his analysis of whitecapping organizations in Mississippi, William Holmes argued that small farmers sought to dominate African Americans and drive black laborers out of the area through violence.⁵⁶ For Christopher Waldrep, these types of vicious, loosely directed racial attacks represented a modern form of violence similar to urban riots. Holmes and Waldrep agree that small farmers and farm laborers often viewed black laborers as economic competitors. When

⁵² Vanderwood, 41-42.

⁵³ “Kentucky Weep!,” *The Daily Ledger* (Maysville, KY), October 6, 1908, 4; “Mob Wipes Out Negro Family,” *The Alliance Herald* (Box Butte County, NE), October 8, 1908, 2; “Mob Slaughters Family,” *Valentine Democrat* (NE), October 8, 1909, 2; “Whole Family Killed,” *The Bemidji Daily Pioneer* (MN), October 6, 1908, 4; “Night Riders Kill Negroes,” *The Hartford Republican* (KY), October 9, 1908, 1.

⁵⁴ “Local Notes on the ‘Night Rider’ Situation,” *The Hickman Courier*, October 15, 1908, 5.

⁵⁵ “Soldiers Ready to Suppress Outbreak,” *The Citizen* (Berea, KY), October 15, 1908, 7.

⁵⁶ William F. Holmes, “Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi, 1902-1906,” *The Journal of Southern History* 35, no. 2 (May 1969): 167.

Reelfoot Lake's night riders murdered the Walkers, they were not protecting community values, they were lashing out in a grotesque display of violence meant to frighten and intimidate all African Americans.

On October 19, Captain Rankin and Colonel Taylor traveled to Reelfoot Lake to meet Fred Carpenter, who was interested in leasing Grassy Island, a peninsula on Reelfoot Lake that the locals used as pasture.⁵⁷ James Carpenter, a civil engineer, traveled from Paducah, Kentucky to meet Taylor and Rankin at Reelfoot Lake and run survey lines for the land they were planning to lease. When the night riders went to Ward's Hotel at Walnut Log, where Rankin and Taylor were staying, they searched the hotel for James Carpenter but could not find him. James Carpenter had left a few hours earlier to spend the night with his mother, who lived near the lake, only four miles above Walnut Log.⁵⁸ By the morning of October 20, the night riders had hung Rankin, riddled his body with bullets and attempted to kill Taylor, who narrowly escaped by leaping into the lake and walking to Lake County. Just four days earlier, former sheriff Finch had expressed confidence that the fishermen were satisfied with the commercial fishing arrangements at Reelfoot Lake.

Governor Malcolm Patterson reacted swiftly, suspending his re-election campaign, announcing a \$10,000 reward for Rankin's murderers, and ordering three companies of troops to the area.⁵⁹ The militia arrived on October 21 and treated every man or boy in the area as a suspect. Officials questioned and released some suspects quickly but held many suspects for further questioning. The investigation finally made significant progress on November 4, when night rider Frank Fehringer confessed.

⁵⁷ Hillsman Taylor, "The Night Riders of West Tennessee," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 6 (1952): 80.

⁵⁸ "Mr. Taylor Swims Bayou and Escapes Night Riders," *The Paducah Evening Sun*, October 21, 1908, 1.

⁵⁹ Vanderwood, 47-8.

Although other men confessed shortly after Fehringer, including several men who later testified on behalf of the state, local reaction to Fehringer's confession transformed him from a leader among the night riders to an almost cartoonish villain. When Paul Vanderwood interviewed former night riders Bud Morris, Joe Johnson, and Fred Pinion years later, their dislike of Fehringer remained surprisingly intense. Johnson claimed that Frank Fehringer was a spy hired by Harris to infiltrate the night riders. Morris named Fehringer as the leader of the attack on the Walkers. Both Morris and Pinion accused Fehringer of selling out the band in exchange for the \$10,000 state reward, even though no one, including Fehringer, ever claimed the reward. In addition to being a traitor, a spy, and a greedy opportunist, the disdain for Fehringer among the former night riders led Vanderwood to classify him as "a criminal element," "riffraff... with utterly no community standing" and a wanderer who had somehow snuck into a leadership position within the night riders.⁶⁰

Fehringer actually was a criminal, but he did not entirely conform to the night riders' later depiction. He ran whiskey along the lake and had been charged with bootlegging in Lake, Obion, and Fulton Counties. The other night riders certainly knew of his crimes and he was not the only member of the group charged with crimes before or after 1908.⁶¹ Fehringer was slight, mild-mannered, charming, and friendly. If he was a wanderer, he had not gone far. His father, Philip Fehringer, moved to Obion in 1874 and lived just above Samburg, on the Northern shore of the lake. Philip Fehringer ran a fish business in Hickman, Kentucky where Frank attended school.⁶²

⁶⁰ Vanderwood, 76, 143.

⁶¹ "For Bootlegging," *The Hickman Courier*, February 1, 1907, 3; "Tried Next Monday," *The Hickman Courier*, January 25, 1901, 2; "Assault on Young Girl," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, November 27, 1909, 5.

⁶² John S. Foster Scrapbook, undated clipping "The Romance of a Night Rider," Betty Wood Papers, Obion County Library, Union City, TN.

The night riders had nothing positive to say about Fehringer after 1908, but the man was likeable. According to the prosecuting attorney in the night rider trials, “Frank Fehringer was an exhibitionist who enjoyed the limelight.”⁶³ The state could not have hoped for a better witness. On the stand, Fehringer was composed, clear, and entertaining. With his wide-brimmed hat balanced on the toe of his boot, Fehringer held his own for three hours of cross-examination, during which defense attorney Rice A. Pierce, an experienced lawyer and accomplished orator, unsuccessfully tried to provoke Fehringer into contradicting himself. The defense could not even rattle Fehringer, who, when insulted, jabbed back with jokes and word play of his own.⁶⁴ Although other former night riders testified, none matched Fehringer’s performance on the witness stand.

Frank Fehringer may have been a leader of the night riders, but he was not welcome around Reelfoot after the trial. Although Fehringer charmed reporters and frustrated the defense, he fell apart after the trial ended. In exchange for his testimony, Governor Patterson offered Fehringer immunity from prosecution, but Fehringer remained in state custody for his own protection during the trials. In January of 1909, while held in protective custody at a Weakley County jail, a despondent Fehringer attempted suicide by taking bichloride of mercury. In soap opera fashion, Frances Campbell, a woman Fehringer had known during his schooldays in Hickman, heard of his attempted suicide and traveled from Nashville to Weakley County to comfort him. Frances and Frank Fehringer were wed in the Weakley County jail on January 20, 1909.⁶⁵ This bizarre fairytale soon fell apart. Later that year, a Hamilton County jury convicted Fehringer of attempting to murder his new bride. In jail during November of 1910, Fehringer

⁶³ Vanderwood, 76.

⁶⁴ “Bares Clan Crimes,” *Washington Post*, December 22, 1908, 1; Vanderwood, 106.

⁶⁵ John S. Foster Scrapbook, undated clipping “The Romance of a Night Rider.”

again attempted to kill himself.⁶⁶ Given the animosity that former night riders retained for Fehringer decades after the trial, it was safest that he never returned to Reelfoot Lake. Bud Morris and Fred Pinion thought he had moved to St. Louis, Missouri.⁶⁷

Fehringer's performance on the witness stand and his subsequent personal collapse likely contributed to the other night rider's characterization of his prominence in the band as somewhat inexplicable, but the men did not rely entirely on captains like Fehringer for their leadership. Garrett Johnson, who was involved in the organization of the Reelfoot group, and a leader throughout 1908, was a widely respected farmer. During Johnson's trial, a reverend and a justice of the peace testified to his character, although both admitted under cross-examination that, since the violence began, rumors held that Johnson was a leader of the night riders.⁶⁸ Other local officials and moral leaders supported the night riders as well. Sheriff T. J. Easterwood took no action following the night riders' crimes.⁶⁹ The deputy sheriff in the Reelfoot area, William A. Mayo, became a night rider himself.⁷⁰ According to night riders Fred Pinion and Bud Morris, notable men would not participate in night rider raids, but they encouraged and supported the group by speaking at night rider rallies.⁷¹

Night rider Ed Marshall, who testified that the band threatened to harm his wife and child if he did not join, was "probably the most prominent and affluent of the suspects."⁷² Marshall's brother, Richard Marshall, a Baptist minister, returned to Reelfoot to post bond for his brother and remained to implement a moral campaign on behalf of the prisoners. Reverend Marshall appealed to local churches on behalf of the accused men and portrayed Patterson's zealous

⁶⁶ "Tries to Kill Himself," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, November 22, 1910, 8.

⁶⁷ Vanderwood, 135.

⁶⁸ "Reelfoot Crowd Fills Benches," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 1, 1909, 3.

⁶⁹ Vanderwood, 35.

⁷⁰ Vanderwood, 4; "Bares Clan Crimes," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1908, 1.

⁷¹ Vanderwood, 25.

⁷² Vanderwood, 84, 127, 93.

prosecution of the night riders as a gross over-reaching of state power. According to Reverend Marshall, “The strong arm of the Governor rushed in and gathered up the sons of toil” and held them without bond despite the fact that “fewer deprivations, fewer invasions of law and virtue” had occurred in the area around Reelfoot “than perhaps in any other section of Tennessee.” In his appeal for the men accused as night riders, Reverend Marshall declared, “I deplore the death of Captain Rankin, but perhaps the State will not know for some time to come the gross injustice perpetrated upon the citizens of the lake region, which I do not give as an excuse for murder, but as explanation of animosity.”⁷³ Reverend Marshall may not have excused murder from the pulpit, but parishioners could certainly leave believing that Rankin had it coming.

When the night rider cases proceeded to trial, the accused men hired former U.S. Congressman and agrarian reformer Rice A. Pierce to represent them. They could not have hoped for a more dedicated or appropriate defender. The night riders trusted him completely.⁷⁴ Despite Pierce’s “flamboyant courtroom demeanor” and widespread public sympathy, the jury convicted eight men.⁷⁵ Judge Joseph E. Jones sentenced six of the convicted to death by hanging. In 1909, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the convictions due to a number of legal errors committed by the prosecution during the intense state investigation and prosecution. The state never conducted new trials. Patterson’s zealous investigation quelled the violence at Reelfoot Lake, but no one served time for Rankin’s murder.

During the investigation and prosecution of the night riders, the connection between the men accused of night riding and cotton cultivation became clear. One of the suspects, John Ratliff, owned a nearby general store. Ratliff unsuccessfully appealed to be released on bail

⁷³ “The Night Riders,” *Scott County Kicker* (Scott County, MO), November 14, 1908, 4.

⁷⁴ Vanderwood, 80.

⁷⁵ Lester, 229.

before “local farmers sold their cotton crops and spent their proceeds elsewhere,” ruining his business.⁷⁶ Della Frog, a 16-year-old woman from the Reelfoot area, testified that, on the day Rankin was murdered, she and accused night rider Hirschell Hogg spent the day picking cotton.⁷⁷ Hirschell Hogg argued that he could not have been involved in Captain Rankin’s murder because he had traveled to Troy to deposit cotton in the Farmers’ Union warehouse on the morning of October 20. In response, the state produced receipts to demonstrate that Hogg deposited the cotton on October 21, leaving Hogg time to be at Rankin’s murder and still get to the Farmers’ Union warehouse.⁷⁸

Hogg’s connection to the Farmers’ Union demonstrates that the farmers around Reelfoot Lake remained aware of and connected to the ongoing agrarian reform movement. Emerging after the political collapse of the Populist movement, the Farmers’ Union was popular with men who had previously supported the Alliance and other agrarian reform efforts. The Farmers’ Union learned from the collapse of earlier organizations and aimed to survive by providing members with recognizable material benefits.⁷⁹ To ensure that farmers profited from participation, the Farmers’ Union promoted modern business practices, “practical and visionary goals” and “sought both professionalism of agriculture and rural uplift.”⁸⁰ The organization succeeded in establishing a lower limit on cotton prices through acreage reductions, crop withholding, and a system of warehouses like the one in Troy. John H. McDowell, Obion

⁷⁶ Vanderwood, 10.

⁷⁷ “Women on Stand in Union City,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 31, 1908, 5.

⁷⁸ “Juror Taken Suddenly Ill,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 4, 1909, 2.

⁷⁹ Commodore B. Fisher, *The Farmers’ Union* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1920), 9.

⁸⁰ Lester, 209.

County's outspoken Populist reformer, served as President of the Obion County Union and was a delegate to the 1909 Farmers' Union National Convention.⁸¹

Throughout the trials, accounts of the night riders' prosecution shared newspaper space with public outcries against the hated trusts and monopolies. Between 1907 and 1909, the Standard Oil case wound through the court system; the editors at *The Hickman Courier* left no doubt about their opinion of the corporation. When the court reversed the fine assessed against Standard Oil in 1908, the editor declared, "The Standard Oil Company, like most of the big corporations, has squirmed out of paying." The editor lamented the failure of justice to overcome bureaucratic restrictions and hold corporations responsible.⁸² During the summer of 1908, the editors complained that Republican politicians refused to intervene against corporations like Standard Oil, which were acting with impunity. With the presidential election approaching, the editors predicted that Republicans would suffer for failing to act.⁸³ In 1908, both William Jennings Bryan and Howard Taft ran on platforms promising to address the problem of monopolies and trusts. Standard Oil became an issue in the presidential campaign when William R. Hearst published letters revealing an inappropriate relationship between Standard Oil and Democratic Party Treasurer, Governor Haskell of Oklahoma.⁸⁴ In Hickman, the editors held Bryan blameless but made no allowances for Standard Oil, arguing that both Bryan and Taft were "entirely free from any taint of slime that may have been left in the trail of the corrupting trusts."⁸⁵

⁸¹ Lester, 234. 236.

⁸² Untitled, *The Hickman Courier*, July 23, 1909, 4.

⁸³ "Is Only One Cure," *The Hickman Courier*, March 20, 1908, 10; "What Congress Has Not Done," *The Hickman Courier*, June 18, 1909, 5.

⁸⁴ Frederic Austin Ogg, *National Progress, 1907-1917* (New York: Harper & brothers, 1918), chap. 1.

⁸⁵ "The Effect," *The Hickman Courier*, October 22, 1908, 4.

The night riders convinced the local representatives of the land company to withdraw in April. Consequentially, the night riders benefited from the national sentiment against distant monopolies and trusts during the trial. Although reporters often portrayed the night riders as simple, uncivilized ruffians, they were nonetheless *oppressed* ruffians who had responded to monopolistic control in the only way they understood. In a letter to the editor, a resident of Long Beach, California provided his interpretation of the murder of Captain Rankin. According to the writer, “In the closing days of struggle for office... an incident illustrative of the methods by which the lands and waters of our locality are being rapidly monopolized as they are now in Great Britain” had occurred at Reelfoot Lake. Previously, the lake was “free for hunting and fishing. Now, owing to the efforts of the lawyers of the class which formed the great trusts of our country, it has become a private preserve for a few moneyed men.” The writer concluded that, although one man was already dead, the state “will hang a few more of the mudsills of society” before the tragedy ended.⁸⁶ In December of 1908, the West Tennessee Land Company affirmed the public sentiment that placed it in the fraternity of oppressive national corporations; the company leased thousands of acres of Reelfoot Lake to Standard Oil.⁸⁷

Although the narrative of the West Tennessee Land Company played out in the public arena as a battle between a distant, powerful monopoly and oppressed locals, it did not begin that way. Locals Shaw and Pleasant were forced out of the land company by coercive violence. The same tactics had worked before. During the late nineteenth century, Obion’s small landholders were able to exert social pressure in reaction to unpopular decisions by local elites. When Mr. Wilson attempted to profit by leasing commercial rights to the lake during the 1860s, local pressure not only convinced him to acquiesce, it converted him to a permanent advocate for

⁸⁶ Felix F. Grandy, Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Herald*, October 26, 1908, 4.

⁸⁷ “Will Bore For Oil Near Here,” *The Hickman Courier*, December 10, 1908, 1.

public control of the lake. During the 1909 state investigation into the acquisition of Reelfoot Lake, Mr. Wilson asserted that title to the land did not provide control of the lake. The West Tennessee Land Company asked \$75,000 to surrender its titles to the state of Tennessee, a price that Wilson and others found exorbitant. At the time, Wilson still held title to 5,000 acres in the area, which he offered to the state for \$450, adding that he would gift the land to the state for the public good if they could not pay. His offer undercut the West Tennessee Land Company's position and the high valuation that the company placed on its property at Reelfoot.⁸⁸

In 1908, community coercion remained an effective tool against locals like Shaw, Pleasant, and Burdick, but wealth and power placed Judge Harris beyond the reach of disgruntled locals. Harris was neither faceless nor distant, but by 1908, he was infuriatingly untouchable. J. C. Harris had left his son landholdings so extensive that when he died in 1910, Judge Harris was the richest man in the state. Harris lived just across the lake but in a veritable fortress that, rumor held, he had surrounded with electrically detonating explosives. Harris' vast wealth bought him the allegiance of many Lake County residents. Shaw, Pleasant, Rankin, and Taylor believed that the lawyers were insulated from community attacks, but when Rankin and Taylor traveled to Reelfoot Lake they became accessible surrogates for the night riders' anger at Harris. In his own account of his ordeal, Taylor reported, "The leader of the mob talked with us, telling us we were associated too much with Judge Harris and were taking entirely too much interest in the lake."⁸⁹

Although the attacks against Shaw, Pleasant, and Burdick and the murder of Rankin generated widespread interest, the night riders' targeted a host of related agricultural and land

⁸⁸ Cecil Humphreys, "The Formation of Reelfoot Lake and Consequent Land and Social Problems," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 14 (1960): 47; Vanderwood, 130.

⁸⁹ "Col. Taylor is Unharmed," *Owingsville Outlook* (KY), October 29, 1908, 2.

pressures through their crimes. When the land company signed the lease that Taylor and Rankin traveled to Reelfoot to finalize, farmers stood to lose open range forage lands, an essential element of their precarious economic independence.⁹⁰ Judge Harris ruled a cotton empire governed by tenancy and the primacy of private property rights. For Obion County's small farmers, their economic independence depended on an increasingly precarious patchwork of cotton, tobacco, and common land rights. For these farmers, Reelfoot Lake provided a natural buffer between themselves and Lake County's merchants and landlords. When the West Tennessee Land Company imposed restrictions on the use of Reelfoot Lake, the natural barrier that had separated Obion's white smallholders from Judge Harris' cotton empire threatened to disappear.

The night riders responded with violence that was informed by earlier agrarian uprisings and the changing agricultural conditions that had transformed their region. During the state investigation, the night riders' bylaws and constitution became public. In addition to demanding that no black tenants remain in the area after July of 1909 under penalty of death, the documents proposed to fix interest rates at 6 percent; regulate the profit of merchant's goods at 10 percent; establish fixed prices for cotton, corn, and other farm produce; establish fixed wages for farm labor; and limit land ownership to 500 acres.⁹¹ These demands reveal the ideological underpinnings of the Reelfoot uprising and the host of agricultural issues that informed the night riders' crimes. William Holmes argued that, "the racist and nativist elements of the farm organizations tacked on to these laudable goals [of agrarian improvements through cooperation], a steadfast determination to control the Negro."⁹² Reelfoot's night riders retained Populism's

⁹⁰ Vanderwood, 14.

⁹¹ "Night Riders Ringleader," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, October 31, 1908, 4.

⁹² Holmes, "Whitecapping," 165.

impulse for economic reform but expunged the ideal of racial cooperation that had troubled the People's Party in the South.

The night riders initiated two concurrent strains of violence when the West Tennessee Land Company exerted control over Reelfoot Lake, which had previously acted as a buffer between Lake and Obion Counties. The night riders' restrained, traditional attacks against Shaw, Burdick, and Pleasant aimed to reassert community values through intimidation. They succeeded in driving Shaw and Pleasant out of the land company, leaving it in the hands of Harris and the attorneys, and providing the foundation for the depiction of the land company as an exploitative imposition on the bewildered residents of Reelfoot Lake. The night riders targeted attacks against the men involved in the West Tennessee Land Company, but their violence against African Americans was neither restrained nor traditional. The night riders did not seek to alter the behavior of specific African Americans; they wanted to remove all black labor from the region. For much of their campaign, the night riders' adopted different forms of violence depending on the race of their victim, but night rider crimes against people of both races indicate an interest in the mechanisms of the cotton economy rather than issues directly related to the lake.

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICAL LESSON OF RURAL REVOLT

Malcolm Rice Patterson was no wild-eyed agrarian reformer. The son of Confederate Colonel and U.S. Congressman Josiah Patterson, Malcolm Patterson was educated at Vanderbilt University and practiced law before being elected Attorney General for Shelby County. In 1900, Patterson won election in the tenth congressional district, replacing Edward Ward Carmack, who had recently secured election to the U.S. Senate. Malcolm Patterson had aristocratic roots, but he knew more than most politicians that he needed agrarian votes. For months, Patterson chose not to intervene in the violence around Reelfoot Lake. As long as the night riders constrained their attacks against whites to traditional community coercion and focused their unrestrained, vicious attacks on African Americans, the governor felt no need to risk alienating supporters on either side of the issue. When the night riders subjected two prominent white men to the type of violence usually reserved for blacks, Patterson responded immediately. Even after Rankin's death, a conflict between large cotton landlords and economically-pressed small farmers presented Patterson with a significant political risk. Fortunately for Patterson, most of the night rider crimes directly tied to the expanding cotton economy targeted African Americans. Politically, Governor Patterson could not afford to appear insensitive to the agricultural and economic concerns of Tennessee's small farmers, but he could comfortably ignore the plight of African Americans.

Malcolm Rice Patterson learned from the political career of his father that, in Tennessee, politicians who discounted agricultural concerns risked losing elections. In 1896, Josiah Patterson lost his Congressional seat in the tenth district to Edward Ward Carmack. Although

vocally opposed to the Populist movement, Carmack welcomed disaffected Democrats back into the fold when the party embraced free silver as a panacea for the farmers' complaints. Josiah Patterson, however, firmly advocated the gold standard.¹ As Patterson explained to his constituents, his position placed him at odds with the party leadership in the state, including both sitting Senators, but despite party pressure and the prevailing political wind, Patterson refused to move. Cotton tied him to the gold standard. As Patterson explained to the voters he represented, "You are all dependent for your money on cotton...Sixty-eight per cent, or 68 out of every 100 pounds of cotton produced in the Southern States is shipped abroad and sold in foreign countries."² Patterson believed that, while the United States could sufficiently subsidize silver in order to maintain the exchange rate between silver and gold within the U.S., the imbalance between the exchange rate for gold and silver on the world market would place cotton producers at a disadvantage when trading with countries that maintained a single gold standard.

While most Tennessee Democrats offered free silver as a palliative against agrarian unrest, Patterson simply dismissed farmers' complaints. Josiah Patterson was not merely resistant to free silver, he was confident that Populism had no place in his district. He wrote, "Notwithstanding all you have heard from the mouths of Populist orators about the Southern people being oppressed with debt, it is not true. The fact is that the South when compared with the balance of the country is practically out of debt."³ Patterson knew his district, but the agrarian message of reform resonated with voters, particularly when voters could adopt aspects of the reform platform without deserting the Democratic Party. The race was close, but

¹ Clyde J. Faries, "Carmack Versus Patterson: The Genesis of a Political Feud," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 332-347.

² Josiah Patterson, *Open Letter from Hon. Josiah Patterson to His Constituents* (Washington: Hartman & Cadick, 1894), 17.

³ Josiah Patterson, 17.

Patterson misjudged the strength of agrarian rhetoric. Carmack won. Josiah Patterson's son would not repeat his mistake.

Malcolm Rice Patterson represented the same district as his father, but he navigated the political currents more adeptly. Josiah Patterson had dismissed the frustrations of disaffected farmers as illegitimate and ultimately detrimental to the cotton market; Malcolm Patterson linked popular political complaints directly to the cotton crop. Malcolm Patterson proposed cotton markets as an agricultural barometer for the entire nation, arguing, "what is true of them will be true of all other agricultural interests in the country."⁴ He believed that trusts and tariffs unreasonably disadvantaged cotton growers, driving down the cost of cotton and forcing young men away from the "quiet pursuits of agriculture" into cities, which he thought was a particularly unfortunate outcome because "the strongest ties which bind a citizen to his country are found in ownership of the soil."⁵ Beneath the rising arch of Progressive rhetoric lambasting trusts, Patterson framed agricultural production as essential for national identity and the cotton market as a bellwether for all agricultural production, arguing that trusts and tariffs which disadvantaged cotton producers were "opposed to and subversive of republican government."⁶ For Patterson, this framework was enduring. In 1903, Patterson wrote, "The cotton crop of the South is its great money crop... and will be for many years to come."⁷ He called trusts, combinations, and monopolies Frankenstein's monsters whose "dread and sinister influence" demanded immediate

⁴ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Trust Problem Causes and Power of Allied Wealth: Speech of Hon. Malcolm R. Patterson of Tennessee, in the House of Representatives, Thursday, January 29, 1903* (Washington DC: n.p., 1903), 7.

⁵ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Trust*, 6.

⁶ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Trust*, 4.

⁷ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Trust*, 8.

action.⁸ Patterson responded to critics who accused him of pursuing reform at the expense of states' rights, by saying, "I believe in State sovereignty, but I do not want State sovereignty prostituted to the base uses of the trusts."⁹

In 1905, within two weeks of longtime Senator William Bate's death in office, the Democratic State Executive Committee nominated and the state legislature elected Governor Frazier to succeed Bate in the Senate. John Isaac Cox, a close associate of Frazier, gained the governorship. The rapid election drew criticism from Robert Love Taylor, who alleged that the state Democratic machine held a snap caucus to prevent candidates from challenging the governor's nomination. Campaigning on the issue of the snap caucus, Robert L. Taylor challenged Edward Ward Carmack, a close associate of both Cox and Frazier, for his senate seat. Taylor successfully exploited the snap caucus, dividing Democrats across the state and leading the State Democratic Executive Committee to set the first primary for determining a senatorial nominee. Although the party convention still selected the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, the snap caucus eroded Governor Cox's support. Malcolm Rice Patterson's supporters gained control of the convention and secured the nomination for Patterson. After difficult fights to secure their nominations, Taylor and Patterson went on to win their respective offices. Both men boasted political pedigrees, but they owed their offices to the divisions that erupted within the party when Robert L. Taylor launched a frontal assault on the existing Democratic coalition.¹⁰

Robert L. Taylor had remained a popular political figure since he joked and fiddled his way to victory against his own brother during the 1886 gubernatorial election. As late

⁸ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Trust*, 23.

⁹ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Trust*, 21.

¹⁰ William R. Majors, *Change and Continuity: Tennessee Politics Since the Civil War* (Macon: Mercer, 1986), 40-41.

nineteenth-century agrarian rumblings rose to a roar, disaffected farmers embraced aspects of agrarian reform, but no southeastern state embraced all aspects of the official 1896 Populist Party Platform. In Tennessee and across the Southeast, Populism's appeal to voters rested on specific issues within the platform that appealed to discontented voters who were more interested in gaining a political voice than in mounting an insurrection against existing political parties. After Robert L. Taylor's term as governor, Tennessee, along with three other southern states, "softened the Alliance's insistence on radical solutions by nominating for governor men who had ties to the movement but who opposed the St. Louis platform."¹¹ Even during the height of the agrarian reform movement, Tennessee's voters were far more committed to individual reforms than to the formation of an alternative political party. Robert L. Taylor's strength lay in his ability to speak to these disaffected voters from within the Democratic ranks. For voters who wanted a voice in politics, "Our Bob" seemed to offer evidence that the old party could adapt to the concerns of the common people.

When Taylor defeated Carmack in the 1906 senatorial primary by a scant 7,000 votes, he won by carrying the urban vote, but he had consistently recruited disaffected rural whites. Although historians may see the Populists' acceptance of William Jennings Bryan as the deathblow to Populism, in Tennessee at the turn of the twentieth century all but a handful of purist reformers regarded Bryan as their champion. Taylor repeatedly referenced Bryan when wooing rural voters. He reminded voters that Carmack had not always been as committed to their interests as he now seemed. During the senatorial primary, Taylor chastised Carmack saying, "After you were through clubbing the populists and the gold wing of your party... you

¹¹ Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 130.

left your seat in the United States Senate and went to St. Louis, and there... you assaulted with scorching tongue your friend and benefactor, the great leader of your party and the idol of the common people, William Jennings Bryan.”¹²

Malcolm Patterson tied his primary campaign to Taylor’s critique of the snap caucus, attempted to appropriate Taylor’s rural appeal, and stressed his own reform credentials. In announcing his candidacy for governor, Patterson lambasted trusts, the perennial theme of agrarian reform: “I have opposed unlawful combinations of wealth and the concentrated power of the great industrial trusts which have preyed upon the people.”¹³ Taylor and Patterson’s oblique appeals created sufficient links between Patterson’s campaign and earlier agrarian reformers that committed Populist John H. McDowell felt it necessary to announce publicly that he did not support Patterson’s 1906 campaign.¹⁴

When Robert L. Taylor exploited the snap caucus to create a rift in the Democratic Party, Patterson successfully joined enough factions to secure the governorship. Patterson’s personal collection of clippings from the election of 1906 reveals how well he understood the precarious nature of his own position. One author editorialized that Patterson’s nomination posed “the greatest disciplinary test [the Democratic Party] has had in Tennessee since the war.” The writer reflected, “It is a pity that his winning is chargeable to factionalism and not to a straight party fight, because he may not be able to unify the elements and harmonize a strong fighting

¹² “Exchange Between Taylor and Carmack,” undated, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, Accession No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹³ *Opening Speech of M. R. Patterson, Democratic Candidate for Governor, made October 5, 1905 at the Vendome Theater, Nashville, Tennessee*, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁴ Untitled news clipping, 1906, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

democracy.”¹⁵ The core issue of Malcolm Patterson’s campaign was the restoration of high political standards through the deconstruction and reform of Tennessee’s corrupt Democratic political machine.

The high standards that Malcolm Patterson espoused were, in Patterson’s view, not only limited to white voters but also attainable only by an electorate comprised entirely of white voters. During their 1906 campaigns, both Bob Taylor and Malcolm Patterson targeted only white voters. For instance, Bob Taylor shared Malcolm Patterson’s faith in the cotton markets. Taylor believed world demand for cotton would soar, and white men needed to hold the color line and plan to replace black workers who abandoned agricultural labor for cities.¹⁶ Patterson explicitly called for sectional reconciliation among white men at the expense of African Americans. While still in Congress, Patterson said, “It was not the war that kept sectional antagonism alive so long ...but it was universal negro suffrage which provoked a misguided northern feeling and ate its way like a corroding canker to the very heart of the southern people.”¹⁷ Patterson characterized the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as mistakes and crimes, even saying, “the fifteenth amendment...chained the South to a corpse.”¹⁸ He admitted that southern whites might have “resort[ed] to questionable measures” to escape the threat of Negro rule, but portrayed the outcome as unquestionably positive. Patterson believed that, since the Civil War, “there [had] been another – a moral – and a greater victory, when the South

¹⁵ “MR Patterson and the Campaign of 1906,” undated news clipping from *The Chattanooga Times*, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁶ “Speech Delivered at the Tabernacle in Nashville, Tennessee by Ex-Gov. Robt. L. Taylor, Candidate for United States Senator,” May 12, 1906, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁷ Excerpt, Congressional Record - House, undated, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁸ “Old Guard in Gray,” undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

asserted, and despite envy and passion, fixed secure forever the right and power and necessity of the white man to rule the land of his birth.”¹⁹ Southern men had secured white supremacy in the South and Patterson exhorted young white men to “take a decent and a healthy interest in politics” so that victory would be protected.²⁰

The district that both Josiah and Malcolm Patterson represented, the Tenth Congressional District, experienced some of the worst electoral abuses in the state during the 1888 Democratic push to gain control of state politics. The Democratic representatives elected through that fraud helped enact changes to election law that strengthened the Democratic Party’s grasp on statewide politics, but stalwartly Republican East Tennessee ensured that the Democrats remained vulnerable. In the initial vote count for the 1894 gubernatorial election, lackluster Democratic candidate Peter Turney lost the hotly contested election to Republican Henry Clay Evans by 748 votes. Although the Populist candidate, A. L. Mims, won only 10 percent of the overall vote, even such a slim percentage dwarfed the narrow margin of victory. The Democrats rallied, launching a legislative investigation that reversed the outcome and declared Turney the winner by 2,354 votes.²¹ The Democrats successfully reasserted control of the electoral process, but the election of 1894 demonstrated that, even under the new election laws, Republicans retained sufficient power to exploit divisions and challenge Democratic control.

Between the Democrats’ quelling of the agrarians during the 1896 election and Malcolm Patterson’s assault on machine politics in 1906, gubernatorial elections had been relatively routine. Patterson understood that the nature of his nomination placed him in a dangerous

¹⁹ “Elk’s Memorial Service at Chattanooga,” undated speech, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

²⁰ “Patterson’s Speech,” undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

²¹ Connie Lester, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell*, (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), 199-201.

position. His father had learned the peril of ignoring disaffected agrarian voters. By exploiting party conflict to seize the gubernatorial nomination, Patterson exacerbated the party divisions that Democrats feared Republican candidates would exploit. In Tennessee, the Democratic Party was not unassailable. Patterson had reason to believe that he needed help gathering an effective coalition to win and maintain the governorship.

Throughout his political career, Malcolm Patterson collected news clippings, mostly about himself. The vast majority of his clippings from the election of 1906 are pieces about himself or Bob Taylor, but among these mementoes, Patterson carefully saved an article called “Georgia Populists.” The article explained that Tom Watson and the Georgia Populists were going to save Democrat Hoke Smith. The Populists had “decided that, while the democratic party was about the vilest thing that ever happened and the rules adopted by the state committee were ‘damnable,’ yet the welfare of Jeffersonian democracy demanded that on this occasion the populists should submit.”²²

Malcolm Patterson was not a Populist, but he could hardly afford to offend voters with a proven record of voting on behalf of reform, and he was not above pandering to a demographic group if it would pay off at the ballot box. As C. Vann Woodward noted, “The picture of the Georgia Populist and the reformed Georgia conservative united on a platform of Negrophobia and progressivism was strikingly symbolical of the new era in the South.”²³ In Patterson’s personal record of the election, he saved an article detailing the conditions and the strategy under which Georgia Populists consented to boost Democratic progressive Hoke Smith into the

²² “Georgia Populists,” undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

²³ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 90.

governorship. Malcolm Patterson was no agrarian reformer, but he knew an effective strategy when he saw one.

When Patterson defeated his Republican opponent in 1906, he admitted, “My election to the office of Governor was not the peaceful result of undivided public sentiment, but rather the culmination of the storm and unrest of divergent and hostile political forces.” Nonetheless, Patterson pledged, “to deserve; if I do not have, the support of every man who sincerely wishes... higher political standards.”²⁴ For Patterson, like many Progressive reformers in the South, efficient reform and the attainment of high political standards required the disfranchisement of African Americans. Having achieved election by lambasting the corruption of machine politics, Patterson turned his attention to righting the wrongs he perceived in other aspects of state government.

During his opening message to Tennessee’s General Assembly in 1907, Patterson chided the legislature to address several issues that risked diminishing Tennessee’s esteem among other states. Tennessee had no executive mansion. In the face of limited appropriations and deferred maintenance, the Capitol had fallen into disrepair, and the state militia was underfunded. Patterson requested immediate action to restore the structures of state power, expand the militia, and extend the governor’s control over the state militia in order to prevent these aspects of state government from becoming an insult to Tennessee.²⁵

Patterson also outlined the wide swath of Progressive reforms that formed the foundation of his political agenda. He suggested replacing the existing system of school directors with

²⁴ “M.R. Patterson is Governor,” undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

²⁵ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Message of Governor Malcolm R. Patterson to the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly, State of Tennessee, 1907* (Nashville: Ambrose & Bostelman Co, 1907), Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN, 3-4.

county school boards “as the first progressive step to educational reform.”²⁶ He wanted to replace the existing road overseer with a Good Roads Commission. The governor requested that the General Assembly support or appropriate funds for laws addressing pure food and drugs, election reform, fire and life insurance, labor reform, juvenile detention, and prison reform. Patterson believed agriculture would “always be [the state’s] chief dependence,” but this belief did not justify a nostalgic appreciation for traditional practices.²⁷ To support the development of Tennessee’s agricultural resources, Patterson recommended legislation supporting scientific agriculture, the creation of farmers’ institutes, and the establishment of agricultural experiment stations in each of Tennessee’s grand divisions.

Among the long list of scientific, progressive reforms Patterson advocated during his first message to the General Assembly, he also pushed for the enactment of laws focused on conservation and the establishment of state forest preserves. In 1906, Patterson wrote to Gifford Pinchot to inquire about the establishment of state forest reserves. The new governor provided the General Assembly with a copy of Pinchot’s reply. Pinchot wrote, “I am very glad that you intend to take up this important question as Governor of the State of Tennessee.”²⁸ In accord with Pinchot’s suggestions, Patterson requested an appropriation from the General Assembly to fund a study of forest conditions in the state, but he was interested in preserving more than timber production. The new governor emphasized the need for speedy enactment of laws that would protect game across the entire state and prevent the pollution of streams, along with general conservation legislation. Patterson requested “some initial legislation that may arouse public sentiment to the danger which threatens a complete forest denudation, and the necessity of

²⁶ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Message to the Fifty-Fifth Assembly*, 7.

²⁷ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Message to the Fifty-Fifth Assembly*, 4-5.

²⁸ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Message to the Fifty-Fifth Assembly*, 10.

a system of re-forestation and the proper care and preservation of our trees.” The governor reasoned, “The streams, forests and game are given to us in trust, not for our present selfish use alone, but for rational enjoyment now and for future preservation.”²⁹ To Patterson, the need for state intervention was clear, not only to ensure the rational preservation of natural resources but also to arouse public interest in a statewide problem about which neither the government nor the people had expressed proper concern.

Patterson’s laundry list of proposed Progressive reforms was ambitious enough on its own, but the new governor also had to navigate issues that pre-dated his election, including the tobacco night riding associated with the Planters’ Protective Association. On the Paducah side of the Black Patch, Kentucky’s Republican governor, Augustus Willson, responded to the violence in the region with a combination of impotence and fury. Although Willson avoided disparaging the tobacco growers during his election campaign, critics accused him of an apparent lack of sympathy for farmers generally and tobacco growers specifically when he reached office. Willson blamed farmers’ inability to understand the laws of supply and demand for the plight facing growers. When Willson attempted to broker a meeting between the factions in the tobacco dispute, both major players, Felix Ewing of the PPA and James B. Duke of the American Tobacco Company, declined to attend. Willson vetoed legislation prohibiting growers from reneging on cooperative agreements. When the bill passed despite his veto, he pardoned growers who broke their contracts. As tobacco night riders destroyed personal property and burned warehouses, a blustery Willson called out the state militia, but the troops perpetually

²⁹ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Message to the Fifty-Fifth Assembly*, 10.

arrived in the wrong place at the wrong time while tobacco warehouses smoldered elsewhere. None of Willson's efforts curtailed the violence.³⁰

Patterson's approach was decidedly more sympathetic to the PPA. In fact, Patterson believed that cotton growers, always the centerpiece of agricultural production in his mind, could benefit from the PPA's example. Speaking to over 1,500 farmers at an agricultural institute in Nashville, Patterson emphasized the enormous value of the South's cotton crop. In light of this rich resource, Patterson told the farmers, "I believe the cotton planters could form an organization such as that of the dark tobacco growers and get living prices. The tobacco association is an object lesson to the world for it has forced the trust to pay living wages."³¹ Despite his positive assessment of the PPA, on August 15, 1907, Patterson issued a proclamation offering two monetary rewards for the arrest and conviction of night riders responsible for burning a tobacco warehouse. Although Patterson called the acts of arson "high-handed outrages" and offered a vague threat of further state intervention, he specifically limited his interest in the matter to "further depredations upon property."³² Patterson took no additional action and the monetary rewards remained unclaimed.³³

Patterson's support of the PPA and his unimpassioned response to tobacco night riding revealed his willingness to tolerate extralegal coercion and violence, as long that violence fell within prescribed racial boundaries and supported a goal that he believed was just. Patterson acknowledged that southern men resorted to "questionable measures" in disfranchising African

³⁰ Tracy Campbell, *The Politics of Despair: Power and Resistance in the Tobacco Wars* ([Lexington]: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), chap. 5 "Night Riders."

³¹ "1,500 Farmers Take Charge of State Capitol," undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

³² "Tennessee's Governor Makes a Proclamation," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, August 17, 1907, 1.

³³ Campbell, 89.

Americans, but through those questionable acts voters inherited “a great trust... to keep the liberty we have inaugurated pure and untarnished and undefiled and to hand that liberty down to our posterity as we inherited it.”³⁴ For Patterson, abuses against African Americans were not the result of lawlessness but of “the monstrous wrong against civilization and the dominant race” that occurred when the North “clothed [the Negro] with political rights.”³⁵

Christopher Waldrep distinguished between the PPA’s aristocratic leadership and the lower-class whites who comprised the organization’s enforcement arm, but early twentieth-century observers drew the class divisions within the PPA differently. In 1910, the *Journal of Political Economy* published an article exploring the conditions in the Black Patch and Burley tobacco regions. The writer characterized Felix Ewing as a classic paternalist, a gentleman with the means, ability, and intelligence to implement a complex solution to a seemingly insurmountable problem. Sheltered under Ewing’s auspices, the author granted all the members of the PPA, including sharecroppers, inclusion in the better class. The tobacco associations denied any involvement in the violence, but the author rejected this disclaimer as transparently untrue. Instead, she explained that a lower class of unscrupulous “hill-billies” left the association no choice but violence when they sought to profit at their neighbors’ expense. In her analysis, “However deplorable the loss of life and the destruction of property ... the fact remains that it was only by the aid of night-riding that the farmers held their ground against the trust and the ‘regie’ buyers. No amount of determination would have enabled them to accomplish the desired result without violence.”³⁶

³⁴ “Patterson’s Speech,” undated news clipping.

³⁵ “Old Guard in Gray,” undated news clipping.

³⁶ Anna Youngman, “The Tobacco Pools of Kentucky and Tennessee,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (January 1910): 47.

Patterson fancied himself a friend of progressive agriculture and believed the PPA promised a model of agricultural productivity. As Waldrep demonstrated, the PPA's leadership "was dominated by tobacco planters whose status was inherited from their ante-bellum slaveowning ancestors."³⁷ The organization had widespread popular support. Tennessee Congressional Representative John Wesley Gaines made his career through support of agriculture and the PPA's efforts to raise the price of tobacco, even defending the PPA and their tactics on the floor of the United States Senate.³⁸ Just across the state line in Kentucky, a Republican governor busily demonstrated the limits of state power through his own ineffectual efforts to suppress the uprising. Patterson, on the other hand, intervened as little as possible. His statement against the destruction of property bowed to the advocates of law and order but omitted any reference to other coercive tactics or the PPA in general.

Patterson's choice to forego intervention against the PPA was hardly reflective of his approach to governance as a whole. By the end of his first term, the legislature had appropriated funding to repair the Capitol Building, purchase a Capitol annex, and purchase, furnish, and maintain an executive mansion. The governor proudly reported that the state militia was better equipped than ever before. In just two years, the structures of state power had received the attention Patterson believed the state of Tennessee deserved.³⁹

The new governor could also point to substantial movement on many of the Progressive reforms that were the foundation of his platform. Education reform proceeded largely as Patterson had outlined in his opening address to the General Assembly, leading Patterson to

³⁷ Christopher Waldrep, "Planters and the Planter Protective Association in Kentucky and Tennessee," *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 4 (November 1986): 566.

³⁸ Waldrep, "Planters," 584.

³⁹ "Opening Speech of Governor Malcolm Patterson," April 11, 1908, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

boast, “My recommendations on this subject were substantially enacted into law.”⁴⁰ The governor claimed similar victories for insurance reform, labor laws and a state food and drug law that complemented federal legislation. Patterson even bragged that Tennessee’s exemplary action on insurance reform led West Virginia to “incorporate into her law the insurance laws of Tennessee.”⁴¹

As governor, Patterson moved to implement electoral reforms aimed to dismantle the mechanisms of machine politics that he had attacked during the Democratic gubernatorial primary. Patterson proposed removing local electoral commissions from the hands of the governor entirely, but some legislators resisted. Instead, Patterson and the legislature compromised, agreeing to remove direct local appointments from the hands of the governor and place that power in the hands of a three-man commission appointed by the governor. Additional legislation aimed to purify elections and reduce fraud, and Patterson credited these changes with eliminating charges of electoral fraud in Memphis, Chattanooga, and Knoxville. Although electoral reform did not take the form Patterson originally proposed, the governor claimed the result as a victory.⁴²

Agricultural education also received a substantial boost during Patterson’s first term. The legislature provided for the creation of a new agricultural hall at the University of Tennessee, funded an agricultural fair in Nashville, and passed legislation to address the regulation of animal feed and the prevention of communicable diseases among livestock. In 1908, Patterson announced that an experiment station in West Tennessee was scheduled to open as soon as

⁴⁰ “Opening Speech of Governor Malcolm Patterson,” April 11, 1908.

⁴¹ “Opening Speech of Governor Malcolm Patterson,” April 11, 1908.

⁴² “Opening Speech of Governor Malcolm Patterson,” April 11, 1908.

January of 1909. As the governor saw it, scientific farming in Tennessee had become a “signal success.”⁴³

The governor could claim substantial progress toward a number of long-term goals, but there were aspects of his platform that the legislature either addressed insufficiently or failed to address at all. Although Patterson organized a commission to explore possible sites for a new juvenile detention facility, the legislative appropriation of \$10,000 was insufficient to fund the project. Patterson was unable to organize even a Good Roads Commission, leaving road construction in the hands of local officials who he believed were inefficient and disorganized.

During his first gubernatorial address to the General Assembly, Patterson stressed the importance of enacting fish, game, and forest conservation laws. He specifically requested legislation to incite interest in conservation, preservation, and reforestation. Patterson felt that he lacked sufficient information to recommend specific legislation, but feared that “the time will soon come, if it is not already here, when the constant destruction of trees without replacement will make it necessary for the State to acquire large tracts of land for reforestation.”⁴⁴ Patterson regarded the legislature’s response as mixed. He allowed that the laws enacted by the General Assembly “may not be all that is desirable,” but nonetheless regarded the legislation as a “distinct advance” over previous conditions.⁴⁵ To reduce forest fires, the legislature required the clearing of brush along railroad right of ways. Other laws established the state’s first fishing law and expanded existing game restrictions.

Rather than seeking to preserve, conserve, replenish, or reforest, Patterson’s fish, game, and conservation initiatives sought primarily to limit the gross destruction of natural resources.

⁴³ “Opening Speech of Governor Malcolm Patterson,” April 11, 1908.

⁴⁴ Malcolm R. Patterson, *Message to the Fifty-Fifth Assembly*, 10.

⁴⁵ “Opening Speech of Governor Malcolm Patterson,” April 11, 1908, 7.

While limited in scope, the laws expanded the state's involvement in conservation. Patterson acknowledged the progress, but held that the state needed to do more. In fact, Patterson accused the state itself of polluting waterways even while imposing pollution restrictions on individuals. The General Assembly had been surprisingly amenable to Patterson's platform, but by the end of 1908, Tennessee had made relatively little progress toward advancing Gifford Pinchot's goal of preservation and reforestation.

Malcolm Patterson actively discussed bringing Tennessee into the national conservation movement, and he knew the area around Reelfoot Lake well enough to be sure that the lake held appeal for both recreation and conservation. Since his days as a Tenth District congressional representative, Patterson had advocated cotton as the cornerstone of Tennessee's agricultural economy; given his interest in the state's cotton production, he was certainly aware of Lake County's exploding cotton economy. On December 7, 1907, Patterson married his third wife, Mary Russell Gardner of Union City, at her family's home in Obion County. The Patterson family even used letterhead from a Union City company as notepaper.⁴⁶ In line with the Democratic declaration that the lakes and forests of the state were the property of the people that "should be kept for the use and enjoyment of all," Patterson invited his political supporters from Memphis to a Fourth of July barbecue on the beach at Reelfoot Lake.⁴⁷

In addition to his personal connections to the region, Patterson visited Obion County in June of 1908, during the night rider violence. Early in 1908, Carmack announced that he would

⁴⁶ Virginia Fire and Marine Insurance Company Letterhead, undated, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁴⁷ "The Platform Adopted by the Democrats of Tennessee in Convention," July 14, 1908, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN; "Memphians to Hear Patterson," undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

challenge Patterson for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. The nominees agreed to hold a series of 50 debates across the state between April and June. Carmack and Patterson shared similar platforms, but as the challenger, Carmack needed to differentiate himself from the incumbent. Patterson supported local option voting on prohibition; Carmack became a vocal supporter of statewide prohibition, garnering the support of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Prohibition became the central issue in the acrimonious primary contest. The bitter exchanges between Carmack and Patterson drew large crowds. Fights broke out among the crowds at some debates and, during the debate in Fayetteville, Carmack tried to attack Patterson.⁴⁸ On June 4, 1908, almost two months after night riders burned Burdick's fish docks at Reelfoot Lake, Malcolm Patterson debated Edward Ward Carmack in Obion County.⁴⁹

Although Patterson's support was centered in the urban areas of the state, his supporters worked diligently to scrape away at Carmack's rural appeal. In Obion County, the embers of Populist revolt still smoldered in the former hotbed of agrarian unrest. During the agrarian revolt, Carmack had led the Democratic editorial assault on agrarian politicians, particularly targeting John H. McDowell's appointment as coal oil inspector by Governor Buchanan. McDowell was the hardest hit politician in a statewide assault that struck almost every agrarian representative. Particularly in Obion County, Patterson's supporters hammered Carmack with his own earlier positions. Judge Felix W. Moore reminded voters that Carmack "gained notoriety in this State fifteen years ago while editor of the *American* by abusing" John McDowell and, as recently as the Democratic Convention of 1904, "it was reported that he abused William

⁴⁸ William R. Majors, *Editorial Wild Oats: Edward Ward Carmack and Tennessee Politics* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 130.

⁴⁹ "Hickman Has Patterson Club," *The Hickman Courier*, June 5, 1908, 6.

J. Bryan to such an extent that it was difficult to prevent serious trouble.”⁵⁰ Initially printed in the *Obion Democrat*, Moore’s letter was picked up by other newspapers before Patterson’s campaign printed and distributed it as a campaign circular.

Both candidates attempted to profit from Bob Taylor’s popularity. Carmack quoted Taylor during the campaign and some Carmack supporters believed Taylor might become a vocal supporter of the challenger.⁵¹ Although Taylor largely stayed away from the election, he announced, “I want no friend of mine to vote against Governor Patterson.”⁵² “Pattersonian Democracy,” another campaign piece originating in Obion County, ridiculed Carmack for “quoting an interview with Taylor in an effort to help his failing fortunes” and reminded voters that Carmack had “vilely” abused Taylor in the past.⁵³ In answer to Carmack’s apparent change of heart, Patterson’s supporters invoked the editor’s earlier attacks on Taylor, the Farmer’s Alliance, William Jennings Bryan, and John McDowell. Patterson’s supporters scoffed at Carmack’s apparent hypocrisy. One author confidently concluded, “ninety per cent of the Democrats who supported Taylor... are Patterson’s supporters, and they can not be driven or tolled away.”⁵⁴ As anticipated, Patterson won the June primary, although Carmack performed better than anticipated, carrying much of East Tennessee.⁵⁵

Even if the busy primary election distracted the governor from the rising vigilantism around Reelfoot Lake, he had secured the nomination by August, when citizens from Lake

⁵⁰ Felix Moore, “Patterson vs. Carmack: Appeal to Reason,” March 25, 1908, 8, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁵¹ Majors, *Editorial Wild Oats*, 129 n9.

⁵² “Bob Taylor’s Clarion Call,” undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁵³ “Carmack and Taylor” in *Pattersonian Democracy*, undated campaign brochure, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁵⁴ “Carmack and Taylor” in *Pattersonian Democracy*.

⁵⁵ Majors, *Editorial Wild Oats*, 137.

County appealed directly to him for aid protecting their black laborers. In 1907, when Patterson suggested the PPA as an agricultural model for cotton producers, he almost certainly meant that cotton growers could benefit from adopting a structure similar to the one envisioned by Felix Ewing. Unfortunately for Patterson, to a widely supportive public the PPA encompassed both the aristocratically controlled organization that Ewing imagined and the unrestrained vigilantism that PPA night riders actualized.

“Democrats needed the symbolic support of the old agrarian radicals,” wrote Connie Lester and, during both his initial campaign and the primary contest with Carmack, Malcolm Patterson and his supporters did everything possible to ensure that Patterson was the Democrat who voters regarded as the inheritor of the agrarian reform impulse.⁵⁶ Patterson adopted agrarian rhetoric, associated himself with Bob Taylor, appeared in public with former Alliance leader and Tennessee governor John Buchanan, and circulated publications that reminded voters of his opponents’ previous attacks on agrarian reformers.⁵⁷ The PPA had wide public support, and Patterson believed cotton producers could emulate aristocratic planter Felix Ewing’s model to increase cotton profits. Instead, residents around Reelfoot Lake turned the tactics developed by the PPA’s enforcement wing against the large landowners whose cotton production was reshaping the northwest corner of Tennessee.

Across the South, when African Americans entered an economic system previously dominated by white smallholders, whites often responded with violence. William F. Holmes’ research suggests that the smallholders who comprised the bulk of the Farmers’ Alliance’s membership were more conservative than many interpretations of the later Populist movement

⁵⁶ Lester, *Mudsills*, 207.

⁵⁷ J. M. Shahan, “Rhetoric of Reform: The 1906 Gubernatorial Race in Tennessee,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 68-69.

implied, particularly on issues of race. In Georgia, as in Tennessee, when Alliance representatives joined the state legislature, they voted along Democratic Party lines.⁵⁸ William Holmes' research into the decline of the Colored Farmers' Alliance revealed that when blacks threatened "white's economic domination, they could expect determined and, quite likely, violent opposition."⁵⁹ Between September 1 and 5, 1889, whites murdered at least twenty-five African Americans during a violent campaign in Leflore County, Mississippi, effectively shutting down the county's Colored Farmers' Alliance. State officials, including Mississippi Governor Lowry, were aware of the violence, but made no move to intervene in the massacre. Holmes suggested that the death toll would have been even higher, but black laborers received protection from the white planters who depended on their labor during cotton harvest.⁶⁰ In both Mississippi and Georgia, smallholders within the Southern Alliance offered the most determined opposition to the efforts of the Colored Farmers' Alliance to improve conditions among African American farm laborers.⁶¹

During the 1908 night rider violence at Reelfoot Lake, Patterson was busily courting Tennessee's white rural smallholders. In the governor's mind, cotton was an enduring concern, but the African American farm laborers who picked that cotton were not. African Americans had been effectively (and to Patterson's mind, rightly) disfranchised by the turn of the twentieth century. Black migration from farms to cities had not yet begun in earnest, but planters and politicians, including Bob Taylor, recognized the threat that urban industrial opportunities posed

⁵⁸ William F. Holmes, "The Southern Farmers' Alliance and the Georgia Senatorial Election of 1890," *The Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 2 (May 1984): 197-224.

⁵⁹ William F. Holmes, "The Demise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance," *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 2 (May 1975): 200.

⁶⁰ William F. Holmes, "The Leflore County Massacre and the Demise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance," *Phylon* 34, no. 3 (3rd Qtr. 1960): 273.

⁶¹ Holmes, "Demise," 199-200.

to the existing labor model. The Alliance had dissolved, but Patterson was actively pursuing the rural voters who had formed the bulk of its membership, the same constituency who had nurtured resistance to the Colored Farmers' Alliance's efforts in other parts of the South.

Patterson's failure to respond to Lake County's appeal for aid protecting their African American workers served the governor's interests. First, had Patterson intervened, he risked alienating the rural smallholders who were most attracted to the rhetoric of agrarian reform, a group that Patterson and his supporters believed could provide the essential margin for victory in a close election. Second, a free and mobile black labor force threatened cotton production, which Patterson earnestly believed was the heart of Tennessee's wealth and prosperity. As their petition made clear, Lake County landowners had already launched a widespread effort to protect the African American laborers who picked their cotton. Where Lake County landlords perceived a threat to their labor force, Patterson may well have seen labor insurance.

When the threat of indiscriminate violence forced African Americans to choose between relying on their own resources and fleeing to the protection of a paternalistic landlord, laborers often opted for the protective auspices of a landowner who needed their labor. In the words of C. Vann Woodward, it was not adoration for upper-class southerners that led African Americans to turn to landlords for protection "but the hot breath of cracker fanaticism they felt on the back of their necks."⁶² With Lake County landlords already actively intervening to protect their labor force, Patterson may have believed the situation around Reelfoot Lake ensured Lake County's landlords a more reliable and loyal labor force than cotton producers elsewhere in the state, where the potential consequences were less dire for workers who opted to leave an established

⁶² Woodward, *Strange Career*, 51.

labor arrangement. Malcolm Patterson may have been an urban Progressive, but both he and his supporters worked to make Patterson palatable to smallholders and rural voters. Despite his ties to the region and his intense interest in cotton production, when Lake County's residents asked him for help, he refused.

The situation changed dramatically on October 20, 1908. Captain Quentin Rankin was dead. Although Colonel Robert Z. Taylor was actually making his way across Reelfoot Lake to Lake County, he was presumed dead as well. When the night riders committed this breach of the established racial boundary, Patterson responded with an immediate and unprecedented display of power and authority.

Tobacco night rider violence had generated news coverage, but Rankin's murder held special appeal. A midnight assault on prominent white men, Rankin's dastardly murder, Taylor's daring escape, and Malcolm Patterson's forceful response transformed rote reports of violence into newspaper gold. Reporters who traveled to Reelfoot had much to report. Hillsman Taylor summoned the Vanderbilt football team and several members arrived at Reelfoot Lake to aid the state militia as they combed the swamps for Taylor's attackers.⁶³ For his part, Robert Z. Taylor readily detailed his ordeal for the media. Malcolm Patterson cancelled campaign appearances, but the media interest in the case provided the governor with many opportunities to issue public statements.

The media portrayal of Patterson's response to Rankin's murder was overwhelmingly positive. When opening his campaign for re-election, Patterson exhorted Democrats to remember that Republican hopes for success hinged on "the supposed disaffection in the

⁶³ "Collegians Chase Outlaws," *The Sun* (NY), October 25, 1908, 10.

Democratic Party.”⁶⁴ Patterson’s supporters praised the governor for sacrificing his campaign in order to suppress lawlessness, proclaiming, “The people will run the Governor’s campaign for him” while he tended the state’s business.⁶⁵ News accounts portrayed Patterson fearlessly leading the charge against the night riders, despite threats to himself and his family. Writers praised Patterson for his valor, compared him to Napoleon, and offered him up as an example to other governors.⁶⁶ Patterson easily defeated his Republican opponent in the general election.

Overall, Governor Patterson benefited from the coverage of the violence at Reelfoot Lake, but not all editors completely abandoned criticism of Tennessee’s governor. Patterson’s opponents cast his response to the night rider violence as pure political opportunism. One writer reminded readers that Patterson had deliberately ignored lawlessness in the tobacco district, where men of status and money condoned violence. He sarcastically informed readers that although Patterson was “heedless of the complaints from Clarksville and other night rider infested communities,” following Rankin’s death, the governor “has suddenly heard that there are night riders in Tennessee.” He explained that Reelfoot did not pose the same problems as tobacco night riding because “no one but poor, ignorant fishermen are implicated, [so Patterson] is perfectly safe in making a big show with his soldiers there. They probably marched into that section ‘battalion front,’ driving the rabbits before them.”⁶⁷

Although condemnation of Rankin’s murder was almost universal in news reports, even newspapers from other states maintained sympathy for the night riders while deploring their

⁶⁴ Malcolm Patterson, Typed Manuscript, Speech Opening Campaign for Re-election, October 8, 1910, 8-9, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁶⁵ “The People Will Run the Governor’s Campaign for Him,” undated news clipping, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

⁶⁶ “Letters from the People,” *The Nashville American*, October 24, 1908; “An Example to Other Governors,” *The Pensacola Journal*, October 27, 1908, 4.

⁶⁷ “Fighting Night Riders,” *Paducah Evening Sun*, October 23, 1908, 4.

methods. The *Ocala Banner* characterized Rankin's tragic murder as the result of "an ugly state of lawlessness in which the right is not all on one side."⁶⁸ The editor of a Missouri newspaper wrote, "All this trouble is over the killing of a rich lawyer named Rankin who sold out his clients – the farmers around Reelfoot Lake." He explained that Patterson had responded with "the wholesale arrest of farmers by the military." In conclusion, the editor quipped, "Mind you, this is not in Russia, but in 'free' America where 'the peepul' rule."⁶⁹

Patterson knew that some people believed there was more to the violence at Reelfoot than fishing rights. A man who identified himself as RCW wrote the *Nashville American* and made clear that more was at stake than news articles suggested. RCW wrote that many people had condoned earlier lawlessness "for selfish reasons." Even after Rankin's death, there were people who "excuse the lawlessness of the cotton growing night riders, suggesting that their demands should be acceded to and some concerted action taken to keep up the price of cotton." RCW indignantly declared that sympathy with the night riders was folly and asked, "If the price of tobacco and cotton is to be kept up by threat and intimidation why not corn and wheat and merchandise?"⁷⁰ RCW supported Patterson's position, but he also directly connected the recent violence to cotton markets. Malcolm Patterson clipped the article for his personal file.

For readers far outside of Tennessee's cotton and tobacco markets, the incident at Reelfoot Lake offered a compelling cautionary tale about the power of private trusts and the loss of public resources. Shortly after Rankin's murder, newspapers in Florida and California carried

⁶⁸ "The Reelfoot Lake Tragedy," *Ocala Banner*, November 6, 1908, 10.

⁶⁹ "The Night Riders," *Scott County Kicker* (MO), November 14, 1908, 4.

⁷⁰ "Letters From the People," *American*, October 24, 1908, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

articles comparing members of the West Tennessee Land Company to European feudal lords.⁷¹

Florida newspapers directly framed Rankin's murder as a call for conservation: "Let us get together and buy a million acres of pine lands for a common game and fish preserve, open to every citizen of Florida forever, let us forbid Governor Broward from selling another acre of the state lands but keep it for a holiday and picnic ground."⁷²

The racially charged violence that dominated the night riders' actions throughout the summer largely disappeared in newspaper accounts of the attack on Rankin and Taylor. Newspapers across the country identified Rankin's murder as a resurgence of the violence that erupted almost a year earlier, with the destruction of Burdick's fish docks. Occasional references to racial violence slipped into coverage of Rankin's murder and the state investigation. For instance, one account identified the violence at Reelfoot as "an outgrowth of a controversy" over fishing rights at the lake, while presenting the massacre of the Walker family as evidence of the night riders' "desperate character."⁷³ When night rider Tid Burton confessed and turned state's evidence, he admitted to involvement in the attack on George Wynne earlier in the summer. An Arizona newspaper reported that Tid Burton confessed to whipping a prominent white man but failed to mention that the night riders targeted Wynne because he made an unfavorable comparison between the members of the band and African American laborers.⁷⁴ The majority of news coverage included no references to the summer of violence preceding Rankin's murder. Most newspapers simply pointed to Rankin's murder as an egregious escalation of the dispute

⁷¹ "The Public Letter Box," *Los Angeles Herald*, October 26, 1908, 4; "The Reelfoot Lake Tragedy," *The Ocala Banner*, November 6, 1908, 10.

⁷² "Let Us Save a Little," *The Ocala Banner*, October 30, 1908, 4.

⁷³ "Judge Escapes From Riders," *The Mexico Missouri Message*, October 29, 1908, 2.

⁷⁴ "Confesses He Helped Whip Squire Wynne," *The Bisbee Daily Review (AZ)* October 28, 1908, 1.

concerning ownership of Reelfoot Lake and referenced the earlier attack on Burdick.⁷⁵

Following Rankin's murder, even *The Hickman Courier*, which had covered violence at Reelfoot throughout the summer, reported, "The last trouble in the lake district was in the spring."⁷⁶

As the readers and editors of *The Hickman Courier* were fully aware, there had been trouble around the lake all summer, but, in the wake of Rankin's murder, the only violence that mattered in news reports was violence against whites. Almost all accounts, including Taylor's statement to reporters, emphasized that Rankin and Taylor guilelessly accompanied their abductors, believing they would be threatened and set free. Most newspapers were satisfied with decrying Rankin's murder, characterizing the attack as a lynching or describing the attack in detail and permitting their readers to draw their own conclusions.

While many newspapers trusted their readership to draw inferences from implicit references, one Kentucky newspaper outlined explicitly what set Rankin's murder apart. According to the writer, Rankin and Taylor did not resist because they "could not conceive of such a thing as men of their prominence being hanged and shot like dogs by men of their own color."⁷⁷ Before Rankin's murder, the night riders had destroyed white men's property, intimidated African American laborers, attacked prominent white men, and murdered an entire African American family. None of these crimes generated the unprecedented interest and outrage that accompanied Rankin's murder.

⁷⁵ "Night Riders Slay Lawyers," *The Bee* (Earlington, KY) October 22, 1908, 1; "Father of Paducah Woman Murdered By Night Riders Near Reelfoot Lake, Tenn," *The Paducah Evening Sun*, October 20, 1908, 1; "Night Riders Murder," *The Muskogee Cimeter* (OK), October 30, 1908, 7; "A Band of Assassins," *Ocala Evening Sun*, October 21, 1908, 2.

⁷⁶ "Tragedy at Lake!," *The Hickman Courier*, October 22, 1908, 1.

⁷⁷ "Mr. Taylor Swim Bayou and Escapes Night Riders – Shoot at Him in Water," *The Paducah Evening Sun*, October 21, 1908, 1.

Race lay at the core of the public response to Rankin's death. Public sentiment could not tolerate this type of violence directed at prominent white men. The attack on George Wynne prompted a response within Lake County but failed to generate much interest beyond the community. In his own account, Robert Z. Taylor stated that he and Rankin assumed that the night riders intended to whip them and that they accompanied their abductors willingly. The night riders had whipped a number of other white people over the course of the summer and, when the night riders roused Rankin and Taylor from their beds at Walnut Log, both men grudgingly submitted to their anticipated punishment. Even Taylor and Rankin apparently accepted whipping as a form of community coercion that white men might legitimately perpetrate on other white men, but lynching was another matter entirely. Taylor, Rankin, and newspaper writers who echoed Taylor's surprise believed race and status protected white men from being tortured and murdered by other white men, regardless of their supposed offense. The night riders subjected Taylor and Rankin to the sort of extralegal violence reserved for black men.

For an urban Progressive who had risen to office by exploiting a schism within Tennessee's Democratic Party and casting himself as the inheritor of agrarian reform, the murder of Captain Rankin presented a potentially catastrophic conundrum. Patterson advocated the PPA's aristocratically led organization as a model for other farmers, even tolerating night rider violence conducted under the PPA's auspices. Even when residents around Reelfoot Lake dispensed with the aristocratic leadership and adopted only the PPA's vigilante tactics, Patterson refused to send state resources to bolster Lake County landlords' efforts to protect their African American laborers. Patterson consistently courted rural voters and steadfastly avoided positions that risked alienating small farmers. In Patterson's mind, attacks against African Americans and

restrained violence against other whites were understandable, but lynching a prominent white man displayed a blatant disregard for the privileges afforded by race and class. In response, Patterson crushed the night riders beneath the full force of Tennessee's authority.

The racial and agricultural issues around Reelfoot Lake were as gnarled and tangled as the lake itself. While market conditions pinched small farmers across the state, Judge Harris and other Lake County landlords extracted vast wealth from a growing African American labor force. Just across the lake, Obion's white residents believed the expanding cotton economy threatened their economic rights. As a large black labor force freed wealthy landowners from dependence on white wage labor, wealthier landowners no longer required the goodwill of poorer whites. Earlier, landowners had relented to community pressure against enforcing private control of the lake, but unwanted wage laborers lost the advantage that the need for a large labor force had traditionally given them. Landowners with a plentiful black labor force were free to pursue their own economic self-interest without fear of reprisals from the white community, and the lake became fair game. In light of the ongoing agricultural shifts, the violence at Reelfoot presented not a targeted response to the loss of fishing rights, but the final skirmish in an ongoing class struggle between groups whose traditional bonds had completely broken down.

Rankin's lynching demanded action, but the agricultural foundations of the violence around Reelfoot Lake threatened to put Malcolm Patterson's agrarian-friendly image into direct conflict with his interest in expanding cotton markets. For Patterson, neither side of the agricultural dispute offered a winning political position. The conservation of the state's public resources, however, was an imminently defensible position. Acquiring Reelfoot Lake as a state game preserve made political sense. Patterson had already pressed the state legislature to take action to conserve the state's resources, he had discussed a plan for establishing forest reserves in

Tennessee, and the state Democratic Party platform included a declaration that the forests and streams of Tennessee belonged to the people. Patterson had led a caravan of Memphis supporters on a recreational outing to Reelfoot Lake. For these urban voters, the lake represented neither a potential source of supplemental income nor the final battleground in an ongoing conflict between traditional access rights and private ownership. Patterson's urban base valued Reelfoot Lake's potential as a recreational escape for city dwellers looking for rural regeneration.

With the West Tennessee Land Company disentangled from the agricultural changes wrought by James C. Harris and Judge Harris, the company became just another trust run amok. Patterson responded to Rankin's death with unprecedented force but also immediately pointed to Reelfoot Lake as an example of the peril of the monopolization of public resources and advocated the creation of a public game and fish preserve as a prophylactic against future depredations. From his command center at Reelfoot Lake, Malcolm Patterson transformed into a valiant, trust-busting conservationist.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In a 1925 address to Tennessee's General Assembly, Tennessee Governor Austin Peay wrote, "We should forthwith establish a system of State parks and forests. ... Reelfoot Lake in West Tennessee, is a great natural asset... It should be perpetuated for the pleasure and recreation of the people through all time."¹ In seeking to establish a state park system, Governor Peay attempted to resolve the disputes over ownership of Reelfoot Lake that had plagued the State of Tennessee since 1908, when his one-time political ally, Governor Malcolm Patterson, initiated the state acquisition of Reelfoot Lake.²

In the immediate aftermath of Quentin Rankin's death, Governor Patterson successfully turned the violence around Reelfoot Lake to his political advantage, but his triumph was short-lived. On November 8, 1908, Robin Cooper, the son of Patterson's close associate Duncan Brown Cooper, shot Edward Ward Carmack dead on a street in downtown Nashville. Carmack had relentlessly printed personal attacks against Duncan Cooper. On November 8, Duncan, accompanied by his son, angrily accosted Carmack. Carmack opened fire, hitting Robin. Robin returned fire, killing Carmack. When Carmack's coffin left Nashville for Columbia, Tennessee, the Women's Christian Temperance Union gathered at the Nashville train station. After the train left, Dr. Ira Landrith spoke to the women gathered at the station, pleading that "the blood of ex-Senator Carmack must be as productive as the blood of the martyrs of old."³

¹ Tennessee, *House Journal of the Sixty-Fourth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, (Nashville: n.p., 1925), 33.

² Austin Peay, letter to Malcolm Patterson, May 18, 1923, Malcolm Rice Patterson Papers, acc. No. 1157, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

³ "Tennessee is Stirred," *New York Tribune*, November 11, 1908, 1.

In the wake of Carmack's death, the large-scale military operation at Reelfoot Lake suddenly seemed less like a model for suppressing lawlessness and more like evidence that lawlessness was even more pervasive in Tennessee than in other southern states. As the *Washington Times* reported, "Tennessee, already plunged into the gloom of feud and assassination" was rocked by Carmack's murder. In Los Angeles and San Francisco, newspapers reported that "conditions [were] such that the commonwealth of Tennessee [was] placed on trial before the world as accessory to murder."⁴ The *Memphis News Scimitar* accused Patterson of attempting to shield the Coopers and called for the governor's impeachment; New York's *The Sun* printed the *News Scimitar*'s accusation.⁵ The Women's Christian Temperance Union and other prohibitionists succeeded in converting Carmack into a martyr for their cause. In January of 1909, the Tennessee General Assembly voted to prohibit alcohol in Tennessee. Despite Patterson's long list of Progressive victories, after Carmack's death, prohibition became Tennessee's defining Progressive reform.

Following Carmack's murder, Patterson lost the political advantages he had acquired while leading the charge against the night riders, but he had successfully restored the divisions of race and class in northwest Tennessee. On November 23, 1908, a mob lynched three African American brothers, Marshall, Edward, and Jim Stinebeck, at Tiptonville in Lake County. The previous day, on the way to respond to a call that the three brothers were causing a disturbance at an African American church, Lake County Sheriff John Hall deputized Richard Burruss. An altercation erupted when Hall and Burruss confronted the Stinebecks outside of the church and one of the brothers shot them both, killing Burruss and seriously injuring Hall. The three men

⁴ "Commonwealth is to Blame for Growth of Lawlessness," *The Los Angeles Herald*, November 28, 1908, 4; "Tennessee on Trial," *The San Francisco Call*, November 13, 1908, 6.

⁵ "Ex-Senator Carmack Buried," *The Sun* (NY), November 12, 1908, 3.

escaped but were captured early the next day. J. L. Burnette convinced the mob to delay the lynching until nightfall, so that a sheriff and judge could organize an impromptu trial that would condone the lynching. After the men were condemned, the mob hung all three men from the rafters of the African American church.⁶

Patterson attempted to prevent the lynching, but the militia arrived too late. The governor clarified that he moved to intervene not because he “didn’t believe that the negroes deserved to die” but because he hoped to avoid the appearance of lawlessness. For Patterson, the lynching in Lake County was not actually lawlessness at all. Patterson explained, “Now, that act has got to be differentiated from an act of lawlessness by organized mobs, because that act was the act of infuriated white men against negroes who had murdered white men in cold blood, and that is likely to occur at any time.” Although Patterson perceived Rankin’s murder as an unjust and unjustified act, he refused to admit that the lynching of three black men was the same ethically or morally. In Patterson’s words, “When we kill a negro in the South for a nameless crime against our civilization and the purity of our women, we don’t visit punishment upon the innocent. If we happen to form a mob and kill a negro for a murder such as was committed in Lake County, we don’t follow it by burning their houses.” Patterson presented the targeted nature of the lynchings as a credit to southern restraint. In Patterson’s view, the Stinebeck lynching was nothing like Rankin’s murder. Following forceful state intervention, residents around Reelfoot Lake were once again venting their rage at poor blacks. The night riders were quiet, Rankin’s accused killers were awaiting trial and, in Lake County, three black men hung from the rafters of an African American church, lynched for a crime that only one man committed. Indeed, the mob in

⁶ “Three Negroes Hanged by Mob in Tennessee,” *Los Angeles Herald*, November 25, 1908, 2.

Lake County did not burn the church after lynching the Stinebecks. Two doctors asked them not to burn the building because fire would have threatened a barn belonging to a bed-ridden white man who lived nearby. Instead, the community leaders who organized the lynching left the lights burning and the church doors open so that the men's silhouettes were visible from the street.⁷

In April 1910, Malcolm Patterson pardoned Duncan Brown Cooper and sealed his own political fate. Patterson successfully fended off Carmack's attacks while his opponent lived, but he could not defeat a martyr. Nonetheless, Patterson insisted on announcing for a third term. In his nomination speech, Patterson invoked his successful suppression of lawlessness at Reelfoot Lake, but he could not overcome the political damage of Carmack's murder and the pardon of Duncan Cooper. The Democratic Party attempted to salvage the race by substituting Robert L. Taylor at the last minute, but it was too late. Carmack's death had irrevocably divided the Democratic Party. Not even "Our Bob" could overcome the taint of murder and collusion surrounding the gubernatorial election. Republican Ben Hooper won the election, placing Tennessee's governorship in the hands of the Republicans for the first time since 1880.

Carmack's death and Patterson's defeat rerouted Progressive reform in Tennessee, but the narrative surrounding Reelfoot Lake was already established. In February 1909, after the men were convicted and before those convictions were overturned, a bill was introduced to acquire

⁷ Abigail Rice Hyde, "1908 Incident at Keefe: Death of Dick Burrus" in Alfred Michael Franko, *The Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake, TN*, compiled by Winnie Mooney Hood and Arline Erwin Orr (n.p.: Lake County Historical Society, 2000), xii - xiii. Hyde stressed that she wrote an account of the lynching to correct mistaken stories, which attributed the lynching to the night riders rather than to highly respected citizens of Lake County. Hyde attributed the majority of her information on the event to a personal account provided by John Perry Moore, who as a 16 year-old, climbed into the church's rafters to pry loose one of the Stinebeck brother's fingers from a joist that he grabbed when the mob first attempted to hang him. Hyde concluded, "As far as the community was concerned, justice had been done. It never occurred to anyone to think the night riders had been responsible."

the land around Reelfoot Lake as a game and fish preserve in the interest of public welfare.⁸ Despite some opposing politicians who argued that the purchase rewarded the lawlessness at Reelfoot, the bill passed the house in April.⁹ The state spent decades unraveling the overlapping land claims to Reelfoot Lake, but within months of Rankin's death the state legislature dedicated resources to acquiring the lake, an act that simultaneously legitimized Patterson's conservation narrative and dismissed the night riders' potentially troubling attacks on surrogate victims connected to Lake County's expanding cotton economy.

Patterson's conservation narrative diverted attention away from the potentially dangerous critique of the cotton economy and toward a popular Progressive program, but conservation rhetoric also helped limit the threat that dissatisfied residents could pose in the future. Historians have demonstrated that Progressive Era projects targeting rural areas contained an inherent disdain for rural residents. For instance, Charles Postel argued that the Commission on Country Life, which Theodore Roosevelt established to explore methods of improving farm life, dismissed farmers' longstanding efforts to identify and rectify the challenges of rural life and presumed instead that rural residents' problems required external technocratic intervention.¹⁰ In his analysis of the Country Life Movement, William Bowers argued that the chairman of the commission, Liberty Hyde Bailey, "concluded that the chief problem [with rural life] was how to make farmers revere all things rural."¹¹ As Bowers' observation suggests, the denigration of rural residents was embedded within Progressive movements for rural uplift, but these efforts also assumed that rural life was worth preserving. Progressives worked to keep people in rural

⁸ "Reelfoot Lake Act," *The Hickman Courier*, February 11, 1909, 1.

⁹ "Reelfoot Lake Bills," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, April 9, 1909, 5.

¹⁰ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 282-287.

¹¹ William L Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), 61.

settings through efforts like the Country Life Movement, but, through conservation efforts, Progressives worked to remove rural people from specific rural places. As William Cronon found, conservationists and urbanites viewed rural residents as polluters of rural landscapes rather than producers who worked in rural areas.¹² Karl Jacoby found that changes in conservation law transformed rural residents overnight from producers into squatters, poachers, and thieves. This rhetorical transformation limited rural residents' abilities to gain a public hearing. As a result, Progressives conceived of rural residents as outlaws, defined new limitations on land use, and framed even longstanding and benign violations of these new rules as criminal behavior.

The night riders of Reelfoot Lake committed numerous violent atrocities, not benign violations. By any definition, the night riders were outlaws, but after Rankin's death, portrayals depicted all lake residents as squatters, despite the fact that Tennessee courts had repeatedly recognized locals' cases against private ownership as legitimate claims under private property law.¹³ When the state legislature legitimized Patterson's portrayal of the Reelfoot uprising as a conservation conflict, they simultaneously legitimized portrayals that depicted the residents around the lake as ignorant and backward. As a result, the act of conservation served not only to divert attention from the night riders' critique of the cotton economy but also to undercut

¹² William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, and Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹³ "A Kappa Sigma Victim of Night Riders," *Caduceus of Kappa Sigma* 23, no. 2 (November 1908): 101; "Collegians Chase Outlaws," *The Sun* (NY), October 25, 1908, 10; "Judge Escapes From Riders," *The Montgomery Tribune*, October 30, 1908, 3; "Are They Blind!," *Scott County Kicker* (MO), November 7, 1908, 1; "Bloody Rule of Reelfoot Night Riders," *The Spokane Press*, November 6, 1908, 7; "Long Standing Lawlessness," *Valentine Democrat*, November 12, 1908, 3.

residents' ability to gain a hearing for future critiques. No reasonable urban Progressive would value the opinion of an ignorant, backward outlaw.

Denigration of the residents around Reelfoot Lake contributed to the reestablishment of racial boundaries and shored up existing patterns of wealth and authority. Patterson knew that the night riders targeted the cotton economy, but as long as they conducted their attacks within the boundaries of white supremacy, he trusted the existing patterns of wealth and authority to hold. In Patterson's mind, when the night riders lynched Rankin, they demonstrated a fundamental disregard for the racial boundaries that provided the foundation for the structure of wealth and power in Tennessee and enabled the purified electorate to enact all other Progressive reforms. Fortunately for Patterson, the night rider violence toward whites focused on men connected with the West Tennessee Land Company. By pursuing state ownership of Reelfoot Lake, Patterson framed himself as sympathetic to the residents around the lake even while he abhorred their lawlessness, tied the unrest at the lake to an existing plank of his political platform, and espoused a conservation philosophy that was ideologically appealing to his urban voter base.

For distant proponents of conservation, the pressing agricultural conditions and racial violence that had plagued the area disappeared and the residents who became night riders were framed simply as backward locals who were intensely devoted to hunting and fishing. In 1921, Nashville lawyer and conservationist Joseph Acklen recounted his experience traveling to the lake to enforce a federal migratory bird law. Acklen characterized the night riders as "quaint" and related how he wooed them with alcohol and cigars, disarmed an angry mob with his knowledge of French and a glimpse of his .45 automatic, and ultimately persuaded them "to

respect the law, which promise, no doubt, they forgot the next day.”¹⁴ Acklen’s self-inflated account stressed the dire warnings he received that natives at Reelfoot would respond violently to impositions on their hunting rights. This account reveals the depth of misunderstanding regarding the events at Reelfoot Lake. Within 13 years of the conflict, Acklen had framed the night riders as backwoods bumpkins who were ready to start a war when someone interfered with their fishing. Acklen’s success in gaining local support for the migratory bird law likely had nothing to do with his charm. Denial of the right to fish for profit at Reelfoot Lake was merely another setback among the economic pressures threatening small farmers around the lake. By the time the night riders formed at Reelfoot Lake, Judge Harris’ cotton empire had remade the region in ways that were disadvantageous to small farmers; the West Tennessee Land Company’s successful assertion of private ownership of the lake was yet another turn of the same screw that had been gradually squeezing smallholders for decades. Acklen was never in danger during his time at Reelfoot Lake. His cause was not tied to pervasive agricultural pressures, he held no connection to landlords like Judge Harris, and small farmers had no economic interest in migratory birds. The conservation narrative of Reelfoot Lake created an enduring mythology of the night riders as rural champions of conservation, a mythology that purposefully neglected the economic motivations of small farmers living on the edge of a newly created cotton empire.

¹⁴ International Association of Game, Fish and Conservation Commissioner, *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Convention, Allentown, PA, Sept. 8 and 9, 1921*, (New York: Greenhalgh Printing Company, [1921]), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b2991621> (accessed September 10, 2012).

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