

Business increases show efforts of merchants

One of the most encouraging things we have seen in some years is the just-published U. S. Census Bureau report that shows a 30-per-cent increase in retail sales in Letcher County during the past five years.

That figure of 30 per cent is remarkable in many ways, for sales outdistanced the Kentucky state average increase, which went up only 23 per cent. And, the sharp Letcher County retail sales gains came in the face of a continued heavy population loss, totaling at least 15 per cent during the period.

In the face of the population losses, the general decline in the economy, Letcher County retail establishments would have done well had they only held their business volume of five years ago.

The report reflects many things. Perhaps the most important is the truly outstanding job done by several Letcher County merchants in upgrading quality. Offhand, we suppose about 50 per cent more types of items are offered in Letcher County stores now than five years ago.

Reflect along with us for a moment. Hoover Dawahare has skilfully led his retail store from a small dollar-an-item Army surplus type of operation into a large department store offering many items never on sale here before. Holstein Hardware has more than doubled the number of items it carries in stock. The new Walgreen Agency drug store has opened; the bowling alley has opened; there is a new flower shop; the Style Shoppe has added substantially to the quantity and quality of selections in women's clothing. In fact, there is hardly a business establishment in Whitesburg which has not remodeled and greatly expanded its line of merchandise in the period.

At the same time, the new A&P store in Neon has attracted large numbers of food purchasers from nearby sections of Knott, Floyd and Pike Counties. This has breathed new life generally into the retail business at Neon.

All of this, we think, has had a couple of results. The temptations and the reasons for rushing off to Lexington, Bristol, Knoxville or Cincinnati on a shopping expedition fade more and more as local merchants improve. Similarly, there is less and less reason to order items from Sears, Roebuck, Montgomery-Ward and so on. The result has been that much greater sums have been spent locally. There appears no letup in this trend.

The five years really have seen basic and permanent changes in the buying habits of Letcher County residents. One reason has been the closing of the coal company commissaries at Secco, Millstone and Jenkins, which has tended to provide a more stable and broader base for private merchants to build on.

A couple of other things also enter into the picture. The passage of the three-per-cent state sales tax and the resulting increase in the amount of money available for education and welfare programs has put at least \$1.5 million additional dollars each year into the county, mostly for teacher salaries. Teachers have had more to spend and families on welfare also have had a bit more.

Another major factor has been that in 1958 the thousand-man crew of Bethlehem Mines Corp. at Jenkins worked two and three days a week. In 1963 they were working five and six days a week, with a net difference in pay of about two thousand dollars an employee.

The entire subject of the general economy of Letcher County and indeed most of Eastern Kentucky is filled with strange contradictions. For it is an obvious and indisputable fact that many Letcher County residents are today earning more and spending more than ever before in the county's history.

It is just as obvious and just as indisputable from other census reports, however, that for many thousands of persons in the county incomes have vanished and their lot is one of deep, endless poverty.

We are confronted with the simple fact that for perhaps a third of our total population life is good, incomes and spending are high, and for these lucky people there is every prospect that things will get better and better.

But we must continue to face the fact that for the bottom third of the population, the situation is about as bad as it can get. The middle third? Well, mostly they just get by.

All in all, it is a situation of both growing prosperity and growing poverty in the same place at the same time, giving ground for both deep concern and bright optimism. This largely is the national pattern, with the increased concern and fears of growing unemployment clearly reflected in President Johnson's Great Society legislation even at a time of record-breaking national prosperity.

Here, the contrasts are the greatest and in this section of Eastern Kentucky are reflected most clearly both the dangers and the opportunities that lie ahead for the nation.

What price progress

It is sad and rather sobering to note that Eastern Kentucky's two most progressive mayors--Sam Isaac of Cumberland and Willie Dawahare of Hazard--have ended up in the hospital recently, Isaac with stomach ulcers and resultant severe hemorrhages and Dawahare with a severe heart condition.

No two men in Eastern Kentucky have tried any harder than these two to obtain outside aid for their communities and to push the local leadership that remains into trying every possible scheme to improve conditions in their towns.

Apparently, however, their efforts have succeeded better in landing them in the hospital than in changing the prevailing mood in their towns. Each man lost the support of his city council in the last city elections, and Isaac in particular has lived a miserable public life for the past year because of the constant friction between him and the Cumberland city council.

Interestingly enough, it has not been local newspaper criticism that drove the two to their beds but the opposition of local businessmen to the mayors' attempts to bring about progress.

Dawahare has had the satisfaction recently of seeing his efforts toward progress vindicated by voter approval of an urban renewal program in Hazard, but even so the petty back-biting continues.

Isaac, on the other hand, finally resigned this week. He announced he is moving to Lexington. Like so many others who have tried and failed to move Eastern Kentucky towns forward in the face of overwhelming local opposition, he has decided he can no longer continue the fight.

Perhaps some day Cumberland and Hazard will realize what they have done, and what they have lost.

Dr. Fred (IV) COUSIN URBIN WAS A MUSICIAN, A TRUE TROUBADOR

By Larry Caudill
Back in the first decade of the Twentieth Century the grandmothers of us mountaineers were apt to believe that such frivolities as dancing, card-playing and banjo-picking were erosive of character if not downright sin--wasters of time which could better be put to useful work. So she didn't allow such capers around her house.

My older brother Fred, who died in 1946 as Dr. F. W. Caudill of the State Board of Health, clung always to those principles, though not to extreme in practice.

Me, now--I have noticed over the decades that skill in a youth at dancing was conducive to the poise and fast reflexes that made great college athletes; that contract bridge is the finest discipline for the mathematical mind and orderly thinking of all card games; that few things can revive sagging spirits like a rollicking rondo or evoke the delicious agony of nostalgia like a sad sweet ballad on the old banjo.

Among the unforgettable characters of our boyhood was a kinsman, Urbin Comett. Orphaned early, he was a true and beloved vagabond. He lived here and there among the kith and kin. At every household he was accepted simply as just another of the younguns and took his share of the work or play.

If the work became too onerous or he became otherwise unhappy, Urbin simply moved on. He traveled lightly, with little more than the shirt on his back, a pocket knife--and his beloved banjo. For he was a musician, a true troubadour.

When Urbin came to Grandpa Arch Comett's for a sojourn he carefully cached the banjo in the barn before going to the house.

After supper of a moonlit autumn evening Urbin was apt to saunter out to the barn and his banjo, rest against the back of the barn and play and sing the ancient ballads which now make fortunes for professional folksingers with guitar and dulcimer.

Urbin at other times was a master storyteller around the hearthfire, especially ghost tales. It was said that he believed in ghosts.

In the household were some eligible girls--and there were the inevitable wooers. These young men knew of Urbin's banjo in the barn and his penchant for indulging his lightheartedness with lonesome songs behind the barn.

They decided one night to test out his belief in ghosts. One of them took a white sheet to the barn, hid at a corner and put the sheet over his head in the manner of the most approved ghost.

As Urbin sang the saddest climax of the tragic ballad, the youth stepped out of hiding into his view.

Urbin got one glance, sprang up and ran headlong for the house, reaching the outlying cookhouse as the nearest haven of refuge.

There sat Grandma, beside the warm kitchen stove, calmly smoking her clay pipe.

To his horror, Urbin suddenly realized that he still had his banjo in his hand.

He escaped, but it was quite a passage of time before he was again seen around Grandma Martha's premises.

Maybe there's a moral here; it's all right to let yourself get carried away with your music, but don't let it carry you into trouble.

As mere tykes we lived at Mod Holler opposite the mouth of Elk Creek and got to enjoy occasional visit to Grandpa's house on Leatherwood. There on one winter trip we ran across another memorable character who had become a member of the household. His dress was odd and his language strange to us.

He was friendly, and brother Fred, being the elder, soon was on agreeable terms with him. He had the room upstairs, and we slept in the other attic room. Far into the first night we heard a mysterious tap, tap, tap--tap-tap. We later learned that it was a typewriter and that he was writing a book.

He was John Fox, Jr., who

spent his time with mountain families while he wrote "The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come" and "Trail of the Lonesome Pine."

As an accepted member of the household he took on his share of the work and other chores around the farm.

One snowy afternoon it was his turn to tend the chores around the barn. He allowed two small boys to go along with him and carried on bantering conversation that kept us in giggles.

First, he let a suckling calf in to its mother for the first taste of

the evening milk. He took time to give us a rundown on what chores lay before us.

"Now, the first thing you ought to do," he said in mock seriousness, "is grab that little ol' bull calf by the tail and throw him over the fence out of yer way so you can get on with the milking."

We thought that was the funniest remark ever made by a man.

He even let us watch him operate his old Oliver typewriter.

He was another unforgettable character.

Of which, perhaps more later.

Current comment: THIS YEAR'S APPALACHIA BILL EVEN MORE DISAPPOINTING THAN LAST YEAR'S

It is a pity that the people of Appalachia have come to expect so much of the Appalachian Development Bill. They will be disappointed. The bill as unveiled at Senate hearings last week is about as resourceful as a surgeon who assumes in advance his patient cannot be saved. Administration witnesses spoke of making Appalachia "just like the rest of the Nation" in 20 years, but the bill betrays them. If this is really a long-range development program, it is the only one we know of with such short range plans. The life of the Appalachian Commission expires in just six years. This bill is so innocuous that the U. S. Chamber of Commerce and other like groups did not bother to testify against it. It even lacks the usual handouts to big business, which in Appalachia means coal, chemicals and railroads. "We couldn't come up with any solutions that were acceptable to all involved," said John Sweeney, the chief federal planner, "and therefore we had best avoid it." Evasion is the bill's one distinctive trait.

This bill is even weaker than the one the Senate passed last summer. A new section has been added which requires federal funds to be concentrated where there is "the greatest potential for future growth, and where the expected return on public dollars will be the greatest." Shouldn't the government be as interested in need as in profit. Isn't this just a polite way of saying that the most impoverished areas will receive the least funds? If so, the addition is superfluous for the entire administrative procedure tends to by-pass the poorest areas. The federal government is not permitted to initiate any projects. The purpose of this is to foster local self-help, but the effect is to give unfair advantage to the well-organized, administratively sophisticated urban centers which already have had some experience with government programs. By the time the more backward communities submit development plans, there will be little money left.

This isn't merely cynical speculation. Near the close of its hearing the Senate Public Works Committee heard testimony from two representatives of Jackson County, Kentucky. Jackson has the lowest median family income in the state. This means that 60% of its families earn less than \$2,000 a year and 75% earn less than \$3,000. About 10% of its home are graced with hot running water. There is maybe one lawyer in the county to help with development plans.

Jackson's spokesmen told the Senate committee that what Jackson and its four surrounding counties need most is a better highway. The present one, US 421, is narrow and winding. It frightens off tourists and makes it hard to market the produce of the area. Highway construction is central program in the Appalachia Bill and one would think that the Jackson region would be a priority target.

It isn't. When these Jackson men visited the state Appalachian plan-

ning office, they were told of tentative plans to build three highways all of which will neatly by-pass the poorest counties in Kentucky. There is no indication that the state will revise its plans, and Jackson is not entitled under the bill to appeal to Washington. All projects, according to another new amendment, must come through the state representative.

Appalachia's planners envision flourishing timber and tourist industries as the foundation of the region. Even if they are successful, the achievement is not an inspiring one. Timber is an uncertain business and some say demand is declining. Tourism is seasonal and low-paying. Surely this is not the best we can do. The bill is a challenge to Congressional liberals. We look to them for strengthening amendments. --I. F. STONE'S WEEKLY, Washington, D. C.

Appalachia gets sewage systems but not water

Sen. COOPER (R., Ky.): . . . Is there a gap in the (Appalachia) bill in that this section would not be available for the provision of just plain water to some community? I know it would provide sewage facilities . . . but there is no provision for water. And I know that there are many communities in my state, several county seats, which do not have any water facilities, they still use wells. In many cases, it is brackish mine water and very very dangerous to the health of the people and to the children in schools even . . . I think we should correct that.

Mr. SWEENEY (Chairman, Federal Development Planning Committee for Appalachia): Senator, let me explain why it is not in the bill. We are aware of this. There are also no funds for school construction. It was our judgment and the President's judgment that until Congress had resolved this question nationally, we ought not to ask for a special program in Appalachia. When those two questions are resolved and there is a national program for water supply on a grant basis and also for school construction, . . . we (will be) in a position to recommend the needs Appalachia actually has . . . This whole bill is an extension of existing programs to meet Appalachia's needs."

--Hearings on Appalachian Development Bill, Senate Public Works Committee, Jan. 19.

Kentucky governor favors area bill

" . . . the proposed Appalachian program will, for the first time in history, provide Kentucky with the necessary tools for meaningful human and economic development."

--GOV. EDWARD T. BREATHITT

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