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Patronage Politics in Eastern Kentucky: The Turner Family of Breathitt County

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PATRONAGE POLITICS IN EASTERN KENTUCKY: THE TURNER FAMILY OF BREATHITT COUNTY

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
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By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

PATRONAGE POLITICS IN EASTERN KENTUCKY:
THE TURNER FAMILY OF BREATHITT COUNTY

From the 1930s to the 1970s, the Turner family of Breathitt County held a political and economic monopoly over their rural county in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. They were emblematic of the patronage, clientele, and kinship politics that characterized twentieth century eastern Kentucky. The family rewarded their supporters with jobs and other economic benefits in exchange for continued political support. Ervine Turner served as a state senator during the Great Depression and was later appointed circuit judge over a three-county district, his wife Marie served 38 years as superintendent of Breathitt County schools, and their children later emerged as prominent political leaders in the region. The Turners were loyal Democrats who embraced New Deal liberalism and its commitment to government-sponsored economic development. They cultivated political connections with prominent Democrats that extended as far upward as the White House. Throughout their time in power, the family gained loyal followers but also attracted vocal critics for alleged acts of fraud and corruption. By the 1960s, the family's influence had grown so strong that some observers referred to them as the "Turner machine." Political machines have traditionally been perceived as corrupt, wasteful, and inefficient. This thesis uses the Turner family as a case study for reexamining the traditional roles of political machines by highlighting the benefits that patronage politics can deliver in historically isolated places like eastern Kentucky. It argues that the Turner family served as mediators between their constituents and the government. Through their political connections, the Turners generated jobs and infrastructure for the people of Breathitt County. But this economic growth did not generate long-term development and came at the expense of reinforcing conditions of dependence, processes that ultimately perpetuated poverty in Breathitt County and eastern Kentucky.

KEYWORDS: Kentucky, Appalachia, Breathitt, political machines, politics, education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

In their more than 50 years in power, the Turner family of Breathitt County, Kentucky made some remarkable headlines in their isolated mountain county. Marie Turner, superintendent of Breathitt County schools for 38 years beginning in 1931, brought in two First Ladies of the United States to dedicate new school buildings. Her husband Ervine, a state senator and later circuit court judge, was a confidante of Kentucky governor and United States senator Earle Clements. Ervine and Marie Turner were staunch Democrats who had connections with the most prominent Democratic politicians of the day, and to have a Democratic governor spend the night in their home was no rare occurrence. In Breathitt County, the Turner family held a political and economic monopoly for close to half a century. In addition to controlling the county school system and courthouse politics, the family by the 1960s owned a local bank, influenced local newspapers, controlled regional poverty programs, and the Turner children emerged as formidable politicians that expanded and enhanced the capacity of the family's political influence. The family's efficiency and ability to get things done resembled all the trappings of a well-oiled political machine. A 1965 Louisville *Courier-Journal* article mused, "Only the inexorable progress of time, the unseen future, seems able to shake the fortress the Turner family has built from their two-story yellow brick house on Jackson's highest hill, a house the Turners call the 'Big House.'"[1]

The Turner family of Breathitt County was emblematic of the patronage, clientele, and kinship politics that characterized twentieth century eastern Kentucky. Even as

[1] Robert Deitz, "Paternalism Plus Patronage Equals Power," *The Courier-Journal Magazine*, November 14, 1965, 52.

political machines declined and fell out of favor across most of the United States, the Turners used patronage politics to secure and grow their power in Breathitt County. The elite family served as mediators between their constituents and state and federal governments that seemed a world away. Like typical machine politicians, the Turners rewarded their followers and, if need be, punished their opponents. Beneath the surface, however, the Turners were no ordinary piece of political machinery. Accusations of graft, corruption, and fraud constantly threatened the family's hold on power, but they never crumbled. Controversial as their political tactics might have been, the Turner family fought for their county and its people's welfare. In an isolated region of abject poverty, it took a powerful family like the Turners to initiate necessary changes, even if it came at the expense of political machinery. Using the political connections they had cultivated over a lifetime, the family tried and often succeeded in taking advantage of state and federal resources, particularly under Democratic administrations. The Turner style of rule was at times cruel and unabashedly undemocratic, and Breathitt County, like many other counties in eastern Kentucky, remained one of the poorest in the nation after the family fell from power. But the family filled a necessary void and quite often served a useful purpose, providing direction and guidance in a county that for so long seemed to have none.

The Turner Family's Rise to Power

Even before the Turner family took power, Breathitt County had a national reputation. Popularly known as "Bloody Breathitt," the county received nationwide media attention as a place of bitter family feuding and extreme violence. Even into the early-twentieth century, Breathitt County was called "the darkest and bloodiest of all the dark and bloody

feud counties." In his study of Breathitt County, T.R.C. Hutton has found that feuding almost always stemmed from political disputes, with those in power using violence to assert or maintain political control.[2] At one point, the county held the highest per-capita murder rate in the United States, and national newspapers including the *New York Times* frequently ran stories reinforcing typical stereotypes of eastern Kentucky and Appalachia as backwards, violent, and lawless. According to Henry Shapiro, the proliferation of novels and short stories by local color writers such as John Fox, Jr. exploited the "picturesque aspects of feuding and moonshining" and contributed to the image of Appalachia as a "community of lawlessness."[3] Although most feuds had run their course by the 1930s, they left "in their wake a heritage of violence and the nickname 'Bloody Breathitt,' which lingered long after any justification for it remained."[4] It was in this turbulent climate that the Turner family ascended to power.

The Turner family emerged onto the local scene in the 1910s, when a member of Ervine Turner's family occupied political office for the first time. In this decade, Marie Roberts also married into what would become one of eastern Kentucky's most powerful political dynasties. Born in a log cabin in Knott County, Kentucky in 1899, she was the only child of two educators who worked in neighboring Breathitt County. Turner grew up in a devoted Democratic household and became involved in politics at an early age, even staying at the polls all day as a young 12-year-old when her father ran for magistrate. She

[2] T.R.C Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt: Politics and Violence in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).
[3] Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia On Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 104.
[4] John Ed Pearce, *Days of Darkness: The Feuds of Eastern Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 53.

admitted that politics is "all I've ever known."[5] Indeed, she was later described as a "pretty girl who turned down suitors simply because they happened to be Republican," a clear sign that partisan politics influenced her from an early age.[6]

Marie Turner was quite ambitious, her career "marked by a knack for knowing where she wanted to go and how to get there." After graduating from Riverside Christian School in the Lost Creek community, she met Ervine Turner, eleven years her senior, who was then serving as principal of Jackson High School. Marie earned a teaching certificate at age 16, although she was two years shy of the legal age. She managed, however, to skirt the rules and at age 17 found herself teaching at an isolated one-room school with more than 80 students and earning less than $60 per month. In the mountain schoolhouse, she sometimes faced unruly students. Most boys were older and much larger than Marie, with one having "done time" for moonshining and three others that carried knives. But Marie showed little fear, whipping five in her first week and stressing the importance of a good education; thereafter, they caused little trouble. All the while, she attended a business college in the county seat of Jackson and even served as a chief deputy for her father, who was elected sheriff in 1918. She married Ervine Turner in 1919, thus beginning a long and fruitful political partnership.[7] Within the next five years, Ervine and Marie Turner produced three children, Lois in 1920, John Raymond in 1921, and Treva in 1923.[8]

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[5] Marie R. Turner, interview by William Berge, June 15, 1982, Marie R. Turner Oral History Project, William Berge Oral History Center, Eastern Kentucky University (hereafter "MRT Oral History Project").
[6] Ewell Alltrip, "Marie R. Turner, Matriarch of the Kentucky Democratic Party," in *Breathitt County Memories: Remembering Breathitt County and Jackson During the Last Century*, Vol. 1, Charles Hayes Jr., ed. (Jackson, KY: The Kentucky Explorer Magazine, 2007): 227.
[7] John Ed Pearce, "A Dynastic Family at the Crossroads," *The Courier-Journal and Times Magazine*, August 30, 1970, 12.
[8] Ervine and Marie's eldest child, Lois Irene Turner, was born with a permanent spinal injury. Although the family sought advanced medical care for Lois, she suffered her entire life. Lois lived to the age of 53 and,

Ervine Turner came from an influential Breathitt County family. His brother William had served as superintendent of the county school system during World War I. In 1924, Ervine assumed the position and employed Marie as a clerk in his office, a time she later described as a "wonderful experience." These years solidified her resolve to become an educator, and when Ervine resigned in 1931 to practice law, Marie took the reins. Hesitant to assume such a responsibility at a young age and without a college education at the time, she struck a deal with her husband: "He made me superintendent and I made him run for the Senate." With the school system struggling financially, Marie realized that political connections could be helpful in passing favorable school laws and acquiring road funding for the isolated county. Ervine kept his promise and in 1934 earned a seat in Frankfort as the state senator for Breathitt, Lee, Magoffin, Morgan, and Wolfe counties, a position he held until 1941. In this capacity, Ervine cultivated political connections that became very important for Breathitt County and the Turner family in future years.[9]

Although Marie Turner saw herself as an educator first and a politician second, the two went hand in hand, with politics profoundly influencing the way she ran her school system for nearly four decades. In fact, her ambitions extended well beyond the realm of education. She remained a voracious advocate of educational reform throughout her life, but also realized that basic infrastructural improvements were needed to support good schooling. She lobbied for adequate roads, government supports to aid failing farmers, greater access to healthcare, and a diversified educational system that offered industrial, vocational, and agricultural programs. To achieve these goals, politics seemed the best

according to one educator, was "one of the real tragedies" of Marie and Ervine's life. Thomas P. Collins, interview by William Berge, March 6, 1984, MRT Oral History Project.

[9] Marie Turner, interviews, June 15, 1982 and July 27, 1982.

and most natural route. She later said, "The only way you can better a county is through politics. You have to have politics before you can get roads, bridges, and buildings." In her view, other superintendents never realized the value of forming political connections at the state and national levels. She said, "If you don't know your governor and don't know your senators, how do you expect [them] to help the school system." Because of the Turner family's political connections, Breathitt County received more government projects than neighboring counties, particularly when Democrats were the ruling party.[10]

Patronage Politics

Some observers have likened the Turner family's power structure to a political machine. Particularly in the 1960s, when the Turner children became politically involved, it was common to hear of the "Turner machine." Although Marie Turner denied there was ever such a thing ("It was just people who worked together"), the family's power structure exhibited features of clientelism and patronage politics. Although clientelism is difficult to define and can manifest itself in varying ways, Allen Hicken has identified several themes that undergird patron-client relationships. First, clientelism implies a "dyadic relationship" based on brokerage and networking. Those at the top "generate resources that are channeled down the pyramid," while "forms of fealty" such as vote buying flow upward. Second, clientelist relationships always have a "contingent or reciprocal nature" with a constant exchange of goods, services, and support. Third, a clear hierarchical relationship is apparent, with individuals of higher economic or political status using their influence to provide resources, protection, benefits, or a combination thereof to their clients. Finally, the patron-client relationship holds the expectation of a continuous

[10] Alltrip, "Marie R. Turner," in *Breathitt County Memories*, 225.

relationship rather than a one-time deal. There is a degree of inherent trust in both parties to deliver on their promises.[11]

These criteria generally define the parameters of clientelism, but more ambiguous is the concept of volition. In other words, what holds the patron-client relation together? Scholars have pointed to a number of factors, including power/force, needs/demands, or voluntary obligations. But successful examples of clientelism, as Hicken notes, are ones where "exchange is a mutually reinforcing equilibrium, with each side free to exit if they become dissatisfied with the nature of the relationship." The most successful relationships emerge from rational decision making on the part of clients, who generally see patrons as potentially beneficial to their success. Once the relationship is secured, however, the power differential is clear, and patrons "possess a variety of tools to enforce clients' compliance, from social ostracism to withholding of material benefits."[12]

On the whole, these characteristics generally follow the contours of the Turner family's methods of governance. The family maintained constant contact with members of the community, cultivating connections with prominent leaders in every part of the vast county. These loyal supporters served as the eyes and ears of the Turner family, gauging public and political sentiment on the ground, especially as election day approached. In some cases, the Turners performed this job themselves. In Marie Turner's early days as superintendent, she ventured into remote parts of the county to assess the conditions of rural schools. She stayed with prominent families in the community and in

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[11] Allen Hicken, "Clientelism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14 (2011): 290-293. See also, Christopher Clapham, "Clientelism and the State," in *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State*, Christopher Clapham, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 1-35. Clapham identifies similar criteria as Hicken for defining clientele relationships, yet he addressed in greater depth the emergence of clientelism as a direct response to the structure of the state. In the case of the Turner family, their power emerged from a relative absence of the state in Breathitt County.
[12] Hicken, 293-294.

the process learned of the community's greatest needs. Since people's most pressing needs were steady jobs, the Turners were well-equipped to address these needs by virtue of Marie Turner running the school system, the county's largest employer, and her husband having access to government payrolls. In exchange for jobs or material benefits (which might include a load of gravel from the county maintenance garage to cover a family's private driveway), clients reciprocated by going to the polls and keeping the Turner family and their allies in office.

Clientelism and patronage politics were not unique to the Turner family and Breathitt County. Because of the large number of counties in Kentucky, local elites like the Turners used the power of local government to extend their sphere of influence. As historian Robert Ireland has suggested, many Kentucky counties have functioned as "little kingdoms" since their creation. Kentucky's constitutions in the nineteenth century made it fairly easy to petition for the creation of a new county, which afforded local elites a variety of political and economic opportunities: gerrymandering, land speculation, and patronage dispensations via newly created county administrative positions. Local contestations over power frequently led to counties coming under the control of influential families.[13] The same process occurred in Breathitt County. Founded in 1839 and named after deceased Democratic governor John Breathitt, the county's creation "was brought about by landowners who saw the area as a commodity rather than just a living space." Speculators and slaveowners viewed the county as a "business venture carried out for personal, not public gain." Jeremiah South, one of the county's founding members, was a Jacksonian Democrat "fully capable of using the carrot of patronage—

[13] Robert Ireland, *Little Kingdoms: The Counties of Kentucky, 1850-1891* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 1-2.

and the stick of inconvenient summonses—to swell the Democratic vote." In the county's early years, South and his allies seized control of local politics and produced one of Kentucky's most reliable Democratic counties.[14] The Turners were certainly not the first to practice patronage politics in Breathitt County. Their Democratic predecessors carved a path for the family to inherit their own little kingdom.

The Democratic Party became a vehicle for expanding the Turner family's political influence. Democrats had been the majority party in Breathitt County since the Civil War (when most of the county allied with the Confederacy), yet the Turner family effectively used patronage to strengthen the Party's appeal. Moss Noble, a Republican attorney from Jackson, offered this candid testimony:

> During the days of the New Deal the Democratic machine controlled everything. [They dispensed] patronage [and] everybody that was given a job was given to understand how they had to vote. If they didn't register right and didn't vote right, they were fired from whatever job they might have had. Every job from the state, to the schools, to the courts, to the federal government was controlled by the party and they naturally had economic power of life and death over the citizens of the county… Disloyalty was strictly not tolerated… The independent individual, the person not connected with any of these machines, was afraid to say anything, afraid reprisals [would] be taken against him. I had this problem. It got so hot in the courts here that I found it to my advantage to give up my practice and take a job with the United States government [in] 1958.[15]

Although Noble did not mention the Turners by name, the implications were clear. The Turners were the strongest Democrats in Breathitt County and used the Party to elect candidates of their choosing. In Breathitt County, Democratic primaries were always the most heated races and usually determined the eventual winner. According to J. Phil Smith, a Republican and owner of a local bank with which the Turner bank later

[14] Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt*, 12, 24-26.
[15] Quoted in Lauren Shackleford and Bill Weinberg, eds., *Our Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 43.

competed, being active in Republican politics was the equivalent of "committing suicide" in Breathitt County and convinced him to change his affiliation.[16]

Patronage politics pervaded eastern Kentucky, but the Turners played the game particularly well, in large part because they understood the personal nature of Appalachian politics. As sociologist Jack Weller noted in his influential 1965 study, the mountaineer "conceives of government processes in terms of personal relationships…He sees the actions of government not in terms of general order or law but in terms of the personal whims of each official." In elected officials, constituents looked for individuals who would best serve their personal interests and ensure their respective community got "its fair share of the favors."[17] Agencies were defined and identified by the individuals who ran them, whether it be Marie Turner and the school system or Ervine Turner, who more or less represented all that was county government in Breathitt County.

Naturally, this system of governance attracted critics. Weller noted that "government based on personal whims finds itself unable to make objective decisions that could lead to progress."[18] It was eastern Kentucky's Harry Caudill, however, who emerged as one of the most influential voices against political corruption. Caudill became eastern Kentucky's most vocal and ardent twentieth century activist and made it his life's work to challenge the political status quo in his native region, exposing deficiencies that, in his view, stunted wholesale progress. Caudill was particularly critical of county school superintendents who, by virtue of eastern Kentucky's isolation and lack of economic development, often controlled the largest job market in their respective counties. Even as

[16] J. Phil Smith, interview by William E. Ellis, September 20, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.
[17] Jack Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965), 114-115.
[18] Ibid., 116.

late as 1963, Caudill lamented that "the region's school system is still hopelessly bogged in politics… Almost without supervision by the state he spends hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, all of which can be dispensed to political as well as educational advantage." By way of "massive patronage dispensations," school superintendents are "interwoven with the courthouse political machine" and thus "keep the schools enmeshed in endless political brawls." Teachers, according to Caudill, were often hired on the basis of their "vote-getting power" as opposed to their teaching skill, leaving many schools and students with limited prospects and substandard instruction.[19]

Indeed, Marie Turner's hold on the school system and Ervine Turner's control of the county courthouse seemed to fit well Caudill's assessment. Together, the couple held sway over most of the county's jobs and quite often used their positions as fronts for dispensing political favors. Nationally recognized journalist Haynes Johnson reported in 1966, "No matter where you travel in the county you are told that if you want anything from a highway job to a poverty job, see the Turners."[20] Securing one of these lucrative positions in Breathitt County often meant navigating the Turner power structure. But Caudill's generalizations about the educational system in eastern Kentucky did not always ring true in Breathitt County, for Marie Turner remained a fierce educational crusader. Whenever possible, she consulted and brought in outsiders with educational expertise. She encouraged and often required her teachers to attend professional development sessions at regional universities. Adron Doran, former president of

[19] Harry M. Caudill *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Ashland, KY: Jesse Stuart Foundation, 2001, originally published 1963), 336-337.
[20] Haynes Johnson, "Happy Pappies and the Poverty War," in *United States of America Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 89th Congress*, Vol. 112, Part 1 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), 936.

Morehead State University, recalled that Turner frequently called upon him to arrange workshops for teachers with emergency teaching certificates. Even her political opponents often conceded that she ran an efficient school system recognized to be one of the best in the region.[21]

In some ways, being politically involved was a necessity for superintendents who hoped to remain in power. During Turner's tenure, superintendents were elected every four years by their school board members, making it an imperative to maintain a school board stacked in their favor. John Ed Pearce of the *Courier-Journal* noted that local school boards were notoriously "unprogressive, corrupt, and mired in politics." Under the system, school superintendents almost always had to be "politicians first and educators second." They required school board members that would continue to elect them, making loyalty, not fitness, the first virtue. Born in the nineteenth century, this system of local control perpetuated provincialism and proved exceedingly difficult to overturn.[22] But according to former Kentucky Education Association (KEA) administrators J.M. Dodson and Lyman Ginger, superintendents could not hope to maintain power solely on political coercion. At some point, they had to demonstrate they were capable of running a competent school system, and both men believed that Turner succeeded.[23] The Turner family, therefore, did not always fit so neatly into prescribed categories; they bowed to and defied the norms of political machines.

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[21] Adron Doran, interview by William E. Ellis, June 3, 1987, MRT Oral History Project.
[22] John Ed Pearce, *Divide and Dissent: Kentucky Politics, 1930-1963* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 126-127.
[23] J.M. Dodson, interview by William E. Ellis, March 19, 1987, MRT Oral History Project; Lyman Ginger, interview by William E. Ellis, November 5, 1986, MRT Oral History Project. Ginger, who served as Superintendent of Instruction for Kentucky and president of the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), affirmed Marie Turner's stature as a devoted educator. Unlike other superintendents who were solely concerned with politics, Marie Turner "stood out like a lighthouse" and emerged as the foremost "education leader of that area."

At some point, however, the term political machinery connotes a set of negative presuppositions that include graft, corruption, and vote buying. Indeed, the Turners frequently faced accusations of election fraud, cronyism, and political intimidation. Throughout their many decades in power, the family managed to keep their allies in office on the school board and in the courthouse, facts that naturally translated to accusations of vote buying. David Watts, a former teacher and principal in the Breathitt County school system, recounted a conversation with Ervine Turner over the election of a school board member running for county sheriff. When Watts approached Turner, the judge reportedly said, "There are so many votes you can influence and so many you have to buy." Watts later attended a teacher's meeting presided by Marie Turner, who asked for volunteers to serve on the campaign committee for her son John Raymond, then a candidate for the state senate. At the meeting, Ervine Turner asked county school principals to contact their teachers about giving donations. Watts refused to participate and was later confronted by Marie Turner on the street, where he affirmed his decision to not become politically involved. Turner tersely replied that his current position as principal would be "the best job he will ever have in Breathitt County." Watts later left the school system and pursued a doctorate at the University of Kentucky.[24]

David Watts's experience was not an isolated incident. As late as 1969, one election officer was "appalled" by vote buying in the Lost Creek precinct, saying, "I am not exaggerating when I say that about half of the 422 votes cast in our precinct had been sold." Without mentioning the Turner family, he said, "Political machines have too long

[24] David Watts, interview by William Berge, March 7, 1985, MRT Oral History Project; According to J. Phil Smith, Marie Turner asked her teachers for election contributions by sending a "black bag" around the county. J. Phil Smith, interview.

oppressed the people of this and other counties. The political bosses must think of the citizens of this county as a bunch of ignorant cattle to be fattened for the kill."[25] Even Governor Bert T. Combs confessed that the Turners were not above stuffing a ballot box or running a chain ballot, also noting that the practice was quite common throughout Kentucky. Another teacher who served under Marie Turner noted that the superintendent often sat at the Clayhole precinct on election day. Although she did not intimidate people directly, her "presence was enough" to persuade voters.[26] John Ed Pearce, a longtime reporter for the *Courier-Journal* who covered eastern Kentucky, knew the family quite intimately and even dated Ervine and Marie's granddaughter for a brief period. According to Pearce, members of the family often kept whiskey in the trunks of their cars. When Pearce asked a family member if they felt guilty or self-conscious about such practices, they replied that distributing pints of whiskey was a simple means of encouraging people to get out and vote, a process that could take several hours in isolated parts of the county. The whiskey served as a small payment for the trouble of voting, though the Turners all but knew that recipients of the whiskey would cast ballots for "our people."[27]

Others alleged that Marie Turner punished teachers who politically challenged her by relocating them to various schools throughout the county. According to Harry Caudill, a teacher who was "troublesome or 'ungrateful' could be assigned to a remote and roadless hollow far from his home. These 'Siberias' served as disciplinary centers, and each autumn saw a few crestfallen and chastened pedagogues disappear into exile in primitive,

[25] *The Jackson Times* (hereafter abbreviated *JT*), June 5, 1969.
[26] Bert T. Combs, interview by William E. Ellis, September 10, 1986, MRT Oral History Project; D. Fred Landrum, interview by William E. Ellis, September 5, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.
[27] John Ed Pearce, interview by William E. Ellis, September 17, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.

backwoods communities."[28] Breathitt County was no exception under Marie Turner and, according to former teacher Buford Howard, it became a "running joke" that one could end up being relocated as a form of political punishment.[29] But for those affected, relocation was no joking matter. As the twelfth largest county in the state geographically, Breathitt County's vast and rugged terrain made travel difficult and time-consuming in the early half of the twentieth century. Traveling from the county seat of Jackson to remote parts of the county sometimes took a day's travel. Relocating a teacher from one side of the county to the other was devastating for a teacher who could not afford to uproot their family. Thomas P. Collins, a former teacher in the school system, recounted a conflict in the 1930s between Marie Turner and his father, a teacher who had worked to unseat some of Marie's board members. Marie promptly relocated Collins to the Evanston community on the far edges of the county. According to Collins, his father's relocation was tantamount to a "firing" because the county was so large. The school near Evanston was reportedly so remote that it could not even be reached by mule, requiring students and teachers to "walk the last two miles and swing from a grapevine."[30]

Although there is a wealth of evidence that the Turner family engaged in corrupt practices, it would be unfair to characterize them as politicians concerned only about machine politics. In recent decades, scholars have reexamined traditional conceptions of political machinery and moved away from the stereotype that all machines were corrupt, wasteful, and manipulative. Although most studies have focused on urban areas, there is no reason that these frameworks cannot be applied to rural politics. Just like their urban

[28] Harry M. Caudill, *Watches of the Night* (Ashland, KY: JSF, 2010, originally published 1976), 214.
[29] Buford Howard, interview by William E. Ellis, September 15, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.
[30] Thomas P. Collins, interview.

counterparts, rural politicians faced the challenges of running local governments and maintaining the support of their constituents, albeit on a smaller scale. If an argument can be made for the utility of political machines, this is particularly true in Breathitt County. Jonathan Rauch has argued for a sense of political realism in viewing political machinery, positing, "Government cannot govern unless political machines or something like them exist and work, because machines are uniquely willing and able to negotiate compromises and make them stick." Opponents of political machines have long fixated on rampant corruption but have failed to consider the benefits that transactional politics can deliver. For example, machines have historically been successful in getting people involved in politics through local organizing. Just as Tammany Hall held picnics for its supporters, the Turner family hosted fish fries to encourage participation and increase voter turnout. These events created a political culture that strengthened community bonds, and in isolated places like Breathitt County, these gatherings became the lifeblood of communities.[31]

Second, the hierarchical nature of machine politics does not necessarily translate to authoritarianism. According to Rauch, "Like a large corporation, a well-oiled machine is characterized by multiple power centers, decentralized authority, and internal negotiations over authority and turf."[32] Although the Turner machine consolidated its power through the courthouse and school system, its success depended upon attracting followers and, most importantly, keeping them. This meant establishing connections in remote parts of the county and beyond, sometimes requiring the Turners to stretch across

[31] Jonathan Rauch, "Political Realism: How Hacks, Machines, Big Money, and Back-Room Deals Can Strengthen American Democracy," *Brookings Institution* (May 2015): 2.
[32] Ibid., 9.

the partisan aisle, which they often did. Republican and rival banker J. Phil Smith often accompanied Marie Turner to educational conferences and worked with her to bring cultural events such as music concerts and art exhibits to the county. The Turners did not always hold grudges either. David Watts, the formerly mentioned teacher who left the county after being asked to support a Turner family member's campaign, was later asked by Marie Turner to give the dedicatory speech at a new multi-million-dollar consolidated school. Watts visited Marie at her vacation home in Florida after her retirement and even returned to Breathitt County to serve as superintendent. Another educator close to Marie Turner said that she often consulted political opponents if they had ideas that would better the community, bringing them into her inner circle and giving them a seat at the table. Running a political machine was therefore a delicate act of balance, requiring negotiation and a constant reassessment of one's political position.[33]

Finally, Rauch notes that machine-style leaders are middlemen who "seek to organize and channel political activism and voter participation… The ethic is, 'If you need something, we're the people to talk to.'" In Breathitt County, where residents had little interaction with the state or federal government, the Turners stepped in as power brokers and mediators for the poor. During the New Deal and War on Poverty years, the Turners pressed for government relief programs that would provide jobs and resources to their constituents, even if such programs failed to bring the county out of poverty and deprived neighboring counties of much-needed resources.[34]

[33] J. Phil Smith, interview; David Watts, interview; Edgar Raleigh, interview by William Berge, May 5, 1983, MRT Oral History Project.
[34] Rauch, 10.

There are other factors that set the Turner family apart from traditional machines and contributed to their political longevity. The family's success hinged on the mutual relationship between Ervine and Marie Turner. Unlike political rings headed by a single "boss" with all-encompassing powers, the Turners employed a reciprocal exercise of power with Ervine and Marie each playing a unique role. Marie preferred the role of public spokeswoman, saying, "I've been the outspoken one and Ervine's been the real politician who stays behind the scenes and keeps things running."[35] Others who knew the Turners intimately generally agreed that neither Ervine nor Marie Turner monopolized political power. A. Dale Bryant, an attorney and counsel for the Turner family's bank in the 1960s, noted that the couple shared similar goals and ideologies, something crucial for forming a successful political partnership.[36]

The advantage of having two political personalities also allowed the couple to broaden their appeal. Even before their marriage, Ervine and Marie Turner had come from politically active families, which helped them win loyal followers. They also hailed from different parts of the county and, in a geographically large county like Breathitt, this proved crucial in building political coalitions. Although Marie served as the public face of the Turner machine, the quiet reticence of Ervine Turner should not be discounted. The political connections he made during his time in the Kentucky senate lasted throughout the Turner machine's long reign. When Ervine Turner assumed his judgeship over a three-county area in the late-1940s, he had even more political patrons at his disposal. If Ervine Turner made most of the political decisions, Marie Turner sold them to the public. Having a female in the spotlight, one who served the community's children, also helped

[35] Deitz, "Paternalism Plus Patronage Equals Power," 52.
[36] A. Dale Bryant, interview by William E. Ellis, October 27, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.

soften the Turner machine's political edge. The partnership of Ervine and Marie Turner, with their differing personalities and different spheres of influence, enlarged their political base and gave them valuable tools to meet the needs of their constituents.

In addition to their unique partnership, Ervine and Marie Turner also possessed other attributes that set them apart from eastern Kentucky political elites. First, the Turners were staunch Democrats in the traditionally Republican stronghold of eastern Kentucky. They could exact favors from a state government usually headed by a Democrat, as Kentucky only had two Republican governors from 1931, when Marie Turner assumed office as superintendent, to her death in 1984. Even when Republicans held power, the Turners could rely on their regional contacts to procure some political favors from Frankfort. The federal government's makeup was also particularly friendly to the Turners during their time in power. Save for the Eisenhower years from 1953 to 1961, the White House was occupied by a Democrat from 1933 until 1969, encompassing most of Marie Turner's years as superintendent. Except for Eisenhower and Nixon, she met every president and most of the first ladies from Franklin Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter.[37]

Second, the Turners practiced a clientele politics that differentiated them from their more ruthless counterparts. According to Governor Bert Combs, neither Marie nor Ervine had a great deal of personal ego. They were ambitious for both power and money, but not in a "grimy" sort of way. The Turners were, according to Combs, dedicated to being in positions of leadership, knew what they wanted, did their homework before taking action, and took any means necessary to realize their goals. Unlike other mountain politicians, they were "basically honest" both morally and financially. They were not necessarily

[37]Adron Doran, interview; Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982,

politically honest, as they would do anything to carry a precinct, yet their time in power was devoid of personal scandals involving adultery, alcoholism, or theft that typically brought down other political machines.[38] Although these ambiguities may seem underwhelming as a template for efficient governance, these attributes set the Turner family apart in a region that played by a different set of political rules.

The Turner family came to power during the grips of the Great Depression and consolidated their power over the next 40 years. Marie Turner's tenure as superintendent of Breathitt County schools from 1931 to 1969 is a particularly useful way of framing the Turner family's rise and fall from power. She took office just two years before the New Deal transformed the American political economy and left office just as War on Poverty programs were being phased out. Jefferson Cowie has argued that the years from approximately 1930 to 1970 represented a "great exception" in American politics, a time in which New Deal politics drove political and economic debates. Although New Deal liberalism took many forms and meanings over time, Marie and Ervine Turner supported the ideology's basic commitments to government-sponsored economic development and federal-state partnerships to generate growth. They operated in a period when such approaches to governance were desirable, but perhaps it is no coincidence that the Turner family lost power just as a new wave of conservatism swept the nation in the late-1960s. Because the Turner family's ideology aligned with those of New Deal and War on Poverty politics, these pivotal years will therefore receive the most attention in this study.[39]

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[38] Bert T. Combs, interview.

[39] Cowie takes a more sweeping look at the New Deal order from 1930 to the 1970s, but others such as Alan Brinkley have taken a more nuanced approach. According to Brinkley, the 1937 recession marked the "end of reform" in the sense that New Deal liberalism thereafter took a markedly different approach to

In several ways, the Turner family of Breathitt County provides an effective case study for examining the intricacies of eastern Kentucky politics. On the one hand, Marie Turner serves as an exceptional example of ways women could exercise power in the traditionally male world of politics. At every juncture, she defied gender norms in her quest to expand educational opportunities through political action. Education had traditionally been within the woman's sphere of influence, but even as late as 1965, Turner was one of only seven superintendents in the state who were women. Starting her career in the early-1930s, Turner followed a legacy of Progressive reform and its emphasis on women as agents of change. As superintendent, she embraced a strand of activism that, according to historian Rebecca Montgomery, succeeded in "making the state more responsive to the educational needs of its citizens." Turner used the historically female realm of education as a launching point for political activism and throughout her life served as a spokeswoman for rural educational reform. According to Governor Bert Combs, Turner was in a position of leadership before it was "fashionable" for women to be leaders. She was no political puppet to her husband, but an independent thinker who knew what she wanted and used the politics of education to achieve it.[40]

Second, the Turner family defied ordinary manifestations of eastern Kentucky political machinery, which have so often been characterized by corruption and inefficiency, with power-hungry elites taking advantage of uneducated and helpless

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governance. Whereas the early New Deal emphasized centralized economic planning, structural reform, and institutional regulation, a narrower vision of liberalism after 1937 embraced corporate capitalism as a fact of life while promoting consumption and fiscal policy to generate economic growth. See, Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

[40] *JT*, March 18, 1965; Rebecca S. Montgomery, *The Politics of Education in the New South: Women and Reform in Georgia, 1890-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 235; Bert T. Combs, interview.

mountaineers. Because of greedy elites, so the story goes, ordinary people stood no chance, stuck in an endless cycle of poverty and consigned to lives of fatalism. But this position needs reexamining. In some cases, political machines performed valuable and useful functions in a region that lacked direction and too often was overlooked by state and national politicians. Yes, corruption exposed its ugly face throughout the process, but graft and rent-seeking behavior are not native to the mountains of eastern Kentucky. An examination of the Turner family of Breathitt County exposes some of these stereotypes, but also offers valuable new insights into the inner workings of rural politics and the decision making that goes with it. This is a story of getting, keeping, and losing power in the Kentucky mountains.

CHAPTER 1: A NEW DEAL FOR BREATHITT COUNTY, 1933-1941

"Many of these youngsters come from home environments in which crime has been almost commonplace. Breathitt has a reputation to live down!" -*Marie Turner*

After becoming superintendent in 1931, Marie Turner faced challenges on multiple fronts. Economic depression, a primitive school system, and the lingering reputation of Bloody Breathitt posed challenges for a young educator suddenly thrust into a position of leadership. Ten years later, in the foreword to the Federal Writers Project (FWP) publication *In the Land of Breathitt,* she wrote, "Shortly before the manuscript of this book was sent to the press Breathitt County received nationwide newspaper, magazine, and radio attention. Once again it was "Bloody Breathitt"—the sensational Breathitt that is so well, and, perhaps justly established in the traditions of journalism."[41] For decades, Breathitt County's reputation stood squarely on its long tradition of violence, feuding, and other hyper-romanticized tales that captivated readers across the nation. Divorcing Breathitt County from perceptions of violence and remaking its image seemed a nearly insurmountable task. However, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his promise of a "new deal for all Americans" presented the Turner family with opportunities for putting a new brand of Democratic politics into action.

The Great Depression and New Deal precipitated Ervine and Marie Turner's rise to power. In these dire economic times, the Turners emerged as a power structure committed to addressing Breathitt County's most pressing needs. They took advantage of

[41] *In the Land of Breathitt*, compiled by the Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Kentucky, 1941, Stephen D. Bowling, ed. (Prestonsburg, KY: Williams Printing Co., 2013), 1.

the county's economic instability and used New Deal politics to consolidate power and attract political patrons. As Allen Hicken notes of patron-client relations, "A patron's dominance may arise because that individual or party is truly the best, most credible provider of resources the clients value."[42] With Marie Turner serving as superintendent and Ervine Turner serving as a state senator beginning in 1934, the couple dispensed patronage jobs via the school system and government relief programs, thus rendering their constituents dependent on the Turner family, who in turn expected continued political support. At a time when few jobs were available, the Turners filled a void for the county's struggling population, who often had nowhere else to turn. In fact, more and more people migrated back to Breathitt County during the Depression. During this time, the Turners took advantage of a broken economy and, through New Deal policies, built a strong political coalition that lasted decades.

Breathitt County in 1930

Breathitt County had been relatively poor prior to the Depression, but its history had been punctuated by periods of economic growth. In 1891, the Lexington and Eastern (later the Louisville and Nashville) railroad established a terminus in Jackson, an economic boon that increased the county seat's population over the next decade by 1,100 percent.[43] The economy, however, remained unstable due to a combination of prolonged violence and the precarious nature of the county's economic base. Since its founding, the county had been overwhelmingly agricultural, but its history was "one of soil depletion, erosion, and inefficient farming methods." By 1930, agriculture employed more than 70 percent of the county's workforce, but the rugged hillsides and overworked land were ill-

[42] Hicken, "Clientelism," 294.
[43] Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt*, 136.

suited for most types of production. That year's census reported a total of 3,118 farms encompassing just over 235,000 acres, with most farms between 50 and 174 acres and the average farm size being only 76 acres. However, total value of the land and its products was valued at just under $4 million, considerably lower than other Kentucky counties with similar farming statistics. The value of total farm products sold, traded, or used by operators amounted to just over $1.2 million, again placing Breathitt among the bottom of most Kentucky counties. The most common livestock products were cattle and hogs, and corn was the principal crop, along with smaller numbers of tobacco and hemp.[44]

The coal industry in Breathitt County had "fluctuated widely" over the course of the twentieth century, having taken off after the coming of the railroad, but slowing down after the railroad was extended to Letcher County and its richer seams. Breathitt's relationship with coal mirrored the larger industry's boom and bust cycles, which produced periods of enormous profitability followed by rapid decline. In 1927, the coal industry across eastern Kentucky took a downward turn as a result of lower demand, ineffective company management, increased competition, and flooding. By the 1930s, Breathitt County could not rely on coal mining to support its economy as it had in the past. Coal production fell 64.4 percent between 1928 and 1934, by which time Breathitt ranked nineteenth of the state's 22 coal producing counties.[45]

More profitable was the timber industry, which had a long history in the county. At one point, the county boasted one of the largest sawmills in the world. Log booms at the Swann-Day Company in South Jackson could hold up to 25,000 logs, which were then

[44]*In the Land of Breathitt*, 38; *1930 United States Federal Census*, Agriculture, Volume III, Part 2, Type of Farm, 506, 515, 525, 541, 558, 576.
[45] *In the Land of Breathitt*, 38-45; Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, 165-171.

transported out of the county by river and later railroad. But decades of clear cutting had depleted the land's supplies of valuable poplar and walnut trees, forcing many companies to move elsewhere in search of virgin forests. In 1925, the Mowbray-Robinson Lumber Company left the county after only a decade of operation. By 1940, the only logging operation in the county was a stave company in the Quicksand community that employed about a dozen men producing whiskey barrels and tobacco poles.[46]

Breathitt County had experienced periods of economic growth in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but it was a fragile economy based on industrial exploitation and could collapse at any moment. The Depression only exacerbated Breathitt County's continuing state of economic decline, leaving its people with few choices. The population grew more than 13 percent between 1930 and 1940 from 21,143 to 23,946, the highest number in the county's history, yet this growing population was offset by a shrinking economy and increasing unemployment.[47] Like most Americans, the people of Breathitt County welcomed Franklin Roosevelt's promise of a new deal for all Americans in 1932 and elected him with more than a 3,000-vote majority over Herbert Hoover that November.[48]

Building New Deal Liberalism in Breathitt County

Coming to power during the 1930s, Ervine and Marie Turner embraced a new kind of political liberalism directly tied to the New Deal. They had been loyal Democrats since the early-twentieth century, but the Democratic Party of the New Deal was not the same

[46] *In the Land of Breathitt*, 52.
[47] Population increase across eastern Kentucky was fairly typical during the Depression, as previous outmigrants returned home because of declining job prospects across the nation. See, John R. Burch, Jr., *Owsley County, Kentucky, and the Perpetuation of Poverty* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2008), 57.
[48] *The Courier-Journal* (hereafter abbreviated *C-J*), November 11, 1932.

party of past years. On the surface, Franklin Roosevelt's vision of an expanded central state stood at odds with nineteenth century liberalism and its embrace of small government. For proud mountain residents committed to ideals of economic independence and rugged individualism, a hands-off government was appealing. But as Gary Gerstle argues, FDR emphasized that his changes would not disrupt ideas of a "small and bounded" government. The president called his ideas "liberal," a clear sign that he was redefining existing ideas of political liberalism, but the New Deal was not a complete departure from preexisting liberal ideas. Gerstle argues that the New Deal encouraged public-private and federal-state partnerships in administering its programs, and the Turners fully embraced this mode of governance due to their political connections at the state and national levels.[49] Indeed, Marie Turner attended her first Democratic National Convention in 1932 and her last in 1980.[50] A New Deal liberalism that encouraged federal and local partnerships proved particularly useful for the Turner machine as they sought to revitalize Breathitt County. The family's sudden embrace of New Deal liberalism was partly ideological and partly an act of political expediency. They realized the benefits that an expanded welfare state could bring to Breathitt County and never looked back.

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[49] Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the Founding to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 186-187.

[50] Marie Turner's involvement in national Democratic politics from 1932 to 1980 coincided with a period when liberalism was seen as an "authoritative guide to solutions for the problems of the day." Stephen Skowronek has proposed a useful model for understanding the contours of presidential authority and recurring patterns of governance. According to Skowronek, Franklin Roosevelt was a "reconstructive" president who redefined what it meant to be liberal and a Democrat. Lyndon Johnson articulated and built upon FDR's New Deal order, while Jimmy Carter struggled with a tenuous and fragmented Democratic Party vulnerable to forces of modern conservatism that triumphed with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980. Throughout her adult life, Marie Turner therefore witnessed the rise, growth, and fall of New Deal politics. See, Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 287-406.

This mission to modernize "Bloody Breathitt" relied heavily on road and school construction. The Turner mantra of "roads and schools" resonated with locals because it represented some of the isolated county's most pressing needs. By virtue of Ervine Turner's position in the state senate, he was instrumental in bringing New Deal public works programs into Breathitt County. These programs put people to work and provided much needed infrastructural improvements at a time when most "roads" consisted of creek beds and dirt paths. The Turner strategy of using public works projects to both improve the community and secure political patrons aligns with Jason Scott Smith's argument that New Deal public works programs proved "an extraordinarily successful method of state-sponsored economic development."[51] Smith also argues that public works and political patronage often went hand-in-hand, particularly with the Public Works Administration (PWA), whose bureaucracy and large-scale projects played a "key role in building and solidifying the Democratic Party at federal, state, and local levels of government."[52] This type of New Deal liberalism defined the Turner family's approach to governance throughout their many decades in power.

The federal government became a critical ally for the Turners as they sought to attract New Deal programs, particularly in an ideologically conservative state. Kentucky had been a solidly Democratic state in the twentieth century, but it clung to the Party's nineteenth century ideals. According to George Blakey, "Kentucky officials frequently found New Deal measures out of step with many of their southern, rural, and states-rights traditions." Like other southern leaders, Kentucky officials felt that "New Deal initiatives

[51] Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.
[52] Ibid., 74.

and regulations clashed with the many time-honored customs." Furthermore, most traditional Democrats were fiscal conservatives and believed the best way to combat depression was by maintaining a balanced budget. This included Kentucky's Democratic governors Ruby Laffoon, A.B. "Happy" Chandler, and Keen Johnson, who paid lip service to Roosevelt and the New Deal but wanted no part in the administration's enormous spending and ballooning federal deficit. These Depression-era governors offered little in the way of matching funding to supplement federal programs and, as a result, the New Deal produced a political shift of power from the state to federal level, changing the nature of the relationship between individuals and the federal government. In times of hardship, Kentuckians thereafter looked to Washington rather than Frankfort for government assistance. For those who had been traditionally weary of federal interference, sheer desperation by 1932 convinced them otherwise. As a result, President Roosevelt and the New Deal remained "undeniably popular" throughout the Depression in Kentucky and Breathitt County.[53] The Turner family fully embraced this "attitudinal shift" as they coordinated relief efforts. When state officials proved unresponsive, they looked to the federal government. Marie Turner later said, "I was never afraid of federal control, and never needed to be. Anyhow, where else could we get the money?"[54]

A New Deal in Education

One of Marie Turner's first objectives as superintendent was addressing the struggling school system. Education in Kentucky lacked uniformity and consistency at the onset of the Great Depression, when Kentucky ranked 41st in expenditure per pupil. By 1941, only

[53] Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 157-158; George T. Blakey, *Hard Times and New Deal in Kentucky, 1929-1939* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 168-195.
[54] Pearce, "A Dynastic Family at the Crossroads," 12.

63 percent of Kentucky children received an elementary education, compared to the national average of 95 percent. A 1933 Kentucky Court of Appeals decision stated, "no body of our statutory law is in a more confused state than our school laws," prompting a reform bill the following year that brought about some important changes, including the simplification of the teacher certification process, minimum school terms, and a reorganization of the state administrative board.[55] In rural areas, the issues plaguing Kentucky's educational system were only magnified, particularly in a geographically large and isolated county like Breathitt. Enrollment had grown during Ervine Turner's years as superintendent from 1921 to 1931, but as late as 1927, only 67 percent of the county's enrolled pupils were attending school. Furthermore, Kentucky law did not require elementary teachers to have a high school diploma until 1935. In 1933, there was only one college graduate teaching in the county school system.[56]

From the onset, Marie Turner placed school consolidation as one of her top priorities, as one-room schoolhouses were mostly inefficient, not well-maintained, and usually staffed by underqualified teachers. Even still, school consolidation was controversial. One-room schoolhouses served as meeting places in their respective communities. They hosted local gatherings, religious revivals, and often had active parent-teacher associations. Some students received a quality and highly personalized education in one-room schoolhouses, yet there were rarely enough qualified teachers to serve the dozens of one-room schools across Breathitt County. In a school system that had approximately

[55] Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 384-385; William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 212.
[56] Lawrence Kelly Rice, "History of Education in Breathitt County, Kentucky" (MA thesis, University of Kentucky, 1933), 75, 79.

6,600 students scattered across 108 one-room schoolhouses, some with as many as 90 students, consolidation seemed the most effective remedy to an uneven educational system.[57] In two years, Turner closed seven schools, bringing the countywide total to 101 public school buildings, yet 62 had no library with an average of only 16 books per school; furthermore, 55 percent of schools had no textbooks.[58] Already suffering from a lack of preparedness, young people's prospects of finding a steady job only worsened with the Great Depression.

Being a superintendent in eastern Kentucky in the 1930s was no easy occupation. Turner made a point to visit every schoolhouse in the county at least once every year, which meant traveling to remote parts of the county on trips that sometimes required more than a day's travel.[59] At a time when roads were poor, unsafe, and many times nonexistent, traveling consumed a majority of Turner's time. In her early years as superintendent, she spent Mondays in her office performing administrative duties. From Tuesday through Friday, she saddled a horse and visited as many schools as possible, staying in the homes of reputable families in each community, where she was reportedly "always welcome." When the terrain was rougher, such as in the South Fork community, she rode a mule. This was her routine for the first seven or eight years, until the school board bought her a small Ford car.[60]

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[57] Marie R. Turner, interview, June 15, 1982. Improved transportation networks as a result of the New Deal, according to Turner, made her seriously consider closing one-room schools permanently. Early consolidation efforts allowed her to upgrade larger schools in other parts of the county, and seeing the positive results from such efforts convinced her that consolidation was the appropriate action to improve overall education.

[58] *JT*, January 11, 1934.

[59] According to Eugene Sebastian, who would succeed Turner as superintendent in 1969 after her retirement, visiting rural schools at least once a year was very important to Turner, as it was her way of getting to know people and establish connections throughout the county. Eugene Sebastian, interview by William Berge, May 5, 1983, MRT Oral History Project.

[60] Marie R. Turner, interview, June 15, 1982.

Figure 1. Children walking home from school in Breathitt County.

Marion Post Wolcott, September 1940, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

But even a vehicle was of little help when there were no navigable roads. In many cases, shallow creek beds had to suffice. Turner recalled getting stuck in a creek bed while visiting a school, only to be helped by a man who had served as a deputy sheriff under her father. After having breakfast with his family, who were amazed at the sight of Turner's car and likely the first they had ever seen, the former deputy offered to show Turner a moonshine still located deep in the mountains. He even asked Turner to share a drink, an act that reportedly got the deputy in trouble with Ervine.[61] Like most eastern Kentucky counties, Breathitt had its own complicated history with alcohol. In 1873, it enacted a "local option" ban on all alcohol sales, which proved ineffectual and only reinforced the county's reputation for violence and lawlessness. An 1892 newspaper editorial lamented the "unabated" whiskey sales at political meetings and "blamed both parties for turning conventions and rallies into debaucheries."[62] The association between

[61] Ibid.
[62] Quoted in Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt*, 136; Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, 156-159.

alcohol and violence that had perpetuated "Bloody Breathitt" only intensified Marie Turner's resolve to improve education, but doing so required searching beyond the confines of eastern Kentucky.

Marie Turner's approach to education followed a model of Progressive reform that had already made considerable headway in eastern Kentucky by the 1930s. The Progressive movement reached its high point in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but defining its parameters has been notoriously difficult for historians. It meant different things to different people, and not all participants embraced all aspects of the movement. Marie Turner began her career after Progressivism's high point, yet she showed a commitment to the movement's basic tenets of efficiency and public welfare through government action.[63] In Breathitt County, this meant consolidating schools and holding the state responsible for the welfare of students. In her efforts to create a modern school system, Turner followed in the footsteps of other southern reformers who "were able to work with the very localism in politics that hindered state-level reform." By providing moral support, organizing parents and students, and ensuring adequate funding for public education, women activists like Turner "attempted to effect political change by gathering grassroots support in favor of a new relationship between family, community, and government."[64]

Marie Turner certainly took an interest in improving education, but also sought to better Breathitt County and its people's access to economic opportunity. Harry Caudill made perhaps the most forceful argument that Appalachia, particularly eastern Kentucky, had fallen victim to a form of economic colonialism by the early-twentieth century, with

[63] Harrison and Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, 277-278.
[64] Montgomery, *The Politics of Education in the New South*, 61-62.

absentee capitalists taking advantage of the region's land and people, in the process rendering mountain residents dependent on corporations.[65] To combat this process, some Progressive reformers took the lead by establishing settlement schools in eastern Kentucky in order to "uplift individuals" and "aid the mountain region and the South generally in combating stereotypes of feuding, illiteracy, poor health, and poverty."[66] Marie Turner knew of these developments and, well aware that Breathitt County suffered from each of these stereotypes (particularly feuding), wasted little time in acquainting herself with Progressive models of reform.

In true Progressive fashion, Turner regularly attended educational conferences across the United States from Cleveland, Ohio to Portland, Oregon, attending lectures and presenting her own writings. She was never afraid to ask for outside assistance and worked to cultivate connections that would help modernize her rural school system. Turner developed a promising relationship at a conference of the Southern Woman's Educational Alliance (SWEA) in Cleveland. While there she met Orie Latham Hatcher, head of the SWEA (which later became the Alliance for Guidance of Rural Youth) and a fellow Progressive committed to rural educational reform. The two remained in frequent

[65] In addition to Caudill, see, John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Helen M. Lewis and Edward E. Knipe, "The Colonialism Model: The Appalachian Case," in *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, Lewis, Johnson, and Askins, eds. (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University, 1978).
[66] For example, Katherine Pettit and May Stone established the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County (Marie Turner's place of birth) in 1902, followed by the Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County in 1913. In these schools, women reformers "sought to bring modern, Progressive values to the mountain people" while also preserving their rich cultural heritage. See, Sarah Case, "Cultural Politics of Mountain Reform," in *Kentucky Women: Their Lives and Times*, Melissa A. McEuen and Thomas Appleton, Jr., eds. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015), 169.

contact throughout the 1930s, a partnership that armed Marie Turner with the latest ideas and methods from Progressive educators across America.[67]

One of Turner's first major projects was establishing an ambitious guidance program in Breathitt County schools. In a 1935 essay for the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, Turner acknowledged that Breathitt County lagged behind other counties in terms of educational opportunity. In a county of 22,000 with only one highway and one railroad, even transporting students to school posed serious challenges.[68] Aware of the suffering and hardship in the county and having attended a recent conference of the SWEA, Turner, working with Hatcher, experimented with a new approach to education tailored to the needs of individual students. The two women, with the help of the Alliance for Guidance of Rural Youth, conducted a countywide survey and compiled juvenile delinquency records from the past ten years. In a county with such a violent past, Turner quipped, "Those of you who have not heard of the crime record of Breathitt County cannot really appreciate the character of this study."[69]

The 1934 survey was quite ambitious in its scope and gathered responses from 318 high school boys and girls, including 141 from Breathitt County High School and the rest from other schools around the county. It asked students to identify their academic interests and gave them the chance to inquire about career-related training opportunities. Notably, only 13 students expressed an interest in agriculture, a signal that most young people wished to move on from the way of life of their parents and grandparents. Many

[67]Marie R. Turner, "Guidance in Breathitt County, Kentucky," *Journal of Counseling and Development* Vol. 13, No. 8 (May 1935): 712.
[68] Ibid. The Louisville and Nashville (L&N) Railroad had been an economic boon to Breathitt County, but it only ran through the county seat of Jackson, leaving most rural communities without reliable transportation.
[69] Ibid., 713.

expressed an interest in engineering and its various specializations, though very few were interested in the field of business. Most females inquired about teaching and other office-related work, though a fair few showed interest in the arts, namely music, drama, and creative writing. Males tended to gravitate toward vocations such as electrical and mechanical work, though some expressed interest in healthcare fields.[70] From the survey, it was clear that the young people of Breathitt County had deep-seated desires to make something of themselves. A follow-up study completed the next year focused on students recently out of school and affirmed many of the first study's findings that "the young people are ready and eager for constructive programs." The second report pointed to the inadequacies of federal programs and in its conclusion called for a greater presence among New Deal programs that served young people, particularly the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the newly created National Youth Administration (NYA).[71] The Great Depression and the poverty it exacerbated did not prevent students from dreaming of something greater, and Marie Turner was determined to make those dreams a reality.

In its first few months, Turner noted a healthy participation in the guidance program. One of several opportunity centers enrolled 48 young people, who walked an average of six miles each day to the facility. Making another reference to "Bloody Breathitt," Turner remarked, "Many of these youngsters come from home environments in which crime has been almost commonplace. Breathitt has a reputation to live down!"[72] Through a self-

[70] "What Breathitt County Young People 'Want To Be' and "Want To Know'" (Richmond, VA: Alliance for Guidance of Rural Youth, 1934), 1-8.
[71] "Programs For Which Out-Of-School Young People In Breathitt County, Kentucky Are Asking," (Jackson, KY: Office of the County Schools, 1935), 1, 10.
https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924044790&view=1up&seq=3.
[72] Turner, 715.

designed curriculum that borrowed many ideas she had learned from her travels across the country, Turner helped devise a new curriculum that emphasized practical training, whether in farming, forestry, carpentry, or electrical work. Regardless of ambitions, Turner was interested in preparing each young person in Breathitt County for a promising future. In just a few years, she had shown a commitment to progressive education and social reform, two themes of her long tenure as superintendent.

The guidance program also attracted the attention of other prominent educators in the region. Glyn A. Morris, a Progressive reformer who served as director of the Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County from 1931 to 1942, wrote a 1937 essay on "Progressive Education in the Kentucky Mountains." Although Appalachia had been associated with "backwardness" and "retardation," Morris showed that even national Progressive ideas could penetrate the mountains of eastern Kentucky. In a follow-up article, Morris focused on the guidance program in Breathitt County, where he learned from Marie Turner that impractical courses had been dropped and practical ones added. Courses now placed emphasis on life instead of books, on boys and girls instead of subject matter, and the "curriculum has become a flexible instrument constantly adjustable to the needs of each individual."[73] The publication of Morris's article coincided with the dedication of the new Breathitt County High School, which provided a modern space capable of accommodating the growing guidance program and an expanded curriculum.

[73] Glyn A. Morris, "Progressive Education in the Kentucky Mountains," *Mountain Life and Work* Vol. XIII, No. 3 (October 1937): 8; Glyn A. Morris, "Vocational Guidance Institute," *Mountain Life and Work* Vol. XIII, No. 4 (January 1938): 11.

At the decade's end, Turner reflected on the guidance program quite favorably as an example of "plain good teaching." Instead of following curriculum outlined by the Kentucky Department of Education, she allowed students to choose classes that best suited their needs. One boy went through school taking only classes in agriculture and woodshop, while another student repeated the same music course for a second time because the subject interested her. In another remarkable case, a 24-year-old son of a "moonshining family" decided he wanted to finish school. Marie Turner allowed the student to attend grade school for two months and then admitted him to the high school, where he stayed for five years, specialized in shop work, and dropped the moonshine habit.[74] Offering courses beyond traditional subjects enabled Turner to better equip students for their futures, which often meant staying in Breathitt County as farmers, carpenters, or miners. Although she encouraged students to attend college, she realized it was not for everyone, making the guidance program all the more important.

Another perennial issue for the school system was supplying its schools with books, which were sometimes nonexistent in rural schoolhouses. Providing reliable access to books remained one of Marie Turner's priorities throughout the 1930s, and the New Deal helped accelerate this process. In a period of nine weeks, packhorse librarians employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) delivered more than 900 books to rural communities.[75] Made famous by the young women who rode pack mules up and down creek beds, packhorse librarians worked in coordination with the guidance program to put

[74] *C-J,* February 25, 1939.
[75] Turner, 713. By 1941, the Packhorse Library Program had served nearly one million people in 42 counties in eastern Kentucky and maintained more than half a million volumes. See, Donald Cameron Boyd, Jr., "The WPA Packhorse Library Program and the Social Utility of Literacy, 1883-1962," (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2009).

more books in the hands of hungry readers. The WPA and its many road construction projects in Breathitt County also allowed for the emergence of a bookmobile program. Marion Holcomb Skean, a librarian from neighboring Perry County, noted that the Homeplace Traveling Library grew from a circulation of 5,000 in 1930 to 15,000 in 1936-37. A full-time librarian drove the bookmobile and reached 24 school districts on a weekly basis in Breathitt and Perry counties."[76] For school systems that could not afford books, the bookmobile program was yet another reform that set eastern Kentucky's educational system on a forward path.

By 1940 Marie Turner's school system was making state headlines as a model of exemplary schooling. Along with the guidance program and bookmobile, students had access to courses not typically offered in mountain schools at the time, particularly in the arts. For example, Turner arranged for David Donoho, an art teacher from Tennessee who had trained at the Cincinnati Art Academy and traveled throughout Europe, to assume a post at Breathitt County High School. Turner initially faced pushback from the board of education and male students, who felt that art was for "sissies." But in his second year, Donoho showcased a variety of student work at exhibits in Washington, D.C. and New York. Turner also found creative ways to raise money for such programs when state and federal funds were not available. The parent-teacher association at the Sugar Camp community school raised $2.50 to purchase a pig. The children diligently fed it for several weeks as part of their daily routine, sold it for $15, and used the money to buy new textbooks. By the decade's end, attendance had improved 50 percent and high school

[76] Marion Holcomb Skean, "Book Larnin," *Mountain Life and Work* Vol. XIII, No. 3 (October 1937): 7.

enrollment had doubled under Marie Turner, lending great hope that her school system was headed in the right direction.[77]

Figure 2. Marie Turner and David Donoho attend a pie supper at the Quicksand School.

Marion Post Wolcott, September 1940, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

Alphabet Soup in Breathitt County

For all Marie Turner's ambitions for the Breathitt County school system, she was stymied at nearly every juncture by a lack of funding. School funding in Kentucky usually depended upon local tax laws, which varied widely across the state and disproportionately affected rural counties. Some "pauper counties," including Breathitt, would not tax themselves adequately to fund public schools and were almost entirely dependent on state funding. From 1908 to 1933, the Breathitt County school system collected a one-dollar poll tax and levied taxes that increased over time from 30 cents to

[77] *C-J*, February 25, 1939.

75 cents for each $100 worth of property. With little funding coming from Frankfort, Marie Turner's schools were ill-equipped to provide a comprehensive education.[78]

The New Deal thus became critically important in funding much-needed reforms. The National Youth Administration (NYA), formed in 1935, became one of the most important New Deal programs in Breathitt County. An autonomous administrative body formed out of the WPA, the NYA arranged for work study projects at high schools and colleges, providing students with paid jobs and ensuring they remained in school. The NYA also provided training for those no longer in school and established vocational guidance and placement programs. Most NYA jobs consisted of clerical work such as typing, filing, and grading papers. Others, however, included projects not large enough to qualify for WPA funding, such as landscaping local schools.[79] By April 1936, the NYA employed more than 10,000 young people in Kentucky and only four states had a larger quota.[80] On the national level, the NYA became closely associated with Eleanor Roosevelt and her vision of moral and intellectual reform through education, cultural uplift, and a transformation in young people's thinking toward their futures.[81]

The NYA's goals closely allied with the educational reforms Marie Turner supported and the agency became one of the superintendent's most important lifelines. Although George Blakey notes that the NYA never developed a "distinct personality" and many Americans viewed the agency as a branch of the WPA, this was not the case in Breathitt County. The young generation, in Turner's eyes, represented the future of Breathitt

[78] Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 150; Rice, "History of Education in Breathitt County," 91.
[79] Blakey, *Hard Times and New Deal in Kentucky*, 90-103.
[80] *JT*, April 16, 1936.
[81] Landon R.Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 34-35.

County, and exposure to a stable education and job through the NYA did much to prevent youth from heading down a path of violence and destruction. As Blakey notes, "The money, comradeship, discipline, and job opportunities provided by NYA work transformed them into positive-thinking young adults ready to become productive members of their families and communities."[82] For students who had grown up in a culture of violence, the NYA's programs helped negate these effects. Judges from across the state saw fewer juvenile cases in court, most likely linked to the presence of the NYA in their communities. By May 1937, the NYA had aided 575 young people in Breathitt County and the county quota was raised from 250 to 500 that December.[83] That same year, a local lawyer made an address to the local Kiwanis Club on "Crime and its Control," noting that in the past six or seven years no major cases from the Morris Fork community were listed on county dockets.[84]

Of all New Deal agencies, the WPA by far left the greatest footprint on Breathitt County. As projects from the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) were gradually phased out, the new WPA, formed in 1935, was almost entirely federally financed.

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[82] Blakey, 90, 98.

[83] W. E. Baxter, "NYA Diversified Program Aids Kentucky Cities," *Kentucky City* 8 (July 1937): 10-11; *JT*, December 23, 1937.

[84] In some cases, private reformers worked in conjunction with the New Deal to improve local communities. Samuel and Nola Vander Meer came to the Morris Fork community as missionaries from New Jersey in 1927 and stayed in Breathitt County for several decades. With the help of the WPA, the Vander Meers oversaw construction of a new schoolhouse, community house, and health clinic that provided prenatal care, vaccinations, and inoculations to the people of Morris Fork and surrounding communities. Given the poor state of public health in eastern Kentucky, these institutions were as helpful if not more helpful than new roads and schools. See, Samuel and Nola Vander Meer, "Rebuilding a Community," *Mountain Life and Work* Vol. XIII, No. 3 (October 1937): 17-20. The Vander Meers engaged in the kind of work David Whisnant has called "systematic cultural intervention," in which "someone (or some institution) consciously and programmatically takes action within a culture with the intent of affecting it in some specific way that the intervenor thinks desirable." Marie Turner embraced a similar kind of cultural uplift, evidenced by her association with the settlement school movement and its mission to preserve the cultural aspects of mountain heritage. See, David Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 13.

Supervisor Harry Hopkins assured America that the WPA would positively impact small rural towns. "Work is largely the answer for both areas [city and country]," he said. "Our people don't want a handout but something to help them hold their heads up… That is what the WPA is attempting to do."[85] The majority of WPA projects nationwide consisted of road construction, and in a large county like Breathitt, roads were sorely needed. In her 1935 essay for the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, Marie Turner wrote of traveling only 47 miles in her Ford coupe in a day and half's travel, all within Breathitt County.[86] The winter months made many roads impassable, making an effective road system in the county all the more important. Whether repaving, resurfacing, or constructing a completely new road, the WPA brought much-needed improvement to transportation in the county. In five years, the agency constructed more than 73 miles of roads and 68 miles of sidewalk. It built 16 schools, a jail, and dozens of playgrounds and recreational areas.[87]

Like the NYA, the WPA also offered enrichment programs for young people in Breathitt County. Into the early-1940s, the WPA sponsored weekly recreational programs for young people to socialize, make arts and crafts, and play games. Frank Smith of Berea College traveled throughout eastern Kentucky offering such opportunities. Born in England, Smith came to Berea in 1926 with interests in folk dancing, folk music, carving, and painting. He later became affiliated with the University of Kentucky and carried out extension work in recreation throughout the state in the 1930s. Smith came to Jackson in November 1937 and taught over 100 hundred pupils in seven wood-carving classes. He

[85] *JT*, August 8, 1935.
[86] Turner, "Guidance in Breathitt County," 712.
[87] *JT*, October 10, 1940.

noted, "The happiness of boys and girls in pottery and drawing—like that of my whittlers—has been a joy to see during my travels in eastern Kentucky."[88] Singing and folk dancing also became integral aspects of the recreational program, and one student at Breathitt County High School offered this testimony:

> I have enjoyed learning the several folk dances that Mr. Smith has taught us. I appreciate the people of other lands better, as I seem to know and understand them better. In other words these games have sort of made us closer together. Now it seems that world is not such a big place after all.[89]

New Deal recreation programs acted as a distraction from the harsh realities of the Depression. Students could make friends, enjoy a meal, and take classes with visiting guests. These programs taught students about other cultures as well as their own. Students realized the wealth of opportunities that existed beyond Breathitt County and through the New Deal became more conscious of the outside world.

The New Deal also had a significant presence in the county's struggling agricultural industry. The Robinson Substation at Quicksand became a useful front for fostering agricultural reform in Breathitt County during the 1930s. Established in 1924, the Robinson Substation was controlled by the University of Kentucky's Department of Agriculture for the purposes of "study and experimentation in different phases of agriculture and reforestation."[90] The substation served as an administrative hub through which New Deal programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the Resettlement Administration (RA), later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), could operate. County extension agents based at the substation helped local

[88] Frank H. Smith, "Adventures in Recreation," *Mountain Life and Work* Vol. XIII, No. 4 (January 1938): 2-3.
[89] Ibid., 3.
[90] *JT*, September 27, 1934.

farmers implement better farming practices, provided them with loans for equipment and mortgages, and encouraged them to join farming cooperatives.[91] Each October, the substation was the site of an annual Harvest Festival that attracted people from all over eastern Kentucky, who set up exhibits in farm products, fruits, livestock, and local handiwork. By 1936, the 11th Annual Harvest Festival attracted 5,500 participants from 20 counties.[92] An editorial from the *Lexington Leader* in 1936 noted: "Everything pointed to steady progress in the direction of better standards of living, better farm practices, better educational facilities, better roads, and better ideals of community cooperation."[93] In education, public works, and agriculture, the New Deal was crucial in the revitalization of Bloody Breathitt.

Desirable Publicity

For all the excitement the New Deal had generated in Breathitt County since 1933, none would compare with the events of January 1938, which marked the dedication of the PWA-funded Breathitt County High School by Eleanor Roosevelt. This trip, however, was not the First Lady's inaugural visit to eastern Kentucky. In May 1937, Roosevelt had dedicated a new high school, also built with PWA funds, in neighboring Morgan County. Education, she asserted, must teach children to do for themselves rather than simply "doing what they are told. Children should be trained to develop character and discipline themselves, not rely upon the care of their elders." She spoke of a "new era in education," a sentiment that clearly resonated with Marie Turner. It seemed only natural that the First

[91] These agricultural reforms were effective in some cases, but also presented many challenges. Some farmers refused to follow federal guidelines that required planting fewer crops and shunned the advice of extension agents. When the RA proposed relocating some farmers to other industries, headstrong farmers responded with vitriol and sometimes violence. See, Blakey, 104-130.
[92] Reprinted in *JT*, September 24, 1936.
[93] *JT*, October 8, 1936.

Lady should be present at the dedication ceremony of Turner's greatest achievement to date as superintendent.[94]

Roosevelt's visit to Jackson coincided with the Farm and Home Convention hosted by the University of Kentucky in Lexington. The First Lady relayed her experiences at the conference in her "My Day" column, a nationally syndicated newspaper column she began writing in 1935 that appeared in more than 90 newspapers throughout the United States. On January 26, 1938 while on a tour of the University of Kentucky, Roosevelt received an "urgent telephone call" from Breathitt County, whose leaders "begged us to come up there tomorrow" for the dedication of the new high school. Though the weather was treacherous, Roosevelt wrote:

> It is important to make the trip now because their small schools in the mountains close this week and do not open again until July. I confess that this seems to me a rather odd arrangement, but I suppose during the winter months it is impossible for the children to reach school and in the spring they are probably needed on the farms. It shows how little we know of the everyday life in another state as near as Kentucky is to New York and Washington.[95]

Realizing this may have been her only chance to visit the county, Roosevelt agreed to travel to Jackson the following day.

If not for the efforts of Marie Turner, circumstances nearly prevented the First Lady from journeying to Breathitt County for the momentous occasion. In the midst of the most severe weather of that winter season, it initially appeared that the First Lady would be unable to make the journey over snow and ice-covered highways. Turner hurriedly organized a special committee and raised enough money to charter a special train from

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[94] *JT*, May 27, 1937.
[95] Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day" collection, January 27, 1938, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1938&_f=md054862.

Lexington to Jackson.[96] As a fellow Progressive committed to rural youth and educational reform, Turner was determined not to let such an opportunity slip away. The superintendent later reflected that the First Lady's visit to Breathitt County would give the county much-needed positive publicity, particularly in an age when the stigma of "Bloody Breathitt" continued to define the county.[97]

On January 27, the First Lady made the hazardous journey to Jackson and met with several students, including one who walked six miles from his home to the bus stop each day, followed by a 15-mile ride to school. Another young woman who organized radio listening posts for the University of Kentucky reported walking 19 miles in one day across the county's rugged terrain.[98] Despite the weather, nearly 2,000 gathered in the school's auditorium for the dedication ceremony, which included speeches by Orie Latham Hatcher, UK President Frank McVey, Governor Happy Chandler, and Elinor Morgenthau, wife to the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury and a close friend to the Roosevelts. "A community is no better than its schools," said McVey, praising Turner for the progress she had made in her few years as superintendent.[99] The program also featured a speech by a Breathitt County high school student, who was dressed in old and tattered clothes. When program coordinators suggested the student be given a new set of clothes for a speech to so many state and national dignitaries, Marie Turner said no, partly an act of authenticity but most likely an attempt to show national leaders firsthand the crippling poverty in Breathitt County. [100]

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[96] *In the Land of Breathitt*, 247-248.
[97] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982.
[98] Roosevelt, "My Day," January 28, 1938.
[99] *JT*, February 4, 1938.
[100] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982.

In her speech to the large crowd, Mrs. Roosevelt shared an experience of working in railroad yards during the Great War, where she met a young and illiterate Kentucky soldier who could not communicate with his family at home. Improvements in education, she said, were essential to preventing these kinds of tragedies. She encouraged Breathitt County's youth to lift up their eyes and "not keep them down in the hollows, for disappointment always comes before our dreams come true."[101] After she returned to New York, Roosevelt reflected on her experiences in Breathitt County and was particularly pleased with her visit to a local NYA project, where young men worked to make furniture from native woods. She also spoke favorably of her visit to the Robinson Substation at Quicksand, especially the Breathitt County cured hams she enjoyed for lunch, which "compare favorably with those which I have been buying for many years from a friend in Petersburg, Virginia."[102]

More than a year later, it was apparent that the First Lady's visit to Breathitt County had left a deep impression. She received a letter from Orie Latham Hatcher of the Alliance for Guidance of Rural Youth and learned that its programs had provided individual guidance to approximately 21,000 young people. Roosevelt also learned that the Alliance would be holding a national demonstration of its guidance programs in Breathitt County. The First Lady wrote:

> To anyone who knows, as I do, the difficulties which face many of our rural youth in different parts of the country, the work of this association seems very important. These young people need help in receiving an education, deciding what they want to do in life, obtaining medical care, adjusting themselves to the changes in our civilization… Whether we live in the city or the country, we can ill afford not to help them, for they will make the nation of the future.[103]

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[101] *JT*, February 4, 1938.
[102] Roosevelt, "My Day," January 29, 1938.
[103] Roosevelt, "My Day," November 27, 1939.

The guidance program in Breathitt County had clearly made tremendous progress, worthy of hosting a national demonstration. The fact that Breathitt County appeared in the First Lady's journal nearly two years after her visit to Jackson suggests that her experiences there made a lasting impression. The progressive educational system Marie Turner had established in Breathitt County served as a model of the reforms Roosevelt worked so hard to promote in rural America.

The effects of the First Lady's visit to Jackson had an enormous effect on the small community. A newspaper editorial heralded the new high school as "the dawning of a new era in the educational history of Breathitt County." Another editorial celebrated the "desirable publicity" the First Lady's visit gave the community. "It has often been said that the people of other sections of the State and Nation were seeking opportunity to give Breathitt County a 'black eye.' Happenings in the county of the undesirable nature, have gained wide publicity through the press in the years past."[104] The dedication, however, represented a turning point in the Breathitt's history. For the first time, the county was making headlines not for a brutal homicide or family feud, but for leading the way in educational reform. Nineteen thirty-eight proved to be a pivotal year in both Breathitt County's history and Marie Turner's tenure as superintendent.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 and the growing likelihood of the United States' involvement in the conflict began to overshadow the New Deal by the turn of the decade. As New Deal programs were consolidated and funding slashed, public works and youth programs became less active in Breathitt County. Two major events from 1940 and 1941, however, provided a fitting end to Breathitt County's story of growth and renewal

[104] *JT*, February 4, 1938.

in the 1930s, with both events showcasing the county's progress for a national audience. The first event came in 1940 when Marion Post, then working as a photographer for the FSA, came to Breathitt County. Throughout the Depression, the FSA hired photographers to travel throughout the country and document the realities of everyday life. Though she was one of many FSA photographers, Post's work set her apart. Melissa McEuen has argued that Post's style of photography portrayed collective strength "of Americans working together, playing together, and simply enjoying each other's company, in spite of economic devastation."[105] Having already traveled throughout the Deep South in the late-1930s, Post came to eastern Kentucky in the summer of 1940.

The people of Breathitt County were not accustomed to having strangers with cameras intrude upon their privacy. Representations of mountain people at the time usually depicted primitive and backwards lifestyles. According to Margaret MacKichan, "The people had been made to feel ashamed of their lifestyle." Indeed, culture-of-poverty theorists would later portray Appalachians as having a deep distrust of outsiders, a disposition that made mountain residents less likely to accept a government worker like Marion Post. In many cases, outsiders were met with coldness and sometimes hostility, hindering their ability to document mountain life. Yet Post had several advantages when she made the trip to Breathitt County in late August. When Marie Turner learned of Post's planned trip, the superintendent jumped at the opportunity to provide more publicity for her county.

The partnership proved fruitful. Having an insider and well-respected member of the community in Marie Turner at her side, combined with Post's keen sense of empathy and

[105] Melissa A. McEuen, *Seeing America: Women Photographers Between the Wars* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 195.

humility, allowed the photographer to capture a more genuine portrait of life in Breathitt County. According to MacKichan, Post's "alliance with Turner connected her with the nervous system of the county, and tapped her into its less obvious qualities." The importance of having Turner accompany Post cannot be overstated. When Post traveled alone to neighboring Wolfe County, she encountered fear and trepidation among the local population. One resident later said of Post's visit: "The people were upset… she was a stranger to us. We didn't know her attitude, or what she was going to do with the pictures."[106] In another county, Post was even arrested for being a "suspicious person," though the judge quickly dismissed the charges.[107] To travel the rugged physical and social terrain of eastern Kentucky, having a trusted accomplice like Marie Turner made all the difference in the world.

Marie Turner found Post a refreshing break from other federal representatives that had come to Breathitt County. The two women bonded on a personal level and found common ground as agents of social change. With Turner as her guide, Post ventured into remote parts of the county, traveling along creek beds on mules and peeling potatoes with mountain residents. In a letter to Roy Stryker, head of the FSA's Photography Section, Post wrote of a distressing incident. "A mule that was tied to a fence we were passing got mean when our horse came close to him and hauled off and kicked Mrs. Turner on the foot. It hurt her quite badly, but was just a bruise and she's better now." Post enjoyed her time in Breathitt County so much that she pleaded with Stryker to "please please please let me stay this week at least… can't Chapel Hill wait another week—please yes? Is there

[106] Margaret Anna MacKichan, "Marion Post Wolcott: Farm Security Administration Photographer in Eastern Kentucky" (MFA Diss., University of New Mexico, 1977), 33-45
[107] McEuen, 184.

anything special there or what is to be done?"[108] Everyday mountain experiences were foreign to Post, yet she took a deep interest in mountain life and its people. The photographs Post took in Breathitt County did not tell a story of uneducated, violent people, but of a tight-knit and resilient community even in the face of economic uncertainty. Her shots of school buildings reflected the many educational reforms that had been made throughout the decade. To Post, Breathitt County's experience during the Depression was a story worth telling, and the photographs she took for America to see paid little reference to the history of Bloody Breathitt.

After Post's visit, the 1941 publication of *In the Land of Breathitt* by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) documented the New Deal's work in Breathitt County. From 1937 to 1941, the FWP compiled histories for each state as part of the American Guide Series. Most FWP publications, however, were reserved for larger cities and towns, and the fact that a place like Breathitt County received its own publication signifies both the large presence of the New Deal in the community and the Turner family's political influence. Once again, Marie Turner was instrumental in ensuring that the book was completed. William Brewer, State Supervisor of the Kentucky Writers' Project, was initially hesitant to authorize a book on Breathitt County, where "the mountain people, with good reason, have been more or less suspicious of outsiders seeking information, no matter in what form it is to appear."[109] Only the "full cooperation" of Marie Turner and the board of education convinced Brewer that the project could succeed. While this history of Breathitt County contained a wealth of information on the county's feuds, it was not sensational, nor did it carry overwhelmingly negative connotations. The book

[108] MacKichan, 46-49.
[109] *In the Land of Breathitt*, 5.

portrayed a dignified people, albeit with a dark past, but moving forward. Most importantly, the book expressed optimism for the county's future.

Undesirable Publicity

Breathitt County's story in the 1930s, however, was not a total arc of progress. The desirable publicity generated under Marie and Ervine Turner's leadership in the 1930s coincided with less than desirable publicity that harkened back to the county's violent past. The Turners could serve as agents of change as well as reminders of the status quo. Beginning in 1938, a series of events reinforced Breathitt County's reputation of violence and political corruption. The 1938 Democratic primary race for the U.S. Senate between Alben Barkley and Happy Chandler was especially bitter. Controversies over political patronage engulfed both campaigns from the very beginning. Though considerable efforts had been made to separate politics from federal relief programs among top New Deal officials, including Harry Hopkins and Kentucky WPA director George Goodman, the plan amounted to little more than wishful thinking. Chandler's campaign accused the WPA of "frankly and brazenly operating upon a political basis." Affidavits showed discriminatory hiring practices that favored Barkley supporters, the use of WPA vehicles for transportation, and even the distribution of food items in printed bags that read "Paper Bags donated by Friend of Alben Barkley."[110]

Such practices were widespread and not geographically isolated either. Journalist Thomas Stokes completed a 1,400-mile tour of Kentucky and, in an eight-part article series, documented his disturbing findings. Local political directors passed out Barkley campaign buttons and instructed workers that they must vote for the incumbent senator if

[110] Blakey, *Hard Times and New Deal in Kentucky*, 185-186.

they wished to secure a WPA job. Those who were registered as Republicans were required to reregister as Democrats and those who supported Chandler were dismissed from their jobs. Chandler campaign manager Brady Stewart was not incorrect when he said, "The Works Progress Administration in Kentucky has been converted into an out-and-out political machine dedicated, over and above all considerations, to re-electing Senator Barkley." In Congress, the newly formed Sheppard Committee confirmed the accusations, also finding that Chandler supporters were equally guilty of corruption. According to Marie Turner, Chandler placed swells of men in Breathitt County on Kentucky highway department payrolls in order to attract political supporters, yet these workers turned on the governor when the state failed to pay them because of budget shortfalls. In 1939, Congress passed the Hatch Act to curb blatant acts of political favoritism.[111]

In Breathitt County, political tensions ran just as high. The Turners and their allies supported Barkley, a close friend to President Roosevelt and an ardent supporter of New Deal programs that had been a great benefit to Breathitt County. Having Happy Chandler as senator would almost certainly have meant fewer New Deal dollars going into Kentucky. Roosevelt, who allegedly told Chandler, "You're a good boy, but you won't do," clearly favored Barkley.[112] For the Turner family, Chandler would not do either. The family had opposed Chandler since his days as lieutenant governor under Ruby Laffoon, when Chandler killed a state sales tax that could have funded much-needed educational

[111] Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 163-189; Marie R. Turner, interview by Charles P. Roland, July 20, 1979, A.B. "Happy" Chandler: Life and Career Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky.
[112] Harrison and Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, 369.

improvements.[113] The Turners later opposed Chandler in his 1935 bid for governor who, according to Marie, had ignored the needs of Breathitt County during his time in office. The Turners campaigned hard for Barkley, but allegedly employed similar practices as other political bosses across the state. Though Marie Turner denied both giving out commodities that had the stamp of Alben Barkley and using the WPA to drum up political support, one teacher reported that Ervine Turner dictated who would work for the WPA and even forced some workers to bring him their first federal paycheck as a debt for placing them on the government payroll.[114] Public works politics could be a cruel and undemocratic system, but it was also disturbingly common across Kentucky and the nation.

The bitter tension between the Chandler and Barkley factions in Breathitt County turned deadly in the week before the primary election. On Thursday, August 4, former sheriff Lee Combs and his brother Lewis (both distant relatives of future governor Bert T. Combs), opened fire against sheriff Walter Deaton on Main Street in Jackson. Lewis Combs served as county chairman of Chandler's senatorial campaign, while Deaton was a Barkley supporter. The shootout killed Lee Combs and wounded Deaton, and in the ensuing days, more men were charged in connection with the shooting, including Ervine Turner. The charges against Turner were quickly dropped, yet the conflict served as a stark reminder of the bitter political divisions that existed within the Democratic Party.[115] In the shooting's aftermath, Ervine Turner issued the following statement:

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[113] Until 1992, Kentucky law stipulated that the lieutenant governor became acting governor whenever the governor left the state. Chandler became notorious for using this power to its fullest potential. Though his sustained opposition to a state sales tax was politically popular, Turner believed that the position "set Kentucky back" many years in education. Into the 1940s and 1950s, Kentucky's educational system ranked among the worst in the nation.

[114] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 20, 1979; David Watts, interview.

[115] *C-J*, August 5, 10, 1938.

> My associates and acquaintances know that I have no malice and that I have always been a special friend to S.L. Combs and his two sons, Lee and Lewis, and that I would have been as much opposed to either of them being molested as anyone. I deeply regret that the trouble happened… I do not believe any charges would have been preferred against me except for the purpose of keeping me from taking an active part in the primary.[116]

Even as Breathitt County reformed its image during the New Deal years, the shootout showed that gun violence remained an acceptable means of dealing with political frustrations. According to T.R.C. Hutton, feuds by this time were "thankfully stuck in the past," but Breathitt's "past of factional violence could not be completely forgotten… Although crime had supplanted feud, violence of either sort was still useful." The conflict also showed how Breathitt County's Democratic Party suffered from the same divisions that plagued Democrats on the state level. With Happy Chandler on the political scene, the state's Democrats remained divided for the next three decades. Fearful for his life, Ervine Turner, with the help of fellow Democrat and close friend Earle Clements, arranged for a temporary job in Chicago while lingering animosities cooled down. The fact that Ervine Turner removed himself from Breathitt County proved that the dispute went far beyond ordinary political frustrations.[117]

In the end, the chaos probably had little effect on the final election results. Barkley defeated Chandler by more than 70,000 votes and easily defeated his Republican challenger in the general election. In Breathitt County, which had gone for Barkley in past elections, the incumbent senator defeated Chandler by more than 800 votes.[118] Chandler would not have to wait much longer for a Senate position either. When Senator M.M. Logan died the following year, Governor Keen Johnson appointed Chandler to the

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[116] *JT*, August 11, 1938.
[117] Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt*, 242; Pearce, *Divide and* Dissent, 50.
[118] *JT*, August 11, 1938.

vacant seat, which Chandler won outright in a special election. In 1945, the boisterous Chandler left state politics and served six years as Commissioner of Baseball, yet roared back onto the state political scene in the 1950s. The Turner family's political battles with Chandler supporters were far from over.

The bitter feuds that embroiled Breathitt County seemed to have run their course by 1940, but old stereotypes proved hard to erase from popular memory and made for sensational journalism. Murders in Breathitt County continued to make headlines even as the number of killings declined. Upset at the fact that their county remained a symbol of violence and lawlessness, editors at *The Jackson Times* chastised journalists who "jump at the chance to picture Breathitt County as the place of feuds and fightings, forgetting or overlooking the fact that many other communities have a much darker record than ours." Images of violence usually accompanied images of poverty. In 1940, the *Lexington Herald* ran an article that compared Breathitt County to a "great walnut cleaned of its meat—a shell—no timber, coal, industries, or farmlands that are farmable." The photos showed families living in deplorable conditions, including a young boy who had lost an eye from an injury caused by an angry rooster. According to *The Jackson Times'* editorial board, it was the county's responsibility to "defend themselves against the one who would sell the name of their county for a few dollars."[119]

Only a few months later, *Time* magazine highlighted the long history of violence in Breathitt County, where "homicide has a purely clinical interest." The article recounted the 1938 election shootings involving the Combs brothers and Ervine Turner, noting that homicide ranked fifth as the county's leading cause of death in 1939. *Time* also painted a

[119] *JT*, March 28, April 11, 1940.

picture of welfare dependency, pointing out that 15,000 of the county's 21,600 residents were on relief and that 700 workers on WPA payrolls would soon be cut. The county's total assessed property valuation had dropped by more than $2 million since 1932, there were only 200 telephones in the county, and most Breathitt Countians did not have access to basic health care and suffered from trachoma, syphilis, and gonorrhea in "remote mountain shacks."[120]

To *Time*'s national audience, Breathitt County symbolized the poverty, violence, and backwardness traditionally associated with Appalachia. As the Great Depression dragged on into 1940, viewing Breathitt County, eastern Kentucky, and Appalachia as a deviant subculture helped Americans come to terms with pressing and seemingly inescapable economic realities. According to Henry Shapiro, the idea of the "Appalachian other" and the assumption that mountaineers composed a distinct people with predetermined characteristics lived on after the 1920s. The idea of Appalachia can evoke both positive and negative images. On the one hand, the region represents natural beauty, a rich heritage, hospitality, and a simple, pure society. For Sarah Case, the area "served a psychic need for middle-class Americans who, dependent on but uncomfortable with industrial development, urban growth, and broadening consumerism, sensed a loss of authenticity and human values." When authors such as John Fox, Jr. and Horace Kephart depicted Appalachia as a quaint, exotic place in their novels, they provided an escape for Americans coping with a rapidly changing society. Conversely, Appalachia can conjure images of illiteracy, violence, backwardness, and otherness. These negative images resonated during times of crisis, when discouraged Americans searched for something

[120] "Bloody Breathitt," *Time*, April 8, 1940, Vol. 35, Issue 15, 21.

that might explain the persistent problems at hand. Too often, Appalachia's otherness served this social purpose and became a convenient source of blame. The region has therefore been discovered and "rediscovered" over time, depending on the nation's current economic, social, and cultural climate. Images of destitute children and crippling poverty in places like Breathitt County, which seemed a world apart from mainstream society, perhaps helped Americans distance themselves from the ugly realities of life during the Depression.[121]

Conclusion

By 1941, the New Deal had left its mark on Breathitt County. Along with the WPA's infrastructural improvements, the PWA, known primarily for its large-scale projects, built two schools and an auditorium. The short-lived Civil Works Administration (CWA) in its few months of existence repaired 34 miles of roads, 30 county schools, installed storm sewers and playgrounds, and even began construction on an airport.[122] In agriculture, agencies like the RA, later the FSA, helped curb inefficient farming practices and raised farmers' incomes; the number of farmers participating in cooperatives grew from 760 in 1936 to 2,290 in 1940.[123] Marie Turner's reforms in the school system, coupled with the efforts of the NYA, brought education to more people and, more importantly, gave young people hope for a promising future. The graduating class of 1940 had the largest number of graduates in the county's history and, according to Marie Turner, approximately 60 percent of graduates had plans of going to college, a trend she attributed to the

[121] Shapiro, *Appalachia On Our Mind*, 263-264; Case, "Katherine Pettit and May Stone," in *Kentucky Women*, 172; Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt*, 235-242.
[122] Rachel Kennedy and Cynthia Johnson, *The New Deal Builds: A Historic Context of the New Deal in East Kentucky, 1933 to 1943* (Kentucky Heritage Council, State Historic Preservation Office, 2005), 215.
[123] *JT*, October 31, 1940.

diversification of curriculum. Crime rates among young people also declined, with court dockets indicating that cases involving young people were one-tenth of what they had been just a decade ago, which can surely be attributed to the increased number of children attending school.[124] Going solely by the statistics, Breathitt County found itself in a better place at the end of the Depression than it had at the beginning, a case that cannot be made for other Kentucky counties.

Breathitt County's numbers were also quite impressive in comparison to neighboring counties, which were mostly Republican and whose county officials lacked the political connections of the Turner family. The CWA expended $29,000 in Owsley County between 1933 and 1936, but nearly $100,000 in Breathitt. From 1935 to 1937, the WPA spent $137,783 in Owsley, $234,211 in Lee County, $539,462 in Clay County, yet Breathitt County received a staggering $671,353. Breathitt was geographically larger than most of its neighboring counties and thus had more space to accommodate federal projects, yet it still scored more funding in comparison with other counties of similar population.[125]

Even as the Great Depression devastated the American economy and displaced thousands of families, Breathitt County's story of the 1930s is a reminder that triumph can emerge from hardship. In a place that already struggled from widespread poverty, a national depression seemed to spell disaster for Breathitt County. The 1930s, however, proved to be a time of considerable growth. The New Deal and its revolutionary idea that the national government should be responsible for the welfare of its citizens brought a degree of structure and order to a place that seemingly had none. Through public works,

[124] *JT*, May 23, 1940; *C-J*, March 4, 1940.
[125] Burch, *Owsley County, Kentucky*, 61.

agricultural renewal, and educational reform, the New Deal stabilized the county and brought hope to a place that desperately needed it. In the process, Breathitt County gained roads, bridges, schools, and other modern facilities. Perhaps more enduring than the material gains of the New Deal was the Turner family's rise to power. Ervine and Marie Turner, who coordinated and facilitated the New Deal in Breathitt County, emerged as leaders committed to maximizing federal resources. Their brand of political liberalism ran the county for nearly four decades.

But for all these gains, the New Deal by no means solved all of Breathitt County's problems, particularly its longstanding economic woes. Roads were built, but most areas of the county still had none. Schools were consolidated, yet most remained the primitive and inefficient one-room schoolhouses staffed with less-than-qualified teachers. More people were put to work, but the withdrawal of New Deal programs left many more lacking permanent employment and searching for answers. A growing dependency on public assistance arguably set in motion a trend that would worsen with the reemergence of federal antipoverty programs in the 1960s. Breathitt County's future seemed uncertain, yet one development was quite certain: the rise of Ervine and Marie Turner. In the politically, fiscally, and socially conservative hills of eastern Kentucky, figures like Turner were quite rare. The New Deal was their springboard to power, enabling them to make state and federal political connections that served them well in the future. In 1940, the Turners and Breathitt County could only look to the future with hope and optimism.

CHAPTER 2: POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONSOLIDATION, 1941-1959

"The erosion of our rural youth is far more serious than the erosion of our soil."

-Marie Turner

America's entry into World War II hastened the phasing out of most New Deal programs as the nation shifted toward wartime mobilization. It was a blow for the Turner family and Breathitt County, which had survived the depression thanks to FDR's economic recovery program. Nonetheless, the Turner family, particularly Marie, continued their quest to revitalize Breathitt County and avoid associations with "Bloody Breathitt." Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the Turners could not rely on the strong welfare state of the New Deal years and therefore had to find other ways of getting their "roads and schools." To do so, they relied on their political connections. Ervine Turner's stint in the Kentucky Senate, paired with Marie Turner's growing stature as a competent educator, gave the couple entrée into influential political circles, which was beneficial both for the couple's political advancement and their county's reputation.

The Turners made fewer state and national headlines during the 1940s and 1950s, yet they quietly and effectively consolidated the power they had been generating since the New Deal. During this period, the family relied on Marie's persuasiveness and Ervine's political acumen to push the county forward. Their efforts produced some key developments. Breathitt County's school system continued to improve and innovate as Marie Turner became a more vocal reformer for a Kentucky educational system that ranked among the worst in the nation. Ervine Turner worked his way up the political ladder in a state that, after 1947, saw Democrats hold the governorship and near total

control of the state legislature for 20 years. Kentucky Democrats, however, remained bitterly divided throughout this period, and the Turner family allied with the faction coalescing under Earle Clements and later Bert Combs. This factionalism produced intense political showdowns in Breathitt County, particularly after Happy Chandler's return to Kentucky politics in the late-1950s. Finally, the family developed a political alliance with U.S. Representative Carl D. Perkins, who would become the face of eastern Kentucky in Washington. It was a partnership that paid important political dividends for the family moving forward.

Wartime Mobilization

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the men and women of Breathitt County geared up for mobilization just as they had in previous times of war. Breathitt County already boasted a distinguished record from the First World War for filling its quota of troops without having to draft a single person. Sargent Willie Sandlin, a native of Breathitt County, was the only Kentuckian to receive a Congressional Medal of Honor during World War I.[126] Wartime demands, however, also contributed to a severe shortage of teachers, with some going off to battle and many more leaving the region in search of lucrative industrial jobs in northern cities such as Detroit and Baltimore. Thirteen percent of Kentuckians left the state between 1940 and 1950 and Breathitt County saw a declining population for the first time since its establishment in 1839. The population stood at 23,946 in 1940 and by 1950 had fallen by more than 16 percent to 19,964.[127]

[126] Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt*, 255-256.
[127] *1950 United States Federal Census*, Population, Volume I, Number of Inhabitants, 17-7.

Amidst these changes, Marie Turner continued her push for rural educational reform. In some cases, she traveled to Frankfort and Washington herself to lobby for changes. In others, she relied on her family's political connections, including with Governor Keen Johnson (1939-43), who delivered the commencement address at Breathitt County High School in 1943. Education in Kentucky was fairly progressive under Johnson and Superintendent of Public Instruction John W. Booker's leadership. Wartime prosperity turned the state's $7 million debt into a $10 million surplus, which provided schools with increased vocational education and free textbooks for all courses through the eighth grade. Most importantly, the Kentucky legislature in 1941 debated a new equalization amendment that would redistribute state funding to poorer school districts, a disproportionate number of which were in eastern Kentucky. Without an adequate tax base, Breathitt County schools continued to suffer from inadequate funding. Turner pointed out that most funding in her school system went toward instruction, with little left to maintain school buildings and provide a living wage for teachers. The superintendent from neighboring Lee County argued that better funding for rural schools would combat the increasing number of young people who left the county because of inadequate educational and job opportunities. The equalization amendment later passed and stipulated that 10 percent of state funding could be distributed "according to need," and in 1949 this number increased to 25 percent. In 1950, Breathitt County schools received $120,519 from the equalization fund.[128]

Despite these piecemeal reforms, education suffered during World War II due to a shortage of competent teachers. Once again, Turner responded with innovation and

[128] Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 271-272; *C-J*, November 2, 1941; *JT*, May 20, 1943, September 12, 1946, September 14, 1950.

creativity. In 1943, she petitioned the state Board of Education to experiment with year-round schooling as a way of dealing with the teacher shortage. She proposed a plan that would employ a select group of teachers for 12 months and require them to teach six days out of the week. Under this plan, the county school system provided incentives, including higher salaries, to keep the most-qualified teachers, who would teach three days a week in one school and three days in another. According to Turner, the plan would allow the best instructors teach in two schools while extending the school year for all students. In Turner's mind, year-round schooling was more effective than a seven-month school year, as it allowed for continuous learning and eliminated "negative community influences" during the vacation period. Indeed, Turner had lamented in the 1930s that many students lost progress during summer vacation because of exposure to an unstable and sometimes violent home life. The state board approved Turner's "Breathitt experiment" for one year and praised it as an effective way of dealing with teacher shortages, decreasing salaries, and the logistical problems that came with total war. In Breathitt County, 31 teachers served 62 schools for six days each week, while 75 teachers continued to teach the usual five days a week for seven months out of the year. It was an imperfect system, but at least enabled the school system to provide students with an education in a limited capacity.[129]

The revised calendar also prompted slight changes in curriculum to reflect the needs of a wartime society. Students planted their own "victory gardens," harvested eggs, and participated in health and sanitary projects to aid the war effort. Marie Turner also asked her teachers to help with the war fund drive by hosting community pie suppers. Since the one-room schoolhouse often served as a meeting place for isolated communities, teachers

[129] *C-J*, March 20, 1943, March 31, 1944.

were well-positioned to use their schoolhouses as sites of wartime activism. Turner tasked the schools with raising $1,000 for the United Service Organizations (USO), a private social welfare organization that sought to boost morale by providing recreational opportunities such as lounges, canteens, dance halls, and clubs to soldiers and their families. By 1944, the USO had more than 1,800 centers across the nation.[130] The USO relied primarily on private contributions, making activism at the local level all the more important. Turner must have realized the importance of imparting a sense of civic duty within her students. Breathitt County's impressive record of volunteer enlistments from World War I no doubt weighed on her mind as she asked her schools to make war contributions. Such acts of patriotism also worked to dispel any lingering associations with "Bloody Breathitt" by proving that county residents were doing their part to help win the war. By the end of 1943, 64 schools had been awarded a Certificate of Merit for reaching their quota contributions, with 75 of the 90 schools across the county having made contributions.[131]

Turner further addressed the teacher shortage by implementing a teacher training program that provided young educators the opportunity to regularly observe experienced teachers. Workshops taught by representatives from the University Training School in Lexington were held throughout 1943 and attracted dozens of teachers from across the county. That same year Turner also opened the Little Red School on the campus of Breathitt County High School. Little Red, named because of its bright red wooden board exterior, served first, second, and third graders and allowed students from the adjacent

[130] *JT*, January 28, 1943; Gretchen Knapp, "Experimental Social Policymaking During World War II: The United Service Organizations (USO) and American War-Community Services (AWCS*), Journal of Policy History*, Volume 12, No. 3 (2000): 325-328.
[131] *JT*, December 23, 1943.

high school to observe daily lessons. High school students could conveniently walk over to Little Red for short teaching sessions, where they received instruction from some of the best educators in the county and earned high school credit.[132]

Little Red was but another example of Marie Turner modifying school curriculum to suit students' needs. According to Frances Collins Johnson, who taught at Little Red during World War II, attended Columbia University, and later served as one of Marie Turner's most trusted advisors in the 1960s, Little Red was a "model school" to which parents from across the county wanted to send their children. The experimental school proved so popular that more classrooms were added in later years.[133] Just as the guidance program in the 1930s allowed aspiring carpenters, mechanics, artists, and farmers to create their own curriculum, Little Red provided an excellent way for future educators to gain valuable experience. The school proved to be one of Marie Turner's most successful educational experiments. In 1954, the high school's Future Teachers of America Club voted to rename themselves the "Marie R. Turner Club" in honor of the superintendent who had given them the opportunity to practice student teaching at Little Red.[134]

As the war continued and the school system faced prolonged teacher shortages, the Breathitt County Board of Education renewed the year-round school plan for the 1944-1945 school year. On paper, the revised calendar seemed an effective way of dealing with wartime shortages. But some county residents resented the modifications and drafted a petition in protest of the arrangement. More than 100 petitioners claimed that the revised system caused children to lose interest in their work by only attending school three days

[132] *JT*, May 27, 1943; "Teaching Teachers," *The Courier-Journal Roto Magazine*, March 31, 1946, 22.
[133] Francis Collins Johnson, interview by William E. Ellis, September 19, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.
[134] *JT*, March 11, 1954.

out of the week. Furthermore, it allowed teachers who taught in two districts to "loaf on the job" and was unfair to the majority of teachers who continued to operate under the normal schedule for less pay. Most importantly, the year-round calendar forced students to deal with treacherous weather conditions in the winter and deprived farmers of labor during harvest times in the spring and fall. Since the county remained mostly agricultural, children served as valuable farmhands for families that routinely struggled to make ends meet. For many families, meeting agricultural yields was more important than sending their children to school. It was a problem that most rural school systems across the state faced. In her response to the petition, Marie Turner defended the revised school calendar as an effective way of making progress in nutrition, health, gardening, and county beautification. The modified calendar, according to Turner, resulted in students spending more time in the classroom than ever before and allowed her to keep open 28 rural schools that otherwise would have closed.[135]

The conflict showed how Marie Turner's crusade for educational reform sometimes clashed with the county's traditional economic and cultural structures. In her 38 years as superintendent, Turner often confronted this struggle between innovation and traditionalism. According to Anne Effland, many rural farmers into the twentieth century clung to the Jeffersonian belief that agricultural production was the basis of all wealth, even if it meant consigning their children to a life of backbreaking labor. A life of farming supposedly promoted morality and produced self-sufficient, independent citizens.[136] On the other hand, Marie Turner's beliefs in educational reform and

[135] *JT*, April 13, 20, 1944.
[136] Anne B.W. Effland, "Agrarianism and Child Labor Policy for Agriculture," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Summer 2005): 285.

compulsory schooling aligned more closely with Progressive reform and its legacies. Though Turner respected agriculture as the lifeblood of the community and even created agriculture courses for her students, her actions reflected the Progressive mentality that education needed to supplement agricultural work. Even after the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act established minimum age standards for child labor, it did not apply to children working on family farms. Enforcement of the Act's restrictions was "problematic in rural areas, where employment sites were widely dispersed and much of the population did not support reforms."[137] Marie Turner encountered a similar problem in Breathitt County. The high number of children who continued to work on family farms created a roadblock to reform.

During the war, the Turner family continued to enjoy the benefits of being New Deal liberals and the political connections that came with it. In 1944, the Kentucky Democratic Convention endorsed Franklin Roosevelt for an unprecedented fourth term and named Marie Turner district chairwoman for the Eighth Congressional District.[138] In October of that year, she was selected as one of 200 rural educators from across America to attend the White House Conference on Rural Education organized by the First Lady, who no doubt remembered her trip to Breathitt County just six years earlier. At the conference, Turner participated in focus groups concerning issues specific to eastern Kentucky, including soil erosion, diet deficiencies, inadequate housing, interrupted school terms, and a lack of compulsory schooling. She attended receptions at the White House and heard speeches given by the President and First Lady. For Turner, it must have been

[137] Ibid., 293.
[138] *JT*, June 29, 1944.

satisfying to hear the President affirm his commitment to the principles of New Deal liberalism. He said:

> I believe that the federal government should render financial aid where it is needed, and only where it is needed—in communities where farming does not pay, where land values have depreciated through erosion or through flood or drought, where industries have moved away, where transport facilities are inadequate or where electricity is unavailable for power and light.[139]

Roosevelt remained an immensely popular figure among the voters of Breathitt County, which he carried by more than 1,600 votes that November. Two years later, a group of Washington dignitaries traveled to Breathitt County as a follow up to the conference. The purpose was to "promote interest among laymen in the progress of the rural schools." Among the dignitaries was Glyn Morris, who had helped Marie Turner implement the successful guidance program in the 1930s when he was head of Pine Mountain Settlement School.[140]

As the war came to an end in August 1945, Breathitt County's educational system had weathered the storm quite successfully under Marie Turner's leadership. As she had during the Great Depression, Turner held true to her reputation as a progressive educator and took advantage of all resources at her disposal. Like most other rural school systems across the state, Turner's already underfunded system suffered. Yet her efforts during the war years produced some important victories for Breathitt County's communities, particularly in health and wellness. With help from the War Food Administration, every rural school now offered a hot lunch program, and once the federal agency had been phased out after the war, Turner encouraged teachers and parents to continue with the

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[139] *JT*, October 12, 1944.
[140] *JT*, November 9, 1944, September 26, 1946. By this time, Morris worked for the Council of Southern Mountain Workers, a non-profit organization affiliated with Berea College and concerned with community development in Appalachia.

lunch program. School PTAs thereafter regularly sponsored pie suppers that featured fiddling, square dancing, "pretty-girl" contests, and cake raffles. The events brought communities together and raised money for one-room schoolhouses. These fundraisers, coupled with donations given by local farmers, allowed county schools to receive 40,000 pounds of potatoes and more than 2,000 pounds of onions by 1947. The school lunch program, according to Turner, "makes children want to go to school." Indeed, school attendance continued to increase, with some one-room schools reporting attendance of close to 100 students as early as 1945.[141]

Turner was never timid in asking for support, and she also arranged for the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville to provide a five-week training program for her teachers in the summer of 1945. Sixty-four teachers attended workshops, some designed by Turner herself, with topics that ranged from "The Purposes of Elementary School," "Teaching Reading," and "Discipline and Character Development." Turner even arranged for one of the Peabody teachers, Elizabeth Sutton, to remain in Breathitt County as a health coordinator.[142] On a journey to the Shoulderblade community, Sutton visited a one-room school complete with a newly built kitchen partition. After sampling fresh vegetable soup, Sutton learned that the children had been taught to gather and prepare fresh vegetables as part of a newly implemented health curriculum. Two children who served on the "lunchroom committee" then directed her attention to a daily diet chart that recorded the weight and height of each student. In this "quiet, peaceful atmosphere," Sutton observed a healthy and thriving mountain school.[143]

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[141] *JT*, July 26, 1945, April 10, 1947.
[142] *JT*, June 7, 1945.
[143] Elizabeth Sutton, "Breathitt County Gives Thought to Its Children's Health," *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1947): 153-156.

This emphasis on health and wellness made significant headway in the early postwar years. Even into the 1950s, diseases such as tuberculosis and hookworm ran rampant in eastern Kentucky. In March 1945, a meningitis scare forced the school system to close for several days. Malnourishment, however, was the most pressing health issue at a time when many families lacked access to wholesome foods. In 1946, Breathitt County was chosen as one of 12 rural counties to participate in a child health program made possible by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The grant allowed Turner's school system that normally ran on a budget of $98,000 per year to provide health classes, hot meals, and basic hygiene products to more students. At the Panbowl School, for example, there was still no running water, but students now had access to hot meals and a cup to brush their teeth after each meal. Weight records from one school showed that 28 underweight children showed average gains of 11 pounds between September 1946 and the following January.[144]

Turner's efforts to improve education led one *Courier-Journal* writer to proclaim, "education despite obstacles is the Breathitt County way." Of the 7,000 pupils who occupied 99 schools throughout Breathitt County in 1947, only the high school had electricity. Fifty percent of the schools could only be reached by horseback, making it a long day's journey for schoolchildren forced to traverse the county's rugged terrain. In the winter months, most children left home before dark, left their lanterns on the side of the road, and picked them up on the way home. Of the 153 teachers in the school system, 35 held emergency teaching certificates. One of those teachers was Thomas P. Collins, a Breathitt County High School graduate who had traveled to Detroit during the war to

[144] *C-J*, March 3, 1946; *JT*, March 15, 1945, April 10, 1947.

work in an automobile factory that had converted to wartime production. Because of the teacher shortage, Marie Turner asked Collins to come back to Breathitt County in the late-1940s, though he did not have a teaching degree at the time and had not finished college. Collins later received a degree and continued teaching in the school system, yet his story represents one of many ways mountain schools had to make do.[145]

Breathitt County's educational system on the eve of the 1950s was far from ideal, yet Marie Turner had built a system that exceeded expectations and was recognized as one of the best in eastern Kentucky. Caney Consolidated School, built with WPA funds in the 1930s, was chosen in 1946 by the National Education Association (NEA) to participate in a "survey of progressive schools." Two years later, the completed survey recognized Caney Consolidated and Little Red as examples of "improved instruction" in its study of 82 elementary schools across the nation. In 1947, Turner was even approached by several leaders urging her to run for Superintendent of Public Instruction, the state's highest educational office. Although Turner declined, she continued to lobby for rural educational reform.[146] In the late-1940s, her rise as an educational pioneer coincided with a new chapter in her husband's political career.

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[145] "Education Despite Obstacles is the Breathitt County Way," *The Courier-Journal Magazine*, October 19, 1947, 26; Thomas P. Collins, interview. Collins later received a PhD and was recognized as one of Breathitt County's best educators, yet he also had a tenuous relationship with Marie Turner. The younger Collins described her as a progressive educator "ahead of her time," but also a "mixed bag." According to Collins, his father (also a teacher under both Ervine and Marie) challenged Marie in the 1930s and even managed to unseat some of her school board members, after which he was relocated to a rural school at the far end of the county (see Introduction). Although the younger Collins taught under Turner for nine years, he claimed that she "had a tendency to hold grudges," and his efforts to impress Turner went mostly unnoticed. Even as Turner made strides as an educational pioneer, her political tactics turned many people away.

[146] *JT*, September 26, 1946, January 9, 1947, February 17, 1949.

Ervine Turner's Political Ascent

Ervine Turner had made a name for himself as a two-term state senator during the Depression years. Having her husband in Frankfort was quite convenient for Marie, who could simultaneously keep up with pending educational legislation while prodding her husband to push for favorable school reforms.[147] Ervine chose not to run for reelection in 1941, as President Roosevelt's reelection the previous year was enough to secure Turner a four year position with the Federal Housing Administration. While gaining experience at both the state and federal levels of government, Ervine Turner developed close relationships with powerful Democrats in Kentucky, including U.S. Representative Joe B. Bates from the Eighth Congressional District and Emerson "Doc" Beauchamp, the political boss of Logan County and lieutenant governor under Lawrence Wetherby. Bates and Beauchamp were helpful in arranging for Turner to serve as clerk of the Kentucky Senate for one term in 1948, where he forged other key political alliances.[148]

The most important alliance Ervine Turner generated, however, was with Earle Chester Clements, a Union County native elected governor in 1947 and once called the "man who dragged Kentucky into the twentieth century." Clements and Ervine Turner had been exchanging political favors since the 1930s. After the 1938 election shootout that saw charges levelled against Turner, Clements, then serving as U.S. Representative for the state's second district, arranged for Turner's temporary appointment to a federal agency in Chicago. As governor, when Clements tried to reform Kentucky's 1891

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[147] In some cases, Marie enlisted her teachers to write anonymous "letters of concern" to Ervine, with the hope that he would then support pending educational legislation. For example, Ervine had initially opposed Governor Ruby Laffoon's sales tax in the 1930s. The governor then convinced Marie that a sales tax would bring more funding for Kentucky's underfunded schools. Without telling her husband, Marie persuaded her teachers to write hundreds of letters to Ervine, who then voted for the sales tax bill that ultimately passed. Marie Turner, interview, June 15, 1982.

[148] *C-J*, February 2, 1941, December 20, 1947; Marie R. Turner, interview, October 12, 1982.

constitution and abolish the $5,000 salary limit on state employees, he reportedly asked Ervine Turner for a return favor. On the day before the referendum in 1949, Clements called Turner asking for help in passing the amendment. In conservative Breathitt County, constitutional amendments were usually a tough sell. Turner allegedly told the governor, "Lord Earle, I could make hogs fly before I could get people here to vote for that thing, and you know it." But Clements persisted, and sure enough, the following day the voters of Breathitt County produced a "heartwarming majority" in favor of the amendment. Whether the Turners engaged in any electoral manipulation is unknown (according to John Ed Pearce, there is no doubt that Clements falsified the returns). But the episode showed just how influential the Turners could be when it came to delivering political favors.[149]

The most important political transaction that came from Ervine Turner's association with Clements came in 1948, when the governor appointed Turner to a judgeship for a new judicial district that comprised Breathitt, Wolfe, and Powell counties. It was widely known that the 60-year-old Turner sought a government position that would allow him to work closer to home. A judgeship in his county would also be an effective way of dispensing patronage positions and for influencing local elections. While serving as a state senator, Turner proposed a bill in 1938 that would have created a new judicial district, no doubt with the intent of securing the judgeship for himself. The bill did not pass and in 1945 Turner ran unsuccessfully for the circuit judgeship of the 36th District that comprised Breathitt, Wolfe, and Magoffin counties. During the campaign, Turner's Republican opponent, Walter Prater of Magoffin County, attacked Turner for being a

[149] Pearce, *Divide and Dissent*, 50-51; John Ed Pearce, interview.

political manipulator. In a campaign ad, Prater said, "I am opposed to ticket fixers and slate makers, and if elected, the people will not be used in a primary or general election to defeat any candidate." In the final vote tallies, Turner carried Breathitt and Wolfe County by healthy margins, but lost Magoffin County by a whopping 2,500 votes. Though Magoffin County bordered Breathitt to the northeast, the Turner family never held great political sway in the mostly Republican county, and it cost Ervine Turner the election.[150]

Still determined to secure a judgeship, Turner put his political skills to work. If he could not win an election outright in the district as it currently stood, he would create his own, thus making the removal of Magoffin County of the highest priority. Turner took depositions across the state in order to "show the need" for a new judicial district. As his legal counsel, he enlisted the help of J. Douglas Graham, a native of neighboring Wolfe County who was serving as Breathitt County Attorney at the time. The two became close friends, with Graham later serving as commonwealth's attorney under Turner and assuming the judge's position after his retirement in 1967.[151]

Ervine Turner still had friends in high places after his many years of work with the state legislature. Earle Clements becoming governor in 1947 created a favorable political alignment that put into motion Ervine's plan to lobby for a new judicial district during the 1948 legislative session. Conveniently, Turner served as clerk of the Kentucky Senate at the time and had many Democratic allies that could do his bidding. The legislature proposed a bill that would create the 39th Judicial District and comprise Breathitt, Wolfe, and Powell counties. It was a favorable alignment for Ervine Turner, since heavily

[150] *C-J*, February 9, 1938; *JT*, October 25, November 15, 1945.
[151] J. Douglas Graham, interview by William E. Ellis, September 5, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.

Republican Magoffin County would be traded for Democratic-leaning Powell County. From the onset, this was shrouded in controversy. Even before the proceedings began, those familiar with Turner knew he had his eye on a judgeship and most expected Governor Clements to reward his political ally with an appointment. Understandably, representatives of the districts that would be affected by the proposed realignment were angry and charged that the bill was "another little Munich, where everyone was called in except the people affected by the change." Representatives from Knott and Floyd counties argued that the motivations behind the bill were "selfish" and "only for the personal gain of one man."[152]

Despite heated debate, the act passed and created the 39th Judicial District. Walter Prater and a host of other public officials in counties affected by the redistricting promptly filed a lawsuit against Governor Clements, deeming the act unconstitutional and unnecessary. A Franklin County judge, however, deemed the law constitutional and the decision was later upheld by the Kentucky Court of Appeals. The legislation enabled the governor to appoint a judge and commonwealth's attorney for the new district, and Clements naturally chose his old friend Ervine Turner. J. Douglas Graham became the commonwealth's attorney, cementing an important political alliance between Turner and Graham. Ervine Turner chose his friends wisely and strategically; having an ally from neighboring Wolfe County was crucial if Turner hoped to have success in future elections.[153]

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[152] *C-J*, March 10, 1948. On the evening the bill was passed, the Senate leader asked for a suspension of the rules and immediate adoption of the bill so that Ervine, who was in attendance, could return to Jackson to be with his ailing mother, who passed away the following morning.

[153] *C-J*, March 9, November 6, 1948; *JT*, June 10, 1948. Ervine Turner was not the only member of the Turner family that Earle Clements appointed to judicial posts. After Ervine's brother William, then serving as county judge of Breathitt County, passed away in 1950, Clements appointed his son, William Turner, Jr., to fill his father's position. At only 25 years of age, William Turner, Jr. was the youngest county judge in

Figure 3. Ervine Turner (circa 1930)[154]

Turner's appointment as circuit judge was a clear act of favoritism, yet the new judge was no political puppet either. He had earned a law degree from the University of Kentucky and his quiet and calm disposition uniquely suited him for eastern Kentucky's judicial system. Attorney Alva Hollon of Perry County conceded that Ervine Turner was no "legal scholar," yet he had "common sense" and was never easily rattled. Rarely did the judge lose his temper or raise his voice at anyone. A future ally of the Turner family, A. Dale Bryant, described the judge as a "very gentle man" and "soft-spoken" while on the bench. He allowed members of the audience to whisper to one another and even allowed them to read magazines. To some, it could have appeared that the judge ran his courtroom with little regard for formality. Yet Turner had firm control over his court and, according to Hollon, even attorneys from Lexington and Louisville respected the mountain judge. Beneath the calm and somewhat deceptive façade was a calculating politician who knew how to coordinate and influence others. The contained and self-

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the state of Kentucky at the time. In 1953, he was overwhelmingly elected to an outright term. See, *JT*, April 13, 1950.

[154] Rice, "History of Education in Breathitt County," 85.

controlled judge even had a humorous side that served him well when dealing with difficult situations. When he was cornered on the streets of Jackson after a primary election and confronted for alleged acts of corruption, the judge calmly said, "I'm sorry to hear this, but that doesn't mean we can't be together in the general election." Turner's actions could be cold and ruthless, yet he effectively disguised them with an air of gentility. In the world of Appalachian politics, these traits served him well.[155]

Turner's first political test in his new position came in 1951, when he faced a reelection bid against Grover Cleveland Allen, also of Breathitt County. By this time, Ervine and Marie Turner had cemented their roles as the undisputed political rulers of Breathitt County. At a campaign rally, Allen attacked the Turner family's control of the court system, school system, and highway office, arguing that Turner's reelection would allow for a continuation of their "dictatorship." More damningly, Allen accused the incumbent judge of continuing legal cases in order to gain the political support of the defendant's families and for preventing the indictment of a coal company that had polluted a local creek. Turner countered the accusations by holding true to his record of bringing "roads and schools" to Breathitt County. After the judge finished speaking and Allen rose to make his closing remarks, a majority of the crowd dispersed, with Allen contending that many of those in attendance were teachers and highway employees "summoned" by Ervine Turner in order to create a favorable rally atmosphere.[156]

Allen's accusations against Ervine Turner had merit, particularly since the judge owned coal property in close proximity to the waterway in question. But for all the

[155] Alva Hollon, Sr., interview by William E. Ellis, January 20, 1987, MRT Oral History Project; A. Dale Bryant, interview; John Ed Pearce, interview.
[156] *JT*, August 2, 1951.

controversy surrounding Ervine Turner's appointment and his questionable judicial practices, the voters of the 39th District reelected him with a majority of more than 3,400 votes. Turner carried all but one precinct in the 39th District, while his ally J. Douglas Graham also cruised to an easy victory.[157] The Turners had been accused of election fraud in the past, yet no amount of fraud could overcome a 3,400-vote majority across three counties. Clearly, voters wanted more of the "roads and schools" that Ervine Turner had promised and delivered. He had the political connections needed to get such projects approved, and most voters (especially in Breathitt County) were not willing to give up such benefits. The following year, the Wetherby Administration announced that two new highway districts would be added to boost Kentucky's highway infrastructure, with one being built in Jackson.[158] A district headquarters gave the judge yet another front to dispense patronage jobs and consolidate his political support. To onlookers, Ervine Turner's political ascent seemed complete. He had secured the job he always longed for and built a political coalition that was among the strongest in Kentucky.

The Turner Family in the 1950s

The 1950s in America is generally remembered as a time of prosperity, high employment, and leisure. Postwar optimism abounded as the United States experienced economic growth from science, technology, and consumerism. Nostalgia and sentimentality have partially blinded Americans to some of the decade's ugly realities, yet the 1950s live on in American memory as part of a treasured past. But as the United

[157] *JT*, August 9, 1951.
[158] *C-J*, May 7, 1952. Although there is no evidence to suggest the Turners played a direct role in Governor Wetherby's decision to locate the new highway office in Jackson, it is a likely possibility. The Turners were close allies to Wetherby, who had served as lieutenant governor under Earle Clements. Wetherby later stated that he "treasured" his relationships with county "bosses" like the Turners. Lawrence Wetherby, interview by William E. Ellis, December 5, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.

States economy grew throughout the 1950s, eastern Kentucky and Breathitt County stagnated. The 1950s were times of limited prosperity in the region, a decade when, according to Glen Taul, "Depression returned to Eastern Kentucky with a vengeance" that "paled in severity" to the Great Depression. This economic downturn was generated by four developments: a shift to oil and gas by former customers of coal; increased mechanization of mining; marginalization of the small family farm; and out-migration. Unemployment rates increased, living conditions deteriorated, and access to basic healthcare was nonexistent in some cases.[159]

Breathitt County, never one of the region's top-producing coal counties to begin with, suffered mightily from these developments. A 1947 study on Breathitt County conducted by the University of Kentucky's Agricultural Experiment Station reported a "minimum of management and planning" among local farmers, who continued to express frustrations with their occupation. Seventy-one percent had no farming plans for the coming year and 91 percent had no plans for use of their woodlands. When asked how they would handle any excess money, more than half responded that they would purchase more property. Interestingly, the report also noted "kinship as a factor in leadership" as a contributor to the county's economic stagnation, even describing the "corrupt local administration" and its dispensation of WPA jobs in the 1930s. One informant said, "All the improvements of the last 20 years have been due to the efforts of outsiders who came in and conducted

[159] Glen Edward Taul, "Poverty, Development, and Government in Appalachia: Origins of the Appalachian Regional Commission" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2001), 13.

business and made their homes here." Although the report never explicitly mentioned the Turner family, it suggested greater leadership roles from those outside the county.[160]

By 1950, most county residents were still plowing exhausted soil on rugged hillsides. Most others were employed either in mining, railroads, or manufacturing (usually lumber products), working for a median family income of $818, compared to $2,032 statewide.[161] The number of farms continued to decline and, of the 2,738 farms valued at $32.38 per acre, only 35 had electricity.[162] Of the 4,360 dwellings, more than 2,600 had no running water and just over 2,200 had electricity.[163] Educationally, the statistics ran closer to state averages but still left much to be desired; for persons between the ages of five and 18, the percentage enrolled in school never exceeded 62 percent. Males and females aged 25 or over completed on average 6.2 and 6.3 years of schooling, respectively.[164]

Amidst this economic stagnation, the Turners were uniquely poised to continue their political and educational consolidation because of statewide political developments. Kentucky's declining population in the 1940s meant that the state would lose one congressional district, bringing the total from nine to eight. Since the 1930s, Breathitt County had been a member of the eighth district, represented by Democrats Fred Vinson until 1938 and Joe B. Bates until 1953. Ervine Turner had developed a cordial relationship with Bates over the years, yet Breathitt County remained on the periphery of

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[160] Howard W. Beers and Catherine P. Heflin, "People and Resources in Eastern Kentucky: A Study of a Representative Area in Breathitt, Knott, and Perry Counties" (Lexington, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Kentucky, 1947), 46-50.
[161] *1950 United States Federal Census*, Population, Volume II, Characteristics of the Population, 17-42, 17-95, 17-116.
[162] *1950 United States Federal Census*, Agriculture, Volume I, Counties and State Economic Areas, Part 19, 59, 80, 165.
[163] *1950 United States Federal Census*, Housing, Volume I, General Characteristics, 17-42, 17-50.
[164] *1950 United States Federal Census*, Population, Volume II, Characteristics of the Population, 17-87.

the district and Bates, who resided in Greenup, seemed a world away. This changed in 1952 when the state legislature passed a redistricting bill that eliminated Bates's district and moved Breathitt County to the new seventh district that extended from Pike County in the east to Lee County in the west.[165] It was a geography much more familiar to the Turner family and, more importantly, the district had been represented by Carl D. Perkins since 1949. Perkins, a native of neighboring Knott County and fellow New Deal Democrat, became undoubtedly the Turner family's most important political ally throughout their many decades in power.

Ideologically, Perkins was the New Deal Democrat that the Turner family wanted and needed. According to Robert Weise, Perkins "inherited the political economy of the New Deal, especially its endowment of the federal government to provide relief, regulate markets, build infrastructure, and stimulate employment, through industrial subsidy if necessary."[166] In a letter to President Eisenhower in 1953, Perkins noted that four out of ten industrial workers were unemployed in Breathitt and its surrounding counties. He called for a "major public works program" that, like past New Deal programs, would promote construction of federal buildings, schools, and impose measures for soil and water conservation and flood prevention.[167] Unsurprisingly, Perkins later earned a reputation for his unwavering support of the War on Poverty, particularly its support for education.

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[165] *C-J*, February 26, 1952. This redistricting plan, ultimately signed by Governor Lawrence Wetherby, was also advantageous to Democrats, who were almost guaranteed six of the eight new congressional seats.
[166] Robert S. Weise, "A New Deal in the Cold War: Carl D. Perkins, Coal, and the Political Economy of Poverty in Eastern Kentucky, 1948-1964," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (Summer 2009): 310.
[167] *JT*, May 13, 1954.

Like Marie Turner, the congressman was deeply concerned with and invested in eastern Kentucky's education system. He served as a member of the House Committee on Education and Labor, which gave Marie Turner the highest of platforms to voice her concerns over rural education. As with most political patronage structures, there existed a reciprocal relationship between Perkins and the Turner family. Perkins provided the Turner family exclusive access into Washington political circles in exchange for continued support in Breathitt County, which could be counted on to deliver a strong election majority for Perkins every two years. According to former Knott County superintendent of schools Beckham Combs, Perkins always felt like he owed Marie Turner, who could always count on the congressman to deliver. It was an extraordinary political partnership that lasted for more than three decades.[168]

A more conservative political climate in the 1950s, however, forced New Deal Democrats like Perkins and Turner to pursue economic reform through ad hoc efforts, as systematic approaches to regional development would not materialize until the 1960s.[169] President Eisenhower, the only Republican to occupy the White House between 1933 and 1969, provided little in the way of federal assistance for rural poverty programs. In fact, the Eisenhower years were the only ones in which Marie Turner was not invited to the White House.[170] Furthermore, Happy Chandler won a second term as governor in 1955. As members of the rival Democratic faction under Earle Clements (now headed by Lawrence Wetherby and Bert Combs after Clements took a U.S. Senate position in 1950),

[168] Beckham Combs, interview by William E. Ellis, October 11, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.
[169] Weise, 335.
[170] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982. Though Turner did not find a political ally in President Eisenhower, she did secure an invitation to Washington from his Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, who invited her to Washington in 1953 to testify on ways of improving the National School Lunch Act in rural areas. See, *JT*, August 27, 1953.

the Turners expected fewer political favors from Frankfort. Finally, Earle Clements's loss to Republican Thruston Morton for the U.S. Senate in 1956, coupled with the death of senator Alben Barkley and the election of Republican John Sherman Cooper that same year, deprived the Turners of Democratic allies in the nation's highest legislative chamber. Kentuckians would not send another Democratic senator to Washington until the 1970s. Despite these challenges, Marie Turner worked closely with Carl Perkins throughout the 1950s to improve her school system. Having Ervine Turner residing in Breathitt County as a circuit judge helped solidify the Turner family's influence. The Turner children also emerged onto the local political scene in the 1950s, supplying their parents with additional resources to maintain an efficient political machine.

A partnership with Carl Perkins gave Marie Turner exclusive access into Washington political circles, but the 1950s were by no means Marie Turner's first foray onto the national circuit. As early as the 1930s, she had traveled across the country lobbying for rural educational and health reforms. As recently as 1948, a *Courier-Journal* article that also appeared in *The New York Times* reported on Turner appearing before the National Education Association in Cleveland to report on the appalling conditions of rural schools in her county, some of which had as many as 126 students in rooms built for 40. Three or four students occupied one seat, and some teachers allowed half the class to enjoy recess outside while the other half received instruction. Turner had managed to hire 15 new teachers that year, but they only received an annual salary of $920 and, with limited resources, only elementary reading and writing were possible under the circumstances. One young teacher reassured Turner she could manage so many children, yet the superintendent concluded, "I'm not convinced she can do much more than be a glorified

babysitter." In fact, most teachers quit their jobs after learning how many students they would be supervising, often leaving for higher paying jobs in other states.[171]

The following year, Turner and Pike County superintendent Claude Farley appeared before the House Committee on Education and Labor to lobby for the Public School Assistance Act of 1949. Turner made a forceful plea for the equality of opportunity in education, saying, "The children of no region in our broad land should be handicapped in educational opportunities because they happen to be born in the wrong locality." She painted a grim portrait of Breathitt County, where farmers worked for a subsistence living on unsuitable land. An inadequate tax base generated little more than $25,000 for a school system with nearly 6,200 boys and girls. Of the 90 elementary schools, only four had electricity and none had indoor plumbing. Turner also made a passionate plea for greater access to healthcare. At that time, Breathitt County had no hospital, one dentist, and three physicians to look after 23,000 people. Turner provided a wealth of statistics on buildings and equipment, yet the real power of her testimony came from her focus on people. Approximately 60 percent of the high school's graduating classes from 1940 to 1943 had left the state, a clear sign that the educational and economic systems in eastern Kentucky were not working.[172]

These valuable experiences, coupled with having Carl Perkins at her side, encouraged Marie Turner to make even more forceful demands for state and federal action. In the 1950s, she frequently appeared before congressional committees as a spokeswoman for

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[171] *C-J*, July 6, 1948; *JT*, July 8, 1948; According to Millard Tolliver, the principal of Breathitt County High School beginning in 1954 who frequently accompanied Turner to national conferences, she was on a "first-name basis" with leading educational reformers at the NEA. Millard and Ruth Tolliver, interview by William E. Ellis, October 10, 1986, MRT Oral History Project.

[172] *Public School Assistance Act of 1949: Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1949), 193-196.

the plight of rural schools. Following her 1948 speech in Cleveland, a top official at the NEA recognized her as "one of the nation's outstanding County-school superintendents" and recommended her to testify once more before the Committee on Labor and Education. In April 1952, she claimed that inadequate funding for rural schools had contributed to an "erosion of youth." Using the metaphoric language that Harry Caudill would later employ, Turner compared the erosion of land due to the deleterious effects of strip mining and deforestation to the erosion of young people's minds. She then provided a slew of alarming statistics. Each year, approximately 1,000 students would enroll in the first grade in Breathitt County, yet fewer than 100 would graduate from high school. Of the 87 elementary schools, 59 were frame buildings that dated back to 1900, and Turner estimated that approximately $2 million could be spent on maintaining and updating school buildings. Crowding in the first two grades meant students did not receive adequate attention, forcing most to drop out. As a result, illiteracy was rampant among both children and adults, with a recent report suggesting that 150 out of 413 were illiterate. Turner's testimony won her praise from the committee members, including a representative from West Virginia who commented, "I only regret that you couldn't talk to the entire membership of Congress." [173]

Breathitt County had come a long way since the days of "Bloody Breathitt," yet there were lingering signs that the battle had not been completely won. The "erosion of youth" that Marie Turner described seemed to have a reciprocal effect on juvenile delinquency. In testimony given before the Committee on Education and Labor in 1955, Turner questioned whether students in crowded classrooms would be motivated to put forth their

[173] *C-J*, April 11, 1952; *JT*, April 17, 1952.

best efforts. She asked, "Does the teacher have time to give him that loving pat that he needs so badly? Will she have time to make him feel important?" To support her argument, she pointed out that 535 students had dropped out of school in the past year, and countless young men had been refused by draft boards because of illiteracy. According to Turner, this rejection "destroys their faith in themselves" and could lead them down a path of delinquency.[174] These comments made clear that, even into the 1950s, Turner was determined to avoid any unnecessary connections between Breathitt County and violence.

From these comments, we also see a brief glimpse into Marie Turner's nurturing and motherly side. She was a highly visible public figure throughout most of her life, yet remained a mother to three children. Treva Turner Howell and John Raymond Turner followed in their parents' footsteps and later became prominent community leaders, but the family also dealt with the tragic case of Marie and Ervine's eldest child, Lois, who was born with a permanent spinal injury. For her entire life, Lois was confined to the home and lived with her parents, who refused any other living arrangements for their daughter. Ervine and Marie even took Lois to the Mayo Clinic in search of a cure, only to learn that nothing could be done. When Marie's mother passed away in 1960, the family hired a caretaker until Lois's death at the remarkable age of 53. Understandably, Lois's case was difficult for the family, with one fellow educator calling it "one of the real tragedies of Marie's life." But even her political adversaries, including rival banker J. Phil Smith, described Marie as a dedicated mother. After his first visit to the Turner home, attorney Alva Hollon said that he finally saw the family as "human." The Turners

[174] *C-J*, May 6, 1955.

were the most powerful family in the county, yet they were not devoid of the tragedies that do not discriminate against the wealthy and powerful. Marie Turner's maternal instincts naturally translated to her mission as an educator, which might explain her lifelong motivation to uplift young people.[175]

For the most part, Turner's calls for comprehensive educational reform in the 1950s fell on deaf ears. Postwar optimism reached something of a high point as the American economy experienced the "biggest boom yet." Meanwhile, the Eisenhower administration expressed little interest in social welfare programs that would combat rural poverty.[176] The "rediscovery" of Appalachia would not come until the early-1960s and rural reformers struggled to bring widespread attention to the impoverished region. Breathitt County's population continued to decline and with it the number of qualified teachers who, according to Marie Turner, left for "richer fields." There were, however, a few important developments in the 1950s that improved the quality of education in Breathitt County. Turner continued to consolidate rural schools and expand curriculum, particularly at the high school, and sought out the best educators and administrators she could find. When she hired Millard Tolliver as principal of Breathitt County High School in 1954, she also hired his wife Ruth, a music teacher who quickly started boys' and girls' choruses. Soon thereafter, the choirs regularly achieved superior ratings at regional competitions. Under Tolliver's leadership, the high school's enrollment continued to

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[175] Marie R. Turner, interview, June 15, 1982; Thomas P. Collins, interview; J. Phil Smith, interview; Alva A. Hollon, Sr., interview Adron Doran, interview. From these accounts, the Turners were loving and devoted parents. Doran noted that Ervine Turner was particularly close to Lois. In the 1930s, he purchased a small beach cottage in Florida, where he frequently took his daughter for vacation. However, later developments cast doubt on the family's harmonious relations. After Ervine's death in 1968, serious political divisions existed between the Turner children and their mother, a source of great anguish for the aging matriarch. See Chapter 5.

[176] James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 270-272, 311-342.

grow, reaching a record high of 850 students and 125 seniors for the 1955-56 school year.[177]

Additionally, the bookmobile program had grown considerably from the days of packhorse librarians. Breathitt County's bookmobile regularly traversed the county, delivering texts to rural homes that frequently had no other reading material apart from an old family Bible. Marie Turner delivered 24 sets of the Encyclopedia *Britannica* to one rural school accessible only by mule, where she reported that the bookmobile had increased reading in that community by 90 percent.[178] The county received its second bookmobile in 1954, when Governor Wetherby presented Marie Turner with the keys to the new vehicle at the Kentucky State Fairgrounds in Louisville. Whereas most rural counties were lucky to secure one bookmobile, Marie Turner's drive and political connections secured two for Breathitt County. Even Marie Turner's children became involved in the successful program. Treva Turner had served as a page under her father during his time in the Kentucky Senate, had since married prominent local businessman Jeff Davis Howell, and had been recently appointed assistant superintendent by her mother, a clear act of nepotism and a sign that Marie wanted Treva to continue the family's legacy. In her capacity as assistant superintendent, Howell frequently drove a bookmobile across the county. Like her mother, Treva Howell was aware of a "scholastic backslide" in Breathitt County, but noticed improvement on her routine trips throughout the county because of the bookmobile. In less than one school year, she reported that a

[177] *JT*, July 28, 1955; Millard and Ruth Tolliver, interview; When the Tollivers first came to Breathitt County, Marie Turner expressed great interest in expanding the school's music program. Turner reportedly took Ruth to a wholesaler in Louisville and gave her a blank check to purchase new music equipment for the high school. In his first few years as principal, Millard Tolliver also oversaw construction of new classrooms to accommodate a growing student population.
[178] *C-J*, November 1, 1953; *JT*, September 9, 1954.

lagging student managed to catch up on coursework, completed the second grade as an "average pupil," and by the summer demanded fourth grade level reading material from the bookmobile.[179]

Just as they had in the 1930s, Breathitt County's residents eagerly sought new reading material. The bookmobile even served adults, with religious material being among the most popular. One reader said, "My Bible has taken on a whole new meaning. I didn't know there were so many fine books written on Old Testament characters." But with only two bookmobiles to traverse the large county, funding was still an issue. In 1955, Marie Turner again appeared before a congressional committee to lobby for the Library Service Bill, which funded rural library services across the country, including the Kentucky bookmobiles. This time, she was in distinguished company, accompanied by Louisville businessman Harry Schacter, who had formed the Committee for Kentucky in 1943, and Mary Bingham, a member of the influential Louisville family and chairman of the Kentucky Bookmobile Project.[180]

At the committee hearing, Turner faced pushback from congressmen who feared that the library assistance program would become a permanent federal function. The superintendent agreed that federal assistance could "probably be dropped after five years," after which responsibilities would fall to state governments. She commented on the "appetite of rural youngsters for new experiences and imaginary travels into the

[179] *C-J*, July 2, 1954.
[180] *JT*, October 4, 1956; *C-J*, May 29, 1955. On the state level, serious efforts were made in the 1950s to expand library services across Kentucky. In 1952, Kentucky author Jesse Stuart noted that 80 percent of rural Kentuckians had no library services and 46 counties had no libraries. He enlisted Schacter and Bingham, who worked to collect private donations using tactics similar to the Packhorse Library Program in the 1930s. By 1954, 14 public libraries had been established across the state and by 1955, the percentage of rural residents with no access to library services fell from 90 percent to 10 percent. See, Boyd, "The WPA Packhorse Library Program," 184-185.

reading world," adding that some students had read as many as 117 books from the bookmobile in the past year. Despite "vigorous opposition" from the Eisenhower Administration, the committee voted for the bill, which provided $750 million for rural-library services.[181] Once again, Marie Turner displayed her persuasive skills before the nation's highest legislative body. The federal allotment allowed bookmobile services to continue and, when federal funding expired in 1960, Kentucky had just elected as governor one of the state's most ardent supporters of education in Bert T. Combs.

Political Crises in the 1950s

Despite Ervine and Marie Turner's successes in political and educational consolidation, a series of political crises in the late-1950s tested the strength of the Turner machine. For more than 20 years, the family had maintained an effective Democratic coalition that regularly turned out majorities for their candidate of choice. They had faced political challenges, the most upsetting having been Ervine Turner's defeat in the circuit judge race of 1945, but the family could always rely on their connections in Frankfort and Washington. This changed in the late-1950s, when Kentucky politics took a conservative turn and the Turners faced growing opposition to their hegemony. These challenges were not enough to break the family's hold on power, but they did show that state and national politics had evolved since the Great Depression.

Throughout the 1950s, the Turners were increasingly connected with corruption cases involving high-ranking state officials. In the 1952 general election, Republican campaign director and future U.S. Senator Thruston Morton received reports of "voting irregularities" in Breathitt County, where Republican challengers were "roughed up a

[181] *C-J*, May 29, July 27, 1955.

little." Senator-elect John Sherman Cooper received similar reports of irregularities and promised to prosecute those involved, though Ervine Turner said he knew of no irregularities and no charges were ever filed.[182] The following year, Jackson mayor Charles Davis petitioned for a recount of the Democratic primary results after he was defeated by Turner-backed candidate J. Everett Bach in the race for the 34th District state senate seat, Ervine Turner's old position. Davis charged Governor Lawrence Wetherby's administration, of which the Turners were allies, of using "patronage power, jobs, and influence" in support of Bach. Among the allegations were claims of a slush fund furnished by the Wetherby administration as well as "whisky use" to buy votes in Morgan County precincts. Mayor Davis also alleged that Wetherby influenced state highway department officials in Breathitt County to support Bach. Meanwhile, Marie Turner denied that she had fired two of her school employees because they would not support Bach.[183] Although later interviewees acknowledged that Marie Turner frequently punished or fired teachers for not supporting political candidates, no evidence emerged to

[182] *C-J*, November 6, 1952.

[183] *C-J*, August 17, 1953. Though nothing came of the accusations against Wetherby, the governor was not immune to accusations of corruption. In the 1951 gubernatorial race, Wetherby's Republican challenger Eugene Siler ran on a platform of challenging corruption in Frankfort, which Siler termed "our Nineveh on the Kentucky River." Siler accused the "Clements-Wetherby-Beauchamp political machine" of having its "hands in the pockets of all the highway employees in Kentucky." Siler also accused Wetherby, a native of Louisville, of being a pawn in the city's machine headed by Lennie McLaughlin. Given such accusations, Charles Davis's claims against Wetherby in the 34th District state senate race were not without precedent. However, Wetherby pledged to fight government corruption and in 1952 helped pass the Registration and Purgation Act to "restore confidence in the integrity of the ballot and the appropriation of funds to purchase voting machines." He prided himself on the "qualified and professional people he brought to state government" and no serious scandals arose during his time in office. See, John Kleber, "As Luck Would Have It: An Overview of Lawrence W. Wetherby as Governor, 1950-1955," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* Vol. 84, No. 4 (Autumn 1986): 406-407, and, John E. Kleber, "Lawrence W. Wetherby," in *Kentucky's Governors*, Lowell Harrison, ed., 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 191-195.

support Davis's allegations and a special judge later dismissed the suit after Ervine Turner recused himself from the proceedings.[184]

Another source of distress for the Turners came in 1955 with Happy Chandler's election to a second term as governor. During his first term in the 1930s, the fiscal conservative did not engage in the lavish relief and welfare spending that the Turners wanted. If the Turners needed federal funds for public works project, they circumvented state government and went straight to Washington. But with Eisenhower in office, funding for federal welfare and public assistance programs was limited, so the Turners did everything they could to prevent Chandler from winning a second term. In the Democratic primary, Chandler faced mountain judge Bert Combs, who had earned the support of Ervine Turner after visiting his courtroom in Breathitt County.[185] Having a governor from the mountains, coupled with Combs's more progressive views on public spending (particularly on road construction and education), was appealing to the Turner family. Ervine Turner even ran a campaign ad that extolled the virtues of having a progressive Democrat in the governor's mansion. Under the Chandler, Keen Johnson, and Simeon Willis administrations from 1935 to 1947, a total of 24 miles of roads were built in Breathitt County. This "total black out" compared with the 103 miles of highways (plus 12 miles of rural roads) that had been built under the Clements and Wetherby administrations from 1947 to 1955. For Ervine Turner, a vote for Bert Combs was a vote

[184] David Watts, interview. Watts later left the Breathitt County school system after Marie Turner asked him to contribute to her son John Raymond's state senate campaign; *C-J*, September 6, 1953.
[185] Bert T. Combs, interview. Apparently, the two even joked over the 1938 election shootout between Chandler and Barkley factions that resulted in Ervine Turner leaving Breathitt County for a position in Chicago. The two Combs brothers that headed Chandler's campaign in Breathitt County were distant relatives of the aspiring governor.

for more roads and schools, which was the foundation of the Turner family's claim to political legitimacy.[186]

Factionalism among Kentucky Democrats, however, existed in Breathitt County as well. By the 1950s, the Turner family's political adversaries had grown more aggressive. Among the strongest was Sheriff Carl Back, who headed Happy Chandler's campaign in the county. Ervine Turner and Back had been factional foes for years, with Back eking out a five-vote victory against Grover Anderson (a Turner ally and chair of the Breathitt County School Board) in the 1953 sheriff's race.[187] Chandler had never been popular in Breathitt County, where he badly lost the 1935 Democratic primary to Thomas Rhea. But on the state level, Bert Combs faced an uphill battle. The young judge was, according to John Ed Pearce, "sincere and likable but rather colorless" when compared to the "flamboyant tactics and histrionics" of Chandler, who had a knack for making sensationalist and baseless claims. Conversely, Combs ran a campaign grounded in truth, honesty, and the issues, even hinting that a tax raise might be necessary to fund his ambitious plans. It was an ill-advised move. For Pearce, "Honesty may be the best policy, but in Kentucky political campaigns it is often poor strategy." Though Combs carried Breathitt County by more than 1,200 votes in the primary (a testament to the Turner family's political dominance), Chandler won the statewide race and cruised to an easy victory in the general election.[188]

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[186] *JT*, April 28, 1955.
[187] This was the race where Ervine Turner allegedly told David Watts, "There are so many votes you can influence and so many you have to buy." Apparently, the Turner faction did not have enough money to "buy all that they needed." When Watts refused to participate because of moral objections, Ervine reportedly respected the decision. David Watts, interview.
[188] Pearce, *Divide and Dissent*, 55-65; *JT*, August 27, 1953 and August 11, 1955.

Conflict between Ervine Turner and Carl Back's Democratic factions continued into the election season of 1956, when Senator Earle Clements faced reelection. Naturally, Ervine Turner headed the county campaign for his longtime friend, but Clements's challenger Joe B. Bates (who had represented Breathitt County for years when it was part of the Eighth Congressional District) had his campaign in the county headed by Carl Back. The factionalism also affected that year's presidential race. When the two factions met at the Breathitt County courthouse in July, they could not agree on a delegation to send to the state Democratic convention. Each faction elected their own delegates and sent them to the convention in Louisville, where Chandler recognized his ally Carl Back's faction as the official Breathitt County delegation. Back was then selected as a delegate to attend the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The sleight of hand no doubt infuriated Ervine and Marie Turner, who had been mainstays at national Democratic conventions since the days of Franklin Roosevelt.[189]

Later that year, Carl Back took aim at the Breathitt County school board and endorsed three candidates who were running against Marie Turner's incumbent members. For Turner, maintaining a favorable balance of power on the school board was a political necessity if she hoped to get reelected every four years. Lyman Ginger, who served as Superintendent of Instruction for Kentucky in the 1970s, saw many good superintendents lose their jobs because of political opponents that successfully elected their own school board members. In the 1956 races in Breathitt County, Carl Back's candidates accused Turner of collecting a one dollar "bus fee" from each student, a hefty burden for some of the county's most impoverished families. Turner countered by stressing that the bus fee

[189] *JT*, July 5, 1956.

was for insurance, adding that each child was insured for $5,000, even though not all students had access to the bus. The school board also brought suit against Back, alleging that as sheriff he had withheld more than $10,000 from the school board in sorely needed tax revenue. Turner stated, "Friends, Breathitt County is a poor county. Our schools are not equipped to provide all the service our children deserve." The three incumbent board members won handily in November, but the election showed the fragility of Marie Turner's job security. One political mishap could spell disaster.[190]

Despite the school board victories, Happy Chandler's second term as governor did not help the Turner family and their system of patronage politics. In December of 1956, Chandler's administration announced that the District 10 highway office created in Jackson under Lawrence Wetherby would be removed, along with offices in Madisonville and Louisville.[191] This move denied the Turners control over hundreds of patronage positions and only strengthened Ervine Turner's dislike of the governor. The judge impatiently awaited the next election and in 1959 heartily endorsed Bert Combs in his second bid for the Democratic nomination, this time against Chandler's hand-picked successor Harry Lee Waterfield. The primary was just as bitter as the previous, with Chandler vigorously campaigning for his lieutenant governor. But this time around, Combs successfully targeted Chandler's record and reputation, most notably the "crippled goose incident," when the governor fired at a flock of geese before his allotted time and was fined. At Waterfield rallies, Combs supporters sounded duck and geese calls and later brought along ducks with signs that read, "Happy Killed My Pappy." Chandler also came under fire for allegedly placing funds from a 2 percent assessment on

[190] Lyman Ginger, interview; *JT*, October 18, 25, and November 1, 8, 1956.
[191] *JT*, December 20, 1956.

state employees' paychecks in a Cuban bank. After Fidel Castro took power that same year and allegedly pocketed the funds, the Combs campaign released an unflattering painting of Chandler looking out from a Florida beach, pleading, "Castro! Castro! Send back my 2 percent!"[192] But Combs had grown as a candidate from the last election. He had the help of Earle Clements and political mastermind Ed Prichard running his campaign. When asked if he would raise taxes, Combs gave a straightforward answer and did not rule out the possibility. His frankness appealed to Kentucky voters.[193]

In Breathitt County, Ervine Turner's factional foe Carl Back unsurprisingly endorsed Waterfield. At a Waterfield campaign event in Breathitt County that featured a speech by Chandler, the festivities were interrupted by a wild goose running through the courthouse and wearing a sticker that endorsed Bert T. Combs for governor, undoubtedly a response to Chandler's crippled goose incident. The Turner children also became involved in the race, with Treva Howell heading a Breathitt County Democratic Woman's Club that featured the largest membership in the Seventh Congressional District. But Combs was never in real danger of losing Breathitt County. He was a native eastern Kentuckian, and his promises to promote coal, reforestation, tourism, and education resonated with mountain constituents. Having the backing of the Turner machine only cushioned his margins. He carried Breathitt County by more than 3,000 votes, defeated Waterfield by a

[192] Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 407.
[193] Tracy Campbell, *Short of the Glory: The Fall and Redemption of Edward F. Prichard, Jr.* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 204. Prichard has been recognized as one of the most brilliant political minds in modern Kentucky history. The Bourbon County native attended Princeton, Harvard Law School, and later served as a trusted member of Franklin Roosevelt's brain trust. He was indicted in 1948 for stuffing a ballot box in his native county, a move that all but ended his high political hopes. After being pardoned by President Truman, Prichard once again climbed the political ladder and became one of Bert Combs's most trusted advisors. As a New Deal liberal, he was a member of the same political circles as Earle Clements, Carl Perkins, and Ervine and Marie Turner. In the 1960s and 1970s, Prichard represented several members of the Turner family as they faced legal troubles over War on Poverty programs and election fraud. See Chapter 5.

healthy margin in the statewide race, and cruised to victory in November. In the election's aftermath, "Chandler somehow interpreted the loss as 'overwhelming approval of what we have given the people.'" Combs's victory was a breath of relief for the Turner family, who finally had an ally in Frankfort after a series of crushing defeats.[194]

Conclusion

Like other decades that the Turner family held power, the 1940s and 1950s were a study in contrasts. Improvements in "roads and schools" coincided with political frustrations. But the numerous corruption allegations made against the Turners never posed a serious threat to their hold on power. Dozens of allegations were made over the years, and there is little doubt that the family indirectly and directly engaged in nefarious activities, yet the Turners were always careful in executing their plans. Ervine and Marie Turner were politically competent and rarely acted out of rashness or impulse. Even Bert Combs, who admitted that the Turners were not above stuffing a ballot box or running a chain ballot, said the family "always did their homework" and were "never caught out on a limb."[195] Ervine and Marie Turner may not have been the most educated individuals in their positions as judge and superintendent, but they compensated with the ability to gauge the county's political and social climate. They were attuned to the needs of the county, knew how to effectively mobilize large groups of people, and spoke the language of Breathitt County's people. The Turners proved adept at playing the game of mountain politics and, for better or worse, managed to outlast other political machines that crumbled around them.

[194] Ibid; *JT*, April 30, June 4, October 8, November 5, 1959.
[195] Bert T. Combs, interview.

If anything, the Turner family only gained momentum as the 1950s wore on. After testifying before the House Committee on Education and Labor yet again in 1958, Marie Turner garnered praise from national leaders. Again, the power of Turner's testimony lay in her emotional and personal anecdotes. She was a talented storyteller and this time showed the committeemen photographs of promising students who needed financial aid to attend college. One student was Don Cundiff, the son of a dirt farmer and basketball star who had offers from more than 30 schools but could not afford tuition. In her testimony before the committee, Turner reasoned that the federal government had created agencies to conserve wildlife, forests, and water, yet there was no such government agency for the conservation of brains. More than two decades before a federal Department of Education existed, Marie Turner made demands for such an agency. Representative Carl Elliott of Alabama commented that Turner's testimony was "about the best we've had" out of nearly 200 witnesses.[196] The soft-spoken superintendent from eastern Kentucky was, in many ways, ahead of her time. Luckily for the Turners, the so-called "liberal hour" was just on the horizon.

[196] *C-J*, March 29, 1958.

CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL LIBERALISM IN ACTION, 1959-1964

"We build into this new road a basic foundation for total development action for our region and for new opportunities for our people." -*Governor Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt at the groundbreaking ceremony of KY 15*

By the late-1950s, the Turner family was regularly making headlines across Kentucky. A 1959 *Courier-Journal* article entitled "The Light Burns Late In the Office Of Marie Turner, Breathitt County's Famed Superintendent of Schools" portrayed a women who had devoted her life to the common good. Turner said, "If I had a penny for every mile I have spent on a horse, I would be able to buy a Bluegrass farm." The article recounted her humble beginnings as a 17-year-old educator, her inheritance of a struggling school system during the Great Depression, and her dedication of a new high school in 1938 with the help of the First Lady. Among her proudest accomplishments was the introduction of new subjects into the school system such as home economics, agriculture, music, and art. In 1958, she was named the "outstanding citizen of the year" in Breathitt County. The article celebrated Marie Turner as an excellent educator and an "able" politician, though it made no reference to the political controversies that surrounded the superintendent and her family. But the article, published in Kentucky's most prominent newspaper, left little doubt that Marie Turner was a household name in educational and political circles by 1960.[197]

After more than three decades of playing politics, the Turners showed few signs of slowing down. In fact, the 1960s proved to be some of the family's busiest. The decade

[197] *C-J*, September 27, 1959.

would see the Turner children enter local and regional politics, expanding the family's power base while also opening the possibility of passing the family legacy to a younger generation. By the 1960s, the Turners had consolidated political power in similar ways that Marie had consolidated rural schoolhouses throughout her career, but there was a key difference. Whereas consolidated schools represented modern, more efficient ways of administering education, family political machines were becoming archaic relics of the past. Indeed, a *Courier-Journal* photo from 1960 referred to Marie Turner as a "belle of rural education," evoking an outdated and romanticized archetype of times long-forgotten.[198]

But even as other political machines around Kentucky toppled, the Turner machine stood strong throughout the 1960s. The War on Poverty's launch in 1964 brought national attention to eastern Kentucky, yet Breathitt County had already seen increased government activity in the preceding years. Political culture on both the state and national levels in the early-1960s enabled the Turners, particularly Marie, to make one final push for wholesale reform. The election of Bert T. Combs as governor in 1959 seemed promising. The mountain lawyer from Clay County was deeply concerned with the ills of eastern Kentucky and launched some of the most ambitious infrastructural and educational reforms in Kentucky history. Concurrently, the ascension of John F. Kennedy to the White House in 1961 and his devotion to uplifting Appalachia served as a prelude to President Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty. Beginning with the Combs Administration, increased state and federal spending gave the Turners an opportunity to

[198] *C-J*, October 13, 1960.

exercise one of their hallmark strategies: using political connections to direct government relief dollars into Breathitt County.

Breathitt County in 1960

As in previous decades, the outlook for eastern Kentucky and Breathitt County looked grim in 1960. Once again, the county's population fell, this time by more than 20 percent from 19,964 to 15,490. The 1960 census listed 2,476 male and female employees, with 503 employed in agriculture and 1,973 in nonagricultural industries, mainly in mining, construction, and small-scale manufacturing. A total of 267 were unemployed and the median family income was $1,432, among the lowest in the state and surpassing only that of neighboring Owsley County.[199] Education was improving, but at a slow rate; the census revealed that eastern Kentucky had a 24 percent illiteracy rate among the adult population.[200]

Time was ripe for change and by the late-1950s, various government and private agencies were at work in addressing the so-called "Appalachian problem." The Eastern Kentucky Regional Planning Commission, started in the aftermath of the devastating 1957 floods, had by 1959 drafted a plan for economic revitalization known as *Program 60*. Headed by John Whisman, a New Deal liberal and chairman of the Kentucky Junior Chamber of Commerce (or Jaycees), *Program 60* emphasized highway construction, flood control, and tourism development, ideally planned and coordinated through public and private resources at the local, state, and national levels. Citing economic development as the driving force of the program, Whisman stated, "The principal nature

[199] *1960 United States Federal Census*, Population, Volume I, Characteristics of the Population, 19-227, 19-237, 19-247.
[200] Caudill, *Watches of the Night*, 206.

of the region's problems lies in the fact that Eastern Kentucky is underdeveloped, but not underpopulated."[201]

Harry Caudill, who would gain national attention for his 1963 book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, subscribed to Whisman's idea that eastern Kentucky lagged behind the rest of the nation due to economic underdevelopment and industrial exploitation. Outside investors had plundered eastern Kentucky's vast timber and coal resources beginning in the late-nineteenth century. Absentee landowners made enormous profits, took the profits with them, and left the locals dependent and mired in poverty. For those who glorified coal as the lifeblood of Appalachia, Caudill argued that the mineral "has always cursed the land in which it lies" for being an "extractive industry that takes away and restores nothing." Political scientist Douglas Arnett expounded upon Caudill's "internal colonialism model" by highlighting how absentee ownership and exploitation had rendered eastern Kentucky a "dependent area—an area whose development occurs as a reflex of the expansion of a dominant area and is geared toward the needs of the dominant area." In short, the resources of eastern Kentucky had been drained to meet the needs of northern and midwestern capitalists, resulting in the outward flow of wealth and leaving behind little capital to reinvest in local development. For Arnett, understanding the roots of Appalachian underdevelopment meant understanding the region's economic infrastructure.[202]

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[201] Taul, "Poverty, Development, and Government in Appalachia," 90-128; *JT*, February 18, 1960; David Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power, and Planning in Appalachia* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994, originally published 1980), 130.
[202] Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, x; Douglas O'Neil Arnett, "Eastern Kentucky: The Politics of Dependency and Underdevelopment" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1978), 7-8.

Caudill additionally identified corrupt county politicians as causes of the region's plight. During the 1960 General Assembly, the House Investigating Committee on Education, of which Caudill was a member, issued a scathing report on Kentucky education. The report declared, "A great deal is wrong with school administration at the local level in much of Kentucky," particularly the intrusion of politics in school affairs. Caudill denounced the "self-serving paragons of mediocrity who can twist to their ungodly advantage the best laws ever written," including the 212 school superintendents in Kentucky. More glaringly, the report claimed, "Many teachers have written to this committee about matters pertinent to its inquiry, but in most instances the writer was unwilling to sign his name, explaining that to do so would cause him to be fired or transferred to a remote and inconvenient teaching assignment."[203] With this stroke of the brush, Caudill seemed to directly implicate Marie Turner, who by this time was notorious for relocating teachers who did not comply with her political wishes to far-flung reaches of Breathitt County.

In his groundbreaking book two years later, Caudill again characterized the region's school system as "hopelessly bogged in politics."[204] For Marie Turner, who had always believed that politics was essential for educational reform, Caudill provided resounding evidence that this approach was not working. Marie Turner spent her lifetime branding herself as an educational reformer, but activists like Harry Caudill by the 1960s preached a very different kind of reform that explicitly targeted the Turner brand of politics. Caudill exposed the internal workings of county politics that most bosses had been able to keep secret for many years. The reform impulse, therefore, was a mixed blessing for

[203] Quoted in Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 291.
[204] Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, 336.

the Turners. They continued using their political connections to secure significant funding for roads and schools in Breathitt County, but such efforts also invited closer scrutiny from opponents determined to curb the power of county machines. In the meantime, however, the Turners managed to weather the storm by allying themselves with a new brand of political liberalism that swept the state and the nation in the 1960s.

The Benefits of Political Liberalism

That the Turner machine survived into the 1960s owed to their brand of liberalism that aligned with state and national political culture. Unlike most eastern Kentucky counties, Breathitt remained solidly Democratic. According to Douglas Arnett, "In those counties which are very much in the Republican camp, the county organization is of course almost entirely shut out of state politics during Democratic state administrations—which is to say, most of the time." The liberal consensus enabled the Turners to make a final push for reform in Breathitt County, beginning with the ascension of Bert T. Combs to the Kentucky governorship in 1959, described as "one of the most progressive gubernatorial administrations of the century."[205] Combs's hand-picked successor, Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt, continued with his mentor's reform agenda.[206] Concurrently, the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 and his devotion to uplifting Appalachia, followed by President Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty, also gave the Turners cause for optimism. A friendlier political alignment in Frankfort and Washington allowed the Turner family

[205]Arnett, "The Politics of Dependency and Underdevelopment," 63; Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 408.

[206] Kenneth Harrell has identified Governor Breathitt with a "new breed of Southern Democrats, men who accepted the broad directions of the New Deal and the Fair Deal, who viewed state government as a proper tool with which to address social, economic, political, and human problems." Unlike previous governors who took a more hands-off approach to governance, Combs and Breathitt assumed more active roles, a great benefit to the Turner family. See, Kenneth E. Harrell, "Edward Thompson Breathitt Jr.," in *Kentucky's Governors*, 201.

to make better use of their Democratic connections to get what they wanted. It was a tried and true practice that had been effective since the New Deal years.

Allying themselves with the Combs Administration proved beneficial for the Turner family, particularly in education. In his inaugural speech in December 1959, Combs stated "My program—which I have discussed during the past eighteen months in every county in Kentucky—falls under two broad concepts of government: reform and progress."[207] Indeed, the governor had every intent of delivering on those promises. Two months later, when Combs proposed the first billion-dollar budget in Kentucky history as a step toward "lifting Kentucky from her old depressing place at the bottom of the ladder," education was slated to receive increased spending of more than $270 million, 62 percent more than was being currently spent, and nearly half of which was earmarked for teachers' salaries. Marie Turner, recently elected to another four-year term as superintendent, announced in June 1960 that, for the first time, the state government provided full financing of the free textbook program, but only for grades one through eight, with the possibility that all freshmen would receive free textbooks the following year. Furthermore, over 1,000 books had been added to the beloved bookmobile and the high school's library.[208]

Among Marie Turner's most important contributions to Breathitt County education in the early-1960s was the construction of a new consolidated school in the Lost Creek community, named Marie Roberts Consolidated School in the superintendent's honor. The $187,450 building boasted 10 classrooms, a cafeteria, and auditorium. At the

[207] George W. Robinson, ed., *The Public Papers of Governor Bert T. Combs, 1959-1963* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 8.
[208] *JT*, June 23, 1960

dedication ceremony in August 1963, Turner invited Kentucky Commissioner of Highways and future gubernatorial candidate Henry Ward to speak at the ceremony, a move on Turner's part that was anything but coincidence. During his speech, Ward lauded Marie Turner for erecting the modern educational facility, but also accused her of having an "ulterior motive" in inviting him to speak, a clear reference to the poor condition of the road leading to the school.[209] The new consolidated school also represented a milestone in Marie Turner's quest to eliminate inefficient one-room schoolhouses from the county, which numbered more than 100 when she first took office in 1931.

Figure 4. Marie and Ervine Turner attend the dedication of the Marie Roberts Elementary School.[210]

Education represented only half of the Turner family's mantra of roads and schools, and the Combs Administration delivered on the other half of the deal as well. One of the

[209] *JT*, August 24, 1963. Ward later lost the 1967 general election to Republican Louie Nunn. Marie Turner attributed Ward's loss to his cold personality and inability to connect with voters. From her experiences, he refused to shake hands with everyone, a gesture that Turner said all politicians should make. Marie R. Turner, interview, October 12, 1982.
[210] Alltrip, "Marie R. Turner," in *Breathitt County Memories*, 226.

most pressing orders of business for the Eastern Kentucky Planning Commission was sorely needed highway improvements. Within a 32-county area in eastern Kentucky, total road mileage exceeded 17,000 miles, yet more than 9,000 miles remained unsurfaced.[211] Improved highways would not only save time on travel, but encourage civic engagement. According to Ronald Eller, "Whisman and the commission believed that highway construction would not only address long neglected regional transportation needs and provide immediate jobs but also strengthen public morale and increase public participation in other projects at the local level."[212] The burgeoning interstate highway system all but bypassed eastern Kentucky and Appalachia, leaving the region without transportation networks that, for planning visionaries, were vitally important for establishing economic connections with the rest of the country. Eastern Kentucky's rugged terrain posed yet another problem, since road construction was considerably more expensive than in other areas of the state. With federal funding for mountain roads basically nonexistent under the Eisenhower Administration, reformers in the 1960s looked to the state level for support and found a friend in Bert T. Combs.

Once in office, Combs promised to follow the recommendations of the Eastern Kentucky Planning Commission. He immediately worked to secure funding for a major thoroughfare that would connect his native region to central Kentucky and beyond. Without Combs, it is unlikely the plan would have followed through, particularly had the election of 1959 gone differently. Happy Chandler, a vocal critic of the Combs Administration's highway spending, famously referred to eastern Kentucky as "nowhere"

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[211] *JT*, February 11, 1960.
[212] Ronald Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 49.

and Combs's highway proposal as a "road to nowhere." At the 1962 dedication of a park lodge in Prestonsburg, Combs attacked his political opponent by comparing him to the fabled character "Chicken Little" who, after being hit on the head with an acorn, claimed the sky was falling. In his address, Combs joked that Chandler and his political allies went "to see where the sky had fallen in and discovered it was merely an acorn from a tree by a swimming pool in Versailles," a reference to the shady dealings that helped Chandler acquire the pool at his luxurious Woodford County home.[213] The episode highlighted Combs's strong feelings toward the thoroughfare, which would be named the Mountain Parkway. Normally reserved, soft-spoken, and hesitant to engage in Chandler's notorious brand of political smearing, Combs clearly believed in the value of an eastern Kentucky turnpike and the benefits it would bring to the region.

Indeed, upon its completion in 1963, the $40.5 million Mountain Parkway boasted a 43-mile section from Winchester to Campton. Additionally, two extension projects would stretch the parkway an additional 33 miles from Campton to Salyersville (and later a 40-mile extension to Pikeville) and an 80-mile stretch from Campton to Whitesburg, which would run through Breathitt County and Jackson. At the ribbon cutting ceremony in May 1963, Governor Combs remarked that the finished parkway is a "lasting symbol of the perseverance and hopes of the mountain people." At a second ceremony later that year to mark the opening of the Campton-Pikeville extension, the governor said, "I take more pride in the seventy-six-mile Mountain Parkway than any other single accomplishment of

[213] Robinson, *The Public Papers of Governor Bert T. Combs*, 321-322. At a 1963 campaign rally for Ned Breathitt, who faced Happy Chandler in the Democratic primary, Ed Prichard said of Happy: "He lives by the side of a swimming pool that was given to him by a war contractor when he was a member of the United States Senate, on the military affairs committee that had jurisdiction over war contracts… and spent the war floating around on top of that swimming pool." See, Campbell, *Short of the Glory*, 215.

my administration."[214] At the groundbreaking ceremony in 1965 for KY 15, the leg of the Mountain Parkway that ran through Breathitt County, Governor Breathitt stated, "We build into this new road a basic foundation for total development action for our region and for new opportunities for our people."[215] Previously, the trip from Breathitt County to Lexington took a whole day's journey; now the trip could be made in less than two hours. The road's completion was surely a blessing for Marie Turner, a frequent traveler to Lexington and Frankfort. The superhighway was also the ultimate symbol of the Turner family's "roads and schools" mantra and their commitment to state-sponsored economic development. This kind of highway construction epitomized the "spirit" of New Deal liberalism and its focus on economic development, integration, and planning.[216]

Without Bert Combs, it is unlikely that Breathitt County would have benefitted from state and federal anti-poverty programs in the early-1960s. Marie Turner felt completely at ease in calling the governor's personal number to ask for political favors and did so on many occasions. On Combs's many visits to Breathitt County, he frequently stayed at the Turner household, and Marie later stated that Combs and Earle Clements were the best governors for the mountains in her lifetime.[217] Combs and the Turner family maintained a close relationship and it paid strong dividends. The governor delivered the commencement address for Breathitt County High School in 1963, taking time to acknowledge Marie Turner's remarkable achievements in education. He urged

[214]Robinson, 394, 483; *JT*, May 16, 1963. In the late-1970s, the Parkway would be renamed the Bert T. Combs Mountain Parkway in honor of the former governor.
[215] Kenneth E. Harrell, ed., *The Public Papers of Governor Edward T. Breathitt, 1963-1967* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 220.
[216] Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 255-257.
[217] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982.

students to obtain a college education and noted, "I understand that 65 percent of this graduating class plans to go onto college. This is much higher than the statewide average, and I congratulate you."[218] The strides Bert Combs had made in education during his tenure were particularly salient in Breathitt County, where Marie Turner helped make them happen.

In terms of numbers, the educational and infrastructural benefits of the Combs years far exceeded those of his predecessor. From 1960 to 1962, more than $5.7 million was spent on Breathitt County roads, including the construction of a $400,000 District Highway Office, which was relocated back to Jackson after Happy Chandler's administration ordered its removal in 1956. Allocation for roads in the 1962-63 fiscal year was $242,000, up from $96,000 in 1957-58. In education, funding increased from $699,000 in 1959-60 to nearly $1.1 million. The public library boasted nearly 14,000 books during 1961-62 compared to only 4,000 in 1959-60, including the acquisition of a new bookmobile in 1960, dedicated by Combs himself. By 1963, health funding in the county was up 23.8 percent from 1959-60, and welfare spending for the blind, disabled, needy, and elderly had grown by 24.5 percent over four years.[219] Overall, expenditures in capital improvements in Breathitt County from 1956 to 1960 were $60,550. The Combs Administration allocated more than $150,000.[220]

Limited by the Kentucky constitution to only one four-year term and hoping to continue his progressive policies, Combs hand-picked his successor in Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt, a young state congressman from western Kentucky and descendant of the

[218] "Breathitt County High School Commencement Address," May 30, 1963, Box 77, Folder 21, Bert T. Combs Collection, University of Kentucky Special Collections (hereafter Combs Collection).
[219] *JT*, April 18, 1963.
[220] "Jackson-Breathitt County Luncheon Address," May 11, 1963, Box 82, Folder 38, Combs Collection.

former governor for which Breathitt County was named. It seemed only fitting that the hopeful governor opened his 1963 campaign in Breathitt County. The "Breathitt for Breathitt" rally in January of that year attracted nearly 6,500 people to Jackson, where candidate Breathitt assured listeners that he stood for progress while his opponent, the ever-persistent Happy Chandler seeking a third term as governor, wanted to turn back the clock. Marie Turner naturally organized the event and stated that attendance exceeded Eleanor Roosevelt's visit in 1938. Like any political rally in Breathitt County, it was a family affair, and Ned Breathitt announced Marie and Ervine's son, John Raymond, as chairman of his Breathitt County campaign.[221]

The significance of launching Ned Breathitt's campaign in Breathitt County, however, went far beyond a simple play on names. It would seem unlikely to begin a major campaign in an isolated place like Breathitt County, with a small population and almost guaranteed to go Democrat. But selecting Breathitt County as his starting point was a strategic move on candidate Breathitt's part, a decision influenced by the political power of the Turner family. Outgoing governor Combs later said it was a "psychological necessity" for any candidate to earn the Turner family's support because of their influence over eastern Kentucky politics.[222] The young and inexperienced Breathitt faced a daunting challenge by going up against the seasoned veteran Chandler, and having an established Democrat like Marie Turner organize the opening of his campaign lent the young candidate a degree of credibility that he desperately needed in a contest that few gave him a chance to win. It was a strategy that paid off. Breathitt comfortably defeated the aging Chandler in the May primary, but faced stiff competition from Republican

[221] *JT*, January 17, 1963.
[222] Bert T. Combs, interview.

challenger Louie Nunn. Breathitt's slim victory of just over 13,000 votes in the general election, in which eastern Kentucky played a pivotal role, was buttressed by a landslide victory in Breathitt County that saw Breathitt defeat Nunn by nearly 3,000 votes. Without eastern Kentucky, Ned Breathitt would have lost the race, leading him to later declare, "Marie Turner was the single strongest person in eastern Kentucky in my race." With victory secured, Governor Breathitt and the Democrats could carry on Bert Combs's legacy of reform in an eastern Kentucky region that still suffered mightily.[223]

In Washington, the Turner family continued to rely on Representative Carl Perkins. Aside from roads and schools, Breathitt County had other basic infrastructural needs, including access to clean water. In a letter to Perkins, Marie Turner pointed to a lack of basic sanitary facilities in many rural schools, including a consolidated school in the Quicksand community with 307 students. She wrote, "Water service to this school is from a drilled well which is completely inadequate, antiquated, and unsanitary…Because of lack of adequate water for inside facilities, outside dug toilets are used."[224] Even into the 1960s, running water was a luxury to most county residents. Furthermore, the city of Jackson was in desperate need of a new sewage treatment plant, prompting local leaders including Ervine Turner, County Judge Sam P. Deaton, and Lees College President Troy Eslinger to petition Perkins for assistance in 1964. Rather swiftly, Perkins informed Ervine Turner that a $273,150 grant had been approved under the federally supervised Accelerated Public Works (APW) program to construct a new sewage plant. As part of the package, the county also received a water pollution grant of $182,100.[225] When state

[223] Edward T. Breathitt, interview by William E. Ellis, January 6, 1987, MRT Oral History Project; *JT*, November 7, 1963; Pearce, *Divide and Dissent*, 223.
[224] Marie Turner to Carl Perkins, March 1, 1963, Box D-036, Folder 7, Perkins Papers.
[225] Carl Perkins to Ervine Turner, April 14, 1964, Ibid.

funds were unavailable, Carl Perkins' connections in Washington continued to be an invaluable resource for the Turner family and Breathitt County.

Indeed, the work of Bert Combs and Ned Breathitt would not have been possible without federal assistance. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy witnessed firsthand the extreme poverty of Appalachia during a 1960 campaign stop in West Virginia, and immediately began taking action after assuming office the following January. Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois had previously introduced a bill to address poverty and was appointed head of a task force by the newly inaugurated Kennedy. A new bill designated S.1 received widespread support among Appalachian congressmen, including Carl Perkins, who pointed out that one in three workers in his congressional district was unemployed. The bill passed, created the Area Redevelopment Administration (ARA), and allotted nearly $400 million for industrial loans, grants for public facilities, and technical assistance in Appalachia. Well-intentioned in its scope, the ARA nonetheless proved inadequate in confronting Appalachian poverty. As David Whisnant has argued, the ARA was conceived under a number of untenable assumptions, and even earned the frustration of Harry Caudill and President Kennedy himself. For all its inadequacies, however, some ARA dollars made their way into Breathitt County, including a $642,000 woodworking station located at the Robinson Substation at Quicksand that brought 300 additional jobs to the county.[226]

After realizing that the ARA was failing to bring long-term change, President Kennedy created a joint federal-state committee, the President's Appalachian Regional

[226] For Caudill, the ARA represented little more than "fumbling and red-tape-ridden efforts" and ultimately "accomplished little beyond a few small loans for minor business enterprises." See, Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, 70-91; *JT*, May 17, 1962.

Commission (PARC) in 1963 and headed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. Like John Whisman's *Program 60*, PARC determined that Appalachia's plight was because of economic underdevelopment. But President Kennedy's assassination in November of that year raised questions as to whether Lyndon Johnson would follow through with the Appalachian program. These tensions were short-lived, as Johnson assured Governor Combs and incoming governor Ned Breathitt that he would carry out Kennedy's proposals. Shortly thereafter, PARC proposed increased highway access to the Appalachian region, programs to utilize the region's natural resources, facilities to control and exploit abundant rainfall, and programs for improved human resources. Of particular interest to Breathitt County were proposals for highway development, sewage management, cooperative timber marketing, research into coal utilization, and funding for vocational schools. The newly created Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in 1965 hoped to promote state, federal, and private cooperation in implementing these reforms while also fostering planning and community development. Initial ARC funding stipulated $840 million for highway construction until the law's expiration in 1971 and $252.4 million for other projects until 1967.[227]

Release of the PARC report coincided with President Johnson's famous visit to Appalachia in April 1964, a catalyst for the President launching a War on Poverty. The early-1960s, however, were not short on reforms. The Kennedy, Combs, and Breathitt

[227] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 77-80; Michael Bradshaw, *The Appalachian Regional Commission: Twenty-Five Years of Government Policy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 43; Stephen Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017), 260-263. Stoll argues that the ARC's top-down ethos brought badly needed jobs and created an "army of young volunteers," but ultimately produced gains that were "modest and uneven," partly because the ARC treated Appalachia like an "underdeveloped country." Short term gains procured by strip mining and mountaintop removal came at the expense of burying towns, poisoning watersheds, and drastically altering landscapes. Furthermore, unemployment remained the same in 2000 as it was in 1970.

administrations worked together in bringing attention to Appalachia and implemented significant reforms that set the stage for Johnson's larger assault on poverty. This brand of political liberalism proved advantageous for both the Turners and Breathitt County. As faithful New Deal Democrats, the Turners took full advantage of their political connections to ensure Breathitt County received more than its fair share of state and federal aid. Such an approach was also a recipe for keeping power.

Breathitt County's Bank War

The 1960s presented many opportunities for the Turner family to further consolidate their power. A significant development that reshaped economics in Breathitt County and came to define the Turner family was the founding of Citizens Bank in 1962. This feat, however, did not come easy. The Turner family's Republican adversary J. Phil Smith operated the First National Bank of Jackson, which had been in the county since 1909.[228] Since Smith ran the only bank in town, the Turners had little choice but to maintain a relatively friendly relationship with him. Ervine Turner even bought stock in Smith's bank in 1947 and thereafter served as the bank's attorney, earning a salary as late as 1961. But for Smith, the "enigmatic" Turner had always harbored lifelong ambitions of starting his own bank in Breathitt County. The Turners tried to open their own bank as early as 1952, but were unsuccessful in gaining FDIC approval. By the early-1960s, however, with close ally Bert Combs at the helm, the Turners decided to try again.

[228] Like the Turners, Smith was a prominent community leader and also pushed for educational and agricultural reforms in Breathitt County. In 1959, Smith, then serving as mayor of Jackson, spoke before a U.S. Senate hearing on unemployment and lobbied for the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture's Extension Service to promote "total resource development" in eastern Kentucky. He called for a program similar to John Whisman's *Program 60* that would help the region overcome its dependence on coal, develop forest and water resources, and promote tourism and manufacturing. Smith envisioned the Robinson Substation in Breathitt County as a hub for enacting such plans. See, Bradley L. Goan, "Missed Opportunities in the Mountains: The University of Kentucky's Action Program in Eastern Kentucky in the 1960s" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2015), 32-33.

Combs was a willing partner and later reflected that he thought a second bank would be good for a county that was growing economically and could use some healthy competition.[229] As the Turner family's motivations to start their own bank became clearer, their relationship with Smith deteriorated, who withheld Ervine Turner's salary and told him he had "no use" for someone who tried to start a rival bank.[230] Shortly thereafter, Citizens Bank opened its doors in November 1962, ushering in a new era for Breathitt County and the Turner family.

Although lingering animosities between Ervine Turner and J. Phil Smith likely fueled the judge's ambition for opening a rival bank, politics and power lay at the heart of the Turner family's motivation for opening Citizens Bank. Given the family's strong influence over the flow of capital in the county by virtue of job control, and that the family's political opponent operated the only local bank, the opening of Citizens Bank marked an important moment in consolidating power. As Ronald Eller has noted, this bank war was not a conflict over political patronage, "but over control of economic benefits generated by federal expenditures in the county." Federal funds were now deposited in a bank owned and operated by the Turner family, giving the family a distinct advantage in influencing public opinion. Eller continues, "Those who controlled access to the burgeoning transfer payments for the poor… could influence the location and character of lucrative government 'investments' in their communities."[231]

Despite the ongoing bank war, Smith maintained an amicable if fragile relationship with Marie Turner. Above all, both shared a keen interest in educational progress. Smith

[229] Bert T. Combs, interview.
[230] J. Phil Smith, interview.
[231] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 157.

previously served as interim president of Lees College in Jackson and had even offered to teach for free when the local independent school district (separate from the Breathitt County school district under Marie Turner) faced a teacher shortage.[232] Both Smith and Marie Turner frequently served on local and regional education committees, and often traveled with one another to lobby for school funding. One event represents Smith and Turner's contradictory relationship. During the Combs Administration, the pair traveled together to Frankfort (a surprisingly frequent occurrence) to pay the governor a visit. After Smith left Marie at the Department of Education, he proceeded to the banking department and viewed records of individuals attempting to charter banks in the state, where it became evident that the Turners were pushing forward with their plan to establish Citizens Bank. The two later reconvened and visited Governor Combs, who was quite shocked to see the two together. After the meeting, Smith said, "Marie, you've told me 150 lies today," to which she replied, "I would never tell you a lie." Smith tersely replied, "That's 151," and the two continued with their otherwise "enjoyable" time together. Smith later reflected, "We just had that kind of rapport."[233]

Although the two were frequently at odds, Marie Turner's relationship with Smith reflected her ability to cross the aisle and effectively cooperate with her political opponents. To Smith's credit, he was no political novice, though he did not identify as a "political animal" and claimed to be ineffective at "selling himself" in elections. Despite identifying as a Republican (he would later switch to Democrat), Smith achieved some success and briefly served as mayor of Jackson. His other campaigns resulted in some heartbreaking losses. After running for lieutenant governor in 1959 and losing by some

[232] *JT*, August 11, 1960.
[233] J. Phil Smith, interview.

7,000 votes in the Republican primary, he narrowly lost the 1960 race for county judge against Turner-backed candidate Sam P. Deaton. In 1969, after Smith had switched his party affiliation, he lost the Democratic primary for the Kentucky senate (Ervine Turner's seat from the 1930s) by less than 100 votes. It was his last foray into politics.[234]

Marie Turner's amicable yet fragile relationship with Smith was, in many ways, quite beneficial. Both were powerful leaders in the community and both shared the common cause of bringing Breathitt County into modernity. There is little doubt that the opening of Citizens Bank left Smith furious and with renewed animosity toward the Turners, but both parties remained relatively professional and polished in their dealings. Smith, himself a powerful individual, had no trouble standing up to Marie Turner, a trait he believed Marie respected because she appreciated strong people like herself. Indeed, Smith acknowledged that Marie was above all a resilient and strong woman who "always knew exactly what she wanted" and "very seldom let her guard down." Marie Turner "thought like a man" without being masculine, and Smith genuinely believed that "If she had been a man, she would have been governor."[235]

Democratic Factionalism, Continued

Having come to power during the Great Depression, when times were hard and the Turners held a monopoly on the job market in Breathitt County, there was less room for opposition. As time passed, however, economic conditions were improving and political machines across Kentucky were falling by the wayside.[236] The political crises of the late-

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[234] *C-J*, May 29, 1959, May 28, 1969. Smith's father had served in Republican Simeon Willis's administration from 1943 to 1947. Although Smith was the select choice of the state Republican organization in the 1959 race, he ultimately conceded to Pleaz Mobley of Manchester; *JT*, November 9, 1960. Sam P. Deaton, an ally of the Turner family, defeated Smith by a narrow margin of 2,785 to 2,609.

[235] J. Phil Smith, interview.

[236] For example, the Democratic organization in Jefferson County lost power in 1961 to a Republican faction headed by future U.S. Senator Marlow Cook. Other machines collapsed simply because their

1950s showed that even the Turner family was politically vulnerable, and more than 30 years of Turner rule had some members of the community clamoring for an all-out repudiation of the family's regime. While the Turners had been relatively successful in keeping the county courthouse stocked with their political cronies, there were exceptions.

Carl Back, the former sheriff who had been a source of the Turner family's frustrations in the 1950s, came back onto the political scene when he was elected to a second term in 1962. The vocal opponent of the Turner family seemed well-positioned to use his position of power to attack the Turner family once again, but he suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack only three months into his term. Ervine Turner ordered the local circuit court into a three-day recess as a sign of respect for the fallen official. Shortly thereafter, however, the inner dealings of Breathitt County politics bore its ugly head. Only a month after Back's death, his widow, Ethel Spicer Back, submitted a piece to the local newspaper entitled, "To the friends of the late Carl Back." After her husband's death, she had "begged and pleaded" to take over his post, but was refused by County Judge Sam P. Deaton, a staunch ally of the Turners, who told her she was "not physically able to run the office."[237] The following year, Ethel Back filed for sheriff in a special election to fill her late husband's vacant seat. In a campaign ad, Back stressed that she was "not a politician" and depicted the events of the past year as an attempt by Ervine Turner and Sam P. Deaton to prevent her from taking power. She wrote, "I feel if justice had been based on principle, I would be serving out my husband's term today…I am

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leaders died, which was the case with Willie Foster in Graves County and Albert W. Young in Morehead. See, John Ed Pearce, "Fall of the County Political Boss," *The Courier-Journal and Times Magazine*, July 23, 1972, E1, E4.

[237] *JT*, March 22, May 3, 1962.

appealing to voters to right this wrong."[238] Though Back later lost the Democratic primary to J. Wise Deaton, a relative of Sam P. Deaton, by nearly 1,000 votes, this incident exposed the cronyism of the Turner machine against a well-respected community member in the aftermath of a tragic loss.

While the Back episode did not directly implicate Ervine or Marie Turner, others took direct aim at the political couple. Allie Watkins, a local attorney who had served three terms as county attorney since 1950, announced his candidacy for circuit judge against Ervine Turner in November of 1962, running on a platform "that the courts of the land should be conducted in such manner as to show the people that they can obtain justice and that decisions in these courts are based on the laws and not on politics." Like the late Carl Back, Watkins was a member of the Chandler faction and had supported his campaigns in 1955 and 1963. The Turners, vigorous supporters of the Combs-Breathitt faction for their commitments to educational and infrastructural improvements, were no doubt dismayed when Watkins introduced Chandler at a 1963 campaign rally in Jackson, where the former governor denounced Combs's controversial sales tax and the administration in general as "oppressive, depressive" and "the most wasteful in Kentucky history."[239] Though Ned Breathitt carried the county handily over Chandler and Ervine Turner defeated Watkins by more than 1,500 votes in the May primary, the local lawyer was far from finished in his assault against the Turners.

After his primary defeat, Watkins announced that he would run on the Republican ticket against Ervine Turner in the general election, keeping alive his slim hopes of defeating the popular judge. Meanwhile, he launched an attack on Marie by asking to

[238] *JT*, May 16, 1963.
[239] *JT*, May 2, November 29, 1962.

examine the school board's financial records. Watkins alleged that Turner used the school system "as her own private bailiwick," which included renting office space for the board of education at properties owned by the Turners and for publishing condensed financial statements. According to Watkins, "She's had her own private little accounting system, and never been made accountable to the public." After Watkins asked to view the school's financial records, Marie Turner curtly refused. "Sure I turned him down… The financial records of the Breathitt County Board of Education are open to inspection by any reputable lawyer, auditor, or newspaperman, but not Allie Y. Watkins. I simply can't trust him." Watkins consulted Kentucky's attorney general, who stated that all school financial records are considered public record and that citizens and taxpayers could legally inspect those records at a reasonable time and place. After Watkins filed an injunction in county court, Judge Sam P. Deaton later reported that Marie Turner had in fact opened the records for inspection. But she was unavailable for comment due to being in Washington, where she had testified on a congressional bill concerning more aid for public and elementary education.[240]

Watkins' inspection of the school board's financial records seemingly resolved the episode. He made no headlines in the coming months, aside from his whopping defeat at the hands of Ervine Turner in the general election, losing Breathitt County with only 949 votes to Ervine Turner's 3,765.[241] Clearly, the incident did little to harm the Turner family's reputation and certainly did not diminish their control over county politics. However, something did emerge from the conflict. Thereafter, the local newspaper regularly published financial statements, balance sheets, teacher salaries, and audits of the

[240] *C-J*, August 7, 1963; *JT*, August 8, 15, 1963.
[241] *JT*, November 7, 1963.

Breathitt County school system from 1960 to 1963, perhaps an effort to appease those fixated on Marie Turner's accounting practices.

Conclusion

Despite continued accusations of corruption, oppositional forces never mounted a serious campaign to bring down the Turner family because they, quite simply, continued to deliver the goods that were most important to the people of Breathitt County. Marie Turner continued to control the largest job market in the county by employing school administrators, teachers, bus drivers, custodians, and cooks. Ervine Turner wielded tremendous influence from his position as circuit judge. He controlled courthouse politics in Breathitt County and, to a lesser degree, the other two counties (Wolfe and Powell) that rounded out his judicial district. He held the most powerful political office in the county, and constituents regularly went to him for favors and advice, particularly after the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet placed the District 10 Highway Office in Jackson for a second time. At a time when unemployment ran high in eastern Kentucky, most citizens of Breathitt County simply could not afford to alienate themselves from the Turner machine. The coming of the War on Poverty in 1964 would make Breathitt residents ever more reliant on the Turner family's ability to produce government jobs and generate relief.

CHAPTER 4: BREATHITT COUNTY'S WAR ON POVERTY, 1964-1968

"A lot of the good in this county must be traced to this one woman." -*Lady Bird Johnson on Marie Turner*

"The AV are trying to change the political thinking in this county from Democratic to Republican." -*Marie Turner*

President Johnson's visit to Martin County, Kentucky in 1964 produced the iconic photo of him kneeling on Tom Fletcher's front porch and brought national attention to his recently declared "unconditional war on poverty." The prosperity of the 1960s continued to pass over eastern Kentucky and Breathitt County, yet the War on Poverty promised to uplift the ailing region by helping those who could not help themselves. In Breathitt County, the War on Poverty provided an opportunity for the Turner family to once again take advantage of all that an expanded social welfare state had to offer. Just as they had during the New Deal years, the family continued to use their political connections to direct government relief dollars into their home county. That the Turners were household names by the 1960s meant they could rely more heavily on these political connections. The War on Poverty was a high point for the Turners in procuring federal funding for Breathitt County, which continued to see improvements in education and accessibility to the outside world.

The Turners also had the advantage of being New Deal Democrats in a political climate friendly to this ideology. President Johnson was a protégé of FDR and used the New Deal as a model for the War on Poverty. Carl Perkins remained a crucial ally in the House of Representatives, and, until 1967, the Turners could rely on the progressive

Democrat Ned Breathitt in Frankfort. Democratic politics permeated state and federal levels of government, which enabled the Turners to forcefully leverage power. Additionally, because the Turners were one of the few Democratic machines left in eastern Kentucky and by virtue of their established reputation, they could more easily persuade political leaders that Breathitt County was worthy of federal relief.

Breathitt County also provides an effective case study for illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of the War on Poverty on a localized level. Breathitt dealt with problems similar to those of other eastern Kentucky counties: geographic isolation, economic underdevelopment, and, to a lesser degree, environmental destruction. Poverty rates in Breathitt County were comparable to other counties before, during, and after the War on Poverty, and little has changed since. However, Breathitt County followed a very different path than most counties during the late-1960s, largely because of the Turner family's influence. Their brand of political liberalism reaped many benefits in the early years of the War on Poverty because of connections to state and federal Democratic officials. While the Turners were not exempt from the shady dealings that characterized War on Poverty politics, the family proved both responsive to the needs of the community and adaptable when faced with political crises.

Most scholars deem the War on Poverty an overall failure due to a combination of underspending, overexpansion, and political division at all levels of government. But in many ways, the Turners and Breathitt County actually benefitted from the War on Poverty's purported weaknesses. Because regional politics and administrative fragmentation almost always favored the Turner machine, Breathitt County received considerably more funding than surrounding counties. Because of the family's

connections, the county obtained more roads and schools than neighboring counties, in the process fulfilling the Turner family's lifelong mantra. There was a sustained government presence in Breathitt County from 1964 to 1968, during which the Turners cemented their status as elite members of Kentucky's Democratic Party. But the War on Poverty's abrupt end and a shift toward conservatism in state and national politics was a heavy blow to the family, who saw their power wane in the latter part of the decade. The aging of Marie and Ervine Turner, coupled with conflict between their children, weakened the family's dominance over regional politics. Much would change over the course of a few years. But in 1964, eastern Kentuckians hoped that the War on Poverty could finally bring their region into economic parity with the rest of the country.

The War on Poverty in Eastern Kentucky: An Overview

The War on Poverty in Appalachia has been well documented among historians, who generally agree that the economic revitalization program, while well-intentioned, ultimately failed to bring Appalachia out of poverty. Most agree that the initiative's lack of funding and short time frame prevented it from achieving its ambitious goals. Others charge that the War on Poverty failed to address poverty's structural roots and argue that the poor needed far more than an education, job training, or the assistance of domestic peace workers. Others highlight how policymakers were inherently flawed in their assumption that poor people were to blame for their plight. Some claim that President Johnson's goal to launch an "unconditional war on poverty" was simply unrealistic.[242] According to Stephen Skowronek, President Johnson became overwhelmed by the "nightmare of interest management." His devotion to civil rights, the Vietnam War and

[242] For a brief overview of the War on Poverty, see, Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 530-542.

foreign policy, and the Great Society proved too difficult to balance.[243] What began as a noble vision for "helping those who could not help themselves" soon became overshadowed by the political, social, and cultural upheavals of the 1960s.

In his influential study, David Whisnant has identified five major problems with the War on Poverty that limited its success: insufficient funding, administrative splitting and fragmentation, OEO and regional politics, two titles out of six (referring to the Title I-VI programs, of which only two, the community action and VISTA programs, had a significant presence in the region), and increasing congressional constraints. Whisnant's third tenet is particularly salient for eastern Kentucky, since the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) loomed large over the region. Local political leaders frequently wrestled over coveted OEO dollars, most of which found their way into counties headed by elites with the most political connections. In this world of machine politics, federal funding was acquired and distributed by less-than-democratic processes. County machines notoriously "siphoned off funds for unauthorized purposes; rejected programs considered contrary to their interest; hired friends, relatives, and those who voted as they were told; and used their influence in the statehouses to frustrate the efforts of reform-oriented individuals and groups."[244]

More broadly, Ronald Eller argues that War on Poverty planners pursued the wrong goals. "Poverty in Appalachia, they believed, was simply out of step with the rest of America and could be conquered by government investments in public infrastructure to open up markets and by the extension of opportunities for the poor to join the cultural

[243] Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 350.
[244] Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, 102-108; For more on the OEO and its approach to poverty, see, John M. Glen, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia—A Preliminary Report," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol 87, No. 1 (Winter 1989).

mainstream."[245] But time would show that simply throwing money at Appalachia could not fix the region's lingering problems of an inadequate tax base, environmental destruction, issues of land ownership, and public responsibility. Building highways and providing people with jobs and an education was well and good, but policymakers viewed these issues as the root causes of poverty rather than symptoms of much larger problems. Infrastructural development strategies failed because "they did not confront the structural inequities behind such conditions." Furthermore, the War on Poverty failed to abolish a "perceived differentness of Appalachia" that had historically reinforced images of backwardness. Appalachia had been viewed as a region apart and out of step with mainstream America, yet Americans needed to have an "Appalachian problem" when times suddenly became tough. Even during the affluence of the 1960s, the idea of the Appalachian "other" could serve a social purpose. The failure of the War on Poverty only reinforced the old perception that Appalachia was beyond help.[246]

For all the challenges of the War on Poverty at the federal and state levels, implementing these reforms locally sometimes proved even more difficult. President Johnson envisioned the War on Poverty as a model of "creative federalism" and "maximum feasible participation." It was a noble but sometimes vague vision that imaged national, state, and local governments working with the poor to stamp out poverty. But as Margaret Ripley Wolfe has found, "The often-conflicting dynamics of grass-roots activism, creative federalism and courthouse politics joined in eastern Kentucky." For local elites bent on keeping power, there was no place for a community activism that might alter the existing political order. In 1966, an assistant to the president

[245] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 89.
[246] Ibid., 222-223.

reported that local patronage greatly impeded creative federalism and that the party system remained "well entrenched."[247]

Outside forces faced a monumental task in trying to alter the face of Appalachia. One such group was the Appalachian Volunteers (AVs), which had a sizable presence in eastern Kentucky during the War on Poverty. Founded during the Kennedy Administration, the AVs were committed to community development and aiding the poor in self-improvement. In his study of the AVs, Thomas Kiffmeyer notes that original volunteers hailed from Appalachia. But that began to change by 1965, when most volunteers came from outside the region, usually middle-class college students.[248] These students were catalysts for grassroots activism in the region, but usually came from vastly different socioeconomic classes than mountain residents. The AVs were generally viewed by locals as outsiders with little understanding of mountain society, and some were branded as traitors, race-baiters, and communists.[249] In many counties, AV workers were confined to menial jobs such as painting schoolhouses and fixing playgrounds, tasks that did not threaten the power of local elites. One superintendent remarked of the AV, "I like you fixing up schools, but if you go out and take pictures of those not fixed up, I'll pull away your federal tit."[250] Local politicians resistant to change frequently challenged any and all efforts that might have addressed the structural issues plaguing eastern Kentucky.

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[247] Margaret Ripley Wolfe, "Eastern Kentucky and the War on Poverty: Grass-roots Activism, Regional Politics, and Creative Federalism in the Appalachian South during the 1960s," *Ohio Valley History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2003), 31, 36.
[248] Thomas Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 10-11
[249] Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 73-81.
[250] Ripley Wolfe, 40.

A core tenet of the War on Poverty's creative federalism was the creation of community action committees. According to John Glen, these programs were supposed to be "all-purpose, all inclusive" and would involve "representatives of local government, key public and private agencies, and the poor themselves." Bringing the impoverished into local decision making represented one of the most important aspects of the community action programs and bolstered President Johnson's frequent assertion that the War on Poverty would serve as a hand up rather than a handout. But Glen shows that most community action agencies in the Cumberland Valley worked at cross-purposes and pursued their own objectives, which resulted in "something less than a unified War on Poverty. Instead of consensus there was conflict; instead of freedom from the problems associated with the culture of poverty, there was compromise, confusion, indifference, and a perpetuation of the status quo."[251] In the end, most community action programs failed to achieve their intended purpose and amounted to little more than political bickering among power hungry local elites.

One of the most enduring legacies of the War on Poverty is the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), founded in 1965 to comprehensively address the region's distressed economy, environmental destruction, and political isolation. When Congress passed the Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA) that created the ARC, it stated that "the Appalachian region of the United States, while abundant in natural resources and rich in potential, lags behind the rest of the Nation in its economic growth, and that its people have not shared properly in the Nation's prosperity."[252] Between its founding in 1965 and the late-1970s, the ARC did see progress in eastern Kentucky by raising incomes,

[251] Glen, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia," 42-47.
[252] Quoted in Bradshaw, *The Appalachian Regional Commission,* 1.

improving housing, slowing outmigration, reducing infant mortality, and improving education rates. According to Eller, the ARC "gained a reputation in Washington for getting things done quickly by cutting through established bureaucratic procedures," particularly in implementing the cut-through project in Pike County that rerouted a fork of the Big Sandy River to prevent annual flooding.[253]

However, the ARC faced similar problems as the OEO and community action agencies. The ARC defined Appalachia very broadly, even including parts of New York and Alabama, whose needs were quite different from the more distressed parts of central Appalachia. As a result, change was uneven, inconsistent, and frequently challenged by local political leaders clinging to any vestiges of power they still had. These weaknesses were highlighted in the 1974 publication *A Citizen's Handbook on the ARC*, which heavily criticized the agency for spending almost 80 percent of its budget on uncompleted highways. The researchers declared, "The time has come to turn the authority of the Appalachian Regional Commission around or demand that it cease to exist."[254]

According to Michael Bradshaw, the ARC's regional development theory emphasized economic conditions above human resources. For Bradshaw, infrastructure alone cannot produce economic development, but it can be a useful catalyst. The ARC "did its share" by funding road programs and basic infrastructural improvements such as sewage and water plants, but "more modern views of regional development emphasize the wider aspects of the needs of the people living in an area; social, environmental, and political

[253] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 187.
[254] Ibid., 192-193.

changes assume greater prominence."[255] By the time the ARC tried to adopt these kinds of reforms in the 1980s, the Reagan Administration and a conservative political climate across the nation limited the scope of what the ARC would realistically achieve. Again, the agency found itself limited to purely economic objectives. It built highways, health care facilities, and shopping centers, yet failed to address the structural issues that had dogged Appalachia for decades.[256]

The War on Poverty, however, should not be considered a total failure. By 1974, the number of Americans living in poverty had been reduced by more than half and child poverty rates were reduced from 27 to 14 percent. Even as Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter tried to distance themselves from Lyndon Johnson's massive welfare state, they built upon its many legacies. Scholars have also taken a more sympathetic look at the initiative's overlooked successes. Annelise Orleck notes that the War on Poverty years "were extraordinary—in the upsurge of grassroots organizing, in democratic activism by people so poor and disfranchised that they had never been politically engaged, in community-created and -run service institutions." Poverty was not completely eradicated, but the War on Poverty drastically reduced economic hardship in some of America's most distressed communities.[257]

In eastern Kentucky, the War on Poverty brought much-needed infrastructural developments that helped connect the formerly isolated region to the larger nation. When

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[255] Bradshaw, 139.
[256] Eller states that the War on Poverty brought Appalachia "closer to the rest of America," but failed to address these longstanding problems: an inadequate tax base, a low-wage economy, environmental abuse, civic fraud, political corruption, absentee landownership, and corporate irresponsibility. See, *Uneven Ground*, 221-223.
[257] Annelise Orleck, "Introduction," in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 4-6; See also, Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger, eds., *Legacies of the War on Poverty* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013).

President Nixon dissolved the OEO in the early-1970s, it brought significant hardship to the region. A Letcher County newspaper reported that the agency's demise would withdraw $6.5 million in annual income from Kentucky and cause more than 3,000 antipoverty jobs in the region to disappear, with more than 1,000 of those in four of the poorest counties (including Breathitt).[258] The War on Poverty was not perfect, but it provided job opportunities and much-needed aid for childcare and healthcare in the region. Its sudden withdrawal left the mountain people with many of the same problems as before and even fewer answers.

Apart from the more tangible gains of the War on Poverty, it proved that "public policy can at least have a limited impact" on growth and development and that the ARC's ideas on regional development were not totally lost to the winds.[259] The War on Poverty did little in the way of structural reform, but it did equip locals with valuable tools to challenge the status quo. According to Eller, "The War on Poverty generated a degree of independence and assertiveness that undermined old traditions of deference to authority and laid the groundwork for collective action on a variety of labor, health, and environmental issues."[260] Through work and education, locals gained confidence to challenge the existing system. But for entrenched political elites like the Turner family, they had to walk a fine line. Politicians relied on old practices to get what they needed from the government and their local supporters, even as they faced the ever-present reality that their brand of political rule might be coming to an end.

[258] Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, 117.
[259] Bradshaw, 142.
[260] Eller, 157.

Breathitt County's War on Poverty

Marie Turner started the War on Poverty with a bang in Breathitt County, beginning with the dedication of a new high school gymnasium by the First Lady of the United States. Of course, this was not unfamiliar territory for Turner, who had arranged for Eleanor Roosevelt to dedicate the New Deal-funded Breathitt County High School in 1938. This time, however, would be a much grander occasion. As early as 1960, plans were in the making for construction of a new gymnasium complete with modern sports facilities, auditoriums, and classrooms, and its construction was formally announced in 1962.[261] The new structure, slated to be among the largest in eastern Kentucky with a seating capacity of nearly 4,000, received significant publicity over the next two years, and Marie Turner was determined to have Breathitt County make national headlines just as it had nearly three decades earlier with Eleanor Roosevelt's visit.

Marie Turner placed Lady Bird's visit to Breathitt County in May of 1964 quite strategically, not even a month after President Johnson's famous trip to Martin County. Eastern Kentucky was in the national spotlight, and Marie Turner tried to secure the invitation of the president himself, perhaps hoping that Breathitt County would produce its own photo for posterity. After finding that the President had other obligations, Turner set her sights on the First Lady. In the invitation to Lady Bird, Turner played on the fact that Breathitt County had a history with the White House. Turner said of Eleanor Roosevelt's trip, "The visit has never been forgotten by our people and is still talked about with much enthusiasm."[262] Carl Perkins also worked with Marie Turner to

[261] *JT*, July 19, 1962.
[262] Marie Turner to Lady Bird Johnson, March 5, 1964, Box D-036, Folder 7, Carl D. Perkins Papers, Eastern Kentucky University Archives (hereafter Perkins Papers).

convince Lady Bird to come to Breathitt County. He wrote to the superintendent, "While I am almost certain that her visit will take place it is very important that we do not let any information out about her coming at this time else it might make it difficult for her to withstand pressures that she is getting for appearances elsewhere."[263] When the First Lady did officially accept, the county worked feverishly to prepare for her visit, forming a special committee chaired by none other than Marie Turner and her son-in-law's brother, Jerry F. Howell.[264]

On Thursday, May 21, 1964, Lady Bird Johnson, accompanied by Marie Turner, her daughter Treva Howell, Carl Perkins, and other dignitaries, toured Breathitt County, where 20,000 observers came to participate in the festivities. After visiting Lick Branch School and taking time to join students in reciting the pledge of allegiance, Mrs. Johnson visited the home of a participant in the government's winterization program, designed to aid homeowners in protecting their families from the elements during the harsh winter months. The dedication ceremony was a testament to the power of the Turner family, with Treva Howell serving as Mistress of Ceremonies and her daughter Louise introducing the First Lady. With most members of the Turner family sitting proudly on stage, this moment represented one of their greatest triumphs in their long reign over Breathitt County. The following evening, Governor Ned Breathitt delivered the commencement address for the high school's 168 seniors, a fitting end to the week's events. After the week's festivities, Governor Breathitt developed a "keen appreciation" for Marie Turner's contributions to education and later described her as an "enlightened,

[263] Carl Perkins to Marie Turner, March 10, 1964, Ibid.
[264] *JT*, May 14, 1962.

strong, tough political leader who made a real difference in the quality of life for young people in eastern Kentucky."[265]

Local news coverage commented on Marie Turner as much as the First Lady. Referring to Turner in regal, even saintly terms, a local editorial praised the superintendent for "bringing honor to Breathitt County." More succinctly, a single photo of Turner occupied the center of the front page, accompanied by the simple caption, "Persuasive." It was abundantly clear that the First Lady's visit was the sole work of Marie Turner, and the newspaper even devoted an extra section to the superintendent's accomplishments in her 33 years as head of the school system. The article chronicled the high school's "humble beginnings" from 1927, when there were only 30 students, three teachers, and a principal. In the present, the high school boasted 42 teachers and 1,051 students, a clear sign that education in Breathitt County had come a long way. From 1955 to 1964, the number of high school graduates increased by 49.1 percent, up from 93 to 170 at Breathitt High School and from 163 to 363 countywide, which included private and parochial schools and the independent school district.[266]

Regional and national leaders also took note of Marie Turner and Breathitt County's hospitality. Edmund Baxter, U.S. Regional Director of Health, Education, and Welfare, wrote to Turner congratulating her on a "near perfection performance in an extraordinary task." He remarked, "Every aspect of your program was well and tastefully planned and conducted." Several months after the First Lady's visit, *The Jackson Times*

[265] *JT*, May 21, 1964; Edward T. Breathitt, interview.
[266] *JT*, June 18, 1964. Attention must also be paid to the timing of these statistics. The baby boom generation, conventionally viewed as starting in 1946, would have been the correct age for graduating high school seniors in 1964. Much of this increase can therefore be attributed to a natural rise in young people's population, even though the county's population fell by more than 22 percent between 1950 and 1960.

ran a personal letter from Johnson to Turner, prefacing the letter rather tongue-in-cheek by noting that Turner "does not claim to be an outstanding sentimentalist." In the letter, Lady Bird fondly remembered her day in Breathitt County and "how grateful Lyndon and I are to people like you who care so much about helping others build a better life for themselves." The First Lady encouraged Turner to "drop me a note whenever you plan to be in Washington" and expressed admiration for the superintendent in much the same way Eleanor Roosevelt did after her visit in 1938.[267]

Figure 5. University of Kentucky basketball coach Adolph Rupp, Marie Turner, and Kentucky High School Athletic Association commissioner Ted Sanford attend the dedication of the high school's coliseum.

John C. Wyatt Herald-Leader Collection, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center.

Although the exact date of Lady Bird's letter is unknown, Marie Turner wasted no time in taking the First Lady up on her offer. Less than one month after the dedication ceremony, Turner visited Washington and had lunch with Mrs. Johnson, who was

[267] *JT*, May 28, August 13, 1964.

apparently "very easy to talk to."[268] The First Lady would later write, "If I had to list the ten best days I've spent in the White House, Thursday, May 21, would certainly be among them." Of Marie Turner, the First Lady said, "A lot of the good in this county must be traced to this one woman."[269] The First Lady's visit to Breathitt County represented just one of many crowning achievements in the long career of "this one woman." But more broadly, Johnson's visit and reflections serve as a stunning display of the influence a superintendent from one of the poorest counties in the nation wielded in national political circles.

For all the excitement the First Lady's visit brought to Breathitt County, schools and roads represented only a fraction of the goods that the Turners delivered during the initial stages of the War on Poverty. In addition to new highways and the woodworking utilization plant at Quicksand, Breathitt County acquired a new county courthouse, replacing the existing edifice that harkened back to the feuding days of "Bloody Breathitt." Thanks to heavy lobbying on the part of the Turners and their allies, county voters approved the courthouse bill with the required two-thirds majority in 1962, paving the way for a new courthouse that would open in 1965 with three-quarters of the costs financed by the federal government. Additionally, the Robinson Substation in Breathitt County was selected as the site of a new plant center that would provide "experimental services for the Appalachian area" in plant cultivation techniques designed to combat erosion and runoff from the effects of road building, strip mining, and over-farming. Finally, Breathitt County received a recreational area in 1965 with the opening of

[268] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982.
[269] Quoted in John R. Burch, Jr., "The Turner Family of Breathitt County, Kentucky and the War on Poverty," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (Summer 2009): 404.

Panbowl Lake, an artificial lake created during construction of the Mountain Parkway by impounding approximately three miles of the North Fork of the Kentucky River. The new lake averaged 12 feet in depth and was stocked with a healthy supply of fish, making it a tourism and recreational boon to the county.[270] The early years of the War on Poverty were a time of rapid growth for Breathitt County thanks to the Turners and Carl Perkins' brand of political liberalism. Although the county remained relatively poor, one could not argue with the roads, schools, and favorable publicity that Breathitt County received. These developments allowed the Turners to maintain power and continue as the undisputed rulers of Breathitt County.

Federal welfare spending received a significant boost with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 that created the OEO. In line with the War on Poverty's mantra of "maximum feasible participation of the poor," the OEO reiterated that its purpose was not to provide a dole from the federal government, but to provide a "hand up" rather than a "hand out."[271] Additionally, President Johnson signed the Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA) that same year, guaranteeing that the ailing region would get its fair share of funding. The bill, Johnson remarked, "is the truest example of creative federalism in our times," thereby acknowledging that local, state, and federal cooperation would be essential for optimal results.[272] The Turners worked best with this type of creative federalism, particularly with Ned Breathitt occupying the governor's mansion. In December of that year, OEO head Sargent Shriver revealed that nearly $10.5 million (one-eighth of the total allocated to all 50 states) would be going to Kentucky to fund

[270] *JT*, December 6, 1962, October 4, 1963, March 25, July 1, 1965.
[271] Burch, *Owsley County Kentucky*, 94-95.
[272] Quoted in Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 86-87.

public assistance payments, medical care, employment, education, conservation, and community action programs.[273]

Though most historians agree that the War on Poverty failed to produce comprehensive reform, Breathitt County reaped many benefits in the program's early years. In the summer of 1965, Breathitt County received $82,000 from the Head Start Program to aid 470 underprivileged children, along with a $10,500 allotment for the Youth Corps to enroll 75 unemployed young persons, with Breathitt County's youth project being one of only six in the state that year.[274] The county fared even better in 1966. Highway improvement and construction received $10.3 million in federal and state funds. Education received $1.2 million, with over $900,000 going toward teacher salaries. In health and welfare, an average of 4,125 Breathitt Countians participated in the Food Stamp Program, while an average of 2,610 people received $1.4 million in assistance payments for the needy, aged, blind, and disabled families with dependent children. Breathitt farmers received a delivery of 82,500 tree seedlings, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture distributed $15,202 worth of surplus foods, the Department of Fish and Wildlife stocked 2,300 fish in local ponds and lakes, and the Department of Mines and Minerals inspected 32 local mines as the coal industry slowly ticked upward. The county also received funding for two municipal housing projects that would provide a total of 32 units.[275] In February of 1967, Governor Breathitt "set up" state government in the new Breathitt County courthouse as a sign of respect for the county where he began his campaign four years earlier. While in Jackson, he dedicated a $155,000 public

[273] *JT*, December 31, 1964.
[274] *JT*, May 20, 1965.
[275] *JT*, January 19, March 30, 1967.

assistance building and reported that the county "has benefitted to the total amount of $3,869,021 in 1966 from the Kentucky Department of Economic Security."[276]

Breathitt Countians also appreciated what the War on Poverty was doing for them. In some cases, a regular paycheck was the difference in putting food on the table or keeping families from relocating. Other programs gave residents a chance to complete their high school education. One man from the Morris Fork community wrote to Carl Perkins in 1969 thanking him for his efforts. "I don't know what I would do without this work[.] I have bought a home and got my high school diploma and without it I would have had to left here to have fed my children…There is no work here of any kind and it is really helping and without it we couldn't stay here."[277] A Jackson resident wrote,

> I want to put in a word for all the programs that are going on in Breathitt County and Kentucky. Before they started business was poor. They have been a good thing for everyone. A lot of children can go to school now that couldn't go before. They are also in better health now. The people have more and they dress better.[278]

Even children praised the War on Poverty. One 5th grade student wrote to the congressman, "I think this government project has helped a big lot. It has helped my little brother, my little sister, and me to get to go to school…It has helped me and my family get food to eat. It helps us to get clothes to wear."[279] Just as in the New Deal days, most Breathitt County residents were genuinely appreciative of the government's efforts to improve lives.

Breathitt County's support of the War on Poverty also showed on election day, when most voters continued to support the Democratic coalition the Turner family had built. In

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[276] Harrell, *The Public Papers of Governor Edward T. Breathitt,* 231-233; *JT*, February 9, 1967.
[277] Anonymous to Carl Perkins, 1969, Box C-099, Folder 5, Perkins Papers.
[278] Anonymous to Carl Perkins, Ibid.
[279] Anonymous to Carl Perkins, Ibid.

the 1966 general election, Breathitt County polled the greatest Democratic margin of any of Kentucky's 120 counties. Carl Perkins recorded more votes than anyone on the ballot in Breathitt County, a clear mark of approval for the veteran congressman. Breathitt County school board candidates ran unopposed and Marie Turner's hold over the school system remained intact. Most county residents continued to vote the straight Democratic ticket, even when popular Republicans were on the ballot. For example, senator John Sherman Cooper's reelection bid against John Y. Brown Sr. saw the incumbent triumph by nearly 30 points in the statewide race. Cooper lost only seven counties in the state, yet his margin of loss in Breathitt (1,086) was his largest in any Kentucky county.[280]

Breathitt Countians were also reminded of the benefits bestowed by the Democratic Party. A campaign ad in 1967 showed that from 1960 to 1967 under Democratic administrations in Frankfort and Washington, the county received direct benefits of more than $54 million in state facilities and programs. Highway construction and improvements had been allotted more than $21 million, and Marie Turner's educational reforms scored over $9.3 million.[281] Even as the Democratic Party moved to the left in the 1960s, the conservative citizens of Breathitt County remained loyal to the Party, a sign that personal political relationships meant much more than ideological compatibility. The Turners had created a Democratic stronghold in their home county, and it showed few signs of slowing.

A War Within A War

As the 1960s wore on, however, opposition from inside and outside Breathitt County targeted the War on Poverty and, by extension, the Turner family. In early 1966, Haynes

[280] *JT*, November 10, 1966; *C-J*, November 9, 1966.
[281] *JT*, October 26, 1967.

Johnson of the *Washington Star* published a shocking expose on Breathitt County's War on Poverty. Johnson heavily criticized the "Happy Pappy" program that provided work experience, training programs, and medical care to unemployed fathers. According to Johnson, the Happy Pappy program in Breathitt and 12 other counties in the area received more than $1.1 million each month, with some fathers receiving up to $250 a month. This kind of assistance was well and good, but most families he surveyed had little intention of going off the program. Some men received their checks in the mail and had been receiving them for almost two years with no time limitations. The Happy Pappy education programs were well received, but most funding went toward work programs that employed men in menial jobs such as digging ditches and cutting trees. For Johnson, "The way things are in Breathitt County, from the firmly entrenched power structure to the litter of stripped automobiles in the creeks, is, one feels, the way things will continue to be."[282]

Johnson heavily criticized this "entrenched power structure" and directly targeted the Turner family that, in his view, carried out the economic programs with a "lackadaisical air." When Johnson visited the local poverty office, he found that the local director (Turner family member Jerry F. Howell) was vacationing in Florida and that the office was usually staffed by only a secretary. He learned that the War on Poverty was a family affair in Breathitt County, with much of the funding channeled through the family-owned Citizens Bank where Ervine Turner served as president, Marie Turner as director, son-in-law Jeff Howell as assistant cashier, and his brother Jerry as cashier. With the Turner family running most of the poverty programs, Johnson reported that the poor were not

[282] Haynes Johnson, "Happy Pappies and the Poverty War," 935-936; "Kentucky Poverty War a Cruel Hoax," *Human Events*, Vol. 26, Issue 8 (February 19, 1966): 6.

deeply involved in the county's relief programs, though this was not necessarily unique to Breathitt County. To address such accusations, Marie Turner offered this underwhelming argument: "Any time you have 15 people together you've involved a lot of poor people in this part of the world." On his visit to the remote community of Little Creek, accessible only by a narrow wooden footbridge, Johnson encountered impoverished and bitter residents who believed the county machine "is not interested in them or their needs."[283]

But for all these shortcomings, Johnson also acknowledged the important and beneficial roles the Turner family played. One Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) worker described Marie Turner as a "really dedicated woman" and claimed, "A lot of people swear at her, and some swear by her. I swear by her. She gets things done." Johnson emphasized Marie Turner's educational achievements, which had built "one of the best" systems in eastern Kentucky. But he questioned whether machine politics was the most effective way of dealing with poverty. Ultimately, he expressed "little hope for a basic change" in Breathitt County, where "new elements have been grafted onto the old system."[284]

Johnson's article did not go unnoticed by the Turner family, who were understandably dismayed at the journalist's findings. Ervine Turner even voiced his concerns to Carl Perkins in a phone call, which prompted the congressman to reassure the judge, who was at the time vacationing in Florida. Perkins wrote to Ervine, "I agree there is some cause for a feeling of resentment, but taken as a whole, it appears to be more critical of the Washington policy than it is of you and your friends in Breathitt County." Perkins also emphasized Johnson's praise of Marie for her work in education and the favorable

[283] Ibid., 936-937.
[284] Ibid.

compliments given by the VISTA worker. As he tried to console Ervine, Perkins again blamed the article on Washington policymakers:

> There is a concerted drive to discredit the entire OEO program, undoubtedly politically motivated, but the newspapers appear more anxious to lay the blame for all political activity on the administration without even admitting that a substantial part of the criticism in this program is itself politically motivated. It is always a pleasure to hear from you and I know that it is not necessary to tell you that I am wholeheartedly in accord with your efforts to keep the War on Poverty on the move in Breathitt County.[285]

The judge, evidently unpersuaded, responded by incriminating his political opponents in Breathitt County. "I think these investigations [were] started in Breathitt by the Republicans, and some two of three democrats who should be your friends."[286]

These exchanges between Ervine Turner and Perkins highlighted both the increasing fragility of the Turner machine's hold on politics in Breathitt County and the growing paranoia of the aging judge. Unlike in previous decades, county politics in eastern Kentucky did not operate in a vacuum. The coming of the War on Poverty brought increased attention to impoverished regions of America, but it also heightened scrutiny, to which even the Turners were not impervious. Politicians like Ervine Turner, accustomed to running county politics on their own terms, faced growing criticism from new directions. In this new age of political accountability, protectors of the old guard were understandably shaken by affronts to their authority.

Haynes Johnson would not be the only journalist to expose the inner workings of the Turner machine. Later in 1966, Breathitt County again attracted national attention when Earl Stacy, a father of 16 children and Happy Pappy worker, was served a warrant by the Breathitt County school board and Marie Turner for not sending his children to school.

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[285] Carl Perkins to Ervine Turner, January 24, 1966, Box D-050, Folder 8, Perkins Papers.
[286] Ervine Turner to Carl Perkins, January 31, 1966, Ibid.

Appearing in newspapers as far away as St. Louis, the Associated Press reported that Stacy, a resident of the Quicksand community, refused to send his children to classes because they did not have convenient access to a bus stop. Stacy reported that his children would walk more than five miles each day to the bus stop, which involved traversing a narrow footbridge and a deep creek that often flooded. In the winter months, children were forced to navigate in the dark. The warrant stipulated that failure to comply could result in jail time for Stacy and a loss of more than half of his $250 allotment from the Happy Pappy program each month, sacrifices the father was reportedly willing to make for the safety of his children. When asked about the incident, Marie Turner stated that the school board was required to issue the warrant under state law, and that school buses could not access the Quicksand community because of a lack of funding. At the time of the article, the Stacy children were being taught in their home by a VISTA worker.[287]

The Earl Stacy case caught the attention of other journalists as well. James Daniel, a reporter for *The Reader's Digest* in Pleasantville, New York, was on a tour of West Virginia with an AV worker when he learned of Earl Stacy's conflict. Daniel traveled to Breathitt County and spent two days interviewing locals. Like Haynes Johnson, Daniel witnessed firsthand the county's crippling poverty and found that most people expressed a distrust of the entrenched power structure. He was deeply moved by what he saw and even wrote letters to Carl Perkins and the White House, imploring national leaders to consider other avenues for dealing with poverty. Daniel wrote to Perkins, "I was told in Jackson by a very honest man, a minor official, that all the government programs are

[287] *St. Louis-Dispatch*, September 25, 1966.

having the effect of making the rich richer and the poor poorer… The growing wealth of the Marie Turner family was pointed out to me by all the people I saw." While many constituents acknowledged that the Turners had done "a lot of good since the New Deal days," Daniel expressed doubt if the costs outweighed the benefits. In a rather scathing indictment of the Turner machine, he continued:

> Personally, after my trip to Jackson I wonder if there aren't some horrible social costs that have to be paid for enriching the power structure there in Breathitt County. For one thing, it seems obvious that you have a political system based on bribery and corruption. I have on tape interviews with people who describe in detail how the poor people are coerced to vote the way the machine wants them to by threats to withhold relief money.

According to interviewees, votes were bought for two dollars a head or simply a pint of whiskey. In Daniel's view, this "hankypanky" approach to governance was unacceptable and prompted him to probe deeper into the case of Earl Stacy.[288]

Stacy was certainly not the only person in Breathitt County who ever refrained from sending his children to school. Even into the 1960s, the isolation of many communities and lack of a consistent truancy program left ample room for circumventing attendance policies. In many cases, parents still relied on their children for farm work, which begged the question: Why would the Turners target Earl Stacy? Daniel found his answer, ironically, at the Breathitt County courthouse, the domain of the Turner machine and a symbol of their influence over county politics. Fortunately for Daniel, Ervine and Marie Turner were vacationing in Florida and county judge and first cousin Sam P. Deaton was away because of a death in the family. Had any members of the Turner political circle been present, it is unlikely they would have permitted Daniel to examine court records. The reporter found that the Turner family and Earl Stacy had come to a compromise that

[288] James Daniel to Carl Perkins, February 22, 1967, Box D-066, Folder 13, Perkins Papers.

did not require the Stacy children to go to school. The real conflict centered around Stacy's land at Quicksand, known to house significant coal deposits and ideally located in a bottomland easily accessible for strip mining. Daniel reasoned, "The only possible conclusion is that the school program and the Happy Pappies and in fact the whole machinery of local, state, and Federal power in Breathitt was being consciously manipulated to do one poor man out of his property so as to line the pockets of the power structure."[289]

Though Daniel found no definitive evidence that the Turners' compromise with Earl Stacy centered around mineral rights to his land, it was widely known that Ervine Turner had amassed a sizable fortune over the years by purchasing plots of land known to have significant coal deposits. John Ed Pearce of *The Courier-Journal* knew the Turner family quite intimately during the 1960s and 1970s and even dated Treva Howell's daughter Jackie for a brief period. According to Pearce, Ervine Turner owned more than 10,000 acres, including one piece of land that amounted to $25,000 in monthly loans. As the coal industry in eastern Kentucky resurged in the mid-1960s, the Turner family benefitted tremendously. William Sturgill, a coal operator from Hazard, allegedly asked Ervine Turner which lands he owned, to which the judge replied, "I own what others don't."[290]

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[289] Ibid.

[290] John Ed Pearce, interview. William Sturgill, president of Falcon Coal Company and described by Harry Caudill as "Mr. Coal," was one of the largest and most controversial strip mine operators in eastern Kentucky. In 1965, Ollie "Widow" Combs famously laid down in front of a bulldozer to protest Sturgill's company from mining her land, while Senator Robert Kennedy visited a Sturgill mine on his tour of Appalachia in 1968. Sturgill mined a considerable amount of the Turner family's property in Breathitt County, and Treva Howell later encouraged Sturgill to donate coal to families on welfare when she headed the local community action agency. In Breathitt County, Sturgill also experimented with a new method of mining that proved even more devastating to the environment. Instead of cutting a small wedge out of the mountainside, the new method removed the entire mountaintop, creating a large and fairly level piece of land. The method did help prevent flooding, but drew the ire of Harry Caudill, who said, "It is like saying it's better to cut off a man's head than to scalp him." Sturgill later said, "I have no apologies for strip mining." He later became Kentucky's Energy and Agriculture Secretary, a tenure also mired in controversy. See, Harry Caudill, *Theirs Be the Power: The Moguls of Eastern Kentucky* (Urbana:

Sturgill later served on the board of Citizens Bank and mined Turner property that produced more than one million tons of coal, from which the Turners received a royalty of 25 cents a ton that incrementally increased over time. Larry Kelley, an attorney who worked briefly in Jackson at the law firm of the Turner family's personal attorney, A. Dale Bryant, heard rumors that Judge Turner allegedly doled out light sentences in exchange for mineral rights on property owned by defendants' families.[291] Even former governor Ned Breathitt acknowledged that the Turners had extensive coal interests, recalling that John Raymond Turner, then serving as a state senator, was the swing vote on Breathitt's landmark anti-strip mining bill.[292]

The Haynes Johnson and James Daniel exposés coincided with a resistance movement from within Breathitt County that challenged the Turner power structure, making 1966 a trying year for the family in the midst of the War on Poverty. That year saw the formation of the Grassroots Citizens Committee for Action, which subsequently launched the *Grassroots Gossip* newsletter, created and published by the AVs. The committee appealed to eastern Kentuckians frustrated with the War on Poverty's lack of progress and sought to "relieve the suffering of people that has been forced upon then [sic] by the power structure." Members advocated for political freedom and law and order, stating,

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University of Illinois Press, 1983), 152-154; John Ed Pearce, "Symbol of Controversy," *The Courier-Journal and Times Magazine*, February 7, 1971, 8-15.

[291] Larry Kelley, interview by William E. Ellis, October 20, 1986, MRT Oral History Project. Interestingly, Kelley completed significant research for a book on the Turner family in the early-1970s at the request of Marie Turner, who wanted to preserve her family's legacy. After completing a lengthy manuscript, the book was scrapped by Marie, who was displeased with the book's progress and, according to Kelley, suffered a serious setback with the death of her invalid daughter, Lois. The project was ultimately terminated in 1974.

[292] Edward T. Breathitt, interview. According to Breathitt, John Raymond Turner initially voted against the governor's strip mine bill, but after persuasion from his mother, switched his allegiance. The bill passed by a single vote. Though this move likely cost the family money because of their coal holdings, Governor Breathitt believed that Marie realized the importance of the bill. Turner's move was a sign that personal interests did not always trump the family's desire to improve their native region.

"The House of Law is the dominating structure in the institutional settlement that we call the civilization in which we live… Is your vote worthless because of some unknown political scheme, casting it aside where it won't be counted?" In what appeared to be a direct indictment of the Turner machine, the newsletter continued, "What do we call an invironment [sic] where we don't have the right to speak or vote as we wish for fear of loosing [sic] our income."[293]

Anonymous letters were common in the *Grassroots Gossip,* as the Turners were notorious for relocating or terminating employers on county or school payrolls for perceived acts of political disloyalty. To call out the Turners on their political practices could have consequences that most were not willing to risk. One anonymous contributor wrote, "How can a political group so small be so cruel to this vast number of people in Eastern Kentucky… They do not have the freedom to vote as they would like, and can't speak for themselves. The strong rule of power keeps them down." Another contributor, however, chose to publish his identity. Willard Short was an unemployed father with the Happy Pappy program and, like Haynes Johnson, believed the program was mired in politics. Short acknowledged that politics was "the life-blood of the county" and that it "touches everything and everyone," yet he challenged machine politics in what seemed a clear reference to the Turners. "In conclusion I will say that things will never get better as long as the county officials are one big happy family that runs things like they want it."[294]

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[293] *Grassroots Gossip*, Vol 1., No. 5, Box D-047, Folder 7, Perkins Papers. Formation of the Grassroots Citizens Committee for Action reflects what Margaret Ripley Wolfe has described as a "fleeting interlude of grassroots activism," in which locals "embraced participatory democracy" by attending community meetings, creating citizens' organizations, and publishing newsletters. These concerned citizens now "looked to the nation's capital" for support, a shift that spelled trouble for local elites like the Turner family. See, Wolfe, "The War on Poverty in Eastern Kentucky," 37.
[294] *Grassroots Gossip*, Ibid.

The Turners remained in touch with the county and its people, and a publication of this nature was unlikely to go unnoticed by the family. In a letter to Carl Perkins that included a copy of the *Grassroots Gossip,* Marie Turner simply wrote, "The AV are trying to change the political thinking in this county from Democratic to Republican."[295] In this rare occurrence, Marie Turner denounced a War on Poverty program that she otherwise supported wholeheartedly, perhaps a sign that her allegiance to President Johnson's program only went so far. When federal policies threatened the status quo of county politics, the Turners proved far more critical of government programs. Again, Carl Perkins consoled Marie Turner in much the same way he had Ervine after publication of Haynes Johnson's article. He wrote:

> There is a lot of agitation of this type going on throughout the whole area at the present time. I, personally, am proud of your school system and feel you have done a wonderful job in administering the school funds down there, and perhaps more individuals have gone on to college from Breathitt County than any other county. The record speaks for itself. Please give my best wishes to your husband, and I hope I will have the opportunity to see you both within the next few weeks.[296]

In this case, Marie Turner perceived the AVs as a clear and impending threat to the Democratic coalition she had worked so hard to build. The AVs did not radically alter county politics in the short term, but their presence proved more than a minor disruption and had serious implications that Marie Turner recognized. As Thomas Kiffmeyer has noted, "The hold that the local power/information brokers had was not as tight as they believed, and some of that power certainly slipped through their fingers."[297]

Marie Turner's frustrations with the AVs were not exclusive to the Turner family. The Breathitt County Development Council adopted a resolution in September 1967 to purge

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[295] Marie Turner to Carl Perkins, August 15, 1966, Ibid.
[296] Perkins to Marie Turner, Ibid.
[297] Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 215.

AV workers from the county on the premise that the volunteers engaged in "constant efforts to cause trouble in the community," though no specific acts of "trouble" were outlined.[298] In many ways, Marie Turner proved more amiable to AV workers who were otherwise viewed as disruptors by politicians in neighboring counties. Even some contributors to the *Grassroots Gossip* acknowledged this fact, noting that Marie Turner allowed the AVs to use a rural schoolhouse for a social function after the superintendent in neighboring Owsley County had denied the request.[299] On the whole, Marie Turner was receptive to outside efforts that she believed would uplift the county. There always remained, however, the difficult challenge of balancing this influx of ambitious reformers with the status quo.

Given the circumstances, Marie and Ervine Turner managed these complex and frustrating challenges quite successfully. The Turners remained adaptable and did not crumble against damning accusations. Marie Turner continued to lobby for increased funding in education even as she approached the age of 70, the mandatory retirement age for Kentucky superintendents. According to Larry Kelley, after nearly forty years in power, "Queen Marie" seemed nearly impervious to any form of political criticism. Kelley even compared her to Ronald Reagan for having a "Teflon" quality and image at the height of her power.[300] Even as Ervine Turner's health declined in the late-1960s, the Turner machine was at its peak. The War on Poverty continued, and so did the family's ambition for bringing renewal to Breathitt County.

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[298] *JT*, September 21, 1967.
[299] *Grassroots Gossip*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Box D-047, Folder 7, Perkins Papers.
[300] Larry Kelley, interview.

Late Successes

Amidst these trying times, Marie Turner forged ahead with her agenda for educational reform. She continued to innovate in her final years as superintendent, constantly seeking out new opportunities for her students. Turner had never been afraid of calling on outsiders for assistance; in most cases, she welcomed outsiders and the diversity they could bring to her school system. In 1968 she hired Philip Thomas Riforgiato, a native of New York who received a master's degree from the University of Kentucky at age 23. Wanting to "get out of Lexington," Riforgiato sent an application to Marie Turner, who hired and placed him at the Happy Hollow School in the remote community of John Little's Creek. Riforgiato promptly accepted the offer and began renting a house with no indoor plumbing for $25 a month. Afraid that locals might be suspicious of him, the devout Catholic assumed the name "Mr. Thomas" and, when asked, insisted he was Unitarian because "they don't know what that is."[301]

Mr. Thomas quickly learned that he was dealing with students who lived in rural isolation and abject poverty. In his class of 17, some had never left Breathitt County, and most considered it an exciting journey to make the 16-mile drive to Jackson. Others could not identify whether Lexington or Louisville were cities, states, or whether they were even a part of Kentucky. Though Thomas did not intend to stay at Happy Hollow beyond the current school year, he developed meaningful relationships with his students and exposed them to a variety of cultural mediums, frequently taking them to outdoor movies and even on occasional trips to Lexington. Mr. Thomas introduced his students to the music of Bob Dylan and Don Costa, encouraged them to sing Kentucky folk songs, and

[301] Gayle Griffith, "Mr. Thomas of Happy Hollow," *The Courier-Journal and Times Magazine*, November 10, 1968, 9-18.

showed video reenactments of Columbus discovering America. Though some students had no intention of pursuing high school, their brief time with Mr. Thomas afforded them unique and memorable opportunities.[302]

The case of Mr. Thomas shows that Marie Turner did not abandon the one-room schoolhouses left in her school system. But she also focused on larger consolidated schools. The high point of the War on Poverty's later years, something that Turner would later identify as her greatest achievement in her 38 years as an educator, was the opening of a multi-million dollar school for the 1967-68 school year, a project conceived in the aftermath of Lady Bird Johnson's visit to Breathitt County in 1964. The new school was made possible by the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. which appropriated more than $1 billion for educational improvements across the nation. Title I of the Act stipulated "categorical aid for the children of the poor in the slums and depressed rural areas," making it particularly useful for Breathitt County and Marie Turner.[303] Turner, however, had trouble securing the necessary Title I funds from the Kentucky Department of Education, which, according to Turner, never prioritized the needs of rural schools. When the state would not approve funding, Turner went straight to Carl Perkins, who chaired the House's general education subcommittee. The funds were approved and plans for the $1.3 million school were announced in November of 1965.[304]

The new consolidated school would not follow traditional classroom protocol. The modern facility, later named LBJ Elementary in honor of President Johnson, would follow an open-classroom format. Students would not progress from grade to grade, but

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[302] Ibid.
[303] Hugh Davis Graham, *The Uncertain Triumph: Federal Education Policy in the Kennedy and Johnson Years* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 73-79.
[304] Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982; *JT*, November 18, 1965.

be placed in an open space with up to 100 students and multiple teachers. This setup supposedly provided a more efficient means of finding each student's interests and abilities, and would enable the movement of pupils from place to place based on their performance. According to Marie Turner, "The entire purpose of the new school is designed to give students flexibility of attitude and mind. We believe that boys and girls should have the opportunity to study subjects and processes in which they can be successful." Turner also believed traditional learning too restrictive and emphasized learning as a process that began with birth and continued to death. The open classroom format would better facilitate natural and organic learning while encouraging students to pursue their own interests.[305]

This setup was also meant to provide teachers with professional development opportunities, in which young and inexperienced teachers could learn from their more experienced colleagues.[306] Frances Johnson, a Breathitt County native and Columbia University graduate who had taught at Little Red School and previously headed the Title I and Head Start programs, was selected by Marie Turner to be principal of LBJ Elementary. Johnson began reading on the open classroom setup and sent teachers to conferences to train them in this new style of teaching. She later reflected that the open classroom format in LBJ was extremely effective because it combined the open classroom with more traditional modes of teaching. The new format also benefitted teachers; in the open classroom format, there was no hiding, and it encouraged everyone to improve their skills. Indeed, LBJ Elementary won an Outstanding Educational Innovation Award from Governor Louie Nunn, was recognized as one of the best schools

[305] *JT,* November 11, 1967.
[306] *JT*, March 16, 1967.

in Kentucky, and attracted visitors from across the state, nation, and world.[307] The school became a Title I success story and by 1973 served one-third of the county's elementary school students, 87 percent of which came from families below the poverty line. At the school, students received a hot breakfast and lunch each day, could bathe and wash their clothes during school hours, enjoyed color television in the school's theatre, and girls could even have their hair fixed in a beauty salon staffed by community volunteers.[308] The school was not formally dedicated until 1972, three years after Marie Turner's retirement, but the modern facility represented the political matriarch's ultimate contribution to Breathitt County education.

Conclusion

Breathitt County's War on Poverty was one of triumph and defeat, promise and disappointment. Like the War on Poverty on the state and national levels, Breathitt County's story was one of uneven progress. The county experienced growth in roads and schools and acquired several important facilities of lasting economic benefit. But woodworking facilities, fishing lakes, and basketball gymnasiums could never rescue Breathitt County from the crippling poverty that had become a way of life for generations of people. Faith in growth-based development to eliminate poverty, according to Ronald Eller, "effectively disenfranchises poorer people and rural people and further displaces our collective responsibilities for the land and for each other onto the vagaries of the market and onto the best intentions of bureaucrats."[309] The Turner family insisted that more roads, more schools, and more economic growth could alleviate poverty, but it was

[307] Frances Collins Johnson, interview.
[308] *C-J*, January 26, 1973.
[309] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 7.

a kind of growth that never sought to address deep-seated structural inequalities that by the 1960s made up the political, economic, and social fabric of Breathitt County and eastern Kentucky. In terms of numbers, the War on Poverty treated Breathitt County quite well. But the War on Poverty itself grew too large, was grossly underfunded, and could never hope to realistically achieve its goals in the short span of four years. To say it was doomed from the very beginning would deny its policymakers the benefit of historical hindsight, but even President Johnson himself expressed doubt that the War on Poverty could achieve his ambitious goals in the tumultuous 1960s.

For the Turner family, their own War on Poverty was also a mixed bag of achievement, disappointment, and frustration. They faced criticism at nearly every juncture for their controversial brand of politics. It was a crude and sometimes brutal way of exerting power, but it would be misguided to squarely place blame on the Turners for the failure of Breathitt County's War on Poverty. As the conservative news outlet *Human Events* commented, "If the War on Poverty supporters and critics agree on one thing, it is that the program has been used (or misused) and has enormous potential as a grab bag for patronage and other rewards by the politicians."[310] The War on Poverty itself was a gigantic political machine, and the Turners manipulated the leviathan along with hundreds of other politicians across the country. The family's political connections brought the First Lady and millions of dollars in federal funding into the county, something most other eastern Kentucky counties could not claim. Had Hubert Humphrey or Robert Kennedy become president in 1968, perhaps Breathitt County and the nation's

[310] "Politicians, Patronage, and the Poor," *Human Events*, Vol. 26, Issue 35 (August 27, 1966): 10.

War on Poverty would have turned out quite differently.[311] The rise of Louie Nunn in late-1967 and Richard Nixon in 1968 brought most poverty programs to a screeching halt, although the OEO and community action programs continued in reduced capacities. This conservative turn in Frankfort and Washington was a devastating blow to the Turners, who could no longer rely on cozy relations in the executive branch. The remnants of the War on Poverty thereafter turned into an all-out war between the Turner family and the forces of modern conservatism.

[311] Before his assassination, Democratic presidential candidate Robert Kennedy made a trip to eastern Kentucky in February 1968, including a brief stop in Breathitt County. The visit's purpose was to "find out in the next two days whether these government programs have been successful, whether our fellow citizens are getting enough to eat." Though Kennedy insisted that "the welfare program is not the answer to our problem," he also made a commitment to continue addressing eastern Kentucky's poverty issues if elected. See, *JT*, February 15, 1968.

CHAPTER 5: THE FALL OF THE TURNER MACHINE, 1968-1973

"It just isn't worth it anymore."

-Treva Turner Howell on the future of the Turner machine

That the Turner family managed to direct so many government dollars into Breathitt County during the War on Poverty compared to neighboring counties with similar economic circumstances is a testament to the powerful political connections that the family had cultivated over a lifetime. But by the end of the 1960s, powerful forces from outside Breathitt County, coupled with heightened accusations of corruption, brought the Turner machine to its knees. A conservative shift in the state and national political climate, marked by the rise of Richard Nixon and Louie Nunn, left New Deal liberalism and the Turner family on life support. The latter years of the 1960s showed the limits of what the Turner machine could accomplish and raised serious questions about the viability of political machines in general.

The family suffered a tremendous setback with the death of Ervine Turner. After resigning his position as circuit judge in 1967 because of health problems, the 79-year-old passed in May of 1968 after a heart attack. The judge's death made state headlines, with *The Courier-Journal* remarking that Ervine and Marie "parlayed the New Deal Democratic politics of the Depression into a political dynasty whose influence has been felt throughout the state."[312] An estimated 1,500 people attended his funeral service at the Memorial Coliseum dedicated just four years earlier by Lady Bird Johnson, and floral offerings numbering more than 500 came from across the nation, including the White

[312] *C-J*, May 24, 1968.

House. One teacher, Bertha Watts, eulogized the late judge as her "second father" who showed compassion, patience, and rationality throughout his lifetime.[313]

Figure 6. Ervine Turner and his granddaughter Jackie shortly before the judge's death in 1968.

The Courier-Journal and Times Magazine.

Not everyone may have agreed with Watts' statement, yet there is no doubt that Ervine Turner had become a masterful practitioner of poverty politics. His "let's take care of our people" attitude had resonated with the people of Breathitt County for decades. With his death, the family no longer controlled courthouse politics and the political patronage that came with it. Though commonwealth's attorney and Turner ally J. Douglas Graham succeeded Ervine Turner as circuit judge and later claimed that he was closer to Judge Turner than anyone else, there could be no substitute for the political acumen of the late judge.[314] Furthermore, Graham was from neighboring Wolfe County and could not be relied upon to put the interests of Breathitt County first in the ways that Ervine had. With Ervine's passing, the Turner machine had lost its behind-the-scenes

[313] *JT*, May 30, 1968.
[314] *JT*, June 6, 1968; J. Douglas Graham, interview.

manipulator who for more than half a century had been instrumental in the Turner machine's success.

Maximum Feasible Participation?

Beginning in late-1967 with the ascension of Republican Louie Nunn to the governor's mansion, the Turners could no longer count on a political ally in Frankfort. Unlike Democratic candidates, Nunn did not rely on the Turners for political support and had little to lose from taking on the powerful family. He brought in several prominent national Republicans during his campaign against Henry Ward, who, according to Marie Turner, "could never get in the saddle and couldn't ride" when it came to campaigning. Ward was an underwhelming candidate and helped Nunn become Kentucky's first Republican governor in 21 years.[315] According to Jessica Wilkerson, Nunn "renounced the theory of big government and little people, which he linked back to the founding of New Deal programs." Nunn and a growing chorus of Republicans thought that public assistance represented a "decline in the American work ethic" and contributed to moral decay.[316] Nunn criticized the War on Poverty for encouraging pork barrel politics and called out Carl Perkins who, though well-intended, used politics to keep himself in power and did "more harm to the mountains of eastern Kentucky than any single person."[317]

When the Nixon Administration began phasing out many War on Poverty programs, Nunn took aim at the Turner family's power. In 1969, Breathitt County's War on Poverty devolved into an all-out war between the governor's allies and the Turner family. The

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[315] Robert F. Sexton and Al Cross, "Louie B. Nunn," in *Kentucky's Governors*, 207; Marie Turner, interview, July 20, 1979.
[316] Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have To Fight*, 70-71.
[317] Louie Nunn, interview by Thomas J. Kiffmeyer, July 6, 1993, War on Poverty Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky.

conflict centered around Marie and Ervine's daughter Treva Howell, who by the late-1960s served as assistant superintendent in her mother's administration and was one of four members who sat on the powerful State Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Committee, which regulated federal farm programs and subsidies. Through a series of political maneuvers by the Turner family, in 1969 Treva was appointed executive director of the Middle Kentucky River Area Development Council (MKRADC), a community action committee created in 1961 and acquired in 1964 by the OEO.[318]

From the onset, Howell's appointment as head of MKRADC was shrouded in controversy. The previous director, Roland Sebastian, had a reputation for running the agency's meetings in less-than-democratic ways, sometimes adding board members' names to the meeting minutes at the last minute in order to achieve a quorum and thus allow the committee to make decisions.[319] After Governor Nunn removed Sebastian from office and the likelihood of Treva Howell succeeding him seemed imminent, some members of the community expressed concern about the future of MKRADC. Clyde Pence even wrote to President Nixon to warn against appointing Howell head of MKRADC. "There are several good people that have applied for this position and of course they did not stand a chance since the executive committee is controlled by the local Democratic machine…I feel that the time has come to get some of the jobs in qualified hands, rather than the family." Pence emphasized the value of community action programs like MKRADC and their potential for bringing economic relief to the poor, but lamented that "behind the scenes shenanigans" were a "disgrace."[320] Pence's

[318] For the intricacies of the rigged election process that saw Treva Howell become head of MKRADC, see Burch, "Turner Family of Breathitt County," 407-408.
[319] Ibid., 406.
[320] Clyde Pence to Richard Nixon, February 12, 1969, Box D-078, Folder 6, Perkins Papers.

concerns prompted a response from OEO regional director W. Astor Kirk, who also expressed concerns about MKRADC. He wrote, "We have been concerned with this CAA's [community action agency] inability to effectively come to grips with the basic causes of poverty." However, Kirk said there was no evidence that indicated the selection process was inherently flawed.[321] Treva Howell took charge of MKRADC.

In her position as executive director, Howell oversaw disbursement of OEO funds for MKRADC and its four-county area. Conveniently, federal funds were deposited in Citizens Bank, allowing the family to keep a close eye on how funds were disbursed. Naturally, this practice brought on charges of corruption and even a lawsuit from Governor Nunn. According to Lynn Frazier, state director of the OEO under Nunn, the governor intended to rein in the power of community action agencies that were, in his eyes, mired in local politics and making Kentuckians reliant upon public assistance. Frazier and Nunn immediately worked to discredit Treva Howell and asked that federal OEO funding be cut off until she could be replaced. The two men raised questions about Howell's qualifications for the position, arguing that her affiliation with the state Agriculture Committee and her status as the wife of a wealthy bank executive rendered her incapable of relating to the poor. Indeed, by the late 1960s, a federal report criticized MKRADC's centralized bureaucracy for allegedly not including input from the poor. The War on Poverty's mantra of "maximum feasible participation" had always been difficult to execute, but the concept seemed particularly doomed in Breathitt County.[322]

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[321] W. Ashton Kirk to Clyde Pence, Ibid.

[322] Burch, "The Turner Family of Breathitt County," 409-411; Lynn Frazier, interview by John Glen, November 9, 1990, War on Poverty Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky. According to Frazier, he got along fairly well with Treva Howell despite their disagreements over MKRADC. He even conceded that Howell received "blame for a lot of my problems." However, he criticized the Turner family's "death grip" over the community action agency and the ways they used it for patronage purposes.

Nunn took aim at the cozy relationship by vetoing a $177,000 OEO grant on the grounds that funds deposited in Citizens Bank were benefitting the Turner family. He also pressed Carl Perkins to act, but the congressman supported the Turners, who he still counted on to deliver votes for his reelection campaigns. The governor's veto prompted a national investigation led by OEO chief Donald Rumsfeld and little-known OEO assistant Richard "Dick" Cheney. The pair visited eastern Kentucky and found "no evidence of improprieties." However, John Burch notes that the federal officials dispatched to eastern Kentucky made no intention of finding incriminating evidence against the Turners because, according to one investigator, "Everybody knows that Carl Perkins is the best friend that OEO has got and we are not going to kick our best friend in the teeth." It also did not help matters that Treva Howell accompanied investigators as they traveled throughout the MKRADC service area.[323]

Amidst these proceedings, Howell continued in her duties as head of the community action agency. She stayed in close contact with Perkins, who faced growing pressure from his constituents to do something about the alleged acts of corruption in Breathitt County. One county resident wrote to Perkins: "I felt you did not know the real trouble with the antipoverty program lies with one person Treva Turner Howell. Once the county is rid of her I am sure things will be fine." She further criticized the "Turner dictatorship" for stifling the electoral process, writing, "I feel my forefathers died that I may vote as I see fit, not as 'You vote my way or you don't work in Breathitt Co.' For 40 years that's what we have had."[324] Others, however, continued to support the Turners. One Republican constituent expressed support for Treva Howell in the midst of the

[323] Ibid. See also, *C-J*, July 6, 1969.
[324] Mrs. Fred Deaton to Carl Perkins, August 1969, Box D-078, Folder 6, Perkins Papers.

investigation, saying, "I am confident there is No Other in the four-county area, who could or would do more for this section than she."[325] Publicly, Perkins remained mostly silent on the issue. He remained beholden to the Turner family, but also faced growing criticism from the restless governor. In a letter to the Nunn, Perkins wrote, "I regret that the situation has developed to the point where I must inject myself in this matter…I take no position with respect to the charges you have made."[326]

In August, federal officials called a hearing to settle the dispute. Unsurprisingly, Howell dismissed the charade as a witch hunt and called Lynn Frazier a "blind hog trying to root up an acorn." Howell and her attorney Ed Prichard deemed the investigation a conspiracy by Frazier and Nunn to smear Howell and her work with MKRADC. In a letter to Dick Cheney, the OEO official in charge of arranging the hearing, Prichard said he and his client were not aware that Frazier's office had even filed charges against Howell. In a letter to Treva, Prichard suggested that the charges were being prepared directly by Governor Nunn. Finally, Prichard and Howell later learned that Cheney and Frazier's witnesses would not even be present at the hearing, giving Howell no opportunity to cross examine them. Prichard concluded, "A hearing based upon evidence of this character is almost certain to be farcical at best and to smack of a summary court martial rather than an administrative hearing."[327] At the hearing in neighboring Wolfe County, Frazier deemed the forum a poor place to "discover the true facts" and likely to "end up a whitewash for the local power structure." Frazier asked that the hearing be relocated to "neutral ground" and, when the motion was dismissed, promptly left the

[325] Bertha Watts to Carl Perkins, July 23, 1969, Ibid.
[326] Carl Perkins to Louie Nunn, August 8, 1969, Ibid.
[327] *C-J*, August 20, 1969; Box D-078, Folder 6, Perkins Papers.

meeting. After his exit, a host of witnesses gave Howell "satisfactory" to "excellent" marks for her leadership at MKRADC. Though Frazier's assessments were probably correct, his premature exit from the hearing all but defeated his chances of implicating Howell. In October, Donald Rumsfeld overrode Nunn's veto of the $177,000 OEO grant, which was then disbursed to Howell and MKRADC.[328]

Governor Nunn, however, was far from finished. He appeared before the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Education and Labor in November 1969 to testify on the failure of antipoverty programs in Kentucky and entered numerous affidavits that implicated Treva Howell in the misuse of federal funds. When called to testify before the committee, Howell wasted little time in smearing the governor and his aides as "character assassins, purveyors of perjury, crybabies and cowards." She remarked that Governor Nunn and his "pitiful stooges fled like sheep-killing dogs" in the aftermath of Rumsfeld and Cheney's investigation that cleared her of any wrongdoing, and finally suggested that Nunn and his aides should consult psychiatric treatment and "go see their own headshrinkers."[329] But when asked about how she used the $177,000 OEO grant, Howell offered vague and confusing answers that seemed to affirm the governor's allegations of tampering. Howell testified that MKRADC expended $39,980 toward "conduct and administration" while another $114,005 went toward "community organization," offering no specifics on either count. Furthermore, when asked about how MKRADC disbursed lucrative Head Start funds in 1969, Howell testified that her mother's school system received $83,119 from Head Start. The independent school district in Jackson received $7,712, Owsley County received $24,265, Lee County received $29,876, and Wolfe

[328] *C-J*, August 22, October 4, 1969.
[329] *C-J*, November 14, 1969.

County received $51,500. With Howell's testimony, it became clear that the Breathitt County school system received the overwhelming majority of the funds with little documentation indicating how they were expended.[330]

But in the end, with no concrete evidence of wrongdoing, little came of the governor's crusade against Treva Howell. Some Republicans even came to Howell's aid and denounced Governor Nunn's actions as a politically motivated witch hunt. Republican representative Tim Lee Carter of Kentucky's 5th District, which included Owsley County, commended Howell's "excellent leadership" of MKRADC, which had recently brought a sorghum mill to Owsley County. The community action agency continued its mission to fight poverty, albeit with diminished federal funding, and the agency made some positive changes in its service area. Hunger persisted as a perennial issue in eastern Kentucky, so the agency set aside 20 acres of land for poor families to grow various crops, including sorghum, with the surplus given to other needy families.[331]

MKRADC also oversaw construction of a modular home manufacturing plant in Wolfe County, delivering on a promise made by Treva Howell to provide modular homes for less than $4,000. The new homes sold for $3,999.95 and, when asked about this price at the dedication ceremony for the company's first modular home (a ceremony also attended by Carl Perkins), Howell wryly replied, "That's under $4,000, isn't it?" The homes would be built at the University of Kentucky's Wood Utilization Plant in Breathitt County, with agency leaders hoping that the project would allow poor families the chance

[330] Burch, *Owsley County*, *Kentucky*, 112-117. It is significant that Nunn's testimony came before the congressional committee on which the Turner family's longtime ally Carl D. Perkins sat. On the one hand, Perkins could not alienate the Turners since he still relied on them to deliver votes in his home district, but he also did not want to offend national Republicans as he tried to secure a two-year extension of OEO funding.
[331] *C-J*, July 6, 25, 1970.

to become homeowners. Yet MKRADC hit another snag when the Farmers Home Administration (FHA)—a federal agency designed to assist aspiring homeowners unable to obtain bank financing—told MKRADC that it would not finance homes for persons on welfare or enrolled in job-training programs. The FHA also found that the modular homes in question did not meet federal regulations, were shoddily built, and were too "shotgunish" in design. Howell did manage to salvage the home-loan program by securing a $40,000 grant from the OEO's Atlanta headquarters, which provided financing for 30 low-income families, but this outcome was hardly one that Howell and MKRADC originally envisioned.[332]

Nearly every major MKRADC project conducted under Treva Howell's leadership faced backlash and controversy. The fiery-tempered Howell lacked the grace and charm of her mother and proved less able politically. She inherited her mother and father's political connections but was unable to deliver in ways that her parents had. When faced with criticism, she often turned callous, evidenced by her tirade against Governor Nunn and his "pitiful stooges." Although Howell was vigorous in her antipoverty efforts during her time as head of MKRADC, they did little to decrease poverty rates in Breathitt County. This was not entirely Howell's fault, since the community action agency suffered from inadequate funding and resources from the onset. But sorghum mills, cheaply manufactured homes, a 20-acre community garden, and temporary work programs could never overcome the structural issues that plagued Breathitt County and eastern Kentucky. Welfare rolls swelled as the county's people searched for stable and well-paying jobs to little avail. Most received work from Operation Mainstream, a federally financed project

[332] *C-J*, May 27, July 18, 1970, June 8, 1971.

that employed low-income individuals on menial jobs such as home repair. Even teenagers found work with Mainstream, arguably putting these young people on the same path to welfare dependency as their parents. Like so many other War on Poverty programs, Mainstream kept families afloat in the interim, but did not offer a sustainable lifestyle. Like most of eastern Kentucky, Breathitt County continued to struggle with poverty. By 1990, some 20 counties (including Breathitt) in Kentucky had more than 35 percent of its people living below the poverty line, and all but one of those counties was in Appalachian Kentucky.[333]

Perhaps Treva Howell realized that the antipoverty efforts were going nowhere and saw the writing on the wall. From most accounts, she was less invested in Breathitt County politics than her mother and father. According to Marie Turner's successor Eugene Sebastian, Treva's real interests were in farming, real estate, and horses.[334] This ambiguity, coupled with her confrontational style of politics, made Treva Howell an unlikely successor to the Turner family's mantle of power. In July 1972, she resigned as head of MKRADC amidst a failed effort to obtain federal funds for the agency's emergency food and medical program. Howell said, "I want to challenge some of the people in Washington to come down here and work out this program by their own damn guidelines. They have given us multiplied instructions instead of simplified instructions."[335] A community action agency that began with great hopes of uplifting the poor and incorporating them into the democratic process had failed. Whether MKRADC would have succeeded with another person at the head is debatable, since most other

[333] *C-J*, June 27, 1971; Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 410.
[334] Eugene Sebastian, interview.
[335] *C-J*, July 29, 1972.

community action programs throughout Appalachia suffered similar fates. Maximum feasible participation never worked as it was originally intended, and it certainly did not work in Breathitt County.

The End of an Era

For years, Marie Turner had maintained tight control of her school system, partly through effective management, but sometimes through intimidation and fear. In her later years as superintendent, however, Turner faced backlash from teachers who felt she and her school board were shirking their administrative duties. In the summer of 1968, a group of teachers aired their grievances to the school board and demanded the right to dictate changes in governing policies. Among the demands were additional days for sick leave as well as the right to attend and participate in monthly school board meetings. The teachers also expressed concern over the qualifications of school board members, who under Kentucky law were not required to have a high school education. For the teachers, it was unfair to have board members without a high school diploma dictate educational policy to teachers with four to six years of college. The school board refused to comply with the demands and unsurprisingly defended Marie Turner. One member criticized the "gang of willful teachers who seem to think they have such keen intelligence."[336]

Throughout her life, Marie Turner was never shy in confronting her attackers. In a lengthy submission to the local newspaper, she stated that she was "extremely proud" of her board members, who routinely proved that "it takes more than a college education to make men." Turner did everything but blatantly call the teachers selfish, saying, "Teachers with bad attitudes reflect in classrooms and affect the children… It is most

[336] *JT*, June 6, 27, 1968.

regrettable that teachers who are employed to teach boys and girls would try to tear down a system that they are a part of." She addressed the accusations one by one and informed the public that monthly school board meetings would continue to be held at 10:30 in the morning, a time that prevented most working teachers and community members from attending.[337]

The growing conflict between the school administration and its teachers coincided with a heated school board election in 1968. That fall, a trio of candidates challenged Turner's board members, promising "open channels of communication" and a "competent, well-qualified superintendent" after Marie Turner had completed her term. The candidates also promised a "full-time superintendent" with a two-week vacation, a direct attack on Marie Turner who, in her later years, routinely spent the winter months at her vacation home in Florida. The three candidates jointly purchased weekly advertisements and promised to implement the changes that teachers wanted, saying, "Teachers will not be censured or reprimanded for making reasonable demands." The candidates accused Turner of using the school system for personal gain. The board of education allegedly rented its office space from the Citizens Bank building, bought insurance from a local insurance agency, bought gasoline from a Turner-owned gas station, and bought coal to heat its schools from a mine in which the Turner family had considerable interest. Marie Turner countered the accusations by holding true to her stellar record on school consolidation, the hot lunch program, LBJ School, and a newly built vocational school named in honor of and dedicated by Carl Perkins. Although school board races had historically favored Turner-backed candidates, times had changed

[337] *JT*, July 4, 1968.

by the late-1960s, particularly after Ervine Turner's death earlier that year. "Roads and schools" had kept the family and their allies in office for decades, but there were looming signs that the strategy no longer worked.[338]

On election day, fraud accusations abounded, with some reporting that votes were bought for as much as $35 per head (an outrageously high number, even for Breathitt County). In one of the races, Republican challenger Troy Deaton (not related to the Turner ally Sam P. Deaton) defeated longtime board member J. Floyd Little by 21 votes. Little promptly filed a lawsuit alleging that disqualified voters had cast ballots in the election. As the proceedings dragged on, both men served as members of the school board, which was still tilted in Marie Turner's favor. The aging Little soon resigned his board position due to illness and died in August 1969, only to have a local judge rule that he had won the election by two votes over Deaton. The Kentucky Court of Appeals later nullified those two votes, deemed the race a tie, and ordered the Breathitt County Board of Elections to resolve the impending race. In 1970, after having served more than 15 months on the Breathitt County school board, Deaton was called before the county commission to resolve the race by sortition. The commission instructed Deaton to choose a number and, after doing so, was informed he had lost the election. Whether the outcome of the race was predetermined or not (local newspapers insisted it was not), the Breathitt County school board promptly appointed Floyd Little's son to serve the remainder of Deaton's term. As Deaton left the courthouse, he commented, "It surely seemed strange to be drawing lots with a dead man." The fact that Deaton, a Republican, was competitive in a local election showed that a changing of the guard seemed imminent. But even after

[338] *JT*, October 17, 31, 1968.

Ervine's death and Marie's retirement, the Turner legacy overshadowed school board and courthouse politics into the 1970s.[339]

Another development that severely weakened the power of the Turner family came when Marie Turner retired from her position as superintendent in June 1969. After 38 years, it was the end of an era. On her penultimate day in office, she remarked, "I am quitting as superintendent at the highest point of my administration, but I can't ever quit politics." In one sentence, she captured her lifelong commitment to the politics of education, adding, "Good politics is good for any school system, just like it is for the country too." Turner had accomplished many of her goals, including consolidation of the numerous one-room schoolhouses that dotted Breathitt County. When she took office in 1931, there were 108 such buildings. By 1969, only two remained. As one of her proudest achievements, Turner cited the $1.3 million LBJ Elementary School, which was recognized as one of the most modern facilities in the nation. Had it not been for the school's mandatory retirement age of 70, it is likely that the 69-year-old Turner would have continued in her capacities.[340]

What should have been an emotional sendoff for the superintendent of 38 years was instead marked by controversy. Amidst the 1969 federal investigation into Treva Howell's misuse of OEO funds and the ongoing dispute over the contested school board election, state Republicans pivoted their assault on the Turners toward the family matriarch, accusing Marie Turner of conflict-of-interest in her use of county school

[339] *C-J*, October 25, 1969, April 26, 1970; *JT*, May 14, 1970; Alva Hollon, Sr., interview; Troy Deaton, interview by William E. Ellis, October 27, 1986, MRT Oral History Project. Surprisingly, Deaton reflected that he was not bitter over the results of the election. During his many months serving on the school board, he found it difficult to pursue his own agenda among a host of Turner-backed board members, but noted that many of the reforms he proposed were implemented in the following years.
[340] *JT*, June 26, 1969; Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982.

funds. Though Turner had retired in June, state auditor James Thompson launched an investigation after finding Turner had given "incorrect answers" on a private audit conducted earlier that year. Among the numerous accusations Thompson levelled against Turner were: renting office space for the school board from a building owned by her family; taking out loans from a family-owned bank; purchasing gasoline for school buses from a gas station co-leased by her family; doing business with an insurance agency in which the family had considerable interest; and purchasing coal from a mine owned by the family. These were the same accusations that Troy Deaton and his fellow candidates for the school board had made the previous year, but Marie Turner countered with vague answers. In response to the accusation of purchasing gasoline from her family's service station, Turner replied that her late husband "used to sign my name to things I didn't know anything about." When asked about rental of office space for the school board, she replied that no other space could be found.[341]

Despite Turner's denials, evidence suggests that she knowingly participated in such acts. Ervine Turner had purchased a building adjacent to Breathitt County High School that in the 1960s became the home of Citizens Bank. In 1952, the judge had leased a service station from Gulf Oil Corporation, with a 1968 audit showing that the school system owed the station more than $7,000.[342] The borrowed funds no doubt came from Citizens Bank, and it was widely known that Ervine Turner throughout his life purchased various parcels of land in Breathitt County and beyond that were known to hold significant coal deposits. Teachers serving under Marie Turner also noted that the

[341] *C-J*, October 3, 1969.
[342] Ibid.

superintendent encouraged and sometimes forced her workers to take out insurance with a company of her choosing.[343]

Additionally, Turner modified her story as the investigation continued. Of the service station in question, Turner later replied, "I do not own it" and "have never received a dollar of income from it," though she previously stated that her son John Raymond had owned the station "since after the war." Thompson's report indicated that the two-story building in question was occupied by Citizens Bank on the ground floor, while the basement and second floors were simultaneously rented to the school board and the federally financed Title I program. Turner responded that all rental agreements were conducted legally and she welcomed an investigation by the attorney general.[344] Of the ongoing MKRADC probe, Turner said, "They (Republicans) have been after my daughter Treva for months, but they couldn't find anything on her so now they are taking out after me." Again, nothing came of the investigation. The Turner family enjoyed the protection of the most powerful Democrats in the state, including Attorney General John B. Breckinridge, who declined to take action after declaring Thompson's actions "politically motivated."[345] Furthermore, Thompson lost a special election that November and his successor, Democrat Mary Louise Foust, ended the investigation.[346]

The Turner family had developed a knack for finding their way out of legal troubles, but by the early-1970s, cracks within the family deepened to the point that no amount of

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[343] Former teacher David Watts reported that Marie Turner used Washington National Insurance Company to insure teacher salaries and deducted payments from his check without his authorization. David Watts, interview.
[344] *C-J*, November 1, 1969.
[345] *C-J*, October 3, November 1, 1969. Earlier in 1969, Thompson was appointed to fill the auditor's post after Clyde Conley died in office. That November, Thompson faced a special election to fill out the remainder of his predecessor's term. When asked about how the investigation against Turner might help his campaign, he replied, "It might solidify the opposition."
[346] *C-J*, November 26, 1969.

glue could hold the machine together. Ervine Turner was dead and Marie Turner significantly decreased her public role in Breathitt County, instead devoting herself to personal endeavors and to statewide Democratic politics. The political matriarch who had upheld one-half of the Turner machine for over half a century gradually faded from public view, while ongoing bickering between her children provided little assurance that the machine could continue as it once had. As early as 1965, Marie Turner expressed worry about her family's political legacy. She said, "It's been worrying us for a number of years. It's really a puzzle to us about what's going to happen. Ervine and I have worked hard to get what we have."[347] Turner had spent her life working for the good of the community, but in her later years it became clear that she was also interested in preserving her family's legacy.

By the early-1970s, Marie Turner had even more reason to worry about her family's political future. Treva Howell and her brother John Raymond had never been on the best of terms; Treva's aggressive nature contrasted with her brother's seemingly carefree attitude toward life and politics. Furthermore, Treva and her husband Jeff became increasingly incensed with county politics by the turn of the 1970s, no doubt because of Treva's prolonged battle with Governor Nunn and the OEO. The Howells were also bitter over the results of the 1971 gubernatorial election, during which their friend and close ally Bert Combs failed to best Wendell Ford in the Democratic primary. Ford defeated Combs in the Democratic primary by more than 40,000 votes, but failed to win even 20

[347] Deitz, "Paternalism Plus Patronage Equals Power," 52.

percent of the vote in Breathitt County, where the Turners and Howells supported the mountain politician who had helped them secure a charter for Citizens Bank in 1962.[348]

That same year, Treva Howell's husband Jeff entered the state representative race for Kentucky's 89th House District. He faced incumbent Russell Reynolds, who was supported by John Raymond Turner. Observers described the Democratic primary as a "Civil War of the Turner Family," with Marie Turner ambiguous on whom she supported. John Raymond continued to support Reynolds over his brother-in-law, intensifying a political divide between the brother and his sibling that had been simmering for years. One resident said, "The race has torn Breathitt County apart." Howell bested Reynolds in the primary and faced Republican Warren Eugene Spicer in the general election. Howell defeated Spicer handily, but the latter fired back with allegations of voter fraud in five Breathitt precincts. A special House committee investigated the claims and found evidence of tampering with voting machines. After hearing testimony from Howell's attorney Ed Prichard, the committee declared Howell the winner, citing that the race's outcome would not have changed even if the allegations were true. During Howell's term as state representative, however, growing political divisions within the county contributed to a deterioration of the family's firm hold on local politics. A so-called "Rebel Gang" that had supported Ford in the 1971 Democratic primary later objected to Jeff Howell's "handling of local and state patronage." Unhappy in their relations with Frankfort, rumors circulated by 1972 that the Howells were

[348] *C-J*, May 27, 1971. According to Adron Doran, former president of Morehead State University, Bert Combs by 1971 had grown weary of "old guard" Democrats like Marie Turner and Carl Perkins. He wanted to breathe new life into the Democratic Party and encourage younger people to become involved in politics. This might explain why he asked Treva and Jeff Howell to run his campaign in Breathitt County. Adron Doran, interview.

planning to leave Breathitt County for Florida, where they had a vacation home. When asked about the future of the Turner machine, Treva tersely replied, "It just isn't worth it anymore."[349] Her resignation from MKRADC in 1972 suggested that she was finished with Breathitt County politics once and for all.

However, Treva Howell was willing to give one final push. In a shocking move that displayed the growing animosity between the Turner siblings, Treva Howell in 1973 filed to succeed her husband Jeff as state representative. This time, she would face her brother, John Raymond. The Howells had recently overtaken John Raymond for control of the Breathitt County Democratic Party, which made for a particularly nasty primary campaign. Treva attacked her brother for being a fake Democrat, evidenced by his previous support of Louie Nunn's sales tax and for cooperating with rival banker and former Republican J. Phil Smith. To further the divide, Marie Turner came out in support of her son. Treva responded by declaring on the local radio station that her brother was an alcoholic.[350] In a local newspaper ad, Treva said, "There is no trouble between my mother and me over this election… I have sons of my own. I know that a mother will do anything on earth to help her son, and you know yourself, that often the more worthless a man is, the more his mother will work and sacrifice and hurt herself to help him. I sympathize with my mother." Although John Raymond defeated his sister handily by a margin of 3,891 to 2,411, the election widened an ever-growing divide that could not be bridged. With the Turner machine in shambles and the Howells interested in their Florida endeavors, there was no apparent successor to carry the mantle. J. Phil Smith no doubt

[349] *C-J*, May 20, 26, 1971, January 19 and April 30, 1972; Pearce, "Fall of the County Political Boss," E4.
[350] David Watts, interview. Watts believed that Treva and John Raymond's falling out was due to the settling of their father's estate after his death in 1968.

celebrated on the inside when he declared in 1973, "The family dynasty is finally coming to an end."[351]

Conclusion

Observers from outside eastern Kentucky also hinted that the days of county political machines were coming to an end. In 1972, John Ed Pearce noted that the "heyday of the one-boss county machine so strong that its ripples of power could be felt across the state seems to be passing." The county machines and political bosses that had been staples of Kentucky politics for so long had, in their prime, performed a "real and useful function" by serving as "intermediaries between the common people and government agencies against which the common people felt confused and powerless." County bosses like the Turners knew the ins and outs of government operation and proved adept at circumventing the system to achieve quick and desirable results. They extended jobs, roads, and favors of all kinds to their constituents and in the process gave "the poor and ignorant a voice and a protector… If the boss used them, in turn, to perpetuate personal political power, that is the name of the game as it has always been played."[352]

But by the early-1970s, the rules of the game had changed considerably in Kentucky and across the nation. The 1960s witnessed massive growth in the size of the welfare state as a result of the Great Society and War on Poverty. But War on Poverty politics was very different from New Deal public works politics. "Whereas the New Deal was developed in response to high unemployment and the grave economic crisis of the Great Depression, the War on Poverty was launched during a period of widely shared prosperity." In fact, President Johnson insisted that a War on Poverty was necessary

[351] *C-J*, April 2, May 27, 1973.
[352] Pearce, "Fall of the County Political Boss," E4.

because the federal government could afford to pay for such initiatives.[353] But by this time, federal agencies and programs now provided the road, school, and welfare programs that had once been the exclusive realm of the county machine. Public works had been one of the Turner family's most effective ways of garnering political support, but it was also debatable whether these projects provided what Breathitt County actually needed to rescue it from poverty.

One of the Turner family's missions was to bring Breathitt County into modernity, primarily through roads and schools. In some ways, this had been achieved by the 1970s. County residents now had access to many of the same amenities as those in urban areas, including shopping centers, golf courses, and cultural attractions such as musical concerts and dinner theatres. J. Phil Smith said in 1986, "Anything you can find in the city, you can find here." However, the county had experienced growth without development. According to Ronald Eller, "urban and national models of growth are not always appropriate for rural places." Public spending nurtured some growth in the mountains during the 1960s, but "growth and development are not the same thing." The hope that a massive influx of capital would miraculously bring Appalachia into modernity proved to be wishful thinking. Resource development in Appalachia produced "growth centers," but bypassed peripheral counties like Breathitt. Development, on the other hand, "is a political act that requires democratic community engagement and open public debate." As Breathitt County's story in the twentieth century has shown, "democratic community engagement and open public debate" had its limits.[354]

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[353] Bailey and Danziger, eds., *Legacies of the War on Poverty*, 3.
[354] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 266; For a discussion on ways of rethinking the failures of development in Appalachia, see, Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 320-336.

Furthermore, in an age that increasingly demanded political accountability and openness, the shady practices of county machines represented everything that was wrong with local politics. As a result, county political bosses around the commonwealth toppled throughout the 1960s. The Democratic trio of Lennie McLaughlin, John Crimmins, and McKay Reed, who had ruled Jefferson County since the 1930s, were defeated by Republican opposition in 1961. In Logan County, Emerson "Doc" Beauchamp had amassed a significant political following and received numerous complaints about the "fishy" voting practices in his county, although nothing was ever proved. His death in 1971, however, failed to produce a strong successor and the power was spread about many disparate factions. These political bosses all faced serious challenges in the 1960s and were eventually defeated by a mixture of death, corruption, or insurmountable political opposition.[355] Herman McGuire's case in Carter County was particularly tragic. The superintendent of more than two decades was ousted from his job in 1962 on charges of embezzling more than $16,000 from the school system. He was eventually found not guilty, but the incident showed how corruption charges could ruin the careers of powerful school officials.[356] Marie Turner was spared the same fate as McGuire, but by the late-1960s even she was not immune from challenges that came with a changing world of politics.

More so, the demanding work that came with running a well-oiled political machine seemed pointless by the 1970s. The Turners could still be counted upon to deliver elections in Breathitt County, but the political climate at the state and national levels had changed considerably. Fissures within Kentucky's Democratic Party continued and a

[355] Pearce, "Fall of County Political Boss," E1.
[356] *C-J*, December 3, 1968.

conservative shift in national politics under Richard Nixon signaled that political liberalism was on the way out. Even on the national level, there was a breakdown in Democratic Party politics and party machinery after 1968, which showed that a largely unknown and "unheralded" figure like Eugene McCarthy could "come out of nowhere and destabilize a major party organization." Political bosses and state conventions thereafter became less necessary for making political advancements and candidates could rely more on personality and charisma.[357] The political liberalism of the John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Bert Combs, and Ned Breathitt administrations enabled the Turners to prolong their reign of power, but by the late-1960s the so-called liberal hour was coming to a close.

More importantly, however, the Turners no longer maintained the monopoly on politics and jobs in Breathitt County that had enabled them to curry favor with locals for so long. The days of school and courthouse politics were increasingly becoming a thing of the past and, as Harlan, Kentucky journalist Ewell Balltrip noted, people were not as dependent on the "political powers that be." The Breathitt County courthouse had been the administrative hub of the Turner family's "little kingdom." It was a meeting place for socializing and trading political favors, but a burgeoning generation of baby boomers in the 1970s were not as loyal to partisan factions or alignments. Balltrip observed that more young people were obtaining political office, but were not satisfied to merely hold power; they seriously wrestled with finding ways to wield it.[358] The resurgence of the coal

[357] Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 706.
[358] Ewell Balltrip, interview by William E. Ellis, May 28, 1987, MRT Oral History Project. Like Larry Kelley, Balltrip was also approached by Marie Turner to write a book about her family's legacy. Balltrip completed more than 150 hours of interviews with Turner in the late-1970s, but she became displeased because Balltrip did not carry out the project with sufficient speed. The project was eventually terminated and Balltrip turned over the interviews to Turner.

industry in the 1970s, according to John Ed Pearce, also broke down the family's monopoly on jobs. William Sturgill and Falcon Coal Company controlled more jobs than the Turner family ever had, and the resurging industry saw people transition from welfare to self-supporting jobs. The booming coal industry was one that no family machine could hope to compete with.[359]

Nor could the Turner family compete with government assistance programs that provided support to mountain residents. For Harry Caudill, "The checks, food stamps and medical and housing aids became so numerous and easily obtained that huge numbers of people no longer had to rely upon marginal employment for their beans and bread."[360] As early as 1963, when he published *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, Caudill was alarmed by swelling welfare rolls and the increasing number of mountain residents who seemed content to live on a government check that provided at best a subsistence lifestyle. The welfare system became rife with abuses, with some recipients manipulating or cheating the system, a development that later led Ronald Reagan to decry "welfare queens" during the 1976 election. When in need of a job or financial assistance, constituents took their inquiries to representatives of welfare programs rather than county politicians like the Turners.

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[359] John Ed Pearce, interview. Though the coal industry curbed the Turner family's influence, they still reaped huge profits from coal mining into the 1970s. As coal trucks traversed eastern Kentucky day and night, they wreaked havoc on the region's highways, crushing pavement with their immense weight while throwing dust, grit, and mud into residents' yards and homes. In 1976, the people of the Bush Branch community in Breathitt County declared war on the Buckhorn Mining Company, whose trucks were destroying the highway that ran through their community. When community residents took their grievances to court, Ervine Turner's successor and ally J. Douglas Graham refused a temporary injunction against the coal company. Bush Branch residents, represented by Larry Kelley, then pointed to Graham's close relationship with John Raymond Turner, who owned property near their community and reaped huge profits from the Buckhorn Mining Company. Turner reportedly collected about $20,000 from the company that year and received six cents a ton from that company's coal tipple that produced approximately 350,000 tons each year. Turner denied having any influence in the court's decision. See, *C-J*, May 9, 1976.
[360] Caudill, *Watches of the Night*, 215.

On a broader level, various social and cultural changes took place in the mid-twentieth century that rendered political machines ineffective and obsolete. More roads and highways meant that eastern Kentucky was less isolated from the outside world. Long gone were the days when Marie Turner saddled a horse and rode along creek beds to visit the various one-room schoolhouses in the most remote parts of Breathitt County. Now, these trips could be made by automobile in less than a day. In a sense, the school consolidation that Marie Turner had so vigorously supported inhibited her ability to punish unruly teachers by banishing them to remote parts of the county. Consolidated schools replete with the latest technologies and amenities seemed far more appealing to aspiring teachers, even if it required a longer commute.[361]

Increased exposure to the outside world via transportation and technology decreased eastern Kentucky's isolation and contributed to the rise of what sociologists Plunkett and Bowman have called "interstitial persons." These were individuals who, "by reason of his achieved qualifications, experiences, and opportunities, has access to both inner and outer societies." These individuals, often well-educated and having experienced culture outside of eastern Kentucky, served a "culture-bridge role" by "linking the local and broader societies" and "bridging the traditional and modern outlooks." In a region that had been associated with isolationism and a rejection of "modern" American values, interstitial persons returned to their native region and introduced locals to ways of life beyond the political patronage system that the Turner machine had monopolized for so long. Greater

[361] Ibid., 216. Caudill remained an authority on eastern Kentucky and Appalachia into his later years, but also faced growing criticism. Frustrated and disillusioned with the inability of government programs to alleviate poverty, Caudill embraced eugenics theories as an explanation for low IQ scores among mountain children. He even encouraged outmigration and an influx of "new blood" in order to preserve favorable genetic characteristics. Ibid., 222-227.

communication and transportation networks, according to Plunkett and Bowman, went a long way in lessening eastern Kentucky society's dependence on local elites like the Turners.[362]

Also lessening this sense of isolation was the influx of external media sources. Breathitt Countians could read state and national newspapers and tune into national television programs, increasing their exposure to the outside world and lessening their dependence on local news sources like *The Jackson Times* and local individuals like the Turner family. But the Turners had done a great deal to modernize their beloved Breathitt County over the course of the twentieth century. They were instrumental in garnering funding that ultimately created hundreds of miles of roads and constructed dozens of modern educational and municipal facilities. Although the county remained extremely poor, Breathitt Countians could by 1970 enjoy modern amenities comparable to the rest of the United States. It is quite amazing that the Turners managed to hold power as long as they did. But by quickening the process of modernization, the Turners moved Breathitt County away from the isolationism that enabled them to attain power in the first place. In this way, the Turners were victims of their own success. In their days of power, the Turner family indeed served a "real and useful function," but times had changed and so had the people, thus ending the chapter of one of Kentucky's most influential political machines.

[362] H. Dudley Plunkett and Mary Jean Bowman, *Elites and Change in the Kentucky Mountains* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), xi, 46, 84.

CONCLUSION

"I just love a good fight." -*Marie Turner*

Although the Turner family's dominance in Breathitt County subsided as the 1970s wore on, Marie Turner was not idle in her final years. After retiring as superintendent in 1969, she became more involved in Kentucky Democratic politics and worked to rescue a party in turmoil. On the national level, the Democratic Party struggled to define itself after the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, culminating with Richard Nixon's 1968 victory and his promises to dismantle Great Society programs while restoring law and order. Nixon's victory against Hubert Humphrey was no doubt a blow to Marie Turner, who knew the former vice president and reportedly received a candy dish from him. For only the second time since 1933, Marie Turner lived and worked under a Republican president, one whom she vocally expressed distaste for. Hopes of Nixon being a one-term president ended as national Democrats remained divided into 1972. Another riotous convention nominated the progressive George McGovern, described as "the most left-of-center" presidential candidate in any major political party's history to that point. Even Marie Turner did not like McGovern, who many perceived as elitist, intellectual, and too liberal. After meeting him in Missouri, Marie Turner knew that he "never had a chance." His overwhelming defeat by more than 13 million votes only intensified a growing crisis for national Democrats.[363]

On the state level, Kentucky Democrats had been divided throughout the twentieth century, producing close and bitterly contested gubernatorial primaries, usually stemming

[363] Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 758-765; Marie R. Turner, interview, July 13, 1982.

from Happy Chandler's persistence as a viable candidate throughout his long political career. By the 1940s, Chandler had built a strong coalition that opposed fellow Democrats Earle Clements, Lawrence Wetherby, Bert Combs, and Ned Breathitt. Margins in Democratic primaries were notoriously thin up to 1970, the largest margin being Henry Ward's 96,000-vote victory against the aging and deflated Chandler in 1967. With Wendell Ford's victory in 1971 and Clements, Combs, and Chandler all gone from the political scene, there was a sense that "Democratic factionalism was dead for just about the only time in the century."[364]

This assessment might be overly optimistic, since factionalism was not over in Kentucky or in Breathitt County, evidenced by the heated primary between Ford and Combs in 1971. The Party's state machinery also maintained a reputation for factionalism and nepotism. J.R. Miller, Kentucky's Democratic Party Chairman in the early-1970s, resigned to run Wendell Ford's campaign in 1971 and assumed the post once again after Ford's victory, a move that attracted criticism since both men hailed from Owensboro. Miller also had a reputation for being a political manipulator and was described as a "politician's politician." He faced a number of controversies during his time as Party chair, including one centering around illegal campaign funding. Marie Turner, then serving as vice-chairman, assumed Miller's job during his absence despite having been a vocal opponent of Miller heading the Party in the first place.[365]

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[364] Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 415.

[365] Though Turner initially opposed Miller's election as chair, the two became close as they attended national conventions together, with Miller praising Turner's steadfast devotion to the Party. J.R. Miller, interview by William E. Ellis, March 19, 1987, MRT Oral History Project; *C-J*, June 20, 1971, July 30, 1972.

The factionalism continued after Ford resigned to take a U.S. Senate seat in 1974. Howard "Sonny" Hunt became state Party chairman the following year and readily conceded that he was "Julian Carroll's man" in the Party's machinery.[366] What began as a promising tenure soon devolved into chaos. In 1978, Hunt resigned amidst a *Courier-Journal* probe into his financial and business activities. In the ensuing months, it became evident that he had transferred two state vehicles to his relatives and later plead guilty on charges of taking kickbacks of more than $850,000 from state insurance contractors for the benefit of his family and political allies.[367]

Upon Hunt's resignation, Marie Turner, then serving as vice chairman, assumed his post. Taking power in the midst of a crisis was not foreign territory for Marie Turner. She took control of Breathitt County schools during the Great Depression and nearly 50 years later was prepared to do the same for her beloved Democratic Party. She was the unanimous choice to head the Democratic Central Executive Committee on the basis that "she's probably the one person who can stop the feuding among the Democrats." According to June Taylor, a Kentucky Democratic Party official for more than 40 years, Turner was not named Party chairman because of her name, but because of her skill and political acumen. At 78-years-old, her resolve remained the same as it had throughout her life. She commented, "I just love a good fight." As former U.S. Representative John B. Breckinridge put it, Turner was "Mrs. Democrat."[368]

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[366] *C-J*, June 24, 1975. Although Carroll had served as lieutenant governor under Ford, the two were considered factional foes, as Kentucky's constitution did not permit candidates for governor and lieutenant governor to run on the same ticket until a 1992 amendment. This arrangement had created some tense situations. From 1967 to 1971, for example, Wendell Ford served as lieutenant governor under Republican Louie Nunn.

[367] *C-J,* February 13, 1982.

[368] *C-J*, September 5, 1978; June Taylor, interview by William E. Ellis, November 24, 1968, MRT Oral History Project.

In her time as chairman, Marie Turner stabilized a party structure that had been very fragile throughout the 1970s. According to Turner, she aimed to reunite the Democrats and "hold them together" until a new chairman and governor could be elected. In this sense, she succeeded. In 1979, Kentuckians elected Democrat John Y. Brown Jr. over former governor Louie Nunn in a landslide victory.[369] For Marie Turner, whose family had battled Nunn over the years, Brown's victory was particularly satisfying. In 1981, Turner even hosted a reception for Governor Brown and his wife Phyllis George at her home in Jackson.[370]

Turner was a popular figure among state Democrats, yet her time as party chairman represented a transition period between generations. At the 1980 Democratic National Convention, the Kentucky delegation was nearly evenly divided between old-line Democrats, including Turner, and delegates under the age of 40.[371] Turner supported Jimmy Carter and even exchanged Christmas cards with him, but the incumbent was in many ways a man without a party. According to Stephen Skowronek, Carter had resisted some of liberalism's most basic commitments and pushed the "boundaries of affiliated leadership" to new limits. In the general election, he faced the challenge of simply proving to the party's faithful that he was "proud to be a Democrat." The landscape of

[369] Marie R. Turner, interview, October 12, 1982; Brown's election, according to Harrison and Klotter, was a watershed moment in Kentucky politics for several reasons, including: the emergence of television as an important medium; the emergence of wealthy, self-funded candidates; a shift from party and factional allegiance to personal alliances; and a casual attitude toward governance. It was a very different brand of politics from what Marie Turner had been accustomed to throughout her life. See, Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 416-417.
[370] Governor Brown had been on a tour of eastern Kentucky and made a stop in Breathitt County for a "Government to the People" program. See, *C-J*, September 30, 1981.
[371] *C-J*, August 10, 1980.

American electoral politics was changing, and the Democrats mustered no solutions to address such changes.[372]

Carter's staggering electoral college defeat at the hands of Ronald Reagan led the *Washington Post*'s Haynes Johnson, who had covered Breathitt County's War on Poverty less than 15 years earlier, to declare, "A Reagan Revolution… had altered the American political landscape with profound implications for the nation and the world."[373] Reagan promised to bring a new mood to the White House based on a total repudiation of the New Deal order. The developments must have been devastating for the aging Marie Turner, who witnessed the national Democratic Party's unraveling before her very eyes.

Even in her native Breathitt County, there were signs of an imminent political transition. In 1980, a group of reform Democrats that titled themselves the Concerned Citizens for Honest Government sought to unseat Breathitt County's Democratic Party structure still controlled by the Turner faction and now headed by John Raymond Turner. The Concerned Citizens called into question irregularities in recent election results and took their grievances to state officials. The Turner faction maintained a fragile hold on county politics in the interim, but it was clear they were losing ground. Transitions in state and local politics, combined with Marie Turner's age, prompted her resignation as Party chairman in November 1981. Upon her resignation, the state committee voted her vice chairman emeritus for her lifelong contributions to the Party, while leadership passed on to a fellow eastern Kentuckian, 44-year-old Pike County judge and future governor Paul Patton.[374] Marie Turner had been a pivotal figure in Kentucky Democratic

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[372] Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 404-406.
[373] Quoted in Kevin M. Kruse and Julian Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2019), 105.
[374] *C-J*, April 26, 1980, November 11, 1981.

politics for more than half a century, but the 1980s were the dawning of a new age for Kentucky Democrats. In 1983, Kentuckians elected Martha Layne Collins as the state's first female governor.

Marie Turner's death on March 26, 1984 came in the midst of this transition and made state headlines. The "grand lady of Kentucky politics" died at her home in Jackson at the age of 84. Her funeral service was appropriately held at LBJ Elementary School, the ultimate symbol of her long career in Breathitt County. It was a time of mourning for the entire county. County and city schools closed the previous day and local businesses were asked to close during the funeral. Among the attendees were Governor Martha Layne Collins, former governors John Y. Brown, Bert Combs, and Ned Breathitt, senators Wendell Ford and Walter "Dee" Huddleston, and longtime friend Congressman Carl Perkins. Former governor Julian Carroll officiated, remarking, "Some are apostles, some are prophets, some are evangelists, some are teachers. Marie's teaching was of the highest calling. Educating the young was the most satisfactory occupation to which she could aspire." Among the dozens of flowers on display, one arrangement came from the LBJ Ranch in Texas, accompanied by a note from Lady Bird Johnson, who had left her mark on Breathitt County 20 years earlier.[375]

In assessing the long-term impact of the Turner family on Breathitt County, there are no simple answers. On the one hand, nepotism, shady dealings, and questionable ethics mark the family as a symbol of corruption. Within the Turner circle, there was little room for disloyalty and those deemed guilty of such behavior often found themselves politically ostracized and, most importantly, without a job. Each member of the Turner

[375] *JT*, April 5, 1984; *C-J*, March 27, 1984.

family displayed a shrewdness for political maneuvering at some point or another, sometimes for their own benefit. From an economic perspective, the family's policies did not work. They engaged in exploitative practices by enabling coal corporations to abuse the land and its people, in the process amassing huge profits and inhibiting long-term economic development. Patronage jobs secured through the school system or county government could not adequately provide for the thousands of Breathitt Countians who still did not have access to well-paying jobs. In terms of infrastructure, roads and schools were a boon to the struggling county, but even during the Turner family's time in power, Breathitt County ranked among the poorest counties in the nation. Today, the picture is mostly the same and there are few signs of an economic resurgence.

A strong argument can be made for the devastating effects of the Turner family's "little kingdom" approach to governance. Breathitt County reaped the benefits of federal and state resources because of the Turner family's political connections, but this approach slighted neighboring counties also in desperate need of aid. As John Burch has argued, Owsley County's retarded economic development can be attributed to controlling elites like the Turner family who "controlled the nondemocratic geopolitical structure centered on the Three Forks of the Kentucky River." Indeed, Owsley County became overshadowed by the looming presence of a Turner family protected by political allies from Frankfort to Washington. Any Democratic candidate knew the influence of the Turners in delivering votes throughout eastern Kentucky, and to alienate the family limited one's hopes of being elected or reelected. [376] One must look no further than the political crisis that stemmed from Treva Howell and MKRADC in the late-1960s as an

[376] Burch, *Owsley County, Kentucky,* 149-152.

example of how county politics could get in the way of regional development and planning. This kind of political bickering prevented War on Poverty programs from realizing their full potential and only led to regional fragmentation. For the people of Breathitt County, the Turner family's political connections provided great benefits. But for those in neighboring counties, the Turner sphere of influence could be a perennial thorn in one's side.

But to solely attribute Breathitt County's economic failures to machine politics and the Turner family would be misleading. During their time in power, the Turner family displayed a knack for getting things done in ways that leaders from other counties simply could not. From approximately 1930 to 1970, Breathitt County reaped numerous benefits that its citizens desperately needed. In this period, the Turners could lay claim to the construction of hundreds of miles of roads and highways, dozens of new school buildings, and the desirable publicity that came with two First Ladies of the United States visiting Breathitt County. If, as historian Jefferson Cowie suggests, the years between 1930 and 1970 were the "great exception" in United States politics, these years were also the great exception for Breathitt County. During these years, Breathitt County deviated from its historical roots as a violent and backwards county and garnered attention for its progressive school system. This great exception can be attributed to the Turner family's brand of New Deal political liberalism.

For those who dismiss the Turner family as another example of corrupt county politicians, we might also ask what the alternatives to political machinery might have been. Clientelism has been deemed inefficient at best and downright dangerous at worst, according to Allen Hicken. But it lends itself to social welfare exchange, something the

people of Breathitt County desperately needed and which the Turners provided. Hicken continues, "But if the alternative is a state that provides even fewer benefits to citizens, especially the poor, then clientelism is not such a bad bargain."[377] For all the Turner family's faults, their status as locals meant they were invested in the county and its people. Unlike counties whose economies had been monopolized by absentee corporations, the Turner family's investment in Breathitt County's general welfare spared it from wholesale exploitation. The coal towns described by Harry Caudill in *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* provide a glimpse into the alternatives. Once out-of-state companies had extracted the coal, they moved on to the next town, leaving miners without a job and suffering from crippling health effects.

In considering the alternatives to the Turner family, it is possible that one set of elites could have been traded for another. Jonathan Rauch notes that when traditional machines fall, "shadow machines" tend to take their place. Traditional machines then "find themselves ever less able to maintain order in their environment and in their own ranks."[378] Competition encourages internal fighting that can limit progress. Owsley County's story shows how bickering among local elites over the creation of a reservoir stunted the county's economic development at a time when it was most needed.[379] The political monopoly that the Turner family held over Breathitt County for more than 50 years could be harsh and undemocratic, yet it also inhibited the rise of other factions that could have fractured the county along partisan lines just as it had in the days of "Bloody Breathitt." Complete participation in Breathitt County politics from 1930 to 1970 meant

[377] Hicken, "Clientelism," 302.
[378] Rauch, "Political Realism," 24.
[379] Burch, *Owsley County, Kentucky*, 119-146.

one had to identify as a Democrat, yet it was a good time to be a Democrat with the Turner family in charge.

Determining whether the Turner family had a mostly positive or mostly negative effect on Breathitt County's development in the long run is debatable. The answer to such a question usually depended on who was being asked and their political affiliation. In the end, the Turner family's long-term influence on education is inconclusive. At the time, leaders recognized Breathitt County's school system under Marie Turner as one of the best in eastern Kentucky. But the school system's track record with education since her departure has been uneven and, at times, less than stellar. In 2012, superintendent Arch Turner (no direct relation to Ervine or Marie Turner) was sentenced to prison in connection with a federal vote buying conspiracy and for doling out more than $500,000 to a select group of teachers for missed school days. A state audit determined that the school board under Turner had falsified dropout rates, failed to fill job vacancies, and grossly mismanaged its funds. The Kentucky Board of Education deemed the school system so "ineffective and inefficient" that it placed the school system under state management and appointed their own superintendent, the first time it had done so in 15 years.[380]

The physical improvements in roads, schools, and other vital infrastructure that the Turners brought into Breathitt County went a long way in improving everyday life. But as Ronald Eller has noted, infrastructural improvements only go so far in rescuing a historically impoverished region. Structural changes resulting from a redistribution of land, wealth, and an overhaul of the broken political system did not occur in Breathitt

[380] *Lexington Herald-Leader*, December 8, 2012 and April 4, 2015.

County. With the Turners in charge, it is unlikely that these structural changes would have occurred, since such changes would have disrupted the family's power structure. Eller's contention that growth does not always equal progress also seems relevant for assessing Breathitt County's evolution during the Turner family's time in power. From 1930 to 1970, Breathitt County experienced economic growth that generated new markets in transportation, communication, and commerce. But as Eller reminds us, "Economic growth may indeed generate employment opportunities, but if those jobs provide low wages and few health benefits, they can reinforce conditions of dependence and powerlessness."[381] According to one county resident and former teacher under Marie Turner, the increased welfare rolls and poverty grants that the Turner family generated hardly seemed like progress. For this educator, the Turner machine was built on "poverty, ignorance, and manipulation."[382]

In the years since 1970, it is difficult to define Breathitt County's story as one of progress. Like most other eastern Kentucky counties, the county deals with an aging infrastructure, swelling welfare rolls, and little prospect of attracting industries that will provide high-paying jobs with adequate health benefits. The county appears neither worse off nor better than it was during the twentieth century. In this sense, the Turner family was more of an anomaly. They were an exception to the rules of eastern Kentucky politics for the enormous power and influence they wielded in the Democratic Party, but Breathitt County's story is no exception within the broader context of eastern Kentucky poverty. Today, it remains among the poorest counties in the nation with a poverty rate of

[381] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 5-6.
[382] Bobby Deaton, "Letter to the Editor," *Courier-Journal and Times Magazine*, October 4, 1970, 9.

36 percent. The population continues to decline, most households make less than $26,000 a year, and life expectancy is about nine years less than the national average.[383]

It is difficult to determine whether the Turner family's motivations were guided by politics or a genuine desire to better the county. Again, responses are subjective. Ervine Turner, who preferred to operate behind-the-scenes, was a mastermind at manipulating local and regional politics to his liking. While most acknowledged that he took a real interest in improving life in Breathitt County, his passive role in public affairs makes his true motivations difficult to pinpoint. Marie Turner's dual role as a politician and an educator arguably made her decisions more challenging, coupled with the fact that she was the public face of the Turner family. For Marie, the decisions were not always easy. Some believed that education was her first priority; others believed it was politics. Frances Johnson, a longtime colleague of Turner, believed education came first, fellow educator Fred Landrum believed politics came first, while Marie Turner's successor as superintendent, Eugene Sebastian, believed her purpose was twofold.[384]

In reality, Sebastian was probably correct. Marie Turner took office at a time when politics and education went hand in hand, and she used her skill in both arenas to get what she needed. As time passed and the melding of politics and education became less socially acceptable, Turner walked a finer line, which explains the increasing number of controversies in her later years. In her own words, politics was all she had ever known. Reconciling her lifelong love of politics with the changing world of education made for

[383] "Kentucky counties make up 10 of the 25 worst places to live in the US," https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/03/13/kentucky-counties-dominate-worst-places-to-live-list/3151985002/.

[384] Frances Collins Johnson, interview; D. Fred Landrum, interview; Eugene Sebastian, interview.

some difficult decisions. In this sense, the Turner family was a study of conflicts. The exigencies of the moment determined which motivations the Turners chose to act upon.

For better or worse, the Turner family left an indelible imprint on Breathitt County. Even in the twenty-first century, as conservatism has grown stronger and most Breathitt voters identify with the Republican Party, the county remains a Democratic stronghold on paper. In April 2020, there were 9,697 registered Democrats in Breathitt County compared to only 1,373 Republicans.[385] Even as the county drifts to the right, with Donald Trump winning nearly 70 percent of the vote in 2016, these registration numbers are a testament to the power of the Turner family and their lasting influence on county politics. Today, the Turner descendants are all but absent from the local political scene, but the family's shadow looms large over Breathitt County and its environs.

[385] "Voter Registration Statistics Report," Commonwealth of Kentucky State Board of Elections, https://elect.ky.gov/Resources/Documents/voterstatscounty-20200515-084530.pdf.

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