

1-1

WOODBURN: A MEMORY JUST BENEATH THE SURFACE

NOVEMBER 21, 1989

CAROLYN A. HELM

Sarah Sutherland, a resident of the city of Woodburn proposed this project to me. Her hope was to find someone interested in gathering historic information about Woodburn which could be lost. The project began when she gave me a list of Woodburn residents to interview. I, however, could not foresee what conclusions could be made from random interviews. I felt I could not select a specific historical topic to focus on because I would miss much information from my informants' memories. Sarah defined my project as being "a history of Woodburn" before I ever started. This was helpful when trying to set up interviews and explaining my rationale for doing the project, but I was not sure a history was what I would accomplish.

When my interviewing began, I heard my informants referring to the town as "old Woodburn" and "new Woodburn." This intrigued me because I did not know the meaning and roots of these phrases. The informants volunteered their distinctions without my asking the differences between old and new Woodburn. This became the focus of my paper: specifically, how the center of town which unifies the community has changed.

I found little research within the folklore realm which reflected my proposed project. The Grouse Creek Survey: An Integrated Approach to Field Research by Thomas Carter and Carl Fleischhauer used a method of survey which I would like to see implemented in Woodburn. The major drawbacks with my accomplishing this were people power and time. This cultural survey serves as a possible example for Woodburn and other small communities. The survey included tangible and intangible

features of the community, thus creating a folklife approach.

Holleybush: Folkbuilding and Social Change in an Appalachian Community by Charles E. Martin could have served as a model for my project. It ruled it out because the focus was on a community that went through the opposite change that Woodburn did. The community of Holleybush no longer exists as a town because of industry, while Woodburn is failing because the lack thereof.

Hoiberg defines a community with a church, school house, or country school at its center as an "open-country neighborhood."¹ I have found that Woodburn, Kentucky is in accordance with his definition of an open-country neighborhood. Woodburn has approximately 300 residents, which constitutes it as a small community by definition.² This number includes both those living as townspeople and those who live in farms outside of town. In the past, the consolidated school was the center of Woodburn, but the building burned and changes occurred as a result. Now the central, unifying structure of the open-country neighborhood is Crossroad's Market, a country store in the west part of town. There is a dichotomy between the centralization of the old town of Woodburn and the new, vastly different Woodburn.

Woodburn became incorporated as a town in 1866.³ It came to exist because people living in scattered dwellings associated themselves with this place name. They began to unite with the community through affiliation with a church, school, store, or

other service.⁴ Old Woodburn began on Nashville Road seven miles south of Bowling Green across from Gene Murray's farm. Later, "new Woodburn" was established when Ewing Robertson gave two acres of land to the railroad company for the depot and the public square.⁵ Since then, the town has changed what it considers "new Woodburn" to the town of today, and "old Woodburn" is the town strongly fused with the railroad and the square.

Old Woodburn was typical and uniquely characteristic of a small town. It had a population of 2,500 people or less. It was a specialized center for agriculture and provided food and other necessities for subsistence, hence lacking any frivolous endeavors.⁶ It was a community where people worked together and helped each other build houses, and its members were conscious of a local unity.⁷

The development of this community was marked by an expansion of services. The general store and other specialized merchandise establishments were found there. One or more of these existed in the community: a movie house, bank, hotel, grocery, post office, undertaker, doctor, hotel, blacksmith, saloon, insurance agent, cobbler, druggist, dry goods store, restaurant, stock yard, and school. These constituted the community of "old Woodburn" which developed on the sides of the L&N railroad and was not laid out by a definite plan.⁸

Virgie Edwards, a resident of Woodburn for many years, remembers it as being different from today. She recalls that all the buildings on the square were occupied. The corner store was

a grocery and next to it was a drug store. There were two dry goods stores on the opposite street. The businesses were locally owned. Albert Hobbs owned the drug store and Mr. Blackburn the dry goods store on the corner. Mr. Jones owned the other dry goods store. There was a movie house which she thinks has been torn down. It cost thirty or forty cents to see a movie then. The food store was owned by Hobbs and Uhls. Some of these buildings she remembers have burned.

The last house on the left while leaving the square was a hotel where teachers stayed. She remembers this two-story building as the residence for teachers who were from out-of-town. Edwards' brother lived in her home for several years while he was principal at Woodburn High School. Although many of the teachers were from out-of-town, some lived locally and taught at the school.

The town had boomed before its downfall. Crossroad's Market, previously, was a popular restaurant when Woodburn was more prosperous. There was a small stockyard where Mrs. Edwards' husband was an auctioneer. He continued this work for several years and also auctioneered in Franklin, Russellville, Springfield, Glasgow, and Bowling Green. Her husband ran a trucking business where he hauled livestock. She was responsible for the records of this business. Also, she sent out the trucks and checked them in when they returned. In addition to helping with her husband's business, Edwards would also do housework and canning from her garden.

As she recalls, there were never any factories in Woodburn. She was not born early enough to remember the Union Church, but knew it had existed on Nashville Road near the cemetery. Most people owned farms and farmed at least part time. Woodburn had good schools, but most of them burned down. Woodburn High School stood on the ground between the Church of Christ and the Baptist Church on Highway 240. Children from Woodburn, Richpond and all around went there from first grade through high school.

In 1937, there was a flood and water stood everywhere in Woodburn, according to Mrs. Edwards. The residents road in boats around Woodburn Baptist Church. When it was flooded, the only way to Bowling Green was Highway 240. It was the worse flooding she had ever seen.

She remembers when many black people lived on Highway 240. Only one black family lived on the east side of Nashville Road in Woodburn. Very few families are left, now. Many died or moved away. In the past, she could always find a boy to help on the farm, but now one can not find any help.

Today, Mrs. Edwards comments on the changes in Woodburn. She says that Crossroad's Market is a place to eat and where many people shop. New people to Woodburn often live in the trailer camp. The new house in the square, she feels, is an improvement since the railroad station was torn down. She recognizes that some do not like the new house, but she thinks that the area looks better since the house was built. She now banks in Bowling Green since there is no longer a bank in Woodburn.

Some things remain the same even though the town has changed. Most of the farms in Woodburn have cattle. It is still a good place to live in her opinion. Just like the flood disaster, a tornado caused damage to the town in the summer of 1989, and many pulled together to help with the recovery.

Sarah Sutherland, another resident of Woodburn, feels strongly about preserving the aging history the town. White and black people in Woodburn both have a history and there is a need for it to be recorded. She remembers stories about a thriving Woodburn with a public square. Within the square, there was a stock yard which held hogs, cattle, and sheep. Mrs. Edwards' husband was associated with it. Two country stores existed and were prosperous. The post office was also on the square, and the Women's Club met in the space above it. She personally did not consider it a square because the buildings did not go all the way around to complete it. In the center, where all the buildings faced were a park and a water pump.

Sutherland remembers that the bank failed in 1929 and money was of little value. She remembers the Depression in Woodburn as a sad time. She knew of a college existing in Woodburn on College Street (which was named after the college). This was long before Woodburn High School existed, which burnt in 1942. There was also a girl's school miles away from Woodburn called Cedar Bluff. It was a private seminary.

Currently, Sarah Sutherland volunteers at the Personal Care Home in Woodburn. She sees changes in Woodburn such as the new

house in the middle of the old building area. She enjoys the memories of the joint service between Woodburn Baptist and First Baptist Churches in Woodburn, another a change she noted in Woodburn.

Tim Harris, a younger former resident of the town accumulated his knowledge of old Woodburn from stories he has been told and his own experiences. People tell him that Woodburn used to be a prosperous town, which in their opinion is hard for the youth in the town to believe now. When Woodburn began as a community, there was a Union Church where three churches shared one building. It was located at the crossroads of Highway 240 and Nashville Road. The building no longer exists. Crittendens was a store on the corner of the square and a factory was adjacent to it. Harris remembers the factory, but was not sure of what was manufactured there.

Margie Lewis was a teacher at Woodburn High School, and she brought her children from the classroom to Woodburn Baptist Church for revival services. Revival was held in the morning and at night, and Mrs. Lewis brought the children to the morning service. Harris' father was one of Lewis' students whom she took to church; this was the first time he had ever attended church.

Harris says that Willie Mae Hopper tells a story about a Richpond lady who wanted to attend Women's Missionary Union at Woodburn Baptist Church, but did not have the train fare. A person standing in the station moved his foot, and underneath was a quarter. She rode the train to Woodburn on that quarter and

testified to God bringing her there. Harris interjected that no one ever said how she got back home. Boots Hopper, Willie Mae's husband, tells a story about his having a frog in the classroom. His teacher gave him a few minutes to put it on the porch of the church and get back in his seat. He jumped out of the window and back in it to complete his errand in the allotted time.

The ghost of Woodburn is a story Harris' father tells about a man who would swing from building to building in Woodburn with a sheet over his body. Harris' father would go into Woodburn on a Saturday night and watch for the ghost to make an appearance. The ghost would swing around, and everyone would talk about it. The ghost was caught when someone jerked the sheet off. In Harris' opinion, old Woodburn was a town that had enough buildings for a ghost to swing from.

Tim Harris thinks that Woodburn is unified today by many things. The community cemetery still exists, but had problems with ownership. The records were kept at Crossroad's Market and has been a disorganized situation. The cemetery for the most part runs itself. Harris says, there are funny stories about where bodies are buried or the lack of knowing where every grave is located.

The square in the middle of town used to allow traffic to drive all the way around it. Now, a new house has been built in the middle of the square, disabling traffic flow. The signs from the old train station are still present and visible in the town even though the station has long been torn down.

There is a small area in Woodburn where the black people live. It is known as "the grove." Harris has seen old maps where back roads existed and many black families lived on them. Black people still live on these roads today. The black cemetery is on Highway 240 on the grounds of the black Methodist Church.

The older white people of Woodburn knew the black people, in contrast to the lack of contact between blacks and whites in Woodburn today.

According to Rev. L.V. Woods, the minister of the black Baptist church in Woodburn, the one event that has united the blacks and the whites was the joint service between First Baptist and Woodburn Baptist Churches. The first service was held at First Baptist where Rev. L.V. Woods is currently pastor and Rev. Wallace was pastor of Woodburn Baptist. Rev. Woods delivered the message, and Woodburn's choir shared music. The second and last joint service took place when Ken Cummins was pastor at Woodburn; he delivered the message while First Baptist's choir shared music. Harris remembers Annie Pearl Grainger who played the piano at the joint service at Woodburn. He said that "she could play the fire out of the piano."

Often small communities have inadequate economic resources for supporting their pastor. The pastor is forced to serve one or more churches.⁹ This is true for L.V. Woods who has pastored at the black Baptist church in Woodburn for 27 years. He holds services at First Baptist in Woodburn on the first and third Sundays and at the Loving Chapel Baptist Church in Simpson County

on the second and fourth Sundays.

Evans Duff, born 1899 and one who has lived in Woodburn the longest, remembers it before the row of frame buildings on the square burned in 1904. They were rebuilt in 1909 and were brick. On Clark street, he recalls, there was a saddle maker and the Presbyterian Church. On Main Street, there was Doctor Kirby's grocery, John Sutherland's dry goods store, a drug store, and a hardware store. Those structures on Main Street were the row of buildings that were rebuilt after the fire.

Duff recalls there being a farmer's market, then a store run by Jim Harrington, a produce house, a bank, a doctor's office, and a cobbler in the square. There was a retirement home on Nashville Road about a half mile from Woodburn. On Highway 240, there was a livery stable and located near it was Woodburn High School. Now a church sits on the lot where the high school formerly stood. Behind this church is a ball park that Evans Duff built.

Duff says that when the L&N came through Woodburn, there were ten passenger trains and around eleven freight trains each day. There was a section of town about a mile away from the square where the hired hands for the railroad lived. However, this area no longer exists. Duff says there were no cabooses on the trains. A hotel was located on the other side of the tracks where passengers could eat and stay the night. The water tank for the train, he recalls, was at the first crossing and he remembers when the mail was delivered by the train.

Duff recollects on a day when old Woodburn had horse and buggies traveling throughout its streets. For entertainment, residents of Woodburn would go to the train depot to watch the passengers exit the train. When freight trains would come through the town, Evans and his friends would often jump on one of its cars and ride until it had to slow down for a curve. They would then jump off and walk back to town.

Evans has seen many changes in Woodburn since he first moved there. The ball park once used by the school is now only used annually for the volunteer fire department's ice cream supper. There now are many nursing homes located in Woodburn. He said there were once many businesses in Woodburn, but now the businesses have left, leaving the "old folks" behind. L&N no longer passes through Woodburn and has been replaced by small freight trains. Formerly, the town used Cumberland, Home, and Loose Leaf telephones. Now, he goes to Bowling Green to buy his groceries because the one store in Woodburn is too expensive for him to shop there. He thinks that times were better in the past than they are today.

The centralizing features of "old Woodburn" were the L&N railroad, the town square, and the school. Everyone knew the train schedules and often came together to see who was getting off the train. The town square was where one came to purchase anything they could not make or grow on their farms. The town was independent and self sufficient which made the businesses in the town square a unifying feature. Probably, the most central

structure in the community was Woodburn High School. It was where all the families of Woodburn sent their children to school, and where the community came together for basketball games and graduations. The memories of consolidation with Richpond School are painful.

The centers of "old Woodburn" no longer exist. The L&N train went bankrupt and no longer travels through town. The school consolidated with Richpond and its structure in Woodburn later burned. The businesses in the town square closed one by one. The structures in the square stand abandoned and as a reminder of the thriving "old Woodburn."

Old Woodburn exists just below the surface of everyone's memory. The railroad signs are no longer on the station, but are exhibited on an auction barn at the entrance of town. The train station has been torn down and the wood was reused, by James Stephens to build a house and a music podium. The podium is used at Woodburn Baptist Church. The foundations and the corner stones of some structures exist along with the cisterns. Cedar Bluff College was torn down, but a barn was built from its wood. Beaded 2x4 boards line the inside of the barn which was produced from this wood and is situated near the old site of the college. The front and side walks of the Church of Christ were the original ones for Woodburn High School. Woodburn Personal Care Home used to be the Presbyterian Church.

Everyone seems to have his own theory as to why Woodburn failed as a thriving city; often their reasons overlap. Some say

1-14

it was because the bank failed after the Depression. Others say it was because the flour mill burned and took away industrial jobs offered in the community or because the automobile was so successful and made trips to Franklin and Bowling Green more accessible. These are some of the reasons given by the Park City Daily News in an article about Woodburn.¹⁰ The article goes on to blame the lack of interest by young people, the lack of community leadership, and the lack of good jobs. Mike Larson, a folklore student who researched Woodburn in 1975, found that the people thought losing the school made Woodburn die. World War II caused people to leave for the city to work. Lastly, activity ceased, businesses closed, and the train shut down. These reasons are given for the downfall of Woodburn.¹¹

Since all these changes in Woodburn, the unifying central features also changed. The volunteer fire department is now a unifying force in the town. They organize a community wide ice cream supper which exhibits community involvement by its large number of attenders. Crossroad's Market is the only store left in Woodburn and is appreciated because of its convenience, but further because it is a "local store." Even though its products are not locally produced, it has a strong connection with the town and is locally owned. The post office is the final unifying feature left in this community. It is where one can find out the latest news in the town. Death notices are posted and money is donated at the post office for funeral flowers. The post master is a well known community member.

The idea of Woodburn being "town" has changed. Old Woodburn was when its members came to town to purchase what ever they lacked and it was considered "town." Now town has a different meaning. One has to go to Bowling Green or Franklin to purchase nearly all necessities, and these trips are considered going to "town." There had to be a town here in the past because a trip outside of Woodburn was not as accessible as today. Now farmers are not as independent, they borrow money for their land, and they also bank outside of Woodburn. There are fewer farms, yet bigger ones.

My analysis of Woodburn is not complete. I have only scratched the surface and need to interview more residents and continue to research more of Woodburn's history. I hope my work has fulfilled some of Sarah Sutherland's expectations. I look forward to continuing work on this project and hope that more research will be done on small towns.

1. Otto G. Hoiberg. Exploring the Small Community (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955),10.
2. Hoiberg 1955,9-10
3. Ray Sutherland, "A History of Woodburn" (Western Kentucky University)1.
4. Hayes 1947,30.
5. "The Bowling Galley," Park City Daily News, February 1939.
6. Hayes 1947,7.
7. Hayes 1947,7.
8. Hayes 1947,31.
9. Rockwell C. Smith, The Church in Our Town (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945),135.
10. "In Limbo 20 Years, Woodburn May Revive," Park City Daily News, 3 November 1968.
11. Mike Larson, "History of Woodburn" (Western Kentucky University, 1975)

REFERENCES CITED

- Edwards, Virgie. Interview by Carolyn Helm, 13 October 1989. Tape recording, Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University.
- Duff, Edmund. Interview by Carolyn Helm, 19 November 1989. Tape recording, Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University.
- Duff, Evans. Interview by Carolyn Helm, 2 November 1989. Tape recording, Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University.
- Harris, Tim. Interview by Carolyn Helm, 28 September 1989. Tape recording, Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University.
- Hayes, Wayland J. 1947. The Small Community Looks Ahead. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Hoiberg, Otto G. 1955. Exploring the Small Community. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Larson, Mike. "History of Woodburn." Western Kentucky University, 1975.
- Smith, Rockwell C. 1945. The Church in Our Town. New York: Abingdon-Cokebury Press.
- Sutherland, Ray. "A History of Woodburn." Western Kentucky University.
- Sutherland, Sarah. Interview by Carolyn Helm, 19 September 1989. Tape recording, Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University.
- Woods, L.V. Interview by Carolyn Helm, 3 November 1989. Tape recording, Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University.