



Hettie Lawson

HETTIE LAWSON AND her husband, John Oliver Lawson, lived “across the mountain” from Elizabeth Fox McMahan’s home. Although they lived less than twenty miles from the McMahans’ Sevierville home, a visit would have required a half day of traveling by horse and buggy and well over an hour by car. The Lawsons lived in isolated Wear’s Valley in Blount County. Here they engaged in farming, emphasizing livestock and subsistence crops.

During the Great Depression, Oliver Lawson worked for the federal public works program, the Works Progress Administration, at times. He also found work as a supervisor at a local Civilian Conservation Corps camp. The Civilian Conservation Corps employed single, unemployed men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to construct roads, campgrounds, trails, and other facilities in national and state parks. While Oliver Lawson was away at work during the day, Mrs. Lawson and her children did the farm work.

World War II generated an enormous demand for manufactured goods, creating new jobs in factories all over the region. As a result, in the early 1940s, Oliver Lawson obtained a job at an Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) plant near Maryville. Although it was a thirty-mile commute to the ALCOA plant, the company transported employees from neighboring counties with an extensive network of “work buses,” giving ALCOA access to a large pool of rural employees who did not own cars. After the war ended, the Lawsons moved to a small community near the plant, and Mr. Lawson worked at ALCOA until his retirement.

Mrs. Lawson was in her nineties when we spoke, and she was in poor health. She and her husband lived with one of their daughters, and we spoke in their home on August 16, 1993. Her memory was failing, and she did not have a great deal of energy, so our talk was short. Nonetheless, she provides an interesting picture of life on a mountain farm. At the end of the interview, Mrs. Lawson’s daughter, Betty Lawson Coulter, told a colorful story about a mischievous cow that brings home the hardships that Mrs. Lawson often endured while her husband worked off the farm. Mrs. Coulter’s words are indicated in italics. In the fall of 1994, Mrs. Coulter completed the

family history questionnaire for her parents and made a few corrections to the transcript.



I grew up on a farm in Wear's Valley. I was born July 31, 1901. We had, they called her the home demonstration agent. I guess I joined the 4-H. One year we planted beans. I guess we were supposed to can them. I got a few rows of beans.

I went to Knoxville several times. They used to have, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey used to have a parade. And me and my neighbor and another girl, we'd go down there to see the parade.

We [she and Oliver] went to school together.

It [the Depression] was hard. I had four children.

We had cows for our own use. And raised corn, and we raised tobacco. We had apples. I don't know now hardly how we did it. Just by hard work, I reckon. I put up a lot, canned and put up a lot of stuff. Through the summer, we always had a garden, and I canned all the vegetables. We depended on those through the winter. Of course, we raised a little corn. But we managed some way to buy flour. We never did raise much wheat. We had hogs. Salt and brown sugar and pepper, I believe, was what we put on our hams.

And Oliver, my husband, worked for the WPA some. And he was in the CCs [*sic*] a while. They had civilian employees. They went under the same rules, but they wasn't actually members of the CCs.

The neighbors pitched in and helped each other quite a bit. At that time, we lived close to Oliver's parents and mine, too. And, of course, they helped out with things. They gave us food and helped us out a little bit.

When people were having hard times, the neighbors would help them. Sometimes the churches did [provide aid], sometimes they didn't. At that time, I don't think, now I may not be telling you right, but I think it was mostly neighbors. Maybe they had some quilts that they didn't really need or something.

For fun, we played ball. Just with family, a lot of the times. Sometimes we'd have some of the neighbors or somebody up there to play with us. We didn't have much time to do things. Most things we done for fun was on Sundays. We worked about six days a week.

We went to church. And we'd visit people around in the community. But we didn't do much visiting; I mean, any distance away from home. Only where we could walk. I didn't [visit with other women] very often. Most of 'em was like me; they had to work.

We had little grocery stores. We could get groceries there. For clothing, we could go to Sevierville. Back then, we usually made our clothes. They kept some cloth. They didn't have a big variety, but they had some. Sometimes we'd get something there. Most of it you had to go somewhere else to get it. To get to Sevierville then, with a wagon or buggy, you started early of a morning and come home late at night with your traveling time and the time spent in the stores.

We had, there was a spring up on the mountain, way up above the house. And we had water piped down to the back porch. We had plenty of water. Just get it out on the back porch. No, we didn't have any electricity for several years.

Well, I believe the oldest one, Hugh, was a child [when we got our first car]. I remember what the first we had was a secondhand Ford. Wish I had one of them.

I worked in the garden and the field, too. I milked. We had a mule, but I didn't have much to do with him, only just feeding him and, and after he started to work down here, Hugh [her son] took care of that. I was about halfway afraid of these mules.

DAUGHTER, BETTY LAWSON COULTER: *We lived up next to the mountain. And Daddy bought a cow. This was in the late '40s, wasn't it, when he bought old Lucy. And they had a bell around her neck so we could find her. She'd get somewhere and hide, and she'd stand so still that that bell wouldn't tinkle, and we couldn't find her. And mama would climb those hills till she was just give out.*

We had to have the milk.

Yeah, we needed the milk.

That was the coldest house we lived in up there [in the mountains] I've ever seen. And I made myself a promise then that when I get out, and I ever get a home, I'm gonna stay warm. And I have. And of course after we moved down here [near Maryville], the house we lived in wasn't as bad. It wasn't as cold as it was up there [in the mountains].

I had a brother in the First World War. And then our sons were in the second war. The oldest one went first, of course. He was in Belgium and France. The younger one, he went to Japan.

We moved to Blount County, I guess it was in the early '50s. I can't remember. It was after the war. He [John Oliver] worked for the Aluminum Company. He worked there a while before we moved here [near Maryville].

I encouraged them [her children] to get educations and get a job [rather than farm]. I had enough of it.