

CHRISTIAN COUNTY, MISSOURI:  
AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY, 1860-  
1900

by

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### **Preface:**

The following essay focuses primarily on telling a story about small towns and farmers in one rural, agrarian county in Southwest Missouri. The inevitable question one must expect when pursuing such a study is “why does it matter”? The people discussed in these pages do not occupy a prominent position in the History of the United States, or even the state of Missouri. None of the places mentioned in this account will seem familiar to the casual student of American History, or even the specialist.

Indeed, why do small towns and farmers matter? I believe they are important because they represent the broad scope of the American experience up until the early part of the twentieth century. In our modern, highly industrialized and technological society it is easy to forget that for most of its history the United States has been a rural and agrarian republic. In that sense, the history of Christian County, contributes a vital element to our understanding, not only of our past, but also of ourselves.

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In the preface to *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, Edward Ayers's groundbreaking book on the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War, he defines his study as an attempt to tell the story of the "people of the border" within the broader context of the Civil War narrative. Ayers describes the "people of the border" as those who lived in the Upper South and the Lower North, pioneers whose lives were conditioned by their cultural and geographical liminality. The men and women who lived along the border were important to U.S. history because they "contributed far more than their share of critical votes and leaders, more than their share of soldiers, battlefields, and sacrifices. The nation redefined itself on the landscape of the border, the heart of the nation where North and South met."<sup>1</sup>

Ayers' book focuses on two rural counties in Virginia and Pennsylvania, but his description of "people of the border" could apply just as easily to the Ozarks. The Ozarks (sometimes called the Ozark Highlands or the Ozark Mountain Region) is a tri-state region encompassing Southern Missouri, Northern Arkansas, and a small part of Northeastern Oklahoma. (Figure 2) The most prominent geological features of the Ozarks are a rough, hilly topography, hard and rocky soil, abundant caves, and the presence of minerals such as flint, dolomite, and limestone. But the people of the Ozarks also define the area. From the beginning of white settlement in the early

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<sup>1</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), xix.

nineteenth century the region attracted a large number of Scotch-Irish emigrants from the mountainous regions of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

The people who came to the Ozarks in these early days were a hardy breed typical of the old frontier. They were independent yeoman farmers who rarely owned slaves.<sup>3</sup> They lived a predominantly rural existence; there were few large cities or towns; they worshipped at Protestant Evangelical churches. Their economic activity centered on agriculture, particularly the production of food crops and the raising of domesticated animals.

Like most border regions, the Ozarks did not identify strongly with either the North or the South during the Civil War, favoring compromise over conflict wherever possible. For example, in the 1860 election Missouri voted overwhelmingly for the moderate pro-Union candidates Stephen Douglas and John Bell, relegating the Southern fire-eater John C. Breckenridge and Northern Republican Abraham Lincoln to third and fourth place respectively.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the war did come, and during the conflict the Ozarks, like most border regions, received more than its fair share of armed conflict and suffering. A survey by the National Park Service indicated that Missouri was the third most fought-over state during the Civil War. Endemic guerilla violence ravaged the Missouri Ozarks throughout the war.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Milton D. Rafferty, *The Ozarks: Land and Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Milton D. Rafferty, *Historical Atlas of Missouri* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Harrington Ryle, *Missouri: Union or Secession* (Nashville, TN: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1933), 162-67.

<sup>5</sup> National Park Service, *Civil War Sites Advisory Commission Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1993), 3. This "third place" ranking is based on the number of "principle battles" (battles deemed important by the Advisory Commission) fought in Missouri; Paul R. Petersen, *Quantrill of Missouri: The Making of a Guerilla Warrior* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 2003), 101.

The history of Christian County, Missouri, in many ways typifies that of the Ozarks during the Civil War and the later decades of the nineteenth century. At the time of its formation in 1859, Christian County was an agrarian, predominantly rural county in Southwestern Missouri home to by thousands of small yeoman farmers who owned very few slaves. Like other parts of the Ozarks, Christian County recovered from war-time hardships, fitfully at first, but with gathering strength as it benefited from the resumption of peace and the introduction of export agriculture to the Ozarks starting in the 1870s. The story of that recovery, and its attendant effects on the economic, demographic, and political development of Christian County, is the subject of this paper.

The first settlers to live in Christian County were the Native Americans. Southwest Missouri was home to several different Indian tribes long before white settlers ever saw the region. These included the Delaware, the Osage, the Kickapoo, and many other groups. The earliest white settlers arrived in what is now Christian County in the 1820s after American explorer Henry R. Schoolcraft visited the area in December 1819. The earliest “permanent settlers arrived about two years later, locating in the vicinity of the present town of Ozark.” However, further white settlement remained sparse until the 1830s “when the influx steadily increased.”<sup>6</sup>

Christian County was not officially incorporated until 1859. Originally the area known as Christian County was a part of Greene County, which comprised all of Southwest Missouri when it was established in 1833.<sup>7</sup> On March 8, 1859 the state government created Christian County out of “portions of Greene, Webster, and Taney

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<sup>6</sup> Christian County Centennial, Inc., *Christian County: Its First 100 Years* (Jefferson City, Missouri: Von Hoffman Press, 1959), 1-2. Hereafter, “Christian County Centennial, Inc.” shall be abbreviated “CCC.”

counties,” and they designated the town of Ozark as the county seat. The new county was dubbed Christian County “at the request of Mrs. Tom Neaves who emigrated from Christian County, Kentucky.”<sup>8</sup>

Because it was founded at a late date, it is difficult to know exactly where the first settlers of the area came from. However, one early resident of the county, William N. Collier wrote that they came “principally from Kentucky, Tennessee, and western Virginia, belonged to a pioneer stock whose fathers had carved homes for themselves from the great forests in those states.” Given their background, it is no surprise that these mountain people chose to live in the “rich creek bottom lands and surrounding hardwood forests of the rugged hills” of Christian County.<sup>9</sup>

An analysis of the census returns for Christian County in 1860 (the first year Christian County was surveyed separately) supports Collier’s recollection. In 1860 Christian County had 5,491 residents.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, roughly forty per cent of Christian County residents at this time, or nearly 2,200, were native-born Missourians. The next largest group, numbering more than 1,600, came from Tennessee. Settlers from Kentucky and Virginia numbered 325 and 266 respectively. Northerners had a

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew J. Hernando, *Economic and Demographic History of Greene County, Missouri, 1830-1880* (M.A. Thesis: Louisiana Tech University, 2005), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Christian County Museum Historical Society, *Christian County, Missouri: History and Families* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Company, 1998), 6. Hereafter, “Christian County Museum Historical Society” shall be abbreviated “CCMHS.”

<sup>9</sup> William N. Collier, quoted in CCC, 5; Milton D. Rafferty, *The Ozarks: Land and Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 64.

<sup>10</sup> George D. Hack, *Population Trends in Missouri* (State of Missouri: Department of Community Affairs, 1968), 243.

relatively small presence in the county. For example, there were only 125 settlers from Illinois and just 28 from Ohio.<sup>11</sup>

The southern background of most early settlers meant that economic and cultural life of Christian County mirrored the South in many ways. For example, Protestant evangelical churches dominated the religious landscape of Christian County from an early date. The county's first church was organized in 1833 by "a Methodist circuit rider named McMahan." Services were held in "the home of William Friend," one of the county's first residents, who lived near Finley Creek.<sup>12</sup> By 1860, census enumerators listed nine church edifices in the county, including seven Baptist and two Methodist. In this respect Christian County was not unlike the rest of Missouri, where over sixty per cent of all the churches were either Baptist or Methodist.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fact that Christian County was populated mainly by southerners, it did not rely on slave labor. In 1860, county residents owned only 229 slaves, which represented barely four per cent of the total population.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the vast majority of the county's residents were independent yeoman farmers who cultivated their land by themselves (or with their families) and grew food crops rather than cotton

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<sup>11</sup> These statistics were compiled using the original 1860 census returns for Christian County. These returns can be accessed online using the Christian County Library's website: [<http://www.rootsweb.com/~moccl/>]. See also, Appendix A.

<sup>12</sup> CCC, 5-6. Because so many church groups conducted services in people's homes it is nearly certain that there were more "churches" operating in the county in 1860 than there were edifices to house them.

<sup>13</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Statistics of the United States (including mortality, property, &c.,) in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns and Being the Final Exhibit of the Eighth Census, under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1866). Hereafter cited as "1860 Census: Mortality, Property, Etc." The census takers distinguished between church "edifices" and churches because more than one congregation would often meet in the same building.

<sup>14</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864). Hereafter cited as "1860 Census Population."

or tobacco. In this respect they were typical of farmers throughout Southern Missouri where slavery never really took root.<sup>15</sup>

The three preeminent Southern cash crops were rice, tobacco and cotton. In 1860 Christian County farmers produced no cotton or rice, and only about 36,000 pounds of tobacco. By comparison they grew more than 350,000 bushels of corn, 48,000 bushels of wheat, and 29,000 bushels of oats.<sup>16</sup> The relative dearth of cash crop agriculture in Christian County roughly paralleled broader agricultural trends throughout the Ozarks. One study of an eight county area in Southwest Missouri revealed that the region produced only about 78,000 pounds of tobacco in 1850.<sup>17</sup>

In 1860, Christian County farmers also grew large quantities of Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes. Moreover, many of them were dairy farmers who tended roughly 2,000 milk cows and churned out 82,000 pounds of butter and 2,200 pounds of cheese.<sup>18</sup>

The county's land resources were still relatively undeveloped in 1860. Collectively, the county's husbandmen tilled 23,000 acres of improved farmland, or just a little more than four acres per person. Consequently, in addition to tending milk cows, residents kept many other types of animals, including 3,600 head of other types of

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<sup>15</sup> Rafferty, *Historical Atlas*, 41-42.

<sup>16</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860: compiled from the original returns of the eighth census, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 88-91. Hereafter cited as "1860 Census: Agriculture." While 36,000 pounds of tobacco might seem like a lot, that figure must be placed in perspective. In the 1860 census several counties reported tobacco crops in the hundreds of thousands of pounds. Moreover, only a small minority of farmers in Christian County grew tobacco, and most of them devoted only a few acres to its production.

<sup>17</sup> Milton D. Rafferty, "Agricultural Change in the Western Ozarks," *Missouri Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (April, 1975): 300-01.

<sup>18</sup> *1860 Census: Agriculture*, 88-91.

cattle, 1,700 oxen, and 2,300 horses. They also herded 5,200 sheep from which they collected 9,000 pounds of wool that year.<sup>19</sup>

Swine were by far the most common type of livestock. By 1860 Christian County farmers raised some 13,500 pigs.<sup>20</sup> This was typical of the Ozarks, where pork was the most common meat in the diet of the early settlers. Not surprisingly, the frugal hill people were adept at using virtually every part of the pig for sustenance.<sup>21</sup> So vital were swine to their diet that “hog-killin’s” proved a central part of local culture. These rituals took place in fall or winter. They were social events typically involving several neighboring families. The men killed the swine and packed “hams, shoulders and side meat ... in coarse salt” for seasoning purposes. The women used the fat to make lard and “made sausage and head cheese.” Everyone present could expect to take home a part of the meat produced at these butchering events. Because there were usually several of these “hog-killin’s” every fall and winter, families enjoyed a regular supply of fresh meat. Just as important as the meat was the conversation and socializing that took place at these gatherings.<sup>22</sup>

On the eve of the Civil War Christian County was rural, sparsely populated, and economically underdeveloped. Nevertheless, its residents led relatively comfortable lives subsisting on a variety of food crops and raising several types of livestock. The remote geography of Christian County prevented much contact with the outside world. Nevertheless, they would not escape the great bloodletting to come.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Wiley Britton, *Pioneer Life in Southwest Missouri*, rev. ed. (Kansas City: Smith-Grievess CO., 1929), 113-14.

<sup>22</sup> CCC, 132-33.

The vast majority of Christian County's residents would have preferred to remain neutral during the war, but since that was not an option they leaned toward one side or the other. Given the Southern background of the majority of residents one might have expected them to sympathize with the Southern cause. But in fact the balance of sentiment in the county weighed heavily in favor of the Union, as was the case throughout the Ozarks and in Missouri at large. In 1860, Missouri held a special election to send delegates to a convention empowered to decide the question of secession. Unionist candidates received some 110,000 votes in that election compared to only about 30,000 for the secessionists.<sup>23</sup> In Christian County the unionists garnered an even larger margin of victory: 800 voters opposed secession; 108 favored it. The county's young men enlisted in the Union and Confederate armies at roughly the same ratio as they voted.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Christian County would become one of those places where brother literally would fight against brother, and neighbor against neighbor.

At first glance the history of Christian County during the Civil War does not appear to have been very eventful. Only one major engagement, the Battle of Wilson's Creek took place there. The battlefield is actually located on the edge of the county line next to Greene County.<sup>25</sup> Confederate General John S. Marmaduke, while on his way to make an assault on Springfield, later burned down a small Union fortification at Ozark, the county seat.<sup>26</sup> Other military engagements included a skirmish at Dug Spring near

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<sup>23</sup> William E. Parrish, *Turbulent Partnership: Missouri and the Union, 1861-1865* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1963), 9.

<sup>24</sup> CCHMS, 7.

<sup>25</sup> CCMHS, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Phillip W. Steele, *Civil War in the Ozarks* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1993), 66-67.

Nixa, and another brief clash at Swan Creek in which the Confederates were said to have suffered significant losses.<sup>27</sup> That was about the extent of formal military action in Christian County during the war years.

However, the limited number of formal military engagements did not mean that fighting was limited. Christian County, along with the rest of the Ozarks, would witness some of the most vicious guerilla warfare in American History. The county's "isolated farms ... were easy prey for troublemakers on both sides."<sup>28</sup> Often the combatants were little more than bandits or "bushwackers" rather than soldiers; they were "lawless men who terrorized the hills, robbing, stealing, burning and, many times, killing defenseless people in cold blood."<sup>29</sup>

One of the worst marauders was Alf Bolin, a Confederate guerilla. Bolin's "specialty was the murder of Union men at home on furloughs." He would lay in wait for his victims "along the side of a lonely road" as they made their way home and shoot them without warning. Bolin's actions became so notorious that the Union Army put a reward on his head. A Union soldier by the name of Thomas took advantage of the opportunity for a profit. After gaining Bolin's trust by pretending to be a sick Confederate soldier on his way home, Thomas killed Bolin with a blow to the head. After killing Bolin, Thomas took his body to the town of Forsyth where the outlaw's head was

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<sup>27</sup> CCC, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Glenn, *Mid the Hills: A History of Nixa, 1835-2001* (Nixa, Missouri: The Author, 2001), 10.

<sup>29</sup> CCC, 184.

cut off and sent to Ozark for verification. There local authorities publicly displayed Bolin's head on a pole for several days before sending it on to Saint Louis.<sup>30</sup>

Bolin's Union counterpart was John H. Kelso, a scholarly man who studied Latin and Greek and held the rank of captain in Missouri's state militia. He used his appointment with the military as a pretext to wage a personal war of retribution and murder. Kelso was a religious man who never drank or smoked and apparently exercised an amazing degree of self-control. On one occasion he reportedly snuck into the camp of three rebel bushwackers intending to kill them. As he was about to do so, he took a fancy to the large quilt draped over them, and dexterously removed it from their sleeping forms before dispatching each of them with his knife. Unlike Bolin, no one killed Kelso for his misdeeds. Instead, he won election to Congress as a Radical Republican in 1864.<sup>31</sup>

Although the vast majority of atrocities committed in the Christian County certainly went unpunished, a brief perusal of the cases handled by Missouri's union provost marshals suggests that internecine violence was common. For example, there is the case of Thomas Budd who was accosted by some thirty men, who kidnapped Budd and then shot, burned, and mutilated him (cutting off his nose).<sup>32</sup>

It may be impossible to exactly quantify the social and economic effects of the war on Christian County. No population figures are available for the years 1861 to 1865. However, enough may be inferred from the data we do have to conclude that the war

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<sup>30</sup> Douglas Mahnkey, "Alf Bolin's Buried Treasure," *White River Valley Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, no. 6 (Winter 1974): 1-4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> An index to the Provost Marshal papers is available at the following web address: [<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/provost/>]

had extreme consequences for the county. Oral tradition suggests that the county “was almost depopulated” by the end of the war.<sup>33</sup> That assessment seems to be an exaggeration, for by the 1870 census the county’s population had recovered enough to post a modest gain of twenty-two per cent for the decade, with more than 6,700 residents that year versus slightly less than 5,500 for 1860. Nevertheless, that figure must be understood in the context of population trends statewide. Missouri, as a whole, saw its population increase by forty-five per cent during the same period.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, emigration to Christian County from other states seems to have abated during the 1860’s. The number of residents born in Tennessee decreased by about 160 from 1860 to 1870, and the figures for residents born in Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia show similar declines. Likewise, the county lost roughly half of its tiny antebellum slave population. In 1870 there were 114 black residents; in 1860 there had been 229 slaves. The number of residents born in Illinois and Ohio increased slightly, but the bulk of the population increase in the 1860’s came from people born in Missouri. This means that the county grew through migration from other parts of the state, through natural increase, or more likely from some combination thereof.<sup>35</sup>

The increase in population was accompanied by small gains in the agricultural sector of the county’s economy. For example, the total acreage of improved farmland

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<sup>33</sup> CCMHS, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Hack, 243-46.

<sup>35</sup> As previously noted the nativity statistics for 1860 were compiled by hand using the original census returns for Christian County that year. However, the statistics for 1870 were already available through the *Geospatial and Statistical Data Center*, a research project run by the University of Virginia Library. This resource can be accessed at the following web address: [<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>]. For the figures on the black population of Christian County see, Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census (June 1, 1870.): Compiled Pursuant to a Concurrent Resolution of Congress, and under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872).

increased to nearly 33,000 acres in 1870, or a gain of about thirty-eight per cent.<sup>36</sup> This figure represented less than ten per cent of the total acreage of Christian County itself, or about 360,000 acres. Even by 1870 the county was nowhere close to realizing its full agricultural potential.<sup>37</sup>

A mixed pattern of growth in the production of food crops accompanied the modest expansion in improved acreage. In the 1860s farmers increased their production of wheat by about seventeen per cent to roughly 56,500 bushels; they grew about 45,000 bushels of oats by 1870, a fifty per cent increase over 1860. However, corn production fell thirty-eight per cent to approximately 216,000 acres.<sup>38</sup>

Part of the problem farmers faced during the tumultuous 1860's stemmed from a decline in the availability of labor saving devices and work animals. During this decade the value of all farm implements and machinery in Christian County declined by about two-fifths to less than \$31,000. At the same time the number of oxen fell from more than 1,700 in 1860 to less than 900 in 1870, and the number of donkeys and mules declined by 100.<sup>39</sup> The reduction in farm implements and machinery is probably attributable to the general economic malaise of the 1860's, but the disappearance of so many work animals was almost certainly due to the depredations visited on civilians throughout the Civil War. The confiscation of beasts of burden was deemed a military

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<sup>36</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *The Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States, Embracing the Tables of Wealth, Taxation, and Public Indebtedness; of Agriculture, Manufactures, Mining, and the Fisheries: with which are reproduced, from the volume on population, the major tables of occupations: compiled from the original returns of the ninth census, (June 1, 1870,) under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 188-91. Hereafter abbreviated as "1870 Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry."

<sup>37</sup> CCMHS, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *1860 Census: Agriculture*, 88-91; *1870 Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry*, 188-91.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

necessity by both armies, and both sides took such animals, often without compensation.<sup>40</sup>

The production of nearly every important crop besides wheat and oats either declined or saw marginal growth. Tobacco yields fell by 20,000 bushels, and there were steep declines in the amount of cheese and butter that the county's dairy farmers produced. Wool production remained essentially unchanged, as did annual crop yields for potatoes, peas, and beans. As before, the county grew no cotton.<sup>41</sup>

The lingering effects of the Civil War were felt in other ways as well. Although manufacturing was never a big part of the county's economy in the nineteenth century, it is significant that both the number of manufacturing establishments and the number of workers they employed declined in the 1860s.

Of course, the word "manufacturing" in nineteenth century census documents meant something entirely different from what the term means today. In 1860 in Christian County the "manufacturing" sector included three employees at a leather-goods shop, nine workers at a liquor distillery, eleven workers in the county's eight flour mills and gristmills, a blacksmith shop, and nineteen workers in six lumber mills.<sup>42</sup> There might be several workers at a manufacturing establishment, or only one owner and operator depending on the specific trade, but there were no large plants, no assembly lines, and no complicated machinery. In other words, full-scale industrial activity did not exist in

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<sup>40</sup> John S. Ezell, *The South Since 1865* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1975), 28. This was something that happened throughout the South during the Civil War. Ezell writes that during the Civil War, the South lost 200,000 mules and half a million horses.

<sup>41</sup> *1860 Census: Agriculture*, 88-91. *1870 Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry*, 188-91.

<sup>42</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Manufactures of the United States in 1860: compiled from the original returns of the eighth census, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1865), 298. Hereafter, abbreviated as "1860 Industrial Census."

early Christian County, a situation that would not change until the last years of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the fact that by 1870 the county had lost its leather-goods manufacturer, its liquor distillery, and its tobacco manufacturer meant that during the 1860s many skilled workers sought other work or tried their luck elsewhere, yet another indication of how much the war retarded economic growth.<sup>43</sup>

Fortunately, the lean years did not last forever. By the early 1870's broad economic changes were afoot that would produce many positive changes in the economic fortunes of the County. One of these changes was the completion in May 1870 of the South Pacific Railroad Company's new line from Saint Louis to the city of Springfield in neighboring Greene County.<sup>44</sup> Although the new railroad did not reach directly into Christian County, it was close enough to benefit it by stimulating the growth of agriculture throughout Southwest Missouri. Through the efforts of entrepreneurs like J. M. Doling, a Kentucky businessman who came to the Ozarks in the 1860's, Springfield became the commercial hub for a thriving business in grain exportation. Farmers from the surrounding area, including Christian County, sent their excess wheat, corn, rye, oats, and other food crops to Springfield for transportation to hungry eastern markets.<sup>45</sup>

It is hardly surprising, then, that the production of food staples in Christian County increased dramatically in the 1870's. Wheat crops increased 150 per cent to

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<sup>43</sup> *1860 Industrial Census*, 298; *1870 Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry*, 686.

<sup>44</sup> Hernando, 62. This railroad line has changed corporate hands a number of times in its existence. It is best known to history as part of the Saint Louis and San Francisco Railroad Company (or "the Frisco") which acquired the line in 1876 and continued to operate it until 1950.

<sup>45</sup> George S. Escott, *History and Directory of Springfield and North Springfield* (Springfield, MO: Office of the Patriot-Advertiser, 1878), 152-53.

145,000 bushels in 1870. Farmers also grew 75,000 bushels of oats, an improvement of 30,000 bushels over the previous census year. Most importantly of all, corn yields rose to more than 635,000 bushels in 1880, an increase of 194 per cent over 1860.<sup>46</sup>

The commercial opportunity created by export agriculture also provided farmers with an incentive to clear more land for cultivation. During the 1870's farmers in the county added more than 23,000 acres of improved farmland to their holdings, bringing the total to approximately 56,000 acres. This was more than twice the rate of increase in improved acreage seen in the 1860s. At the same time the county's farmers added more than \$43,000 of farm implements and machinery to their inventories.<sup>47</sup>

Working more land with more equipment meant that Christian County farmers in the 1870s were able to expand production of virtually every important crop except tobacco, which continued to decline in importance, falling to about 7,600 pounds in 1870. On the other hand Irish and sweet potato crops expanded by 8,000 bushels combined and the county's shepherders sheared 70 per cent more wool, raising their take to 16,000 pounds.<sup>48</sup>

Another significant development in the 1870s was the start of a small mining operation in the county. Lead mining had already been a significant part of the economy of Southeast Missouri, because of wartime demand. With the coming of the

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<sup>46</sup> *1870 Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry*, 188-91. Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Report on the productions of agriculture as returned at the tenth census (June 1, 1880): embracing general statistics and monographs on cereal production, flour-milling, tobacco culture, manufacture and movement of tobacco, meat production* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881), 196. Hereafter abbreviated as "1880 Census: Agriculture."

<sup>47</sup> *1870 Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry*, 188-91; *1880 Census: Agriculture*, 123.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

railroad in 1870 lead and zinc mining quickly became a mainstay of the economy in Southwest Missouri.<sup>49</sup>

Christian County participated in this mining boom, although not to the same extent as some other counties in the region. By 1880 there was one lead mine in Christian County which produced 432 tons of lead per year. It employed sixty people, including twenty miners, and paid out more than \$12,000 in wages.<sup>50</sup>

For such an intensely agrarian county the preceding figures might seem like a startling development, and surely local residents derived considerable benefit from the mine. However, in comparison to other mining counties in Southwest Missouri, Christian County was really a minor player. For example, Greene County had three mines annually producing 636 tons of lead and 43 tons of zinc. Dade County also had three mines producing mainly zinc. Jasper County had twenty-nine mines producing about 11,000 tons of lead and 21,000 tons of zinc, making it the center of Missouri's lead and zinc mining industry.<sup>51</sup>

An improving economy led to a growing population. In the 1870s Christian County's population rose by forty-three per cent to roughly 9,600 inhabitants.<sup>52</sup> As had been the case in the 1870s, an increase in the number of residents born in Missouri represented the largest part of that population increase. Over the decade the number of

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<sup>49</sup> Lawrence O. Christensen and Gary R. Kramer, *A History of Missouri, Vol. 4: 1875-1919* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 227-28.

<sup>50</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Report on the Mining Industries of the United States (Exclusive of the Precious Metals): with Special Investigations into the Iron Resources of the Republic and into the Cretaceous Coals of the Northwest* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 804. Hereafter abbreviated as "1880 Census: Mining."

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* Understood in this context, the mine in Christian County was a supplement to the local economy, but only a small cog in the machinery of a substantial mining industry.

<sup>52</sup> Hack, 243.

native Missourians in the county grew by 2,500. The figures for residents born in other states remained essentially unchanged, except for natives of Illinois, who saw their numbers increase from 169 to 274, and Ohioans, whose ranks grew modestly during the same decade.<sup>53</sup>

However, in one respect, the composition of the county's population did change significantly. During the 1870s a small contingent of German immigrants arrived. Overall, the number of foreign-born residents in the county grew more than 450 per cent to 207 by 1880.<sup>54</sup> Of this figure, 114 were Germans. Most of these were German Catholics who settled in the vicinity of Billings, Missouri, near the county line.<sup>55</sup> The influence of German Catholics on Billings was so strong that many important county documents were written in German well into the 1890s. At some point a German school was established there. Moreover, in 1900 local Catholics founded St. Joseph's Elementary School, a parochial school that remains the only Catholic school in the county to the present day.<sup>56</sup>

Christian County's growth remained hampered by two nagging problems that persisted well into the 1880's. The first was a culture of violence and lawlessness, a legacy of the Civil War period. After 1865 most of the young fighting men who left home

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<sup>53</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880): Embracing Extended Tables of the Population of States, Counties, and Minor Civil Divisions, with Distinction of Race, Sex, Age, Nativity, and Occupations, together with Summary Tables, Derived from Other Census Reports Relating to Newspapers and Periodicals, Public Schools and Illiteracy, the Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent Classes, etc.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 517. Hereafter abbreviated as "1880 Census: Population." See also, the Geospatial & Statistical Data Center: [<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>]

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Russel L. Gerlach, *Immigrants in the Ozarks* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 49.

<sup>56</sup> CCMHS, 7, 24.

to join the army of their choice returned to lead normal, law-abiding lives. But a significant number of the guerillas and bushwhackers retained an enthusiasm for theft and violence. They continued to terrorize the unprotected towns and homesteads of the Ozarks just as they had done during the war. In neighboring Taney County, thirty people were murdered from 1865 to 1883, but not one person was punished for these crimes.<sup>57</sup>

Desperate to impose some sort of order to their lives, and despairing of obtaining relief through ordinary legal channels, the Ozarks' hill people turned to a vigilante organization known as the "Baldknobbers" to help reinstate law and order in their communities (Figures 3 and 4). The "Baldknobbers" were founded in Taney County in 1883. James R. Van Zandt, a Methodist minister, and former justice of the peace, helped found the organization. Van Zandt was an emigrant from Tennessee who had served in both the Mexican and Civil Wars. He was typical of most Baldknobbers in that he was considered part of the respectable element of society.<sup>58</sup>

The organization quickly spread to other parts of Southern Missouri, including Christian County. Certain comparisons to other nineteenth century vigilante organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan are irresistible. Like the Klan, the Baldknobbers cloaked their activities in secrecy. They wore colorfully decorated hoods and masks to hide their identity. They met in caves, or on treeless hilltops (or "bald knobs") to keep their proceedings from the public eye.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> CCC, 184-85.

<sup>58</sup> Christensen and Kremer, 23-24.

<sup>59</sup> CCC, 185-87.

But ultimately the comparison is unfair. The Baldknobbers did not have a racial agenda, since the relative scarcity of black people in the areas where they operated precluded significant racial tension. Instead, the purpose of the Baldknobbers was to enforce law and order and punish people who violated certain communal norms. The Baldknobbers administered punishments with a whip or a freshly cut hickory switch. The latter also became a favorite symbol of the organization. When they wanted to warn a transgressor, they did so by leaving a bundle of hickory switches next to his door.<sup>60</sup>

The Baldknobbers and their opponents, the Anti-Baldknobbers, at times waged violent retaliatory campaigns against each other. One of the curious facts about this period is that the attitude people had towards the Baldknobbers tended to reflect the political allegiances they had held during the Civil War. Thus the Anti-Baldknobbers were usually former confederates and members of the minority Democratic Party. The Baldknobbers, on the other hand, were most often former unionists who voted Republican.<sup>61</sup>

The Christian County branch of the Baldknobbers soon became important to the fate of the organization as a whole. The leader of the Baldknobbers in Christian County was Dave Walker. Like many Baldknobbers, Walker was a veteran, having served in the Union Army during the Civil War. He was also respectable; those who knew him regarded him as “an honest man and a good citizen.” However, it also appears that Walker was a poor leader. The Christian County Baldknobbers admitted to their ranks a

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 185-89. The chief targets of Baldknobber justice targets were vagabonds, drunkards, fornicators, wife-beaters, and criminals of all sorts.

<sup>61</sup> Gerry Darnell, “Bald Knobbers: The Ozark Vigilantes,” *Bittersweet, the Ozark Quarterly* Vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer, 1979): 21-23. These were not iron-clad rules, but most people followed this general pattern.

number of “turbulent and ungovernable men” who joined with the purpose of gaining power over their neighbors and exacting “personal vengeance” on their enemies. The well-intentioned Walker lost control of the organization. He was unable to restrain the abuses of some of its more headstrong members, especially his own son William<sup>62</sup>

Although Dave Walker tried to disband the organization in March of 1887, he could not prevent his son and several other Baldknobbers from launching one last raid. The younger Walker and his companions rode to the home of William Edens, an avowed enemy of the Baldknobbers and of the Walker family in particular. The men intended only to whip their victim, but when they failed to find him at his residence they went looking for him. They found him a short distance away at his father’s cabin where a shoot-out ensued. A short time later William Edens, his father, and his brother-in-law Charles Greene were all dead.<sup>63</sup>

The murders caused a sensation throughout the county. Local authorities brought charges against several prominent Baldknobbers, and Sheriff Zack Johnson tracked down some of the fugitives. Eventually four Baldknobbers, including Dave Walker, who had played no part in the shootings, and his son William (who had), were convicted of murder and sentenced to death.<sup>64</sup> The verdict seemed unfair to many people, especially since most believed Dave Walker was innocent in the affair. In 1889, statewide campaign was launched to convince the new governor, David R. Francis, to commute the death sentences. Francis refused, stating that the Baldknobbers

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<sup>62</sup> CCC, 188-89.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 190-91.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 191-98.

represented an “epidemic of lawlessness which has broken out in various parts of the country” which needed to be suppressed. The executions took place on May 10, 1889. The movement soon died out.<sup>65</sup>

The second problem that hampered economic and demographic growth in Christian County was transportation. Although the railroad depot at Springfield was within wagon distance of most of the county’s farmers, they still did not have the same direct access to mass transportation as their neighbors to the north. Their transportation problem was solved in 1883 when the Springfield and Southern Railroad Company built a feeder line from Springfield to Chadwick, a small community in the central part of the county. The town of Chadwick was actually built by the Railroad Company itself, first as a camp to house its workers, and then as the line’s terminal.<sup>66</sup> Beginning around 1870 Missouri underwent a major railroad boom. During the 1870s Missouri’s total complement of railroad track doubled from about 2,000 miles to roughly 4,000 miles.<sup>67</sup>

This rate of railroad construction required a massive amount of building materials, especially wood for railroad ties. The original purpose of the Chadwick line was to supply the lumber needs of the massive Saint Louis and San Francisco Railroad line that ran from Saint Louis to Springfield and then further on to the West. The “immense white oak forest[s]” of Christian County helped meet that demand.<sup>68</sup>

However, the Chadwick line did not exist only to serve the interests of the railroad companies. It also stimulated the economy of Christian County in a variety of

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<sup>65</sup> Christensen and Kremer, 24.

<sup>66</sup> CCC, 16; CCMHS, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Christensen and Kremer, 24.

<sup>68</sup> CCMHS, 25; CCC, 136.

ways, some of which were unexpected. Among them was the dramatic expansion of the poultry business in the 1880s. The numbers for that decade are hard to ascertain because of a change in the categories used by census enumerators between 1880 and 1890. In 1880 census takers counted “barn-yard” poultry, of which there were 24,586 in the county, and “other poultry” of which there were 3,728. They also tabulated county-wide egg production at roughly 116,000 dozen.<sup>69</sup>

In 1890 the census forms included four categories of poultry: chickens, turkeys, geese, and ducks. That year the county’s poultry farmers kept approximately 163,000 chickens, 4,400 turkeys, 5,317 geese, and 5380 ducks.<sup>70</sup> The number of chickens increased 660 per cent. Regardless of how one analyzes these numbers, one unmistakable conclusion remains. In the 1880’s poultry farming in this county experienced explosive growth. The majority of these birds were exported for consumption elsewhere. Most of them were sent up the Chadwick railroad line to Springfield, which by the turn of the century called itself the “world’s poultry capital.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, in the space of one decade poultry farming had come to rival the growing of cereals as the preeminent economic activity in Christian County.

Not that harvests of food crops suffered during this period. In fact, harvests of the county’s three most important grains – wheat, corn, and oats – also grew by leaps and bounds. Corn harvests increased nearly fifty per cent to about 945,000 bushels.

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<sup>69</sup> *1880 Census: Agriculture*, 290-91. For the sake of argument, we shall assume that the term “barn-yard” poultry refers to chickens.

<sup>70</sup> Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Report on the statistics of agriculture in the United States at the eleventh census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 336. Hereafter, abbreviated as “1890 Census: Agriculture.”

<sup>71</sup> Rafferty, *Land and Life*, 165.

Farmers also grew fifty per cent more wheat, and 175 per cent more oats. Additionally, combined harvests of Irish and sweet potatoes rose 260 per cent to about 75,000 bushels, and the county's dairy farmers more than doubled their output of butter to approximately 275,000 pounds.<sup>72</sup>

Increased agricultural production necessitated more cleared farmland. During the 1880's Christian County finally began to realize its agricultural potential and increased its total improved acreage to almost 100,000 acres, a seventy-seven percent increase. Moreover, by the end of the decade farmers had increased their holdings of farm implements and machinery to more than \$110,000, \$28,000 better than 1880.<sup>73</sup>

The rapid increase in farm acreage and equipment was indicative of another important trend in the 1880's: a steady increase in the county's overall wealth and a corresponding expansion of its tax base. During the 1880's both the total taxable wealth of the county, and actual tax receipts grew rapidly. In 1881 county officials assessed almost \$5,900 of taxes on \$490,000 of taxable personal property. In 1884, those figures increased to \$6,800 of taxes assessed on \$570,000 of property. By 1888 county residents owned \$620,000 of taxable personal property on which the tax assessor levied \$7,300 in taxes.<sup>74</sup>

A word of caution is necessary when using nineteenth century tax records from the Ozarks as a broad measurement of wealth. First, not all kinds of wealth are listed in

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<sup>72</sup> *1890 Census: Agriculture*, 478.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>74</sup> Christian County Tax Assessor's Book 1881; Christian County Tax Assessor's Book 1884; Christian County Tax Assessor's Book 1881. These tax documents are available both in hard copy and microfilm format at the Christian County Library, 1005 North 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Ozark, MO 65721. Hereafter "Christian County Tax Assessor's Book 1881" shall be abbreviated as "CCTAB." Also, only the taxable property of individuals are included in these figures.

the tax records, only property on which residents paid taxes. Second, the Ozarks hill people were notorious tax cheats. For example, they had lax attitudes towards such legal niceties as “land ownership,” because actually owning their own land on paper meant paying taxes on it. Consequently, many never bothered filing papers with the government for genuine land titles. Sometimes, a family would live on a farm for “generations without paying any taxes.”<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, while the tax records cited here can not be taken as an objective measurement of total wealth, they do show that throughout the 1880’s Christian County could enjoyed a regularly increasing tax base to finance its local government. In that respect these figures contribute to the overall picture of gradual economic and infrastructural progress in the county.

As the residents of Christian County entered the last decade of the nineteenth century their economic prospects declined. After two decades of strong growth the county’s agrarian economy lost momentum, and the tax base ceased to grow. In reaction to these trends many residents of the county were willing to seek relief through untraditional politics, including the Populist Party.

A large part of Christian County’s difficulties stemmed from broader economic trends over which the county had no control. In the early 1890s a nation-wide economic depression struck the country, and Missouri was no less affected than other states.<sup>76</sup> Agricultural areas like Christian County were especially hard hit. Food crop trends for the decade were mixed, but on the whole unpromising. Only wheat harvests experienced significant growth during this decade, climbing by seventy per cent to

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<sup>75</sup> Vance Randolph, *The Ozarks: An American Survival of Primitive Society* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1931), 16.

<sup>76</sup> Christensen and Kremer, 139.

382,000 bushels by 1900.<sup>77</sup> Corn production grew marginally; oat harvests fell by 20,000 bushels. Meanwhile, potato yields declined by forty-five per cent to 41,000 bushels of Irish and sweet potatoes combined.<sup>78</sup> The county's poultry farms saw a decline in virtually every kind of fowl during the 1890's. The number of chickens alone declined by 62,000 during this period; farmers also kept fewer ducks, geese, and turkeys.<sup>79</sup>

But more important than the decline in production were the disturbing trends in land tenure and farm size that began to emerge during this period. Christian County had always been an area of yeomen farmers who owned small to middle-sized farms and relied on their own labor to cultivate their land. That pattern persisted into the 1890's. However, there was an increasing minority of farms that operated on a rent or tenancy basis. In 1890, there were nearly two thousand farms in the county. Renters operated only eleven of them, and just 361 farms ran on a sharecropping basis. By 1900 the number of rented farms grew to sixty-three and the number of sharecrop farms increased to 509.<sup>80</sup> A growing minority of once independent farmers had to work for someone else.

In addition to the growing number of farm renting and sharecropping arrangements, Christian County farmers discovered that the abundant supply of farmland was beginning to dry up. Average farm sizes declined from 108 acres per farm

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<sup>77</sup> *1890 Census: Agriculture*, 373; Department of the Interior, U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900: Agriculture, Part 2*. (Washington D.C. Government Printing Office, 1902), 172. Hereafter abbreviated as "1900 Census: Agriculture 1," or "1900 Census: Agriculture 2."

<sup>78</sup> *1900 Census: Agriculture 2*, 172, 379.

<sup>79</sup> *1900 Census: Agriculture 1*, 652.

<sup>80</sup> *1890 Census: Agriculture*, 158; *1900 Census: Agriculture 1*, 98-99.

in 1890 to 97.5 acres in 1900. Since the number of farms grew by about 700 in the 1890s, but farm production stagnated and farm sizes shrank, the county's agricultural sector appears to have reached its natural limit during that period.<sup>81</sup>

Declining agricultural production also meant problems for the Christian County's tax revenues. A close look at the county's tax books for 1890's reveals that from 1890 to 1894 personal taxable property increased from \$750,000 to \$820,000. However, after 1894 personal taxable property declined markedly to about \$690,000 in 1897 before recovering to about \$810,000 in 1899.<sup>82</sup> These number show that the dramatic expansion in the county's tax base that had occurred in the 1880s came to an abrupt end sometime in the middle of the 1890s.

Christian County's citizens did not sit still in the face of these problems, but their reaction must be understood within the statewide context of Missouri politics during the 1890s. Like most people in rural America in the late nineteenth century, Missourians blamed their problems on the hard money policies of the federal government, especially President Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, who helped repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893. The populist revolt of the 1890's threatened Democratic political hegemony in Missouri by stripping away its rural Democratic voters. This forced the Democratic Party to co-opt the Populist message by adopting a free silver plank in their party platform.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *1890 Census: Agriculture*, 158; *1900 Census: Agriculture 1*, 98-99; CCMHS, 6.

<sup>82</sup> CCTAB, 1890-1899.

<sup>83</sup> Christensen and Kremer, 139-42.

In Christian County the political situation was somewhat different. There the Republican Party had held sway for most of the period following the Civil War, so it would seem that any threat to the Democrats could only reinforce the Republican position in the county. To an extent this was true, but when Democrats and Populists fused in 1896 to support William Jennings Bryan for the Presidency the results showed that such a coalition had the potential to disrupt Republican dominance. Bryan did lose to McKinley in 1896, but in a close race. He polled 1,729 votes to 1,983 for McKinley. By comparison, in 1888 Republican President Benjamin Harrison had defeated Grover Cleveland by nearly 750 votes in Christian County, and four years later Harrison beat Cleveland in the county again by a larger margin.<sup>84</sup>

In neighboring counties Bryan fared even better. For example, in Greene, Dade, Douglas, Lawrence, and Webster Counties he enjoyed upset victories even though all five counties had voted Republican in the two previous presidential elections, usually by comfortable margins. In Stone and Taney Counties Bryan lost, though he did better than previous Democratic presidential candidates.<sup>85</sup>

Unfortunately for Democrats in Christian County, the Democrat-Populist fusion did not extend to candidates further on down the ticket, but the potential for electoral upsets was present at that level as well. In the local race for state representative, which no populist candidate contested, the Democratic candidate lost the county vote by just 163 votes, further demonstrating the popular sentiment for change.<sup>86</sup> However, when

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<sup>84</sup> Alexander A. Lesueur, *Official Manual of the State of Missouri for the Years 1897-98* (Jefferson City, Missouri: Tribune Printing Company, 1897), 10-11; Alexander A. Lesueur, *Official Manual of the State of Missouri for the Years 1895-96* (Jefferson City, M: Tribune Printing Company, 1895), 11-12.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Lesueur, *Official Manual, 1897-98*, 97.

Bryan lost to McKinley in 1896 the Populist Party disappeared shortly thereafter, and the chance for political realignment in the many rural counties of the Ozarks was lost. Even so, the strength of the Populist challenge to the political status quo in Christian County (and elsewhere in the Ozarks) demonstrates the level of alarm people felt in the face of powerful economic changes they could not control.

In retrospect, the 1890's can be seen as something of a high-water mark for Christian County in terms of both economic and demographic development, but also a time when prosperity came to an end. The county's agriculture-based economy, which had grown significantly during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, was rocked by the depression of the 1890s, and would suffer even more during the Great Depression of the 1930s. After about a half-century of population growth, the 1900 census reported that almost 17,000 people lived in Christian County. The county's population declined steadily for the next six decades reaching its nadir of just over 12,300 inhabitants in 1960.<sup>87</sup> After 1960 the county recovered again, benefiting from several developments, including the booming tourism industry centered in nearby Branson, Missouri.

The history of Christian County is typical of the rural Ozarks, and is in many ways representative of small agrarian areas throughout the United States. As hard as it is for modern, urbanized Americans to understand the lives these people led, we must remember that the way of life described in this paper was actually fairly representative of the lives of most Americans well into the twentieth century. These small farmers who carved a livelihood for themselves out of the Missouri hill country often found

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<sup>87</sup> Hack, 243.

themselves at the mercy of forces beyond their control. They did not start the war that brought terror and torches to their homesteads and small towns. They did not control the demand for their crops that in large part dictated their economic destiny. Neither did they choose to bring in the railroads that revitalized their agricultural economy. At the same time, it would be unfair to represent these people merely as passive actors in an historical drama over which they had no control. They often vigorously tried to assert control over their destiny, sometimes with success. When rejected the Confederacy in favor of the Union, turned to Baldknobberism to restore law and, or embraced the Populist revolt in order to tame dangerous economic trends, the people of Christian County, like rural Americans elsewhere, asserted their ability to choose, not merely react to their destiny. In so doing they demonstrated the strength and resiliency of the hard-bitten pioneer people who first settled the Ozarks.