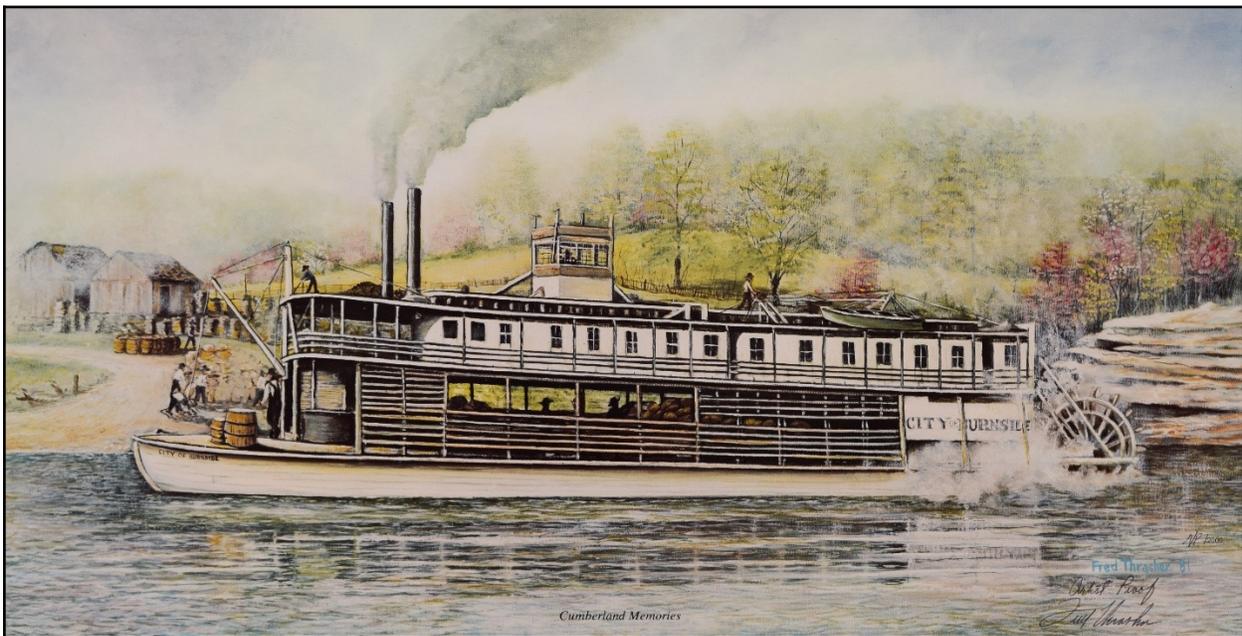


**Exploring Rural Kentucky Through Documentary Art:  
Unit 2 - Rural Life in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
- For the Student -**

**BACKGROUND READING**

History is much more than a list of dates, events, and famous people. It is also the story of everyday people who lived in the past. What were their communities like? How did the people meet their needs for food, clothing, and shelter? How did they have fun? What did they value? The answers to these questions allow us to glimpse into the lives of the real men, women, and children who lived years ago.

A river town with a steamboat landing, Creelsboro, Kentucky was uniquely situated to provide everything needed by town residents as well as those who lived in the surrounding rural countryside. Steamboats brought whatever people needed that they did not grow or produce locally.



*Cumberland Memories by Fred Thrasher, 1981.*

Creelsboro was a thriving mercantile center. Just like rural towns of today, Creelsboro at the turn of the 20th century had a school, churches, a bank, general stores, a farm equipment store, doctors, and pharmacies. However, there were several businesses in Creelsboro that do not have counterparts in most modern small towns.

Today most medicines prescribed by doctors are manufactured at facilities located all over the world and are shipped to local pharmacies, where they are sold to customers. In the early part of

the 20th century, most prescription medicines were compounded and prepared locally. That is why Creelsboro had three druggists in addition to two pharmacies.

You are not likely to find a blacksmith shop in a small town today, but in the early part of the 20th century, most rural communities had at least one blacksmith shop. Blacksmiths' services were in high demand. They repaired tools, wagons, and farm equipment, and actually made many of the tools used in the community. They also shod horses. Horse shoeing is still done by blacksmiths called *farriers*, but because horses are not used as widely today as they once were, few communities have their own blacksmith shop.

There are also very few people who make shoes for people the old-fashioned way - by hand, one pair at a time. But at the turn of the 20th century, shoemakers were as common as blacksmiths. Saddle shops are another example of a store that has become more of a specialty shop than one that serves a central need in almost every small community.



*A view of Creelsboro - Left Behind by Fred Thrasher, 1978.*

Both saddle makers and shoemakers needed a good supply of leather. In the early days of Creelsboro, as in many rural communities of that time, leather was produced locally at a tanning yard. Making leather from raw hides is a difficult and complicated process. Today, most leather is produced commercially. Some people still make their own leather on a small scale to use in handmade items for personal use or sale, but local tanning yards are a thing of the past.

Grist mills are as rare today as tanning yards. In the early days of the 20th century, many farm families grew their own grain. When they wanted it ground into flour or meal, they took it to the local grist mill. Today, both the growing and the milling of grains is usually done on an industrial scale. Of course, there are some people who prefer natural foods and use hand-powered or electric gristmills to make their own fresh flour and meal at home.

Even the general stores back then were different from department or discount stores of today. You can still find stores that sell both clothing and groceries, but they are not likely to also stock caskets and road wagons.

General stores back then also served as community gathering places. If you look at the painting - *Irvin Store, 1920s* - you will see three men on the front porch playing music while other people stop to chat. Maybe they are even sharing one of the jokes that Mr. James Polston says he learned in his youth!

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Have you ever heard people talk about the “good old days?” What does that phrase mean? Why do some of the people interviewed for this documentary think that earlier times in Creelsboro really were the “good old days?”
2. What were some of the things that people who lived in or near Creelsboro in the early days of the 20th century grew or produced for themselves? Who do you know that grows or makes things today? What do they grow or make?
3. What were some of the businesses in Creelsboro in the early days of the 20th century that you are not likely to find in most small towns today? Have you ever visited a blacksmith shop or saddle shop? What did you see there?
4. What are some ways that people in Creelsboro had fun?
5. Have you ever been to a street dance? What was that like?
6. What were some of the shared values of the Creelsboro community?
7. What does the painting - *Irvin Store, 1920s* - tell us about the community?
8. What do you know about how people lived in your community in the first half of the 20th century? How could you find out more?