

Western Kentucky Black Patch War, 1904 - 1909



The Black Patch War of the early 20th century was instigated by extremely depressed prices for tobacco crops, most notably the dark-tobacco area of western Kentucky and western Tennessee, and was directed by one of the historically largest industrial U.S. monopolies, the American Tobacco Company (ATC). By 1900, the ATC had forced out a competitive market for the crop. In 1904 as a response to the growing agricultural poverty, the newly-formed grassroots Planter's Protective Association (PPA) developed a strategy to withhold tobacco crops from the ATC until competitive prices were offered. They had gained 5,000 members in the first year and 25,000 members by 1906.

In response to the demands of the PPA, the ATC began offering higher prices to farmers who refused to join the association as well as instituting a boycott of the association's tobacco. With little success by the PPA in recruiting the independent farmers associated with the ATC, some members resorted to violence and intimidation to attempt to regain their leverage against the ATC. Armed and hooded vigilantes on horseback, known as the Night Riders, destroyed tobacco plant beds, barns and equipment as well as whipping and sometimes murdering the opposition farmers. Night Riders also attacked agents and destroyed property of the ATC, setting fire to tobacco warehouses in Trenton, Princeton and Hopkinsville. Not even a dispatch of troops by Gov. A.E. Willson was able to subdue the acts of violent intimidation.

By 1909 the tobacco cooperative had essentially lost power and the Night Rider raids ceased. The PPA officially collapsed in 1914 after declining membership and internal division.

Oral history interviews about the Black Patch War and the Night Riders can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.

Pass the Word™ is a discovery tool for oral histories throughout the state of Kentucky. To learn more about this topic, visit <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.