

"Making Do On the Macon Ridge: The Eating Patterns of Southern Farm  
Families During World War II"

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## Introduction

Referring to American civilian effort during World War II, the distinguished economist John Kenneth Galbraith noted, "Never in the history of human conflict has there been so much talk of sacrifice and so little sacrifice." Certainly, when compared to Great Britain, which depended upon imports for two thirds of its food at the beginning of World War II and which endured rationing and shortages beginning in 1939 and extending until 1954,<sup>2</sup> rationing and shortages in the United States during World War II seem more like inconveniences than sacrifice. I intend in this paper to deal very little with the issue of sacrifice, but rather to examine how a particular group of people met the challenge of wartime imposed rationing and shortages. My focus is on coping with, adjusting to, and overcoming adversity on the homefront. I have chosen one small area of the American South known as the Macon Ridge in Northeast Louisiana. It was where I was born in 1935 in the town of Crowville and where I grew up during the Great Depression, the war years, and the post World War II Era. It is the home base of three preceding generations of Parkers and a region to which I have maintained a connection throughout my life. I make no claim of intellectual objectivity for I retain a strong linkage to the Macon Ridge.

## The Macon Ridge

The Macon Ridge lies between the alluvial flood plains of the Mississippi River to the East and the Ouachita River to the West. It includes major portions of the Louisiana parishes (counties) of Franklin, Richland, and West Carroll. (See Figure I).

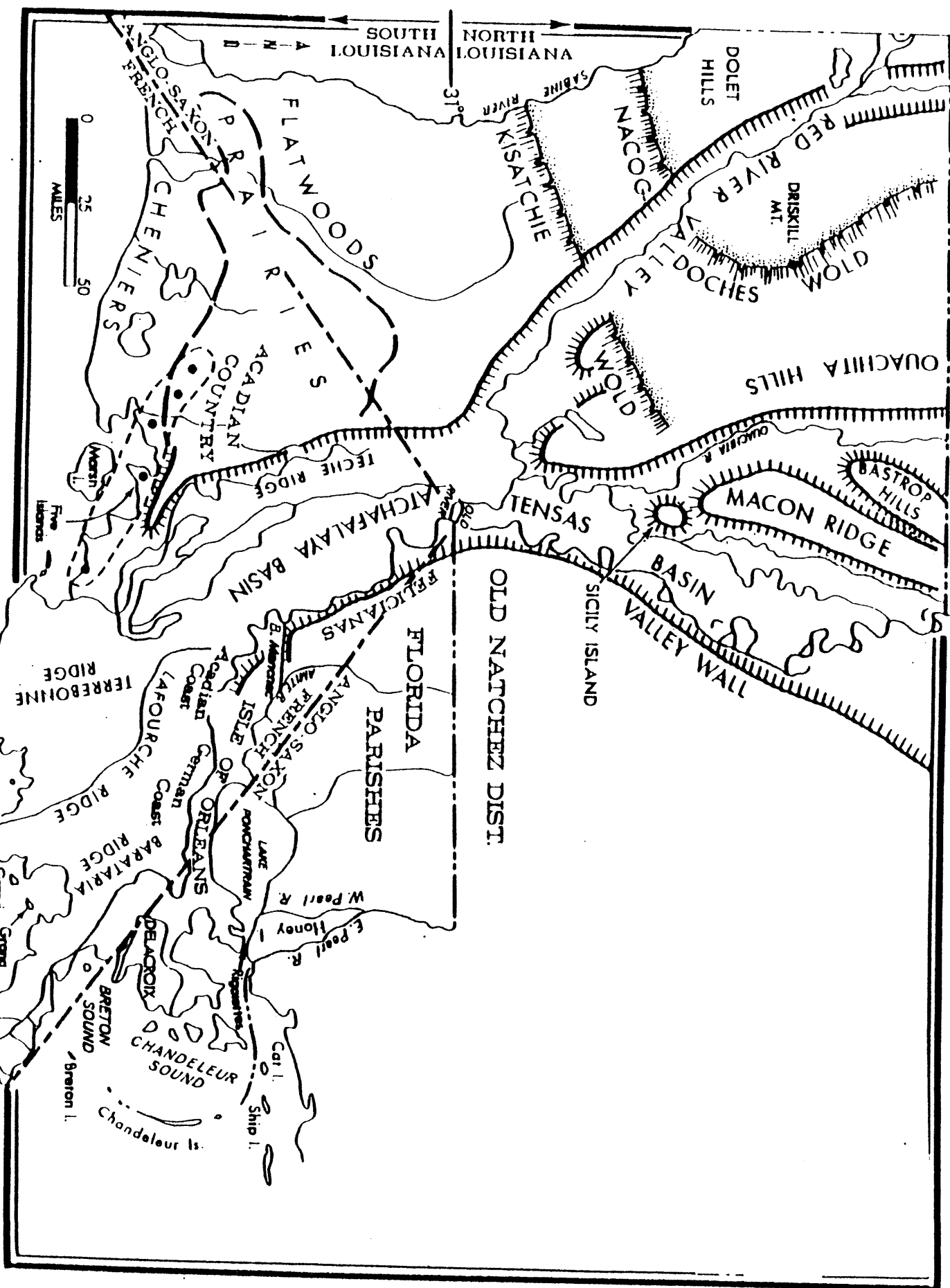
The designation of "ridge" to the geographic area is somewhat misleading. The area is only slightly more elevated than the contiguous eastern and western alluvial plains. The geological designation is "terrace."<sup>3</sup> It is, in fact, an area of low ridges intersected by a variety of bayous, creeks, sloughs, lakes, and wetlands. The soil of the area is classified as "yellow loam"<sup>4</sup> which is reasonably fertile farm land. It is, however, far less fertile than the black soil of the neighboring floodplains, but vastly superior to the red clay hills of Mississippi to the east and in western Louisiana. With an average rainfall of more than 50 inches<sup>5</sup> and a growing season of 220 to 240 days per year,<sup>6</sup> it is an area highly favorable to agriculture.

The Macon Ridge was settled in small farm units. There were essentially no plantation type farm units in the area during World War II. The family farm units were as small as 25 acres and few were larger than 80 acres.

Having given a general picture of the dimensions, topography, climate, and farm size of the Macon Ridge I suggest at this point that it represents a small portion of the American South worthy of

Major And Minor Regions of Louisiana

FIGURE 1



examination to illustrate how southern farm families coped with the shortages brought on by the war effort in the 1940s. The South is a very large and diverse region and any part of it would be something less than a microcosm of the whole.

#### Diversified Self-Sufficiency Farming

Farms on the Macon Ridge were family farms. It was an area characterized by diversified self-sufficiency farming. Farmers relied almost entirely upon their own labor and that of their families--immediate and extended. A very small percentage of farms had tenants. If a farm was large enough to sustain a tenant it was likely that it would support only one tenant family. The diversified farming and the simple life style on the Macon Ridge prepared the area well for World War II. As compared to most Americans these residents had fewer changes in eating habits to make. Decades of living largely on what was produced at home meant fewer sacrifices or a continuance of sacrifices that were part of the way of life of the region.

#### Cotton

Cotton was the cash crop of the region, but cotton was so labor intensive that a farmer could only manage a relatively small portion of his total acreage in cotton. In the war years virtually no one owned a tractor, so cotton land had to be plowed by horses or mules. To fight weeds and grass, cotton had to be hoed by hand at least twice and usually three times. (The first trip through

cotton with the hoe was referred to as "chopping." Cotton seeds were drilled --planted thick with one seed as close as a quarter of an inch from the next. Once the cotton plants had grown to a height of about two inches it was thinned into "hills"--clumps of three or four plants separated by a hoe's width. Grass was cleared out along with the thinning.) The demands of plowing, hoeing, and picking by hand severely limited the volume of acres that a family could manage. All able-bodied members of the family had to participate in the cotton farming. Wives and children had to be involved in the hoeing and picking. A farmer might be able to expand his cotton acreage as children became old enough to work in the fields or have to reduce acreage due to a wife's pregnancy or departure of an adult child from the farm.

#### Corn

While the southern region of the United States was long referred to as the "Cotton South," it could almost as easily have been labeled the "Corn South." Corn was not generally a creator of much cash, but it was a vital part of the nutritional support of the farm family. It was consumed in a great variety of ways (which I will address later) by families and for the feeding of all the farm animals. On a typical small farm about as many acres were planted in corn as in cotton. Corn required far less labor than cotton. It was plowed fewer times and the hoeing was less intensive. Grass and weeds were far less important to the successful production of corn. Corn fed the horses, mules, cows,

hogs, and chickens. It was also a major source of food for dogs. Every family seemed to have at least one dog and most had more. Dogs generally were trained for hunting--rabbits, squirrel, raccoons, and deer. Some were specialized while others were utility hunting dogs. Deer dogs were usually hounds and they were specialized for deer hunting. Dogs were also used in work with livestock.

#### Pastures, Hay Meadows, Woodlands, and Stock Ponds

A typical farm had at least one milk cow. To ensure milk year round two cows were required in order to space calving to keep one cow producing milk at all times. It was quite standard practice for a farm to have several head of cattle. The sale of a few calves each year was a modest supplement to the cotton income. Pasture land was usually low land poorly suited for row crops. Though the term "wetlands" was not in parlance in the 1940s much of the pasture land fit that definition--covered with water in the rainy season of the year, but dry during summer and fall.

Virtually every farm had a stock pond. If a farmer had no stock pond the only alternative source of water was hand pumping. Since cows and horses consume large quantities of water, that was not an attractive alternative. Ponds were crudely dug using a horse/mule drawn "slip" (a slip is a bit like an oversized shovel with handles on either side that allow manipulation in the digging

process.) The stock pond doubled as a fishing pond. Catfish and perch thrived so the ponds were well stocked.

A few acres were normally set aside for hay production for livestock feeding. Again this was normally less fertile soil or an area that was too poorly drained for row crops.

Typically several acres of woodland were included in the pasture. The woodland was a source of firewood for cooking and heating, plus it provided a habitat for wildlife that was an important source of food and recreation.

#### The Vegetable Garden

The vegetable garden was in many respects the most important crop planted. During the summer months a family ate from the garden and canned the excess production for the winter and spring meals. Tomatoes, squash, okra, string beans, butter (lima) beans, onions, bell pepper, carrots, eggplants, and beets were standards of the summer garden. Gardens were large due to the conventional wisdom that if you overplanted there would be adequate production even in a bad growing year, and if it was a good growing year, the excess could be canned, given away, or fed to the chickens, cows, hogs, or horses. Vegetables were not sold because part of the ethos of the region was that vegetables were given away.

Winter gardens were heavily oriented toward greens. Turnips, mustard, kale, collards, and spinach grew well in the fall and in mild winter months. Beets, carrots, and shallots also were part of the winter garden. A clever gardener could count on virtual year



round production. The garden was frequently the primary province of women and children.

#### The Pea Patch

Peas were not normally a garden item. They had vines that grew in profusion and they tended to make a mess of the garden. Therefore they were normally planted in the field near the corn or planted with the corn. Corn stalks provided a place for the vines to climb.

Peas were an important staple. They could be cooked fresh, canned, dried, or included in soups. Numerous varieties of peas were grown in the Macon Ridge soil: blackeye, pinkeye, purple hull, crowder, cream, speckled, etc. Shelling peas was generally a chore of the elderly and children. Since it only occupied the hands, a vigorous conversation could be conducted while shelling peas. Many a tall tale was told at shelling time.

#### The Potato Patch

The potato patch was in most cases also outside the garden. Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes (yams) were important to the diet on the Macon Ridge. Neither required refrigeration and they would last for a long time in a dry cool spot. Lime was used to help preserve Irish potatoes. Irish potatoes are planted early in the spring -- February or early March -- and harvested in May or early June. Sweet potatoes are normally planted just about the time Irish potatoes are harvested. So the same area was frequently used

the two potato varieties. Sweet potatoes would last through the winter if protected from freezing.

#### Watermelons and Cantaloupes

Cantaloupes and watermelons were also excluded from the garden because their vines grow to great lengths. They were normally planted in an open area that allowed their vines to run free. With the cooperation of Mother Nature, July and August brought a healthy harvest of melons. The natural sweetness of melons was a healthy alternative to Southerners' affection for sweets.

#### Fruit and Nuts

Figs, plums, hard pears, and green apples grew well on the Macon Ridge. Virtually everyone had fig trees. They required essentially no pampering, were easily transplanted, and had no predators except for the birds who enjoyed sharing the harvest. The solution to the bird problem was simply to have enough figs for birds and humans. Periodically a hard freeze would kill the fig trees back to the ground, but they invariably grew back--generally missing one year of production or producing only a light crop in the year after the freeze. Figs could be eaten raw or canned for the off-season.

Plums, like figs, grew easily. They too could be eaten raw--a frequent source of belly-aches for children who ate them too green

or in excessive volume--or made into jelly. Plum jelly's tart flavor made it a favorite of the region.

The apples and pears of the Macon Ridge were the cooking variety. They could be eaten raw, but they were no threat by taste to the California and Washington varieties--Bartletts and D'Angelos. They were good for pies, tarts, and preserves. Cooked pears were good as salad pears. The green apples were used to make a tart apple sauce.

Blackberries are native to the South. If allowed to grow unchecked the Macon Ridge would probably have been one massive area of blackberry briars. They were allowed to grow on fences where they formed hedgerows akin to the famous Normandy bocage. Blackberry picking was a big endeavor for children. Berries were delicious raw, could be canned whole, or made into jam or jelly. Children made a bit of spending money selling the excess blackberries to people who were too old or too smart to pick them themselves. Thorny briars and red bugs (chiggers) meant that the picker paid a price for the endeavor. A bath in baking soda water was essential after berry picking.

A peculiar product of the Macon Ridge was the mayhaw. Mayhaws grew wild in marshy areas and were frequently harvested by boat. The mayhaw berries look a bit like shriveled plums. Too tart to be eaten raw, they make a positively sinful jelly. Mayhaw sales were also a source of spending money for children.

Pecans were native to the region. In the wild there were bitter pecans which were inedible, and very small pecans known as

seedlings which was very tasty but were difficult to extract from the shell. Both of the native varieties were easily grafted with the larger varieties. It was rather standard practice for homes to have pecan trees as shade trees, and many farms had several pecan trees. For those who did not have pecan trees, the nuts were easy to buy at very reasonable prices. The sale of pecans was a good source of Christmas money to those who had a surplus.

Walnuts and hickory nuts were native to the area and plentiful. But they have hard thick shells and are difficult to pick out resulting in an unfavorable return for the effort expended.

#### Meat

One of the tightly rationed items during World War II was beef. While Americans are known for their taste for steak, it is not widely known that Southerners were not beef eaters until after World War II. For the Deep South, pork was the meat of choice--or necessity. The explanation lies in the difficulty in preserving beef and the ease of preserving pork. Also, the beef available in the 1930s and 1940s was grass fed and was quite tough. It had to be pounded with a knife or mallet and then cooked endlessly--the gravy was tasty, but the beef had little nutrition left after so much cooking.

Refrigeration was not widely available in the rural south and certainly not on the Macon Ridge. Electricity was available in the small towns and along the main roads, but not off the beaten path.

Freezing capacity of the refrigerators of the World War II era was minimal. A typical refrigerator had freezing capacity for a few ice trays and little else. Widespread use of freezers did not arrive until the 1950s, by which time electricity had spread to cover virtually the entire region.

Pork is easily preserved using salt and smoke. Almost every farm had a pig pen and a "fattening hog" being prepared for late fall slaughter. Hogs eat almost anything - table scraps, excess vegetables and milk, acorns, corn, or oats. A smokehouse was an essential. More than one family could use the same smokehouse.

Hog slaughtering time came around the first frost which in Northeast Louisiana is usually in early to mid-November. Hog slaughtering was quite a ritual that normally required the efforts of the entire family. It was frequently a joint endeavor of two families. The hog had to be dipped in a vat of boiling water to prepare for scraping (shaving) the hair off, then hoisted up on a pulley for scraping and the removal of entrails. The butchering process involved the immediate cooking of the skin and the attached layer of fat for the rendering of lard. The residue of cooked skin known as "cracklins" was something of a delicacy. They could be eaten<sup>d</sup> as a snack or mixed into cornbread which then became "cracklin bread." Virtually everything on the hog was used: "brains and eggs" was a regional delicacy, feet were pickled, and the meat from the head went into hogshead cheese (also call "souse"). Entrails became chitterlings ("chitlins") or sausage casings. (Not everyone had the stomach for chitlins.) The poorer

quality parts of the hog were ground into sausage, and bones were boiled for soup.

For the next several days after hog slaughtering day, lots of fresh pork was consumed (e.g., loin and liver). Hams, shoulders, bacon slabs, and sausage were prepared with salt for smoking which preserved it for year round use.

Southern vegetables were flavored with pork, usually "fat meat." It is fortunate that cholesterol had not been invented in the 1930s and 1940s otherwise life expectancy in the region would have been greatly reduced.

Ham or bacon along with eggs were the standard breakfast menu. The school lunch had a high probability of being ham and biscuit or sausage and biscuit. One of my distinct memories of elementary school days was the wonderful aroma of ham and smoked sausage from the lunch boxes and bags in the cloakroom.

Cooking was almost exclusively with hog lard. Vegetable oils only began to come into use in the post war period.

It goes without saying that far too much animal fat and too much salt was consumed on the Macon Ridge and throughout the South. Considering the intake of fat and salt, the general health conditions and longevity were surprisingly good. Hot weather and hard manual labor perhaps helped to dilute the effects of these unhealthy items. Furthermore, I recall very few cases of obesity of people at any age during the war years.

Aside from pork, chicken was the other meat staple. Everyone had chickens. Eggs were plentiful. Each spring a few hens were

"set." A normal "setting" of eggs would be around 15-16-- effectively what a hen could cover. A good hatching would produce about 10-12 baby chicks. Baby chicks were a source of great excitement for children. Farmers frequently supplemented the home-grown hatching by mail ordering baby chicks. These were raised in a brooder heated with a kerosene lamp. Inside the brooder was sand which held heat well and was easily cleaned. On warm sunny days the chicks could go out on an attached screened coop. When chicks reached a weight of about one pound they were ready for frying. Pullets (young females) were usually retained to become replacement laying hens.

Old hens and roosters were boiled or baked. Chicken and dumplings and chicken salad are Southern favorites along with fried chicken.

Since hunting was a part of the culture of the region, venison, squirrel, rabbits, and raccoon were additional sources of meat. Fishing was also a part of the culture. The abundance of rivers, lakes, creeks, and ponds made fish readily accessible. A variety of perch and several varieties of catfish were the common fish of the area. Most fishing was by pole or trot line. Fish and game were not wasted. If it was caught or killed it was eaten.

#### Milk and Eggs

Almost everyone had a milk cow and almost everyone had laying hens. A year round supply of milk and eggs could be counted on. Eggs could be fried, scrambled, boiled, and used in bread making.

Sweet milk, buttermilk, cream, butter, and cottage cheese were also standard items in the daily diet. A variety of dessert dishes could be made with milk--custards, puddings, and buttermilk pie. Excess dairy products were generally shared with cats, dogs, and hogs. Extra eggs could be sold at the grocery store. The purchase of grocery items was frequently transacted with "egg money."

#### Corn in the Diet

As mentioned earlier, corn was crucial to the dietary system on the Macon Ridge. Each farmer grew his own corn. The consumption of corn began in early summer as "roasting ears." In fact, few people on the Macon Ridge roasted corn. Corn was boiled on the cob or the kernels were scraped off the cob and then cooked to become creamed corn. It was also used in soups and chowders.

In the fall the dried corn was harvested and stored in a corn crib. Cows and horses/mules were then allowed into the corn field for the forage.

From the corn crib came the food for hogs, chickens, cows, and horses/mules plus for human consumption. Cornbread was a staple of the southern diet. Most families on the Macon Ridge had hot cornbread at every lunch ("dinner" as it was called) and cold cornbread with the evening meal ("supper"). Extra cornbread was generally cooked to be mixed with milk for dog food. Dogs and cats ate table scraps. No one on the Macon Ridge had "store bought" cat or dog food in the 1940s. "Mush" was another use of corn meal. Mush is cooked like grits (effectively it is the same as grits



except that it is made of finely ground corn). Mush was far more popular than grits on the Macon Ridge. Spoon bread was another favorite corn meal dish.

The grist mill was an established institution in every small town on the Macon Ridge. It was a flexible business. It would grind corn into corn meal, chicken "chops," or baby chick feed. You could pay for grinding, buy the ground product, or pay for the grinding with corn--normally on a one for one basis. Saturday was normally grist mill day. Corn protected from rats and weevils assured fresh corn meal the year-round.

#### Honey and Syrup

Honey bees thrived on the Macon Ridge. The mild climate was favorable to their life cycle. Bee management was a rather tricky enterprise that required proper equipment and expertise. Many farmers had bees for their own family's honey consumption, and they sold the surplus production. Honey made a good substitute for rationed sugar. It could be used in cooking as well as coffee and tea.

Cane syrup was also readily available on the Macon Ridge. Although North Louisiana was not sugar cane country, cane did grow reasonably well there, and many farmers planted small fields of sugar cane. Syrup mills were common to the area. The process of making syrup is uncomplicated. Juice is squeezed from the cane by a device powered by a mule or horse walking in a circle. The cane juice is then cooked to become syrup. If the juice is cooked long

enough it becomes sugar. Syrup was a very convenient sugar substitute, especially in cooking. Syrup was readily available and inexpensive during the war years. Candy bars were not available during the war, but a homemade molasses candy was a good substitute. To make molasses candy, the syrup was cooked to a point that would allow it to coagulate to a semi-firm state. Chopped pecans were mixed in and the substance was pored onto waxed paper. The end product was sweet, nutty, and chewy (and surely sinful).

#### Adjusting the Diet on the Macon Ridge 1941-45

Coffee, tea, and sugar were the rationed items that had the greatest impact on the Macon Ridge. Sugar was tightly held. Mothers and grandmothers would hold back sugar to have enough to make birthday cakes for children. Honey and syrup were substituted for sugar. Coffee and tea could be consumed without sugar.

Some people opted for Postum as a substitute for coffee though few adults went for the non-caffeine substitute. Chicory became more popular in North Louisiana since it would stretch coffee by giving it a strong flavor. Iced tea was a big Southern drink and folks on the Macon Ridge did their part in the war by reducing consumption. War is hell!

#### The Impact of the War on the Macon Ridge Economy and Lifestyle

World War II ended on August 14, 1945. I have distinct recollections of the dramatic news arriving. Clark Gullledge and I were practicing parachute jumps off the back porch of my parents' home. Although only ten years old, we wanted to be prepared when our turn came for military service. We were happy to hear the news, but decided to do a few more practice jumps just in case it turned out to be a hoax. Clark had the misfortune of breaking his arm shortly after the Japanese surrendered. I guess you could say that his injury was "collateral damage."

By the time Clark had his cast off we could buy Hershey Bars, Baby Ruths, and Wrigley's gum at the local stores--although only one per customer initially. ("Uncle Nat" Black, the ancient clerk at J.A. Harper's General Store, was still holding the candy and gum under the counter and limiting it to one per customer two or three years after the war. He was a bit like the Japanese soldiers on some remote Pacific island who were still fighting the war years after it had ended.)

The general prosperity that came to the nation after the war had its impact on the Macon Ridge. Soon everyone had electricity. Electric refrigerators, freezers, and washing machines were soon common household items. Butane and natural gas followed, so gas stoves and heating were soon available. By the late 1940s most farmers had tractors and pick-up trucks. The hard work that was a necessity for survival was greatly reduced. By the early 1950s insecticides and the mechanical cotton pickers were on the agricultural scene. It was possible to effectively handle far more

acres of cotton with less labor and more financial reward at harvest time. The growth of the industrial economy attracted more and more young men away from the farm to oil drilling and refining, plus many other non-farm jobs that meant less hard work for better pay. The small diversified farm on which a family was nearly self-sufficient rapidly faded away.

Like Mark Twain's teenager who could remember things that didn't happen, it is easy to remember the "good old days" as far better than they were. Few people, if any, would want to go back to the war years with limited household comforts and conveniences or the back-breaking labor that was required of both adults and children in those "good old days." But people who lived through those years took pride in remembering and retelling how they handled the challenge of wartime rationing and shortages. On the Macon Ridge they not only survived - they flourished.

## Notes

1. Neil A. Wynn, "The United States" in Jeremy Noaks, ed, The Civilian in War; The Home Front in Europe, Japan and the USA in World War II (Exeter, England: University of Exeter Press, 1992), p. 83.
2. Gill Corbishley, Ration Book Recipes: Some Food Facts 1939-1954 (English Heritage, 1991), p. 1.
3. Milton B. Norton, Jr., Atlas of Louisiana (Baton Rouge: School of Geoscience - Louisiana State University, 1972), p. 14.
4. ibid., p. 112.
5. ibid., p. 10.
6. ibid., p. 12.