

Industrial Background for Portland, Tennessee
Jim Calloway, Mayor

Like so many rural towns in Tennessee during the late 1950's and early 1960's, Portland's economy was based on agriculture. But unlike other agriculturally-based economies, Portland had become somewhat prosperous, and even a little bit famous for its' fine strawberry crops. The impact of this delicious, little red fruit resulted in a unique economic growth not experienced by other towns in Sumner County. In its 'heyday' the strawberry industry brought us a company that made crates as well as cheese hoops, a Breyer's Ice Cream processing plant, a Bird's Eye frozen food plant, and other companies related to strawberries, such as: Tennessee Frozen Foods, Southland Co., Cleveland Buyers Co. and the Bama Co.

The economic impact of the strawberry cannot be understated. During the late 50's and early 60's over 2,000 acres of strawberries were raised in and around the Portland area. It took 10 people to harvest an acre of berries and more than 3,000 people (about double our total population at that time) were needed to gather (or "pick") and prepare all the crops for market. The season for strawberries lasted about 4 to 5 weeks and during that time, the processing plants would employ more than 750 people. The cash flow of our economy "ran strawberry red", as statistics of that time indicate very clearly. Tennessee Frozen Foods Co. bought and processed 1,800,000 pounds; Brier Ice Cream Co., 1,500,000 pounds; Southland Co., 1,250,000 pounds; Cleveland Buyers Co., 1,000,000 pounds; all of which averaged about 18 cents per pound. That's a little more than 5.5 million pounds of strawberries yielding \$999,000.00! And Bama Co. bought 250,000 pounds of berries at 20 cents per pound, pumping an additional \$50,000.00 into our economy for a total of \$1,049,000.00 for almost **6 million pounds** of berries. Now, factor in the additional 1,000,000 pounds of berries shipped out at 18 cents per pound, and the more than \$50,000.00 worth of fresh berries sold by the Portland Strawberry Growers Association, and you can see how the economy of Portland and strawberries were inseparably linked.

The town prospered from the fields of strawberries until, at one time in the 1950's, Portland could claim the following businesses: 20 food stores, 2 home and auto supply stores, 2 machine shops, 2 barber shops, 3 beauty shops, 5 clothing stores, 2 hardware stores, 2 drug stores, 2 coal and fertilizer dealers, 1 florist, 2 laundry and dry cleaners, 5 restaurants, 12 service stations, 1 funeral home, 7 auto repair garages, 2 insurance agencies, 2 feed mills, 1 seed store, 2 appliance service and repair shops, 2 planing mills and builders supply, 1 auto dealership, 1 five-and-dime, 1 jewelry store, 1 locker plant, 2 used car dealerships, 1 novelty shop, 1 monument company, 1 hatchery, 1 ice manufacturing plant, 3 furniture stores, and 5 strawberry processing plants (seasonal).

Events out of Portland's control would change our economy and the face of our community forever. Due to strawberry production in other market areas and more competitive suppliers, we slowly became the "Strawberry Capitol of Middle Tennessee" **in name only**. Portland was now forced to look elsewhere for economic growth and stability. Of course the small businesses listed

above provided some employment, as well as the Tennessee Gas Transmission Plant that was completed just prior to the "strawberry boom", but not nearly enough to pick up the slack when the strawberry industry began to wane.

Our location along the major routes of State Highways 52 and 109 and our close proximity to U. S. Highway 31W, then later to Interstate 65, would make our shagging economy fertile ground for industrial development.

The sentiment of this desire for economic growth can best be expressed by the following words written by one local man in the 1950's:

"I want the people of Portland to have a sense of adequacy as they go about the business of making a living. I am confident in my own mind that one cannot develop nobility of spirit while in a state of unemployment. I am confident, too, that our people will not have a good life unless they find jobs which are commensurate with their interests and abilities, and which affords them an opportunity to be of service to others."

A brochure on Portland for prospective business and industry, produced about 1952, described the people of Portland as: "favorably individualistic, wholesomely independent, reliable, and willing to work an honest day's work for an honest day's wage". It went on to say that our people were "zealous for and enjoy order and good government", and that they were "interested in moral, social and civic enterprise". And at that time, that was certainly true, as it was in most places similar to Portland. It went on to explain that most of our citizenry were employed in adjoining cities, requiring them to drive out of town daily for employment, and that the people of Portland were interested in a remedy for that situation.

Such sentiment as that brought about a united effort to recruit and secure industry for the town and out of that effort came the first victories with the Sandye Shirt Co. in the mid 50's and the location of Davis Cabinet Co. in 1959. Over the past 40-plus years we've seen more and more industry come into Portland until we've now become the example of how to recruit industry for the entire state. Today Portland has more than 50 diverse industries, with some that came to Portland from other states, and a few even from other countries, that employ more than 106% of our total population. Those statistics make it obvious that many of those employed here live in adjoining cities and counties.

We still seek quality industrial development and we'd open our doors to those who wish to be working partners in our community - living, working, playing here, educating their children here - giving as well as taking - and working with us to make Portland even more "proud and progressive".