THE GI BILL:
ONE FAMILY’S JOURNEY TO THE MIDDLE CLASS

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ABSTRACT

The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, informally known as the G.I. Bill, has long been regarded as one of the most influential pieces of legislation that has ever been passed by Congress. According to Suzanne Mettler’s groundbreaking book, *Soldiers to Citizens*, 80% of the men who were born in the 1920s were military veterans. The GI Bill has been credited with the formation of the middle class and the creation of a different way of life and opportunities for those that benefitted from it. This thesis will examine that notion and trace the rise of the Middle Class through the G.I. Bill and the Abell Family that hailed from Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. The thesis will explore how the G.I. Bill allowed one family the opportunity to achieve social mobility and create a new social and financial reality for the Abell family. The ultimate question to be answered is, “How great was the effect of the G.I. Bill on the formation of the middle class?”

The thesis follows the rise of the Abell family and the personal skills Robert Lee Abell acquired in the United States Army Air Force and what his death meant for the economic future of the Abell family. The ultimate conclusion is that the G.I. Bill, which R.L. Jr. benefitted from after his father perished, allowed the Abell family to obtain economic and social mobility. R.L. Abell Jr. was able to attend Western
Kentucky University, get a college education and go into teaching as a Biology teacher and a future principal. Since then, all family members have attended college with the most recent being Annalee Abell attending Georgetown University. These opportunities and statistics are also consistent with other lower class families through the United States who benefitted from the G.I. Bill. The ultimate conclusion will be that the G.I. Bill helped create the middle class and change the face of millions of veterans, the children of war causalities and their families that had generational longevity.

Note to the reader: This story is written from the author’s perspective and includes details about many close family members and the tremendous effect that the GI Bill had on our family specifically. If deceased family members are not portrayed correctly, the fault alone lies with me.
DEDICATION

The research and writing of this thesis involved many people, but some deserve specific recognition.

To Dr. Greg Havrilak, the most patient and helpful Thesis Advisor ever.

To my family who gives me life and love each and every day.

To Robert Lee Abell, my deceased great-grandfather, who made my opportunities in life possible, I now give to your legacy.
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The History of Lebanon Junction

The history of small towns is one of America’s forgotten pastimes, but one that remains in the hearts, souls and minds of those who hail from rural areas. Small towns were often places where everyone knew every single person and the majority of its residents worked in one area. In small towns, children grow up and often move into homes near their parents to raise the next generation. Activities in these towns are simple and much time is spent swimming in creeks, terrorizing hills, going to church functions and family reunions, and enjoying the company of the neighbors on your porch. Small towns have one main street that includes everything necessary for the town to function such as a general store, doctor’s office, depot, church, and filling station. These towns are intimate and everyone follows and knows the business of their neighbors, most of whom they are related to. This section will focus on the direct history of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky to give context for further chapters.

On March 5, 1850, the Commonwealth of Kentucky issued a charter to the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company to begin charting a route from Louisville to Nashville. Surveyors had examined the terrain and knew it would be difficult to determine a suitable route as the land was wild and unsettled. The initial survey ran from Louisville through Shepherdsville, Elizabethtown, Bowling Green and Franklin. Alternatively, another route was considered by way of Bardstown, New Haven, Glasgow, Scottsville, and Gallatin. Surveys were commissioned through Nelson, Kentucky.

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Washington and Marion counties respectively. The end result was to make a direct route from Louisville to Nashville with a branch line stopping and leaving the main line around Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. Lebanon Junction, Kentucky was established eleven miles south of Shepherdsville and became the stop between Louisville and Nashville for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. By 1856, trains were making the stop at Lebanon Junction between Nashville and Louisville on a consistent basis. The railroad became the focus of the area and an excuse to settle a town at Lebanon Junction.

Lebanon Junction was officially incorporated on Monday, April 1, 1895 through a ruling from the Bullitt County Circuit Court. Since the railroad had been making stops at the Junction for years, people had naturally settled there for job purposes. In 1895, the town had a population of approximately 700. The town was founded on family values and enforced strict religious policies. The random use of firearms as well as the accidental or intentional use of abusive or vulgar language was strictly prohibited.

Public intoxication, disruption of school or church or breaking the Sabbath were all punishable offenses. The majority of the town was employed by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad or earned their income through jobs related to the Railroad. In 1897, the town got its first bank, which was named the Lebanon Junction

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4 Ibid., 16.
Bank. R.M. Hocker and relatives of the Ricketts family owned the majority of the bank stock. The bank was extremely successful initially, but eventually succumbed to the failures of the upcoming Depression and closed its doors in 1926, which caused the town to suffer financially.

The people of the town were most likely all kin to each other in some ways. Even in modern times, family names such as Ricketts, Waters, Abell, Masden, and Harned persist. R.L. Abell Jr. stated, “When I was growing up the preacher always used to say, ‘every one in this town is kin to one another in more ways than one.’”

Schools were established, but not everyone always went to school, which was normal and expected. Lebanon Junction High School was established in 1931 but was eventually consolidated into the county system in 1970.

The main street of Lebanon Junction was focused around Beeler’s Drugstore. A.J Beeler was the only registered pharmacist in Bullitt County at the time and moved his store to Lebanon Junction in 1921. The store served the medical needs of the town but was also used for social gatherings. The store sold candy, soda, and had a counter with stools where children could sit and eat ice cream. The Beelers were always known to be extremely knowledgeable on many different topics, and it was common for folks to stop in and sit for hours to talk about the events in the town and

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5 Revealed by R.L. Abell, interview to author, May 22, 2014.

6 Masden and Pike, Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of Lebanon Junction, 56.

7 Ibid., 68.
in their own lives. Beeler’s Drugstore still operates in modern day Lebanon Junction near its original location on Main Street though the original building still stands nearby.

The main sources of income for Lebanon Junction came from the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. There was one trainmaster in the town that provided train schedules to be announced by “call boys” who would then give crewmembers two hours notice of their departure on the train. The train mostly ran between Corbin and Knoxville so workers had to travel on the train to keep it running. Burlyn Pike writes:

The steam-powered locomotives placed in service on the Lebanon branch were based in Lebanon Junction and required a full roundhouse crew to keep them ready for service at all times. A hostler and his helper acted as engineer and fireman to move the engines from the roundhouse to the cinder pit, to the water tank and to coal bin for service. The steam boilers were washed down every seven days and cinders from the coal residue left in the fireboxes after runs were dropped in the cinder pit. The Railroad required precision, dedication and teamwork to keep the trains moving. Under the Division Superintendent were trainmen, section men who kept the tracks in working order, yardmaster, timekeeper and mechanics who worked on the railroad. There were also groups called “Section Gangs” who laid the tracks but were also responsible for the maintenance of a certain area. These groups truly would have dedicated themselves to the tracks because they would need to be on alert at all times if there were issues with the tracks. The roadhouse crew and section gangs would have likely featured mixed groups of black and white workers. In 1928, photos from Steve Masden and Burlyn Pike’s book Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of

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8 Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, January 5th, 2013.

9 Masden and Pike, Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of Lebanon Junction, 70.

10 Herr, The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963), 32.
Lebanon Junction, reveal several work crews with mixed race individuals, though it was likely that the black workers came from Louisville to work instead of living in Lebanon Junction, specifically.

Lebanon Junction was not known for being advanced in race relations. There was definitely Ku Klux Klan that resided in Lebanon Junction and the surrounding area for an undetermined number of years. There were only a few black families that did minor jobs on the railroad like shoveling coal or laying tracks. The black families would live away from town and would come to town only for necessities or to use the local springhouse to draw water. In the 1920s, though there might have been mistreatment and lynchings, it was not recorded, so it is probably unfair to judge Lebanon Junction based on tales alone. However, Mary Ann Lester Abell, said once, “Lebanon Junction used to have a sign on the railroad that said, “if your face is black, turn around {a} don’t come back.”

There was a black school that sat about three miles from Lebanon Junction, which was about six miles from the center of Lebanon Junction. The school was a one-room schoolhouse and was made of wood. Classroom resources would have been scarce and a black teacher with limited academic experience probably educated students. Eventually, the black school would close shortly after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education verdict to comply with new laws. Mary Ann Lester Abell recalled, “I think it was around 7th or 8th grade that the black children joined us at

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11 Revealed by Mary Ann Lester Abell, interview to the author, May 22, 2014.
school.”\textsuperscript{12} This information is consistent with school photos from \textit{Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of Lebanon Junction} showing mixed classrooms from 1958 on.\textsuperscript{13}

Lebanon Junction, Kentucky is a town that just won’t die. Parts of the original railroad town still exist, such as Beelers Drug Store, First Baptist Church of Lebanon Junction and the Mt. Carmel Church near Wilson Creek. However, the town has changed dramatically since the death of the Railroad. As technology increased, two-way radio communication was established and heavier rail was laid down, which decreased the need for “Section Gangs”. As technology increased, the need for workers decreased and many residents of Lebanon Junction had to go to Louisville, Shepherdsville or Elizabethtown for employment.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1958, the Louisville and Nashville railroad ran its last passenger trains through Lebanon Junction. The railroad depot, which was at one time open twenty-four hours, became a wasteland. Though the residents did not want to acknowledge it, the Railroad had changed and taken the very economic soul of the town with it. Some families moved away for professional and personal reasons, but many stayed. The town has changed significantly since then and there are few grocery stores remaining and limited economic opportunities. Those that still live there are living off pensions from the Louisville and Nashville Railroad or General Electric, which was a popular economic avenue after the railroad closed. Most of the young people that live in Lebanon Junction are living off welfare and are unable to make a decent living.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Masden and Pike, \textit{Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of Lebanon Junction}, 147.
\textsuperscript{14} Herr, \textit{The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963)}, 147.
Today, Lebanon Junction is struggling to maintain its identity and has plenty of economic issues as most small towns do. Still though, the soul of the town persists and residents continue to take pride in their land. The Railroad may have died, but the souls of those that have lived there and continue to live there remain.

**The Goodletts**

The Goodlett family was not originally from Lebanon Junction, but the Harned and Ricketts family was. Acy Goodlett, the patriarch of the Goodlett branch in Lebanon Junction, was born in Anderson County in 1897.\(^5\) He was born to modest parents and lost his mother at a young age. With six or seven brothers, Acy Goodlett grew up with little and never had too many possessions or was ever interested in material wealth. The Abell family disagrees with how far he went in school, but the consensus is that Acy Goodlett likely completed the third or fourth grade. Regardless, he went through life only being able to write his name. However, this did not decrease his intelligence level and he was always known to be very sharp.\(^6\)

Acy Goodlett was tall for his time and stood around 6’1’. He was always a thin man and wore bib overalls most of the time.\(^7\) Acy Goodlett was a man of few words and could hold a very stern tone at times. If the children misbehaved, Acy Goodlett would act like he was going to whip them to death, but never once was known to lay a hand on any of the children. He kept a garden, which was for sustenance reasons, but

\(^5\) Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, January 5\(^{th}\), 2013.

\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^7\) Revealed by Robert Lee Abell Jr., interview to the author, May 22, 2014.
was also a sense of pride for him. It was important to him that the garden looked spectacular and it was normally impossible to find a weed throughout his diverse collection of plants and vegetables. It was also understood that the garden was not a place to play and the grandchildren adhered to that. Robert Lee Abell III asserted, “Whenever I went over to the Goodlett home, I never played in the garden. It was just understood.”

Acy Goodlett was accustomed to taking care of himself and was a good provider for the family. For many years, he worked on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad as a train yard crewmember, but specifically as a pitman. Family members also disagree on whether or not Acy Goodlett retired from the Louisville and Nashville Railroad or whether he was laid off. For a number of years, Acy Goodlett received monthly checks from the Railroad as part of a pension plan. It is likely that Acy Goodlett was laid off from the Railroad later on as the Railroad naturally scaled back a need for workers in the post war era as passenger trains were replaced with car ownership.

Not long after, Acy Goodlett went to work for the Sawmill where he suffered an injury that affected his arm. After that, he likely returned to the Railroad and retired with a pension plan, which helped secure the economic future of the Goodlett family. Acy Goodlett was never a drinker, though many in Lebanon Junction were. According to stories told by the Goodlett family, Acy Goodlett once consumed too

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much alcohol and could not go to work and that was the last time he ever drank.\textsuperscript{19}

Acy Goodlett would spend his free time from work tending to his garden or fishing on Wilson Creek, which was not far from their home.

Acy and Macie Goodlett were married in 1920 and went on to have six children. Nina was first in 1922 followed by Bill, Gerald, Mavis (Mickey), Cliff, and Wayne. Macie Goodlett was a former Ricketts and her family had resided in Lebanon Junction or Nelson County for many decades. Macie Goodlett went through the eighth grade, but became a homemaker upon her marriage to Acy Goodlett. From time to time, she would clean houses for other families that lived close to her.\textsuperscript{20}

Shortly after Nina and Bill were born, the Goodletts moved to Akron, Ohio for a short time and then to the West End of Louisville, Kentucky. Ultimately, their families and their heart remained in Bullitt County so the Goodletts returned to Lebanon Junction.\textsuperscript{21} Macie Goodlett was a talkative woman who wore long dresses throughout her life. The Goodletts were conservative folk so Macie Goodlett never wore pants, at least not until her later years.\textsuperscript{22} She was known as one of the best cooks in all of Bullitt County and would have large Sunday dinners that everyone in the family was expected to attend. It was understood that if one of the family members was not there, they better have a good explanation as to why they were unable to

\textsuperscript{19} Revealed by R.L. Abell, interview to the author, May 20, 2014.

\textsuperscript{20} Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, January 5, 2014.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
attend. Macie Goodlett was known for her homemade biscuits and gravy as well as her lemon pie. She was not overly religious and attended church inconsistently but was usually present for Christmas and Easter.

Macie Goodlett’s duties as a homemaker consisted of tending to the home, cooking the meals, and raising the children while Acy Goodlett was working at the Railroad or the Sawmill. The Goodlett children were similar yet different in many ways, but they were known for being very proud and, at times, very stubborn. Nina Goodlett eventually married Robert Lee Abell who volunteered for the army in 1942 and changed the economic future for the Abell family forever when the G.I. Bill was enacted. Acy and Macie Goodlett passed away in 1985 and 1986 respectively.

The Abells

Unlike the Goodlett family, the Abell family has been in Bullitt County for many decades. Relatives of the Abell family still remain in Bullitt County to this day. There has been a dispute in recent years about whether or not the Abell family spelled their name as “Abell” or “Able”. The result was a split in opinion and some family members spelled it both ways. John Abell was born around 1884 somewhere around Elizabethtown, which is about 10 miles south of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. He was a short man who stood around five foot, seven inches and wore high waist slacks or overalls for the majority of his life. He did not work for a lot of his life, but he did serve as a custodian at Lebanon Junction High School for a few years.23 John Abell also worked briefly for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which was common in

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Lebanon Junction. He worked around the house during his free time and helped his wife, Bessie Waters with food preparation.

Every fall, John Abell would buy a hog from a neighbor, fatten it up and then butcher it for the winter. The meat was then preserved and saved so that the Abells would have enough to get through the winter. It has been told that he had the same breakfast every morning while he was married to Bessie Waters. Bessie would do most of the cooking, but John Abell would never allow anyone to touch the biscuits. Every morning, John Abell would get up and fix biscuits. He would sit on a stool near the stove to ensure that they turned out right. The biscuits would be of medium height and crisp on both sides. They would be served with eggs, bacon, sausage and jelly, which were prepared by Bessie Waters on a gas-propane stove. They also had a coal burning stove that was used for heating the home. The Abell family had a radio that was used to listen to President Roosevelt in the evenings or the University of Kentucky basketball team on some occasions.

Bessie Waters Abell was married to John Abell in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky after growing up in Nelson County. She was a plain woman and never gathered much wealth during her life. The Abell family lived just down the street from the Goodletts and had two children, Robert Lee and Helen. Bessie Abell’s father had been a tenant farmer and had six children. Bessie had made it through the 8th grade and spent the majority of her work life working as a school custodian or a

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.
homemaker. From time to time, she would also iron clothes for a washwoman in town. Bessie, like Macie Goodlett, was an excellent cook and was known for her rice pudding, succotash, pork chops and fried chicken. Robert Lee Abell, John and Bessie’s son was killed in 1943, leaving Nina Goodlett Abell and R.L. Abell Jr. behind. Bessie never got over that death and was never able to speak about her son without tearing up. She died in Frankfurt, Kentucky at the age of 90.  

Robert Lee Abell was born in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky in 1914. There is little that can be recalled about him from living family members, but it cannot be denied that he died a hero’s death. In 1942, Robert Lee Abell informed his parents that he would be volunteering for the military. Bessie Abell always said, “When I told him he did not have to go to war, Robert replied with, “Mom, I am no coward.”

Robert grew up with the simple lifestyle that his parents had created and worked for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad for a few years after graduating from high school. It is believed that he was the first member of the Abell family to attend and graduate from high school. Shortly after graduating from high school, Robert Lee Abell married Nina Harned Goodlett with whom he had one child, R.L. Abell Jr. He entered the Army Air Force after volunteering his services in hopes of making a better

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\[26\text{Ibid.}\]

\[27\text{Ibid.}\]
life for himself and his family. Sadly, Robert was killed in 1943 after his plane was shot down over Lillie, France.\textsuperscript{28}

Nina Goodlett Abell would remarry to Carlos Jackson and continue her simple life in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. However, Robert’s death changed the face of the Abell family forever. Through the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, informally known as the G.I. Bill, R.L. Jr. was able to go to college, which made him the first of the Abell family to do so. As such, he was able to leave Lebanon Junction and attend Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. R.L.’s graduation from Western Kentucky ensured the financial future of the Abell family as he earned enough to move to Northern Kentucky and work as a biology teacher, a principal and then as an assistant superintendent.

The G.I. Bill was the turning point in the Abell family history as it was for so many other families across America. It was responsible for the formation of the new middle class and gave hope and opportunity to so many veteran or war orphan families in the Post World War II Era. The generation who had grown up in the shadows of the Depression and had relied on the New Deal was about to receive new financial opportunities that had not previously been available. A new class was formed as a result of the GI Bill, which was later defined as a self-sustaining middle class.

The Americans who belonged to this ideal middle class were educated and independent property owners. They were viewed as neither rich nor poor, but simply

\textsuperscript{28} United States Department of War, Headquarters of the United States Army Air Force, \textit{Accident Report of Missing Air Crew 8\textsuperscript{th} ASC, 8\textsuperscript{th} AF, Group 387, Squadron 558 on August 31, 1943} (Washington, DC, September 5, 1943).
self-sustaining. The new middle class was created from a mixture of immigrants and poor citizens who dreamed of a better life.\textsuperscript{29} Aspiring members of the new middle class had one simple idea in mind, which was that their children would obtain better opportunities than the previous generation.\textsuperscript{30} In the aftermath of World War II, many of the citizens who joined and formed the new middle class were veterans. They did so through the GI Bill, which provided them with the opportunity and skills to complete a college degree. For the Abell family, Robert Lee Abell created this opportunity by joining the Army Air Forces and passing the GI Bill reality on to his son, which would eventually move the Abell family up to the middle class and secure their financial future.

In this chapter, we reviewed the history of small town Kentucky and specifically, Lebanon Junction. Brief introductions were also given to the important members of the Abell and Goodlett families as well as other important families of the town. Understanding the simple, yet relatively satisfying lives that these families had is essential to understanding the difference that the G.I. Bill had on the families of these small towns. The next chapter will look at the middle class, what defines it, how it was formed and how it was enhanced and dramatically evolved through the GI Bill. The following chapter will also look specifically at how the GI Bill was written, what was intended, who benefitted and who was excluded from receiving those benefits.


\textsuperscript{30} Michael J. Bennett, \textit{When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America} (Brassey’s, Inc: Washington, 1996), 243.
CHAPTER ONE
THE GI BILL AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

When he was a young boy growing up in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, the thought of attending college probably did not occur to Robert Lee Abell. Lebanon Junction was a town that produced railroad workers or other blue-collar employees. It was possible to attend college on a sports or academic scholarship, but sports scholarships were rare and many students never made it to high school due to family work obligations or simply because high school was too far away for them to travel. No one in the Abell family had gone to college so why should it be any different for Robert?

By the time Robert had graduated from high school, World War II was one year away. When the United States joined the war, Robert volunteered for the United States Army Air Force to serve his country, but also to learn a trade that would lead to a higher paying job in the post-war era. If he had lived, he would have been able to attend college on the government’s penny and truly elevate his family’s economic status. As it is, Robert perished, but his son, R.L. Abell Jr. was able to attend college through the G.I. Bill, so Robert’s sacrifice ensured the family’s success through different means.

Before diving into the vast opportunities that the G.I. Bill offered its recipients, it is worth looking at the involvement of the federal government in the lives of its citizens during the Depression Years and prior to 1940. In the early years of the federal government, citizens looked to the government more for guidance of rights and responsibilities. As such, the federal government did little to ensure
economic security of its citizens. Families who fell into economic despair had to rely on relatives or perhaps the local church for income. This idea of small-town community was definitely present in the churches of Lebanon Junction. If a family needed money, extra offerings would be collected to help one another. This idea of community endured even as the federal government started affecting the lives of its citizens even further. Suzanne Mettler writes:

> After the Civil War, the national government began to affect citizens lives more directly through pensions to veterans and their widows; by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, these pensions had become generous and expansive reaching eighteen percent of the United States population age sixty-five and over.¹

During the Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began the initiative to directly support struggling families by establishing job opportunities through agencies such as the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps.² As the United States marched toward war with Germany, Italy and Japan in the 1940s, many young men and women elected to join the army for patriotic reasons, but also for practical economic opportunities. The army offered a cost-free way of learning a new trade that would lead to a higher paying job, which, in turn, would secure the economic future of the individual’s family.³ The new trades that were learned would contribute to the formation of the highly powerful middle class, which changed the social and economic landscape of the United States.

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³ Ibid., 27.
The Middle Class

Edward Humes writes, in his book, “Over Here: How the GI Bill Transformed the American Dream” that the GI Bill remade America. The legislation transformed a nation of renters to a nation of homeowners and created middle class suburbia. Humes asserts that college opportunity was transformed from an elite bastion to a middle-class entitlement.4 Before the GI Bill logistics and intricacies are discussed, it is relevant to discuss the shifts in the American class system to better clarify the effect that the GI Bill had on the landscape of the American social and financial economics.

Prior to World War II, the class system had been split into two groups, which consisted of the upper class and wageworkers who worked for those in the upper class. Those that were rich came from families that boasted decades of wealth. In 1870, the majority of the population mostly consisted of self-employed enterprisers.5 That is to say that each person offered their own skills in order to find employment, but they did not necessarily have an educational background. In small towns, this might be shown by women who worked as the town seamstress or by men who grew crops to sell at the local grocery store. By 1940, this system of self-employment had shifted and most people earned their money by working for the two to three percent of the population who owned approximately fifty percent of the private property in the


United States.\textsuperscript{6} These wageworkers were mostly confined to employment through farms or factories depending on location. The United States was a nation of renters and a place where owning private property and receiving higher education was reserved for a small portion of the population. However, in the aftermath of World War II, with the assistance of the GI Bill, many families were able to break out of the blue-collar labor market, which was mostly limited to factory and farm work.\textsuperscript{7} As new skills were learned, a self-sustaining white-collar middle class began to form.

When Americans think of the middle class, there is a certain status that often accompanies those thoughts. Jobs define income, which determines financial and social opportunities. Occupations are the most direct form of income for most Americans in the middle class as opposed to property. Alternatively, those that belong to the upper class often have significant financial investment in property. Middle class workers gain income by offering their skills to a labor market, while those in the upper class who have already gained financial autonomy spend their time buying and selling property to increase their financial status.\textsuperscript{8}

The new middle class that formed consisted of people from different income levels. There is not a set salary that defined people as being members of the new middle class. However, the members were financially independent with an interest and ability to own private property. The white-collar majority was primarily made of

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 252.

\textsuperscript{7} Bennett, \textit{When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America}, 24.

\textsuperscript{8} Mills, \textit{White Collar: The American Middle Class}, 253.
sales associates, schoolteachers and office workers. Even today, these occupations belong to citizens who are considered to be in the middle class. C. Wright Mills, in his book, *White Collar: The American Middle Class*, asserts that the American class system after World War II was broken into three different groups: wageworkers employed by factories and farms, the white-collar middle class, and the upper class. By World War II, Mills writes, the class system had shifted from a majority of self-enterprisers working on their land to a labor market with citizens working for someone else on someone else’s property.³

This theory on the American class system is certainly present within the structure of the Abell family. During their time in Lebanon Junction, the family worked primarily as wageworkers for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. Wageworkers on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad were making an average of forty to eighty dollars per month depending on their job distinction.⁴ After the war, R.L. Abell Jr. used the GI Bill to go to college and matriculate to become a teacher and eventually a principal. The GI Bill allowed R.L. Abell Jr. to gain entry into the middle class, which as C. Wright Mills asserts was full of teachers.

In the Post World War II era, as the class structure was repositioning itself, changes in status were also occurring. The newly forming middle class was gaining status through job and income security. They were considered to be socially and financially above the wageworkers of the factories and farms, but just below those of

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³ Ibid., 255.

the upper class who enjoyed a rather luxurious lifestyle. Work life began to shift for the middle class. Jobs were no longer just about income, but also about status.\textsuperscript{11} Job satisfaction became an intricate part of family life. Men who worked aspired to not only make a steady paycheck, but to be proud of the work that they were doing. That is not to say that previous generations hadn’t been interested in job satisfaction, but as family status began to increase, job type became more important in social circles and for personal self-esteem.

As the years began to pass, education began to be the determining factor in financial and social outcomes. Office jobs dramatically increased after World War II, which required increased training. Previously, employees could arrive at work and be trained how to operate the machinery or farm tools. In the post war era, job requirements increased and education became a prerequisite. Education replaced property in determining a citizen’s future financially and socially. As Mills writes, “the saving and sacrifice of the new middle class to insure a ‘good education’ for the child replace the saving sacrifice of the old class to ensure that the child may inherit ‘good property’ with which to earn his livelihood.”\textsuperscript{12} This mind shift is also prevalent in the Abell family. Robert Lee Abell left for the Army Air Force in hopes of providing better financial and social opportunity for his family. His thinking, which is explored later correlates with the shifts in the American class system as veterans began to join the newly formed middle class. Veterans were able to gain access to the

\textsuperscript{11} Mills, \textit{White Collar: The American Middle Class}, 458.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 483.
new middle class through the GI Bill, which provided government funding to cover the cost of their college degrees.

**The Creation of the GI Bill**

The GI Bill is regarded as one of the most life-changing pieces of legislation in the history of the United States. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States economy was still working out of the Great Depression where it had relied on the government for federal support. The GI Bill remade America by giving educational opportunities to veterans and by rapidly increasing the number of citizens joining the new middle class. It set in motion a transformation of education, created a new world of suburbia, and changed the population of cities.\(^{13}\) The GI Bill also created new realities of social and cultural geography and changed the personal expectations of veterans and non-veterans.

At the conclusion of World War II, the federal government began examining the task of re-assimilating thousands of veterans into citizen life. The United States was haunted by the mistakes of the previous generation and the lack of federal support for veterans in the aftermath of World War I, which left thousands looking for federal compensation and work.\(^{14}\) Suzanne Mettler, in *Soldiers to Citizens*, attributes some of the formation of the GI Bill to the fear of social unrest as demonstrated from veterans of the Bonus Army in the aftermath of the World War I.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Humes, *Over Here: How the GI Bill Transformed the American Dream*, 5.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{15}\) Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Creation of the Greatest Generation Ever*, 17.
Mettler writes:

The experience of the World War I veterans, who had gained little by way of government benefits, loomed in their memories: early in the Depression, during the Hoover administration, thousands of disgruntled and destitute veterans from all over the country had mobilized to march on Washington in the pursuit of immediate compensation. Policy makers looked to avoid a repeat of such events [the Bonus Army of the Hoover Administration] by ensuring that veterans of World War II would receive better treatment.\(^{16}\)

The fear of social unrest and embarrassment drove policy makers to design compensation for veterans in a new way. Political leaders and legislators were not necessarily trying to remake the American class system, but were simply looking to compensate veterans for their military sacrifices in World War II. Nonetheless, the GI Bill managed to unintentionally redefine the American class system.

As the government settled on the notion of compensation for veterans, President Roosevelt focused his attention on winning the war. He turned over the job of veteran benefits to Democrat congressional leaders to design.\(^{17}\) Dozens of bills were introduced in the late years of the war, but none of them combined all the needs of the veterans. As a result of the uncertainty, the American Legion took control of the project. The American Legion was founded in 1919 and looked to speak for all American war veterans.\(^{18}\) This organization had a significant impact in designing the GI Bill because many members of Congress were extremely active members.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 18.


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 54.
According to committee members of the American Legion, it was imperative that veteran benefits rival or exceed those that were extended to World War I veterans. It was also highly suggested that the Veterans Administration assume sole responsibility for distributing benefits.\(^{19}\)

The legislative bill proposed by the American Legion was composed of several categories of benefits. The first component ensured that veteran claims were processed quickly and that all veterans were informed of their benefits upon discharge. The second category insisted upon an immediate payment of up to $500 depending on how many years of service. The bill also included provisions of educational assistance for those that wanted to go to college and government loans for those that wanted to purchase a home, farm or business. Lastly, the American Legion insisted upon a payment to unemployed veterans of up to $25 per week for up to a year.\(^{20}\) These stipulations put together the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, informally known as the GI Bill.

The ratifying process of the GI Bill did not come without its complications. Although the GI Bill quickly gained support from Democrats and the Roosevelt Administration, there was slow progress from Republicans in the House of Representatives. The Senate passed the GI Bill very quickly, but the House had a number of reservations.\(^{21}\) The largest concern was the amount of power that the GI

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\(^{19}\) Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Creation of the Greatest Generation Ever*, 29.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 59.
Bill gave the federal government over education. John E. Rankin, who chaired the Committee on World War II Legislation, argued that the educational support in the bill would allow federal authorities to be too involved with affairs that belonged to state and local governments.\textsuperscript{22} The fear was that Congress might create a federal hold on education, which would dictate curricula and perhaps control admissions and faculty hiring. There was also the Negro problem to consider and Rankin feared that the GI Bill would disrupt the racial order and Negro veterans would benefit from the legislation.\textsuperscript{23} However, the legislation was eventually rewritten to exclude the majority of Negro veterans, which satisfied many Republicans. The GI Bill was eventually passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate and sent to President Roosevelt. On June 22, 1944, Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the GI bill into law.

\textbf{The GI Bill Effect}

Once the GI Bill became law, its effects became relatively immediate as veterans began to return from Europe. The law itself provided many social and economic benefits to returning veterans of World War II. The only stipulations for the GI Bill were that the soldier would have to be discharged honorably and have served at least ninety days to qualify for unemployment benefits and low-interest guaranteed

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\textsuperscript{22} Mettler, \textit{Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Creation of the Greatest Generation Ever}, 21. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 24. 
\end{flushright}
loans, which could be used to buy a home or a business.\textsuperscript{24} However, the benefit, which changed the economic future of countless numbers of families was that veterans could receive financial assistance to get further education or training. The recreation of America’s economic future and opportunities was not on purpose; it was quite on accident as most congressmen and college deans did not anticipate the vast numbers of veterans who would take advantage of the GI Bill. The repercussions of the GI Bill would redefine the class system in America and create the persistent and existing middle class of today.\textsuperscript{25}

As it was, the GI Bill affected education, class movement and the expectations and aspirations of all Americans, whether veterans or not. Prior to the GI Bill, the United States of America had been split into a low class of wageworkers and an upper class of which there was a large economic difference. The opportunity for education helped level the playing field and allowed the low class to compete with the upper class and earn a place in the growing middle class. The nation’s housing market also began to grow dramatically as many Americans began earning enough money to cease renting and start becoming homeowners.

The changes in college opportunity and home buying helped build the suburbs of America. As office jobs increased, incomes rose and those who joined the new middle class began to look at purchasing homes outside the cities. According to the statistics provided from Edward Humes, in his book, “Over Here”, the GI Bill helped

\textsuperscript{24} Kathleen Frydl, \textit{The GI Bill} (Cambridge University Press: New York, New York, 2009), 50.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 51.
fund the education of three Supreme Court justices, a dozen senators, 238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 450,000 engineers, 240,000 accountants, 17,000 journalists, 22,000 dentists, and myriad numbers of lawyers, nurses, businessmen, artists, actors, writers, pilots and millions of other professional jobs.\(^{26}\) These rapid increases in white-collar jobs contributed to rise of the newly formed middle class and also redefined higher education.

The effects of the GI Bill did not lie completely with veterans. In the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II, the government was steadily becoming more involved in the lives of its citizens and that involvement extended to college admission offices. The massive influx of veterans produced vast changes in the admissions procedures, guidance and testing services, curriculum and pedagogy on college campuses.\(^{27}\) The reasons were simple; the colleges had to factor in the different backgrounds that the veterans came from.

College became an opportunity no longer reserved only for the privileged and wealthy. However, the veterans that entered college were not necessarily prepared for the vigorous academic demands. As such, a lot of the veterans came in behind some of their peers and required special services. Moreover, colleges had to accommodate for the large influx of college applications, which could now be drawn from many different socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, the veterans began to view undergraduate and graduate degrees as the ticket to achieving to the American Dream.


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 8 and 10.
The American Dream was reshaped to prioritize education over property for requirements to join the new middle class. 28 This view of education has persisted to today with many Americans retaining the idea that education guarantees access to a higher socioeconomic lifestyle and reality.

Veterans were very eager to take advantage of the opportunities that the GI Bill provided. In 1945, 88,000 of the 1.6 million college students were veterans exercising their opportunities on the GI Bill. By 1947, college campus numbers had increased to 2.3 million and 1.15 million of them were veterans of World War II. 29 However, the colleges were often less than enthusiastic at the prospect of having so many veterans on college campuses. Admission officers were concerned that the veterans would not be prepared for the vigor of college education and would not mesh socially with the current population of students, which were all from the privileged upper class. 30

Soon after the GI Bill was written, Robert M. Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, predicted that the GI Bill would lead to the degradation of higher education, which would ultimately be a disservice to the veterans. Suzanne Mettler writes, Hutchins said, “The GI Bill gives [the colleges and universities] the chance to get more money than they have ever dreamed of, and to do it in the name of patriotism. They [admission offices] will not want to keep out unqualified veterans;

28 Mills, White Collar: The American Middle Class, 498.
29 Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans, 86.
30 Mettler, Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation Ever, 64.
they will not want to expel those who fail. The public and veterans’ organizations will not stand for it.”

However, from the perspective of the college-bound veterans, the opportunity and reality of qualifying for the GI Bill allowed them to achieve the sacred status and options bestowed only to privileged citizens. The qualifications were small as veterans only had to serve at least ninety days in the military and have an honorable discharge to qualify for benefits. Those with a dishonorable charge were not extended benefits, but those with honorable discharges received benefits with relative ease. The Veterans Administration produced and distributed pamphlets with information regarding their opportunities and how to access them.

Veterans could use the GI Bill at any institution or university that they could gain admission to. The possibilities for school were endless and most veterans took advantage of their new reality. After admission, the veterans would file paperwork, list their status and receive their benefits. A veteran in Suzanne Mettler’s, “Soldiers to Citizens” recalls, “We had to apply. It was processed through some regional offices…and then we simply got a check. I got a check for $75 and the school was paid directly.” War orphans were also extended the same benefits through the Veterans Administration. Robert Lee (RL) Abell Jr. recalled in an interview, “I received $110 a month in addition to my tuition, books and room being paid for. Before I entered school, I also received $70 a month from the government, from

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31 Ibid., 64.
32 Ibid.
which my mother was required to get me an eighteen dollar savings bond.” Benefits were easy to obtain and simple to use and the majority of veterans and war orphans were able to attend schools of higher education as a result. The United States had never seen such an influx of college students and the results were one of gargantuan proportions, which changed the economic future of countless families, but also the financial future of the United States of America.

**Exceptions to the GI Bill**

Although the GI Bill was a wonderful tool used for many veterans to become financially relevant, there were many that were excluded from the use of the legislation. Historically, Black Americans have been socially and financially ostracized from American economic growth. American racism has long been rooted deep in the subconscious minds of most White Americans. As a result, Black Americans did not receive the same benefits from the GI Bill. Before this section goes further, it is important to note that these statistics, assumptions and declarations do not pertain to all Black veterans, but simply to the majority. To be sure, there were Black veterans who accessed the GI Bill, used it to obtain a higher degree and moved their family up the financial and social ladder. However, the majority of Black

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Americans were excluded from this post-war Affirmative Action, which increased the wealth gap between White and Black Americans.\textsuperscript{35}

In the years following World War II, Black veterans waited for their opportunity to cash in on their service. However, Black Americans were not traditionally given large roles in the service. Those who achieved status were still treated as second-class citizens. In a class lecture at Georgetown University on November 4, 2012, Colonel Charles McGhee of the Tuskegee Airmen stated that he found it difficult to return to a country where a German Prisoner of War would be treated with more respect than a Black man wearing an army uniform.\textsuperscript{36}

In turn, the racism that Black Americans received during the war carried over into the post-war era and into the hands of the legislators writing the GI Bill. The GI Bill did not hold the same opportunities for Black Americans who wanted education, training, home loans, or any unemployment benefits. For many Black veterans, this was a major let-down because the military uniform and the victory in World War II left many Black Americans hopeful that the “Double V” Movement would be achieved abroad and at home.

Black veterans’ main roadblock came when attempting to receive admission into the college or university of their choice. Segregation was an active institution and the only schools that were really available to Black veterans were historically Black


\textsuperscript{36} Colonel Charles McGhee of the Tuskegee Airmen, “African Americans in World War II,” (Lecture, Georgetown University, November 4, 2012).
universities. To be true, there were some schools in the North that were integrated that accepted Black veterans. These schools were the George Washington University, American University and Georgetown University, which are all located in Washington, D.C. 

For Black veterans that obtained education stipends in the South, most states would provide a train ticket to the Black university of their choice. Fisk University, Bishop College, Howard University, Morehouse College and Tuskegee Institute were all popular choices. However, these schools could not handle the influx of students due to capacity reasons and did not want a population made up solely of military veterans. Kathleen Frydl, in her book, *The GI Bill*, estimates that HBC’s turned away roughly 20,000 African-American students during the GI Bill years. It is important to acknowledge that the opportunities extended to White veterans were not available or a reality for Black veterans. This resulted in an increase of the wealth gap between Black and White Americans.

**The Veterans Attend College**

As the veterans flocked to the universities, there was concern about their seriousness as college students. After all, most of them came from humble beginnings and were little prepared for the vigor that a university education would provide.

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39 Frydl, *The GI Bill*, 55.
However, those that were concerned that veterans would infiltrate and destroy the high standards of college education were quickly proven wrong. Studies show from the GI Bill years that veterans outperformed their peers in the same classes at the same institutions. Edward Humes, in his book, “Over Here”, writes that many veterans pursued business administration quickly followed by more professional fields such as law, medicine, dentistry, and teaching.\textsuperscript{40} There were plenty of others as well that engaged in engineering, architecture, humanities and social sciences. For these veterans, the sky was the limit in terms of a college education.

For the veterans that attended college, they graduated at large rates. Many college admission officers had worried that veterans would be unable to compete with other students and would have high drop out rates. However, according to the statistics provided by Suzanne Mettler, approximately only twenty-six percent did not complete their degree. In comparison, today’s stats show that thirty-nine percent of college students do not finish their degrees. Veterans recognized the rare opportunity that the GI Bill was providing for them and many took full advantage of its benefits and considered their schoolwork to be a high priority. For the GIs that did not attend a four-year university, many were drawn to vocational school. Statistics show that 3.5 million veterans engaged in vocational training. Vocational training led to veterans obtaining various skills that ranged from telephone repair to gunsmithing. There were

\textsuperscript{40} Humes, Over Here: The GI Bill and the Transformation of the American Dream, 78.
others that attended business school, flight school or received agricultural training to grow their farms.\footnote{Mettler, \textit{Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation Ever}, 80.}

The veterans and orphans that used the GI Bill have always been quick to credit the GI Bill as the turning point in their life. In a survey completed in 1973, 33,614 men between the ages of twenty and sixty-five, both veterans or war orphans, showed that users of the GI Bill gained between 2.7 and 2.9 more years of education.\footnote{Ibid., 91.} Those years of education gave hope and economic promise to the veterans and children of small towns that were not privy to the economic privilege that was reserved for family of higher financial and social status.

\textbf{The GI Bill and Female Veterans}

The importance of the GI Bill provided opportunity in ways that veterans simply did not have access to otherwise, but it did not benefit female veterans in the same way. More women served in World War II than in any other war prior to that, but they only made up a mere two percent of the military and only approximately 132,000 women activated their benefits from the 7.8 million veterans.\footnote{Ibid.,144.} Female veterans would have suffered from the sexist social norms of the time, which would have discouraged their usage of the GI Bill. However, many women did benefit from the GI Bill indirectly through the increased paychecks of their GI husbands after they completed their college degrees.
The writers of the GI Bill designed the legislation with male veterans in mind. It is not necessarily thought that women were intentionally excluded, but rather that the social norms of the time would have naturally pushed the aspirations and opportunities of women from the minds of the legislative writers. For example, according to Suzanne Mettler, a small portion of women who served in World War II were disqualified from using the GI Bill. Mettler writes that the eleven hundred Women Air Force Service Pilots, which was the female unit attached to the Army Air Force did not obtain military status until the 1970s and did not qualify for program benefits of any kind.\textsuperscript{44}

However, there were other female units that did qualify for G.I. Bill benefits, which included the Women’s Army, Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Corps in addition to the nurse corps that accompanied each unit.\textsuperscript{45} These branches of the military did receive GI Bill financial compensation and educational training at the same level as the male veterans. Though these women did receive GI benefits, they were denied dependent compensation. Men were given approximately an additional $105 per month if they had a dependent and $120 for two or more. Female veterans were not extended these payments because legislators argued that their husbands should be able to provide enough money for the family to be stable.

Female veterans who had access to the GI Bill, but did not use it, normally refused the benefits to adhere with the gender roles of the time. In an interview with

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 146.

\textsuperscript{45} Humes, \textit{Over Here: The GI Bill and the Transformation of the American Dream}, 144.
Mavis Olson of the Goodlett Family, she revealed that women were expected to remain at home with the children while the men played the role as “Breadwinners”.46 Women that ever aspired to some type of career normally succumbed to the pressures of the age, which included caring for children or supporting the husband’s career in some way. Societal pressure kept many women out of college since they were expected to remain at home and care for the children. This lifestyle and expectation is reflected in statistics and any pop culture TV shows of the 1940s and 50s that show an idealistic American family living in the suburbs where the father is the breadwinner.

The benefits that the male veterans received also relieved the work pressure on females who typically remained at home. As men began to access their benefits, go to college and get higher paying jobs, women could return to their domestic roles in the home. Women who had worked in World War II were able to return to their homes, which contributed to higher birth rates and marriage rates. Elaine Tyler writes: “Those who came of age during and after World War II were the most marrying generation on record: 96.4 percent of the women and 94.1 percent of the men.”47 Moreover, as the marriage rates began to rapidly increase, fertility rates also began to increase. As males made more money as a direct result of their educational training, women began to have more children and began to birth them at younger ages. Women

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46 Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, May 22, 2014.

also spaced their children closer together, which indicates a higher financial responsibility that more families could afford to take on.\(^ {48}\)

The GI Bill afforded the women an opportunity to return to the home, where they played the traditional role of homemaker. Though more than fifty percent of women held jobs during World War II, the majority of those women left the workplace in the Post War Era as their husbands began to earn more money. Some women went willingly back to the home, while others were forced to resign by their male counterparts. There was a fear that if too many women continued to work, there would be too much competition for jobs between men and women. Congress also clearly supported this idea by revising the federal income tax in 1948 so that married couples could file joint tax returns and receive financial advantage if the male was the sole primary wage earner. \(^ {49}\)

For the women that did utilize GI Bill benefits, their training and education had a far less socioeconomic effect. The GI Bill allowed male veterans to switch career paths from the blue-collar jobs they would have likely held and the opportunity to engage with career paths in new fields and to obtain a higher salary. However, those few women who did attend college were still limited to job fields that were viewed as “acceptable” for women.

The vast majority of women worked as nurses, teachers, secretaries, clerks or social services. Medical and Law schools often had a quota on the number of female

\(^ {48}\) Ibid., 24 and 26.

students it would admit. Moreover, those women that made it through the professional schools were still denied equal pay to their male counterparts. This resulted in a gender gap that America is still trying to work through, but the effects of the GI Bill cannot be ignored. Even if the female veterans did not benefit at the highest level, the GI Bill created something more powerful, which was opportunity. As a result, the middle class was dramatically increased and this changed the face of the economy and the lives of so many families forever. 50

The GI Bill was perhaps the most influential piece of government legislation in the history of the United States of America. The female effects of the war were certainly felt in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. Located in a part of the country, which romanticizes tradition and gender roles, women who worked would have returned to the home. In this small railroad town, jobs were scarce in general so women would have been expected to remain at home.

Macie Goodlett and Bessie Waters Abell were both homemakers for most of their lives. They both adhered to the gender standards of the time and enjoyed their roles in the home. Bessie Waters Abell did work briefly as a school janitor, but received pension checks when her son, Robert Lee Abell was killed in World War II. Prior to the war, Robert Lee Abell had been financially supporting Bess and John Abell, so he remained the sole wage earner for the family before and after his death. However, it was his death, which allowed his son, R.L. Abell Jr. to benefit from the GI Bill and attend Western Kentucky University, which forever altered the financial 50

Humes, *Over Here: The GI Bill and the Transformation of the American Dream*, 104.
projection of the Abell family. The family eventually moved out of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky and to more prosperous areas of the state as a result of the financial and social status gained by attending college.

In this chapter, the basic concepts of the GI Bill have been explored. The conclusion was that the government did not intend to create a new economic class. Nonetheless, the mass influx of veterans into the colleges and universities resulted in a new working class filled with new learned skills and a desire to acquire wealth. These veterans understood that this opportunity had changed their life prospects forever and were inclined to ensure that they worked hard and made the most out of their educational opportunities. It also provided women with the option to return to the home. The colleges were reshaped with a new kind of student and higher education became a possibility for individuals who had previously lived a modest lifestyle. These factors eventually created an economic boom in the United States as citizens became wealthier and began to spend more money.

The next chapter will analyze the opportunities that were available in Lebanon Junctions before and after the war. It will look at the difference in pay that Robert Lee Abell received simply by joining the army and learning a trade, which would give him a better chance to support his family. The difference in pay between working on the Railroad and learning how to operate airplanes as a member of the Air Force afforded opportunities that simply could not be obtained living in a small town in Kentucky.
CHAPTER TWO

OPPORTUNITY BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR

The GI Bill was arguably the most important piece of legislature that changed the face of the American class landscape. Previously, the American class system had been separated into two groups filled with rich and wageworker citizens. With the formation of the GI Bill, the new middle class was created, which consisted of those who were above the wageworkers, but did not posses incredible wealth. Those who are considered to be in the middle class today generally make between $40,000 to $300,000 a year. Veterans that benefited from the GI Bill were privy to new opportunities that changed their lives forever. However, it is worth looking at the difference between Lebanon Junction, Kentucky and the people who lived there before and after the war to see how the GI Bill transformed the destinies of many families, but specifically the Abell family in general.

As previously stated, the town of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky relied on the income provided by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad system. Lebanon Junction was an important stop between Louisville and Nashville and the town’s economy was based on the business brought in from the depot and the people who may have stopped in Lebanon Junction, if only for lodging between trains.¹ At first, Lebanon Junction only had a train depot, which was connected to a hotel with a bar. As business at the depot began to increase, homes and businesses laid the foundation for a busy town filled with lots of character.

¹ Herr, The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963), 382.
Without the Louisville and Nashville Railroad line, the town would have never existed. As a result of the building of the Railroad, Louisville, Kentucky became the epicenter of trade in the South and it joined New Orleans in commercial competition. Lebanon Junction became the stopping point between Nashville and Louisville, which led to commercial growth and new jobs on the railroad for families moving to Bullitt and Nelson County, where Lebanon Junction is located.  

The population of Lebanon Junction began in very modest numbers. The 1860 census suggests that there were only eighteen families residing in the Junction. Of the men that lived in the town in the early days, seventy-three percent of them worked on the Railroad as conductors or laborers. The other few people that lived in the town worked at the town hotel as maids or bartenders.  

As the Railroad grew, so did the town. By the 1920s, railroading was the overwhelming industry in the area. The Louisville and Nashville Railroad line had started as freight lines, but eventually evolved to include passenger lines. The fastest passenger lines ran from Louisville through Lebanon Junction to Corbin and then onto Knoxville or Nashville. The trains connected towns and provided more economic prosperity for the towns where they stopped. Most of the trains on the

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2 Ibid., 252.

3 1860 Census, Bullitt County, Kentucky, Microcopy No. 653, Roll 358. Published originally by Joan Wright and Patricia Dodson, Box 317, Brooks, Kentucky, 40109.

Louisville and Nashville line were freight trains, which required a full roundhouse crew to keep them ready for service at any time.

Typical roundhouse crew jobs included a hostler who acted as an engineer and a fireman to move the engines into service. Other jobs included trainmen, section men who kept the tracks working, yardmasters, timekeepers and conductors.\textsuperscript{5} It took teamwork and great precision to keep the trains moving. The majority of the town was committed to the Railroad mission because they recognized that the town needed the Railroad to survive.\textsuperscript{6}

Members of the Abell family were employees of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company. Acy Goodlett worked as a pitman for the railroad, which meant that he worked to ensure the trains were ready for service at any moment.\textsuperscript{7} His responsibilities likely included washing down steam boilers and cinders from coal residue left in the firebox after train runs. He would’ve also been responsible for building new fires to help the trains run. Though it was simple and humble work, he would’ve played a vital role in keeping the trains moving on time.

Robert Lee Abell also followed in the footsteps of many employees that came before him and joined the Louisville and Nashville Railroad after graduating from high school in Lebanon Junction. Upon graduation, he worked for the Railroad as a member of the section gang, which was a group of men that were responsible for

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Herr, \textit{The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963)}, 291.}

\footnote{Masden and Pike, \textit{Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of Lebanon Junction}, 88.}

\footnote{Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, May 17, 2012.}
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laying track and keeping certain sections of the track ready for train movement.\textsuperscript{8}

Section gang members were on call at any time of the day or night and required to work in any weather conditions. It was difficult and strenuous work, but respected work nonetheless.\textsuperscript{9}

Robert Lee Abell made a modest living working as a section gang member and this work was both dangerous and unfulfilling for him as an individual. It was nearly impossible to make a decent living according to Robert’s ambitious financial standards. Robert’s dreams and realities dramatically increased in 1942, after the birth of Robert’s son, R.L. Abell Jr., which motivated him to earn even more money. Robert’s ambitions would eventually lead him to join the army, which gave his family and his son access to GI Bill benefits in the Post-War Era.

In the Pre-World War II era, job options in Lebanon Junction were limited. The options were to either work on the Railroad as many men did or find a job as a janitor or store worker. Railroading was a big business in the Pre-World War II era and the majority of transportation of goods and people was done through trains.\textsuperscript{10}

There were also few labor laws in the Pre-World War II era so railroaders were paid far less than traditionally required. With the shortage of tracks and cars available for

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{9} Masden and Pike, \textit{Railroad Town: A Pictorial History of Lebanon Junction}, 88 and 90.

\textsuperscript{10} Burlyn Pike, \textit{History of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky} (University of Louisville Library, Louisville, Kentucky, 1940).
the demands of transportation in the 1900s, many laborers worked overtime to create a system of travel within the United States.

However, in 1917, there was a growing dispute over labor wages and the number of hours that workers were being asked to work. By 1917, train and engine men finally gained a reasonable eight-hour workday. However, section gang workers, were still working ten hours days and were on call during the evening.\textsuperscript{11} In the Pre-World War II era, it was ideal for railroad workers to move into military positions because they would often be guaranteed an immediate higher living stipend. As the cost of living increased and railroad wages remained stagnant, workers were unhappy because they were unable to keep up with the growing cost of living.\textsuperscript{12}

The wages that railroaders made were a motivation to join the army when the United States joined World War II in 1941. The railroaders were members of the lower class of wageworkers and were eager to join the newly forming middle class. According to the Railroad Wage Commission’s report of 1918, fifty-one percent of all rail workers were making $75 per month or less and eighty percent were making less than $80 a month. Section gang workers, like Robert Lee Abell, were making around $34 a month in 1915 to keep tracks ready for travel in dangerous conditions.\textsuperscript{13} This rate was eventually increased to approximately $78 per month by 1941 as the cost of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item Ibid., 163.
  \item Ibid., 171.
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living increased.\textsuperscript{14} The job had some benefits as section gang workers were extremely valuable members of the railroad production and were unlikely to be laid off. This meant that the Abells and Goodletts were safe from the effects of the Depression, which laid off tons of men and left families in unbearable poverty. However, they were vulnerable to the lack of opportunity within Lebanon Junction, which could have left many performing manual labor on the Railroad for the majority of their lives.

As the railroads realized that worker wages were minimal, officials began to increase wages after a series of labor strikes. The only worker making a decent wage was the engineer of the passenger trains who averaged around $178 dollars each month. However, as the Second World War II approached, the railroads were not increasing their wages fast enough to detract interest in joining the military. Those that worked on the Railroad were seen as essential to the United States economy as freight and material movement became vital to the war effort.

The freight and passenger trains saw an increase in need as World War II progressed. In 1944, the total freight that was carried by trains was 1,491,000,000 tons, which was an eighteen percent increase from World War I.\textsuperscript{15} As a result of increased necessary labor, those who worked on the Railroad were excluded from the eligibility of the draft, but many joined the military anyway.\textsuperscript{16} Robert Lee Abell, who

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.,172.

\textsuperscript{15} Stover, \textit{Life and Decline of the American Railroad}, 186.

\textsuperscript{16} Herr, \textit{The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963)}, 355.
worked as a section gang laborer would not have been drafted because his job was viewed as essential for the United States economy, especially as the army began to rely on railroads for transportation of goods and weapons.

Railroad labor during World War II was an immediate issue as the Railroad labor force began competing with the draft for workers. According to John F. Stover, in his book, *The Life and Decline of the American Railroad*, some 350,000 workers gave up their blue-collar work clothes for a branch of the military.¹⁷ The labor shortage for railroad workers was so large that Illinois established a program of hiring teenage boys to become brakemen, firemen, switchmen, flagmen and section gang workers. Those that joined the army dreamed of serving their country, but also hoped to learn a trade that would allow them to obtain white-collar jobs.¹⁸

Citizens that left the railroad knew that they could double their pay by joining the military. The armed forces provided an opportunity to learn another trade and increase their pay rate. Railroad workers that joined the military immediately increased their pay and were able to provide their family with more opportunity. Those that survived the war eventually benefitted from the GI Bill, which allowed them to extend their education, make even more money, and join the white-collar ranks of the middle class.

The decision to join the military was a smart move for citizens that worked on the Railroad. As the war raged on, the cost of living increased in the United States.


¹⁸ Ibid., 192.
According to John Stover, prices climbed five per cent during 1941 and another ten per cent in 1942.\textsuperscript{19} The war motivated the railroad workers to look for other means of employment, which benefitted the country’s war effort and their families financially.

The Railroad Commissions knew they had to appease the needs of railroad workers and the rising cost of living to comply with the labor shortage. As such, salaries rose for workers that remained at home to approximately $2550 per year, which was about a twenty five per cent increase from the Pre-War years.\textsuperscript{20} If Robert Abell had remained in Lebanon Junction, he would have received a pay raise and likely worked his way up from the section gangs. However, Robert recognized that he could earn more money in the military, which also provided him an opportunity to learn a different trade and create more opportunities for himself in Post-War America.

Robert Lee Abell’s initiative to join the army was a strong move financially. In the Post-War Era, the economy boomed, but the railroads began to decline. As families began to gain more wealth, they started to buy cars, which decreased the need for passenger rails. As such, the railroads began to shift towards carrying more freight than normal, which reduced the amount of train staff that was needed. Section gang men were still required to keep the trains moving, but Pullman porters, conductors and other forms of train staff essentially disappeared. Moreover, as trains started carrying more freight, they started competing with trucks, pipelines, and barges for need. As other forms of transportation for freight increased, the number of

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 177.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 188.
railroad cars began to diminish. Stover writes that railroad stock cars declined from 87,000 in 1925 to just a mere 17,000 in 1968.21 Railroad towns slowly began to die as the need and desire for railroads simply began to disappear.

Lebanon Junction was not exempt from the decline of the American Railroad. The town had been established as a stopping point between Louisville and Knoxville or Nashville and depended on the Railroad. In the Post-War years, the Louisville and Nashville’s railroad numbers decreased significantly.22 The passenger train had provided the majority of the town’s population and income through people stopping through and staying in town. As Americans became wealthier, they began to shift their transportation attention from railroads to cars and planes. The numbers provided by Kincaid Herr, in her book, “The Louisville and Nashville Road”, reveals that in 1945, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad carried approximately ten million passengers.23 However, in as the Post-War trends continued and the GI Bill created more opportunities for wealth, the railroads suffered tremendously. Just five years later, in 1950, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad reported that the number of passengers in the last five years had decreased from approximately ten million to just over two million.24

21 Ibid., 191.

22 Herr, The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963), 283.

23 Ibid., 283.

24 Ibid., 285.
The dramatic decrease in the Railroad speaks to the decline of Lebanon Junction, whose population began to decrease as jobs in the town became scarce. Robert Lee Abell’s inclination to join the army was likely the best option for him, as his opportunities in the town would have diminished in the Post War Era. The Army and the impending GI Bill would have given him an opportunity to create a larger financial income for his growing family and new son, R.L. Abell Jr. Robert’s own personal sacrifice to join the Army, when his job would have excluded him from the draft is truly heroic. It identifies not only with the decline of small railroad towns, but is consistent with the mindset of the new middle class and the countless possibilities that were eventually created by the GI Bill.

As a result of the GI Bill, the Abell family would be elevated financially and socially. Robert Lee Abell joining the Army Air Force was pivotal moment that changed everything for the family. If he had remained in Lebanon Junction working as a section gang worker, it is reasonable to predict that Abell family would have continued living as blue-collar citizens. Robert’s inclination and understanding that he would need further education and skills shows the shift in the thinking of Americans. Education was rapidly replacing property as it is related to wealth and status and citizens began to adjust to this notion. Americans were looking to move up into the newly forming middle class and Robert Lee Abell was determined to make them Abell family one of those success stories.

This chapter identifies the opportunities that the Army provided for the men who joined from Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. It discusses the salaries of those that worked on the Railroad and why the initiative to join the military was an attractive
option for many. The reasons revolved around serving the United States for a worthy cause and to earn more money in the process. Those that joined the military understood that their pay could be increased and took advantage of that opportunity. Veterans of World War II were given GI Bill benefits. If the soldier perished, their children were given educational opportunities through the GI Bill as war orphans. Joining the military literally paid off for the majority of veterans who took advantage of the GI Bill and were able to join the new middle class.

The next chapter will look at the training that Robert Lee Abell received in the Army Air Force. It will identify the salary change that he endured from joining the Army and what types of jobs he would have been qualified for in the Post-War Era. The next chapter will also look to predict what types of jobs Robert may have applied for and how his financial choices and opportunities helped change the financial trajectory of the Abell family. Specifically, it will look at the pay increase that Robert received and how this was a huge change from the modest paycheck and lifestyle that Robert and the Abell family came from. The GI Bill and the military was surely the turning point for the Abell family and many other families in the United States. The opportunities for the Abell family increased with the implementation of the GI Bill and the job opportunities that followed.
CHAPTER THREE

THE ARMY LIFE AND ACQUIRED SKILLS

On March 27, 1942, Robert Lee Abell of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky was inducted and entered on active duty into the Army Air Force of the United States of America.¹ Robert Lee Abell reported to Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi for a nineteen-week course. He had previously completed basic drilling training at Jefferson Barracks near Saint Louis, Missouri that included marching, target practice, bayonet drill, and orientation lectures.² Upon arrival to Kessler Field, Private Abell began training with airplanes immediately. The intention was to train him as an engineer gunner for the Air Force. This is evidenced in a letter written to Bess Abell in October of 1942. Robert writes:

I am going to be an assistant Flight Engineer Gunner on a big 4 material airplane. It is the wing commander on private ship. And will never be on combat duty he says. We will go with him wherever he [the pilot] goes. The idea of not being in combat duty sounds pretty good and you will have less to worry about, I hope.³

A gunner enlisted in any branch of the military had one duty, which was to defend his squadron partners. In the Air Force, if a flight bomber was under attack, it fell to the gunners to defend the plane from enemy fighters. In the Army Air Force, bomber planes normally had six members aboard during a mission. These jobs included a

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³ Robert Lee Abell, October 18, 1942, Letter to Bess Abell.
pilot, co-pilot, radio operator, navigator, and an engineer. Only the pilot and co-pilot would be exempt from gunner duties, which usually involved shooting at enemy fighters to avoid having the planes shot down. The role of a gunner was dangerous, yet very noble.

In contrast, the roles of an engineer were quite different. The main job of a flight engineer was to ensure that the plane was always ready to run and was safe to fly. Flight engineers would have had to know every aspect and intricacy of the aircraft. If the plane broke down, it was their responsibility to fix it immediately, especially if the squadron was in the middle of a mission. These members of the Army Air Forces were essential and a large component of the bombing success by the Allies in World War II.

As a member of the United States Army Air Force, Robert Lee Abell served under the title of Engineer Gunner, which means he would have been responsible for the maintenance of the planes as well the protection of the plane from enemy fighters. His role was not only heroic, but also vital to the survival of his bomb squadron. Joining the Army Air Force afforded him the opportunity to serve his country, but also allowed him to earn a larger paycheck performing a skill that required training. The training that Robert received was not something that he would have had access to

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in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. By simply joining the Army Air Force, Robert Lee Abell increased his family’s financial status by almost doubling his income. The further opportunities that would come with the GI Bill legislation would only further the family’s progress.

The training to become a flight engineer with the Air Force involved a nineteen-week course broken down into multiple ten-day courses. These courses covered aircraft maintenance fundamentals, airplane structures, hydraulic systems, propellers, instruments, engines, electrical systems, fuel systems, engine operation, and inspection of single and multi engine planes. The type of plane that required a flight engineer or engineer gunner was a B-29. According to several publications by the United States Air Force Historical Preservation, edited by Wesley Craven, the flight engineer would control the plane’s mechanical ability to function, while regulating electrical, hydraulic, fuel, lubrication and oxygen systems.

The flight engineer would be seated behind the pilot and copilot to maintain the mechanical functions of the plane, while the pilots would control the speed and altitude. The flight engineer would also be trained to fly the planes in the event that the pilot and copilot were killed in a strike. Robert Lee Abell’s role as an engineer gunner meant that he would spend majority of his time on missions ensuring that the

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8 Ibid.
mechanical functions of the plane were working properly, but he also had to be aware and ready to move about the plane in the event of an enemy strike.

The initial training that Robert Lee Abell received upon joining the military would have been simple basic training. Robert would have been put through weeks of workouts and lifting to ensure he was in proper condition. Robert also received training on how to use basic military weapons. The adjustment to military life was not an easy one. Based on writings from letters that he exchanged with his family and his wife, Nina Abell, Robert had not traveled much further than Louisville, Kentucky, which was the main travel destination for citizens of Lebanon Junction. Understandably, the military lifestyle change was not easy for someone who had barely ventured sixty miles away from his hometown.

Robert was not used to being away from his family and was not enthralled about leaving his new bride, Nina Abell. Upon joining the military, Robert writes about the constant supply of different types of food that was supplied to the Army Air Force. Robert writes, “I never in my life saw so much food as what we get. Turkey, corn, cream potatoes, sweet pickles, biscuits, cold salad, peas and any kind of cakes and pies.”

Robert also did not have enough money to buy Nina Abell an engagement or wedding ring when he joined the military. In a letter with enclosed money, Robert mentions wanting to use the money to buy a wedding and engagement ring for his new wife, but states that the money should be saved for a home before a material

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possession. This speaks to the humble lifestyle that he was living before joining the Army Air Force and how his life had already been changed.\footnote{Robert Abell, December 11, 1942. Telegram to Nina Abell.}

Nonetheless, the desire to provide for the family was far greater than Robert’s own personal discomfort. In a letter written in his early training days to his wife, Robert asserted:

\begin{quote}
Life is sure beginning to be hell here. It has been two days since I have been in good humor. We get up at 5:30am and they start hollering and cussing us and don’t stop until 8:30 at night. We are in quarantine and can’t leave for anything unless we have permission. I sure will be glad to get out of this madhouse. I will be back to you Darling, but I don’t know how soon it will be.\footnote{Robert Abell, April 14, 1942, Letter to Nina Abell.}
\end{quote}

However, Robert Lee Abell understood the sacrifice that he was making for his country and his family. Though he was miserable, as most people are in basic training, he knew that this opportunity would change his family’s future forever.

After Robert Lee Abell completed basic training, he was transferred down to Biloxi, Mississippi and Keesler Field. The training included a preliminary course on the basics of airplanes and what types of tools are used to repair them. This course was not drastically different from repairing a train, which he was familiar with having worked as a section gang member on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad system. In addition to the preliminary instruction, Robert Abell went on to receive courses based in airplane structures, operating systems, engines and propellers.\footnote{United States Air Force Historical Preservation, \textit{The Army Air Forces in World War II}, 631.} At the end of each
of these courses, Robert Abell had to take tests, which required a certain score to continue to another school and course. This type of training speaks to the shift in job type. As an employee of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, Robert would have been trained on the job or as an apprentice. In the Army Air Force, he was required to take courses and pass exams, which shows how education was being prioritized for job requirements. This was one of the major shifts that affected the American class system and helped define the new middle class.

The tests were designed to retain those who were talented and understood the job requirements. The tests were not easy and only a small fraction of those chosen to become engineers actually made it through the entire program. In a letter to John and Bess Abell, Robert Lee Abell boasts, “Tell Cecil I am moving from here [Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi] I feel like bragging just a little for out of the 1,000 that graduates here this week, there was only 70 of us that was picked to go on to another school.”  

According to Robert’s statistics, that meant that approximately seven percent of all graduates were able to become flight engineers. The rest likely went on to become gunners.

These statistics are very close to the figures that Wesley Craven also provides when discussing the elimination rate of flight engineer potentials. Craven writes: “The elimination rate varied greatly based on the qualifications of each different groups of students. In 1945, the overall graduation rate for flight engineers was about nine

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percent.\textsuperscript{14} In this way, the Army Air Forces ensured that the flight mechanics were properly trained and that they had the most talented individuals working the bomb planes, which ensured that the planes were always ready for strikes and functioning appropriately. This was a lifestyle and training that Robert Abell could not receive in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky.

Moreover, the modest wage and lifestyle that the Louisville and Nashville Railroad provided would not have allowed Robert to pay for this type of training at a vocational school or university. He was already reaping the benefits of joining the military and this was just the beginning for him and the Abell family. As his paychecks started to come in, his family began to see just how valuable further training and opportunities were for advancing the family. Later on in this chapter, the pay change will be dissected specifically, but it is important to understand how intricate the training that Robert Abell received in order to see why his pay was almost doubled by joining the army.

Specific engineer instruction followed aircrew preflight school where recruits would learn how to fly a plane.\textsuperscript{15} The day would normally be spent sitting in classrooms learning the functioning components of an airplane coupled with flight training. Robert Lee Abell, discusses this schedule in a letter to Bess Abell, where Robert states:

\textsuperscript{14} United States Air Force Historical Preservation, \textit{The Army Air Forces in World War II}, 596.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 632.
I have classroom work in the morning and in the afternoon; I have actual experience while flying. We are in the air about three hours each afternoon in a two-engine Medium bomber. The Commanding General said he wanted us to know everything there was to know about airplanes and I’m hoping to keep doing as well as I am doing in school and flying.  

Upon completion of basic training courses, airplane functionalities, and preflight training, potential flight engineers were assigned to a team of six, where they would practice their skills in a pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer team. Combat training would follow, where soldiers would work with their flight teams carrying out simulated missions.

There were a certain number of flying hours that each member of the Army Air Force was required to complete. In his letters, Robert Lee Abell mentions that he was required to finish approximately ninety hours of flight time to be qualified to fly bomber planes. The pride that he took in his work is evident in his letters to his family and he discusses his flight requirement on multiple occasions. In a letter to Bess Abell, Robert writes: “I wish you all could see me operating these big {ole} airplanes. You would be so proud of me.” In Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, Robert had spent most of his work career maintaining the tracks for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, making a modest wage. His job as a section gang worker mostly consisted of manual labor and laying track. It was a job that almost anyone could carry or be trained for. The difference in job skill also explains how why Robert’s pay raise


occurred. He was much more qualified and educated in mechanics as a member of the Army Air Force where he had received high-level training.

Robert Abell understood the difference in his job positions from Lebanon Junction to the Army Air Force and he took extreme pride in his job and the opportunities that the job afforded him. Robert writes in a letter to John Abell, “I flew a B-26 by myself the other night for about 30 minutes. I think that was the most thrilling 30 minutes of my life. The only thing that would’ve made it better was if you all had been there. In those 30 minutes, I wouldn’t have changed places with Roosevelt.” This mindset reveals how different Robert Abell’s experiences in the Army were from his opportunities and lifestyle in a small Kentucky Railroad town. The United States government and Army Air Forces were already on their way to changing the lives of the Abell family as they did for so many other families during World War II and the Post-War Era.

As a member of the Army Air Force, Robert was trained at the highest level for airplane mechanics. The type of training was so intricate that it makes sense that Robert’s pay would have been increased. As a section gang worker, Robert Lee Abell was making around $78 a month according to the pay rates discussed in John Stover’s, “The Life and Decline of the American Railroad.” These figures are confirmed by Ira Marshak, of the Social Security Administration, who writes that

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section gang workers would make approximately eighty dollars a month.\(^{21}\) Robert
Abell’s job on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad involved simple manual labor to
keep the tracks working at all times. In the Army Air Force, he operated machinery
that required special training, which confirms the need and desire for a pay raise.

As a flight engineer for the United States Army Air Force, Robert Abell’s pay
increased to $182 per month with an additional $50 for flying. In a letter to Bess
Abell, Robert wrote, “I got another raise in pay yesterday, $48 more on the month. I
make $182 a month with board and clothes, not bad eh! My worse trouble seems to be
collecting what I have coming if I earn it, I will feel like a rich man!”\(^{22}\) The idea of
earning this much money was a foreign concept to Robert Abell and he knew
that he was helping his family reach a new level of financial security. While Robert was
in the Army Air Force, Nina Abell had a small job working at the local school. She also
worked at a factory making ammunition boxes for the war cause. This job is only
mentioned in letters and has not been confirmed by family members or Nina Abell,
who unfortunately passed away in 2011.

In order to better support the family, Robert began to send money from his
paycheck back to his family. Robert designated for $70 dollars to be sent to Nina
Abell from his month allowance. In a letter to Nina Abell in 1942, Robert writes, “On
December 1\(^{st}\), you will start to get the new money I have allotted for you. It will be

\(^{21}\) Ira Marshak, “Service, Compensation, and Age of Railroad Employees,
2015).

around $70 every month. If that isn’t enough, let me know and I will try to send you more. But we need to start thinking about a little home of ours and it would be nice if we had enough saved to buy our own furniture.”

While Robert was away working in the Army Air Forces, Nina Abell was still living at home with her parents, Acy and Macey Goodlett. Even though Nina was married, neither her nor her new husband had the financial means to buy their own place, which speaks to the financial status of both families at the time. It was common for children to remain home for many years because leaving the house was very expensive. As a result of Robert’s newly elevated salary, Nina was able to envision a future that included leaving the house many years before she might have otherwise. The Army provided a financial opportunity for the Abells in a way that working on the Railroad never could have. Moreover, this was just the start of a better lifestyle and financial times for the Abells.

Family records show that Robert also sent, on average, $50 dollars a month to his parents. During the time that Robert was in the Army Air Force, Nina Abell was working, but John Abell was having difficulty finding work in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky. This is evidenced in several letters to Bess Abell where Robert Abell asks if John Abell, his father, has found work. However, as previously stated, jobs in Lebanon Junction were hard to find if a person chose not to work on the Louisville


and Nashville Railroad. In any event, these statements and insurance claims after World War II reveal that John and Bess Abell were relatively reliant on Robert Abell to earn money for their family. Bess Abell had a few small jobs around Lebanon Junction, which has already been discussed in previous chapters. The Army was giving Robert the opportunity to provide for his family in a way that the Louisville and Nashville Railroad never could. The GI Bill and college opportunities that would follow would only further that success.

Robert’s reasons for joining the Army were simple: provide for the family and serve his country. However, he also understood that gaining necessary skills through the army would prepare him for a new list of jobs in the post World War II era. Though he could not have predicted that the GI Bill would allow him the opportunity to attend college, he did recognize that the army would give him access to new jobs in bigger cities that afforded higher financial options. In an early letter to his Uncle, B.F. Abell, Robert writes:

If I live to get out of this Army, I sure hope I can get a job some place working and flying in planes for I sure feel lost without them. Never in my dreams did I think I would get this opportunity to fly planes. I am making more money than I ever have and I am sure I can make even more after the war is over. 

Robert’s military experience shaped his future forever and shaped him for a world of modern machines and technology.

It is not unreasonable that Robert could have remained in the Army Air Force as a flight engineer or transitioned to a full-time pilot position. However, Robert was

25 Robert Lee Abell, June 1, 1943, Letter to Bess Abell.

26 Robert Lee Abell, October 19, 1942, Letter to B.F. Abell.
a family man and nothing would stand in the way of him returning to his wife and his new son, R.L. Abell who arrived on September 23, 1942. He dreamed the American Dream, which was to have a small home in Kentucky to raise children in.

If Robert Abell had survived the war, he would have accessed the GI Bill and attended college. Based on the flight engineer training that Robert had already received, it is most likely that he might have pursued a degree in engineering from a university in Kentucky, which may have been either the University of Kentucky, the University of Louisville, Western Kentucky University or Eastern Kentucky University. Alternatively, Robert may simply have transitioned to a position with commercial planes as a flight engineer, which is a position he could have obtained in Louisville, Kentucky or Lexington, Kentucky as both cities have medium-sized airports.

As a flight engineer in 1945, the work hours for flight engineers were limited to a flight time of 120 hours in thirty days, 300 hours in ninety days or a thousand hours for the whole year.\textsuperscript{27} Wages were distributed based on experience and number of hours. It was possible to increase based on experience by approximately $200 dollars a year, which was an option that many engineers obviously took advantage of. In 1945, flight engineers worked around forty hours per week and were compensated for time and a half if their time exceeded the normal eight-hour workday.

In terms of wages, commercial flight engineers were paid approximately $250-500 per month based on experience. At the lowest rate of pay, Robert Abell would have made approximately $250 dollars more as a commercial flight engineer, which is a pay raise from the $182 per month that he was making in the Army Air Force. This type of pay raise would have provided the opportunity for the Abell family to move out of Lebanon Junction, Kentucky to larger with a larger number of job opportunities. However, Robert Abell was a family man and likely would have wanted to remain close to Lebanon Junction to ensure that R.L. Jr. grew up near his Abell and Goodlett grandparents.

In the Post War Era, commercial pilots were the highest paid individuals and averaged around $600 to as high as $850 per month.\textsuperscript{28} Given Robert’s work ethic that shows consistently through his achievements and letters, it is relatively likely that he would have gotten a pilot’s license, which would have raised the family’s financial status even further.

According to Suzanne Mettler, by the time World War II veteran and war orphan eligibility expired, approximately 7.8 million veterans, which was 51% of those who served in the military benefited from the GI Bill and the opportunity to get further education. 2.2 million veterans sought degrees from accredited colleges and universities, while 5.6 million went to vocational school, received on the job training, or attended community college.\textsuperscript{29} In any event, Robert’s pursuit of the GI Bill and a

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 194.

\textsuperscript{29} Mettler, \textit{Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation Ever}, 42.
lifestyle in the post war era would have been filled with pride, higher-level academics, a loving family and an increased paycheck. Unfortunately, he would not get that opportunity. His son, R.L. Jr., however, would reap the benefits of his father’s sacrifice and pursue education through the GI Bill as a war orphan.

Robert Abell became a flight engineer and achieved the status of Staff Sergeant, which was given to those who successfully completed the necessary strenuous training. He was with 556th Bomb Squadron of the 387th Bombardment Group, which was constituted on November 25, 1942 and completely activated on December 1, 1942 at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. MacDill Air Force Base was where Robert Abell spent the majority of his time training while in the Army Air Force. The squadron nicknamed themselves the “Tiger-Striped Marauders” because the B-26 airplanes that they flew had tiger stripes on their tails.\(^{30}\)

The 387\(^{th}\) Bombardment Group spent time in Michigan and Fort Knox in Kentucky before being sent overseas. In May of 1943, Robert Abell was able to return to Lebanon Junction for the first time since leaving for the military. He was able to meet his son, Robert Lee Abell Jr., whom he called “R.L.” for the first time. It would also be the last time he ever saw his young son and his wife, Nina Abell.\(^{31}\)

On June 19, 1943, the 387\(^{th}\) squadron left the United States for England. Robert was unable to let his family know that he had been sent overseas, but later


\(^{31}\) Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, May 22, 2014.
provided an address for them. The 387th Bomb Group that Robert Abell was a part of was stationed in Willinghale, Essex County, England. The 556th Squadron carried out three different missions including its first bomb mission on August 15, 1943. They flew from England to Northern France along with thirty-one other B-26s planes dropping bombs over German territory. On August 31, 1943, the 556th Squadron carried out its final mission.

The 556th Squadron traveled from Willinghale, England to Lillie, France. The plane they were flying had been nicknamed the “King Bee”. The plane was shot down over Lillie, France and separated into two pieces. Of the six soldiers that were in the King Bee, only one survived and was taken as a Prisoner of War by the German Air Force. Robert Lee Abell did not return to his family, but his death was not only a hero’s death for the United States of America, but also for his family.

Though one can never trade a family member’s death for money, his family was able to cash in on his life insurance from the Army Air Force as well as benefits from the Veterans Administration. Moreover and most importantly, Robert Abell’s son, R.L. Jr. was able to benefit from the GI Bill as a war orphan. Though the emotional burden on the Abell family was extremely heavy, the financial opportunities were about to change their lives forever.

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This chapter has explored Robert Abell’s journey in the army. It discussed the type of training that he received as a member of the Army Air Force and how his salary changed by joining the military. The opportunities that Robert received in the Army Air Force would not have been afforded to him if he had remained in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.

Robert’s inclination to join the Army Air Force gave him the opportunity to learn a new trade and prepare himself for the Post War Era and a potential increase in salary. He understood that the Army could create a new lifestyle for his family. If he had survived, his opportunities would have increased even more with the benefits of the GI Bill. Though he did not survive, his legacy and opportunities were passed on to his son, who did utilize the GI Bill as a war orphan. Attending college and working as a teacher, which was a white-collar job allowed the Abells with the opportunity to join the new middle class.

In this chapter, Robert Lee Abell’s skills were examined and possible jobs were predicted. It was concluded that although Robert did not live to access the GI Bill himself, the family was still affected as Robert’s son utilized the legislation to attend college. The next chapter will look at the changes that America endured in the Post War Era as a result of the GI Bill and the new opportunities for veterans as a whole.
CHAPTER FOUR

AMERICA IN THE POST-WAR ERA

Robert Abell’s death cast a dark shadow on the Abell family, but opened up a plethora of opportunity as a result. The Abell family was not the only family to benefit from a soldier’s death or a veteran returning. At the conclusion of World War II, the United States rewarded its veterans and war orphans with an incredible opportunity, which was to attend a college or university paid for by the government. As the intricacies of the GI Bill have already been discussed, this chapter will focus on how the GI Bill changed America as a whole and created a whole new economic class.

When veterans return from war, it is always a hard adjustment. Some had difficulty finding jobs or places to live. Congress addressed this immediately in the Post War Era by solving the housing shortage problem for veterans. The Lanham Act was updated, which allowed the United States government to build public housing in direct correlation with the veteran need. For the veterans that immediately started college after the war, Congress used the Lanham Act to speed up funds to convert housing units into veteran student housing. Congress also reimbursed all colleges and universities that had already made steps towards accommodating the housing needs of the student veterans.¹ Colleges gained approximately 33,260 campus housing accommodations through the Temporary Education Facilities for Veterans program and countless off-campus accommodations for public war housing under the control

¹ Keith Olson, The GI Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges (The University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, Kentucky, 1974), 66.
of the Federal Public Housing Administration. At the height of GI Bill enrollment, approximately 300,000 veterans were living in housing provided from the Lanham Act.

Colleges also had to deal with a dramatic increase in enrollment. Other buildings needed to be built to accommodate the new students. In 1946, the American Council on Education reported that colleges were struggling to provide adequate numbers of classrooms, libraries, administration buildings, cafeterias, and student activity buildings.\textsuperscript{2} Congress used the Lanham Act to pull funds to provide college with the necessary changes to various campuses that the veterans required. Universities also responded to the increase in enrollment by hiring more faculty members. Between 1940 and 1948, faculty numbers increased by 52% as college enrollment skyrocketed by almost 73%.\textsuperscript{3} Colleges saw an opportunity for their student population to dramatically change as veterans stormed the campuses. They recognized the sacrifice that the veterans had made for their country and rewarded them with accommodating housing situations and solid educational support through faculty. After all, most veterans were older than the standard college age of 18-22 and had families to support.

The majority of colleges provided marriage housing for veterans that had spouses or children. These units became their own epicenters of achievement as most veterans who were married maintained higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs) than veterans without a family to support. Veterans understood that obtaining a higher

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 67.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 70.
educational degree would lead to further job opportunities. Most of them had completed skill training while in the army, but a college degree increased their chances of obtaining a white-collar job and earning enough money to join the newly forming middle class and move to the suburbs. To the veterans, the GI Bill and the college opportunity was a ticket to the American Dream and they took it extremely seriously.

Veterans were similar to other students in terms of financial problems. Most veterans were determined to be self-supporting. Robert Lee Abell was not unusual in this regard as he always pushed to be as financially independent as possible. The Veteran’s Administration tried to assist with this desire to provide for families, but only a handful of veterans were financially satisfied. According to Keith Olson, married veterans were only receiving ninety dollars a month for a stipend in 1948. That number did increase to $105 dollars with an additional fifteen dollars if the veteran had two or more dependents.4 To live comfortably, veterans normally needed approximately $180 a month.5 Many veterans had to take jobs while they were in school as funds became tight. The sacrifice would eventually be worth it for them as the schooling qualified them for a large number of new jobs in the Post War Era.

The education that the GI Bill provided veterans not only changed their lives, but the socioeconomic class system of America as well. Social and economic trends were already prominent at the conclusion of World War II. America experienced an


5 Olson, *The Veterans and Their Colleges*, 77.
economic boom, which helped define the middle class. The GI Bill gave rise to the middle class, which helped give rise to mass-produced housing units, stores, schools, and transportation. Supermarkets, chains and companies began opening franchises all over the country with new services that hadn’t been previously desired by citizens because most of them could not afford any unnecessary luxury.\(^6\)

One important change to the American lifestyle was the switch to personal cars. Most Americans wanted to own automobiles especially since gas was no longer rationed in the Post War Era. As veterans finished schools and got new jobs, they began to move their families out to the suburbs of the cities. These homes were completely new and veterans commuted into the city in their new cars, which eliminated the need for transportation such as streetcars and trains.

In Lebanon Junction, it was the switch from trains to cars that truly killed the town. The Louisville and Nashville Railroad barely had any passenger trains left after 1953, which eliminated tons of jobs and forced businesses to close as the number of people coming and going in the city decreased with each passing year.\(^7\) Elsewhere, the switch from trains to cars was profitable for most businesses. The mass exodus from cities to suburbs helped new businesses expand as companies began to open franchises in the suburbs so citizens didn’t have to leave to spend money.\(^8\) The true

\(^6\) Bennett, *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America*, 278.

\(^7\) Herr, *The Louisville and Nashville Railroad (1850-1963)*, 289.

\(^8\) Bennett, *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America*, 281.
American Dream began to form as people bought homes in the suburbs with yards, where kids could play in the yard of their homes as adults visited with neighbors. This became a normal lifestyle for many middle class families. Experiencing new items and goods was a staple for many veteran families and helped define the middle class lifestyle and expectations.

Veterans took advantage of their new opportunities and began to invest in their future through businesses. The Post War Era saw a boom in business as hotels, car dealerships, and restaurants were established. Holiday Inn opened in 1952 and received an incredible response, which resulted in the forming of thousands of franchise businesses. As the sales of cars increased, the United States helped transform the transportation business by establishing more highways. As highways were built, shopping malls were also established, which became another huge industry. Life and wealth was established in the suburbs, which became the new American Dream for the lower class and those who aspired to join the new middle class. The GI Bill made all of this possible for veterans and their families.

By 1962, the GI Bill was expanding its reach. According to Michael Bennett, author of “When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America” asserted that the number of blue-collar workers had declined by four million. In the years between 1945-1962, the number of professionals, managers, salespeople and other various white-collar workers had increased by ten million.

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9 Ibid., 310.

10 Ibid., 313.
Union membership was also declining as the average production worker was making almost $100 a week.\textsuperscript{11} By 1963, the average number of eligible Americans attending college was around 50\%, which was a jump from 15\% before World War II.\textsuperscript{12} Statisticians estimated that approximately sixty and seventy percent of Americans belonged to the newly formed middle class. The growth of suburbs, industries, homeownership and jobs was a direct correlation with the formation of the GI Bill. The opportunities and values that had previously been reserved for the upper middle class were now becoming the expectation for the middle class and their families.

The formation of the middle class was the turning point for so many American families. Members of the middle class were afforded the opportunity to move their families out of rented city apartments and into the homes of the suburbs. Children could grow up playing in yards that their family owned and go to local schools with kids that were in their social and financial class. Families remain financially stable through the passing of wealth. As jobs and wealth increased, families began establishing futures not only for their present families, but also for decades to follow. The sacrifice of the veterans was not only reserved for their children, but their grandchildren as well.

The passing of wealth was an opportunity that the Abell family experienced along with so many other veteran families. Robert Lee Abell’s decision to join the military was a personal sacrifice for his family. Robert writes throughout countless

\textsuperscript{11} Olson, \textit{The Veterans and Their Colleges}, 81.

letters to family members about wanting to create a better life for his family, but especially his wife, Nina, and his son, R.L. Jr. The love that he felt for those individuals motivated and pushed him to successfully become a flight engineer in the Army Air Force. If Robert had survived, he would have gone on to receive further education through the GI Bill and earned even more money. Fortunately, his son benefitted from the GI Bill and went on to become a teacher, principal and county school board member. Robert Lee Abell’s grandchildren also went on to college and received advanced degrees, which refers to the passing of wealth previously mentioned.

In this chapter, the effects of the GI Bill and the changes that America endured in the Post-War era were discussed. The major change was a move from the cities to the suburbs as the middle class was established. The other major development was the white-collar job boom, which veterans accessed with college degrees. The GI Bill had an enormous effect on the American class system and created opportunities for so many veterans in ways that had never been conceived before. The next chapter will look at the Abell family in the Post-War era and the effects of Robert Lee’s death on the opportunities that were afforded to his son and family for the decades to follow.
CHAPTER FIVE

R.L. ABELL JUNIOR AND THE GI BILL

On August 13, 1943, Robert Lee Abell was reported missing in action in Lillie, France. The pride of the 558th Bombardment Group, the “King Bee” was shot down by German forces as it returned from a mission. The loss of the five men was obviously difficult on all family members. Mavis Olson, sister of the late Nina Jackson, asserted, “I had gone home for lunch and was home when the telegram came from the Depot in Lebanon Junction that Robert was missing in action. In so many ways, Nina never recovered from Robert’s death.”¹ The news of Robert’s disappearance came by way of the Western Union on September 7th, 1943.² Robert left behind a wife and a child, R.L. Abell Jr., who was named after his father. Robert had only met his young son once while breaking rules to leave Fort Knox during a short stint in Kentucky. Robert’s legacy lives on through his son and the opportunities that he created for him as a result of his death.

In the direct aftermath of the news that Robert was declared, “missing in action”, the Abell family immediately began to gather information on what might have happened or if the telegram was a mistake. Unfortunately, Robert was officially declared, “killed in action” in November of 1943. The news was sent to the Abell and Goodlett families by Kentucky Senator Albert B. Chandler and also by the Quarter

¹ Revealed by Mavis Olson, interview to the author, May 17, 2012.

² The Adjutant General, Telegram to Bessie Abell, September 7, 1943.
Master General’s Office in Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{3} His body was buried in the United States Cemetery in Margraten, Holland, which was located about ten miles from Aachen, Germany.\textsuperscript{4} Robert’s body remained there until 1957 when President Truman ordered the remains of World War II victims to be returned to their families. The Abells had the option to have Robert buried in Arlington National Cemetery, but tradition is deep in Kentucky, so the Abell family preferred to have him buried in Lebanon Junction near other relatives.

Robert’s death had immediate financial implications for the Abell family. Once the death was finalized, Bess and John Abell received a portion of Robert’s life insurance policy. Shortly after Robert’s death was confirmed, Bessie and Nina Abell began receiving letters from the Veterans Association and Ex-Service Men’s Board.

A letter from November of 1943 from the Ex-Service Men’s Board reads:

\begin{quote}
This [letter] is to advise you that there are certain benefits, which may be due to you as a result of your son’s demise. In quoting such benefits may we state that there is insurance and certain war death compensation cases when parents are dependent upon their son. We are offering you to opportunity to be represented by us to the Veterans Administration to receive compensation due to your family.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Financial compensation to the Abell family came through life insurance policies as well as Railroad Retirement payments as well.

\textsuperscript{3} Albert B. Chandler, Letter to Bessie Abell, November 16, 1943.

\textsuperscript{4} Major General Tom B. Larkin, Letter to John Abell, December 17, 1946.

\textsuperscript{5} Mrs. Edna Tyler, Letter to Bessie Abell from the Disabled Ex Service Men’s Board, November 22, 1943.
The first financial collection that the Abell received was Robert’s life insurance policy, which he had received through the Veterans Administration. Bess and John Abell received $5,000 as a beneficiary.\textsuperscript{6} Nina Abell, received a larger amount of approximately $8,000 as told through family letters. This money was initially very beneficial for Nina Abell. She was able to move out of the Goodlett home and into a house of her own. Moreover, she was able to provide her son, R.L. Abell, with athletic opportunities and the finest clothing she could find. R.L. Abell confirmed this in an interview by stating, “Mom always made sure that I had the nicest clothing. It was important to her that we always looked good.”\textsuperscript{7} Personal effects of Robert Lee Abell were sent to Nina Abell along with the remaining amount of his paycheck, which consisted of $48.65 in his wallet and a check of $182 dollars from Robert’s monthly salary.\textsuperscript{8} The family was on its way to being more financially independent, which can be largely attributed to Robert’s death.

The Abells and Goodletts had to make a lot of changes to their lifestyle in the Post War Era. The Louisville and Nashville Railroad made numerous rounds of job eliminations that changed Lebanon Junction forever. The majority of the town had to find other jobs as the economy of the town shifted towards factories and plants. Interstate-65 was extended through Lebanon Junction in the Post War era and many unemployed railroad workers were hired to help build the new interstate. Amongst

\textsuperscript{6} H.L. McCoy of the Veterans Administration, Letter to Bessie Abell, November 30, 1943.

\textsuperscript{7} Revealed by Robert Lee Abell Jr., interview to the author, May 17, 2012.

\textsuperscript{8} Nina Abell, Letter to Bess Abell, December 22, 1943.
those workers were Cliff and Bill Goodlett who were younger brothers of Nina Abell. Nina’s other brother, Gerald worked 37 years for General Electric and a few years for Wholesale after the closing of the Railroad Depot. Though the Railroad was in decline, Nina Abell continued to receive payments each month of $49.50 from the Railroad Retirement Board until her son, R.L. Abell turned eighteen years old.

The last form of compensation came from the Veterans Administration. On June 1, 1944, Nina Abell received a letter from the Veterans Administration that stated, “You [Nina Abell] are hereby notified that as the unmarried widow of Robert L. Abell, whose death was due to service, an award of death pension has been made to you under the provisions of the Act of 3-20-33 as amended. Your rates will be $65 per month commencing September 1, 1943 and an additional $50 per month commencing September 23, 1960.”

Pension compensation as well as financial assistance from the United States government allowed Nina Abell to provide for her family. However, it was not initially enough to move the Abell family from the blue-collar lifestyle. Nina Abell was not able to attend college and did not have the financial means to do so. After all, she had not even finished high school.

During the war, Nina Abell worked in a factory making ammunition boxes and doing other work for the war cause. In the Post War Era, Nina Abell worked at Beams Distillery near Lebanon Junction and then briefly at a restaurant called the Glass House near Elizabethtown. This type of work supports the notion that the

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9 R.J. Hinton, Director of Veterans Administration Dependents Claim Service, Letter to Nina Abell, June 1, 1944.

Abells were initially part of the wageworker lower class that C. Wright Mills writes about in *White Collar: The American Class System*. Nina Abell was unable to increase her own income because she lacked a college degree. As the new middle class began to grow, education became the focal point for elevating one’s socioeconomic status. The Abell family owned as small amount of land, which would have given them status within the town, but since the new middle class prioritized education, the Abells remained in the blue-collar ranks.\(^{11}\)

The shift to educational focus is not only prevalent in the newly formed middle class, but also within the Abell family. Nina Abell had not completed high school, but Robert Lee Abell had. In the Army Air Forces, he learned a new trade in flight engineering that prepared him to make more money for his family. Robert understood that joining the army would increase his education level and change his family forever. As Robert was training, education statistics began to dramatically change and more people began to attend school. According to C. Wright Mills, in 1890, only 7% of school age children were actually enrolled and regularly attending school. By 1940, that number had increased to 73%. Mills writes that on average, those who held white-collar jobs averaged 4.3 more years in school than their wageworker counterparts.\(^{12}\) The newest members of the new middle class were younger, more financially ambitious, and better educated. In this way, the white-

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 557.
collar lifestyle and focus on education paid off as education became a source of additional income and social ascent.

The ambitious nature of Robert Lee Abell is a legacy that persisted throughout his family. Nina Abell took it upon herself to elevate the family in any way that she could. She pushed her son, R.L. Jr. to attend school and dream of college. The sacrifice that Robert Lee Abell made for his family changed them forever. As a result of his father’s death, R.L. Jr. was able to receive GI Bill benefits as a war orphan and attend Western Kentucky State College, which is known today as Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. He received $110 dollars a month in educational assistance allowance from the Veterans Administration to go along with stipends from savings bonds that Nina Abell received as a result of Robert’s death. R.L. also received an additional $50 a month to support his wife, Mary Ann Abell, whom he married right before enrolling at Western Kentucky State College. R.L. Jr. attributes the GI Bill to his ability to attend college. R.L. Jr., in an interview, asserted: “There is no way I would have been able to attend college without it [The GI Bill]. We simply would not have had the money.”¹³ R.L. Jr. used the GI Bill to complete a biology degree. He was the first in the family to graduate from college and gain access to white-collar jobs.

Shortly after his graduation, R.L. Jr. moved his family from Bowling Green, Kentucky to Independence, Kentucky. He had a college degree, a faithful wife in Mary Ann, and a new son, Robert Lee Abell III. R.L. Jr.’s first job after college was a biology teacher at Simon Kenton High School in Independence, Kentucky. Mary Ann

Abell would take the home economics position at the same school. Both of them were working popular white-collar jobs and making more money than anyone in the family had ever made. They were the first in the family to make such a financial jump and that success can be attributed to the GI Bill. For the Abell family, the economic and social gaps between them and the new middle class were beginning to close.

In the United States of America, the easiest form of economic security is inherited wealth and expectations. Children that grow up and matriculate in homes of college graduates are always more likely to go to college. R.L. Jr. and Mary Ann went on to have two children, Robert Lee Abell III and Paula Abell Billiter. Both of them would go on to four-year universities and earn advanced degrees. Robert Lee Abell III graduated with honors from the University of Kentucky with a history degree. He eventually attended Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana earning just the second advanced degree in the Abell family history. Robert Lee Abell III worked for several corporate firms and as public defender in Louisville, Kentucky and New York City before opening his own private independent firm in Lexington, Kentucky. The firm focuses primarily on employment and accident law and is extremely successful. Robert Lee Abell III married Patty Ann Davis Abell of Louisville, Kentucky. They went on to have two children, Annalee and Sara Abell.

The Abell family’s journey from Lebanon Junction to college would not have been possible without the GI Bill. In just two generations, the Abell family went from the wageworker ranks to the white-collar lifestyle of the new middle class. The family continues to grow financially with each passing generation as each family member matriculates through college and professional school and inherits the wealth and
expectations of the generation that came before them. Robert Lee Abell could not have predicted that his own actions in joining the Army Air Forces would make it possible for his great-granddaughter, Annalee Abell to attend one of America’s most elite institutions, which is a dream that would not have even been conceived in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky as a wagooner on the Railroad.

Annalee Abell graduated from Georgetown University in the spring of 2013. She is now a math teacher in New Orleans, Louisiana as a member of The New Teacher Project at Renew SciTech Academy, which serves underprivileged and underserved minority children in the inner city. Her sister, Sara Abell, is a consistently named to the Dean’s List at the University of Kentucky as she pursues a career in medicine. In just two generations, the social and financial status of the Abell family has dramatically changed. They are now stable members of the middle class and are continuing to work their way up. This opportunity is directly correlated with the GI Bill and R.L. Jr. attending College in the aftermath of his father’s death.

The growth of the middle class and the suburbs of America reshaped American opportunity, society and politics. Michael Bennett writes that America was fulfilling Jefferson’s idea of a yeoman’s republic by becoming an overwhelmingly middle class nation. The American Dream has shifted and those in the city now dream of life in the suburbs. Life in suburbia is not perfect, but it promises and signifies better housing and social opportunity than the rented apartments of the cities.

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By 1963, the number of blue-collar workers in America had declined by four million and the number of professionals had increased grown by ten million since D-Day. Union membership was in decline and the paycheck of a production worker had increased to $100 a week, which according to Michael Bennett is four times the amount that a worker would have earned during the Depression. The number of college students had also increased from 37% of eligible high school graduates in 1957 to 50% by 1963. Those numbers started to gradually increase as more baby boomers began to attend college. According to statisticians, approximately 60% of Americans belonged to the middle class by 1963. It had become the dominant class and shared many of the opportunities and values that had once been reserved for the upper class.

Although the GI Bill created countless new opportunities for the Abell family and other veterans, life in America will always be a challenge. Americans live in a society that is overcome with racism, conflict, and a selective class system. However, America is a place where opportunities are abundant and dreams can become realities. American society has dramatically shifted over the last 60 years and opportunities were added because of the GI Bill. Without the GI Bill, the Abell family and myriad amounts of other families might still be living in small railroad towns as wageworkers. Instead, the GI Bill allowed them to attend college secure their family’s


future through hard work and determination. Gone are the days of a thriving Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, but the sacrifices of Robert Lee Abell made for his family persist. The job will never be quite complete as the responsibility of retaining wealth and expectations must be passed on to each new generation, but one must always be mindful and grateful of the sacrifices of family members who came before them.

The story of the growth of the American middle class and the GI Bill for veterans is scintillatingly fascinating. The GI Bill was responsible for the rapid expansion and creation of the new middle class in America. 80% of men born in the 1920s went on to be military veterans or passed along GI Bill benefits to their children. Over half of the veterans took full advantage of the GI Bill and reshaped American society. The GI Bill did more than create the middle class. It affirmed and satisfied dreams of small town wageworkers across the country. Although life will never get easier, government assistance of this nature does help alleviate some of the financial burdens on families and helps make the American Dream tangible for the majority of citizens. So long as Americans continue to dream and the government continues to support its citizens, the future for the middle class will always be bright.
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