

# Hardship and Heartbreak: Surviving the War at Home

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One of the most difficult things for families to endure during the war was separation. Separation of the men in the army from their family members back home caused considerable emotional pain. Separation also caused many practical problems at home. With the men and older boys away, how were the farms to be tended? With only the elderly, women, and children left at home, who would do the heavy work on the farms? How would the bills be paid? On the plantations and wealthier farms, slaves did the work. But most North Carolina farmers had no slaves, especially those in the western Piedmont and Mountains. How could these families feed themselves during this time of separation?

When the war began in April 1861, few people believed it would last long. Southerners thought the war would end as soon as the North lost a battle. So when men volunteered to serve, they thought they return home soon, perhaps in time to bring in the fall harvest, or to plant the next spring's crop. Most families were willing to endure separation and hardship for a time in order to win the war quickly.

But the war did not end quickly in 1861. It did not end the next year either, or the next. The war lasted four long years and was far more terrible than anyone had imagined. More than 125,000 soldiers left their North Carolina homes. More than 40,000 never came back. Meanwhile, families suffered increasing hardships. At first, women sent clothing, blankets, and food to the men in the army. Soon they had little left to send. Later in the war, Confederate agents went from farm to farm taking livestock, wagons, and food for the army. In some areas, Union troops drove people from their homes and destroyed farms and towns.

From letters and diaries we can learn about the lives of farm families during the war. Consider, for example, the story of John and Edna Armsworthy. They were married on December 7, 1854, and lived in Yadkin County. By 1861 they had three children: Branch, Ella, and Mathew—all under five years old. The Armsworthys lived on a 270-acre farm. They grew wheat, corn, oats, peas, potatoes, and sweet potatoes. They had a mule to plow with, two milk cows, two other cattle, fifteen hogs, and a flock of chickens. The cows provided milk and butter for the family, and the hogs were butchered for pork. The family also made its own molasses. The Armsworthys were a typical North Carolina farm family. They did not own any slaves.

In fact, few people in Yadkin County owned slaves. Yadkin was settled by a large number of Quakers, a religious group who believed slavery was wrong. Although John and Edna Armsworthy were Methodists, not Quakers, they were no doubt influenced by their community. When the war began in 1861, Yadkin County sent its share of volunteers, but its citizens were

not overly excited about the war. Like others, John Armsworthy did not enlist. He stayed home with his family working on his farm. In April 1862 the Confederate government called on a military draft of all young men. So John Armsworthy left home and volunteered to serve in the army.

While John was away with the army in Virginia, his family stayed home. He and his wife wrote many letters to each other. He wrote to her about army life, and she wrote about the family at home. As time passed, life on the farm grew more difficult. Edna had to ask her Uncle Mathew to harvest the corn crop in the fall. John wrote home very worried about whether there would be enough food for his wife and children the upcoming winter. In November Edna had to sell the cows to pay off debts and taxes.

Spring 1863 brought more troubles. Edna could not plow and plant the next corn crop. She had to borrow a milk cow from her uncle and ultimately sold her husband's colt for twenty-five dollars to help pay debts. In the summer John wrote her advising that she buy some pigs, if she could find any for sale. The money John sent from the army was nearly worthless, but Edna spent it quickly on his advice. It was better to buy something of use than to keep the money. Edna became more and more dependent on her uncle to keep food on the table.

After being wounded in battle and captured in November 1863, John Armsworthy died in a Northern prison in January 1864. Edna and the children were heartbroken. The years of separation had been hard enough. But now they would never see their husband and father again. Then, within months, three-year-old Mathew died. This was more than Edna could take. She took and her remaining children moved to her uncle's farm in nearby Davie County. Edna never returned to her farm. She never remarried. The Civil War destroyed the lives and dreams of this North Carolina family and many others across the state.

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