

THE NEW DEAL, RURAL POVERTY,  
AND THE SOUTH

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the political and administrative history of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and its predecessors, the New Deal agency most directly associated with eliminating rural poverty. In addition, it studies and describes the efforts to remedy rural poverty, with an emphasis on farm security efforts (particularly rural rehabilitation) in the South, by looking at how the FSA's actual operating programs (rural rehabilitation, tenant-purchase, and resettlement) functioned. This dissertation demonstrates that it is impossible to understand either element of the FSA's history – its political and administrative history or the successes and failures of its operating programs – without understanding the other. The important sources include archival collections, congressional records, newspapers, and published reports.

This dissertation demonstrates that New Deal liberal thought (and action) about how to best address rural poverty evolved considerably throughout the 1930s. Starting with a wide variety of tactics (including resettlement, community creation, land use reform, and more), by 1937, the New Deal's approach to rural poverty had settled on the idea of rural rehabilitation, a system of supervised credit and associated ideas that came to profoundly influence the entire FSA program. This proved to be the only significant effort in the New Deal to solve the problems of rural poverty. The FSA proved to be modestly successful as an anti-poverty program; it ameliorated the suffering of the rural poor and generally improved the lives of its clients. It did not prove to be successful as a political institution, succumbing to political attacks during World War II.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

To make footnotes a bit easier to read, citations for the following frequently-cited sources and collections have been shortened throughout this dissertation. Full documentation of these sources is available in the bibliography.

### *Government Documents*

The yearly reports of the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration between 1936 and 1946 are listed in full in the bibliography under the authors “Resettlement Administration,” “United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration,” and “United States Department of Agriculture, War Food Administration.” They are cited by title throughout the footnotes.

The titles of the annual agricultural appropriations bills and hearings have been shortened and are listed by house of Congress and year, with the year the hearings were held or the bills passed in parenthesis.

“*Byrd Committee Hearings*” is the shortened citation for U. S. Congress. Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures. *Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures, Part II*. 77<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> sess., December 1, 1941, January 23, 1942, and February 3, 1942; and U. S. Congress. Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures. *Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures, Part III*. 77<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., February 6, 10, 13, and 27, 1942.

“FDR, *PPA*” is the shortened citation for Franklin D. Roosevelt. *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vols. 1-13. Edited by Samuel I. Rosenman. New York: Random House, 1938-1950.

“House, *Activities of the FSA*” is the shortened citation for U.S. Congress. House. *Activities of the Farm Security Administration, Report of Select Committee of the House Committee On Agriculture to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1944. H.R. 1430.

“House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*” is the shortened citation for U.S. Congress. House. *Farm Labor Program, 1943, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, on the Appropriation for the Farm Labor Program, Calendar Year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943.

“House, *Farm Security Hearings*” is the shortened citation for U.S. Congress. House. *Hearings Before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943-1944.

“House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*” is the shortened citation for U.S. Congress. House. *Farm Tenancy, Hearing before the Committee on Agriculture on H.R. 8*. 75<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1937.

“House, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects*” is the shortened citation for U.S. Congress. House. *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Ways and Means*. 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1936.

“Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*” is the shortened citation for U.S. Congress. Senate. *Resettlement Administration Program*. 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1936. Doc. 213.

## *Archival Sources*

“Alabama Relief Administration Papers” is the shortened citation for Alabama Relief Administration, State Publications, 1932-1935, SG014348, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

“Bankhead Papers” is the shortened citation for John H. Bankhead, Jr., Papers, LPR53, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

NAL refers to documents and publications currently housed at the National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland. Many of these documents, such as reports and brochures, lack other clear information regarding publication and source.

### *Farmers Home Administration Records, National Archives at College Park, Maryland*

The following collections from the Records of the Farmers Home Administration, Record Group 96, held at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, have been shortened in the footnotes (the current archival entry number for each collection is in parenthesis).

“FSA Historical Records, RG 96, NACP” refers to Records Relating to the History of the Farm Security Administration (Entry 19).

“General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP” refers to General Administrative Records, 1943-56 (Entry 48).

“General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP” refers General Correspondence Maintained in the Washington Office, 1935-38 (Entry 1).

“Project Records, RG 96, NACP” refers to Project Records, 1935-1940 (Entry 71).

“Rural Rehabilitation, General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP” refers to Rural Rehabilitation Division, General Correspondence, 1935-38 (Entry 5).

*Farmers Home Administration Records, National Archives Southeast, Morrow, Georgia*

The following collections from the Records of the Farmers Home Administration, Record Group 96, held at the National Archives Southeast Region at Morrow, Georgia, have been shortened in the footnotes (the current archival entry number for each collection is in parenthesis):

“Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE” refers to Records of the Rural Rehabilitation Division, Region 5, Montgomery, Alabama, Farm Ownership Case Files, 1938-1946 (Entry 94).

“Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE” is the shortened citation for Records of the Office of the Director, General Correspondence, 1934-1942 (Entry 93).

“Project Construction Files, RG 96, NARASE” refers to Project Construction Files, 1938-1941 (Entry 97).

*Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives at College Park, Maryland*

The following collections from the Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16, held at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, have been shortened in the footnotes (the current archival entry number for each collection is in parenthesis):

“Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP” refers to Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, 1906-1975 (Entry 17).

“Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP” refers to Records of the Office of the Solicitor, Records of Resettlement Administration Cases, 1935-1937 (Entry 113).

“Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP” refers to Records of the Office of the Solicitor, Records of Rural Rehabilitation Cases, 1937-1943 (Entry 101).

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I could not have completed this project without the help of dozens of researchers and research assistants at archives and libraries across the country. I must express my thanks to the people at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland; the National Archives Southeast Region at Morrow, Georgia; the Alabama Department of Archives and History; and the Mervyn H. Sterne Library in Birmingham, Alabama. I particularly appreciate the help and patience of Robert G. Richards, who helped me the first time I visited the Southeast Region Archives when I did not really know what I was doing or where I was going with this project. I also thank Elizabeth A. Boyne and Kathryn Coursey, who helped me obtain copies of records in Iowa and New York.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1941, sociologists Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid described one tenant family that had fallen down the so-called agricultural ladder. Seab Johnson sharecropped on land that once produced a hundred bales of cotton a season; working alone with a single mule, he could manage only two bales. The absentee landlord Seab worked for had gained the property after its previous owner fell into bankruptcy despite planting cotton everywhere he could, including removing the garden and most of trees around the house. The Johnsons had lived in a tenant cabin on a neighboring plantation until they found themselves unable to get credit. They had been lucky to move into what was formerly the home of a great planter, but veiled threats from their landlord left the husband and wife wondering where they could move next. Their son in Pittsburgh had trouble getting work, so the old man surely could not. Similarly, a daughter in Jacksonville was working hard and still falling behind. Their other children were all too poor to support their parents. Old and alone, the Johnsons hoped to stay in their current home in case one of them got hurt or sick, because the other could ring the bell until help came.<sup>1</sup>

The conditions of the rural poor, like the Johnsons, did not develop as a result of the Great Depression, though that economic catastrophe made matters worse. Rural poverty was an old problem in 1929, particularly in those regions characterized by tenancy and poor farming practices. Conditions were the worst in the South, which suffered from a debilitating mix of racial tension, one-crop farming, poverty, an imbalanced credit system, and tenancy. The Great

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur F. Raper and Ira de Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 3-17.

Depression worsened these problems but also brought them out into the open, creating political conditions that offered the hope for some improvement.

The New Deal, in general, failed to alleviate or in many cases even to adequately address the enormous problems of rural poverty in America. This failure resulted from a number of causes. One, obviously, was the sheer magnitude of the problem, not just among the rural poor but in the agricultural economy and in the United States as a whole; only so much could be done. Additionally, there were a great many people and organizations opposed, for political, economic, or ideological reasons, to government efforts to improve the lot of small farmers. Opponents had considerable strength in the early years of the New Deal, enough to expel the so-called liberal influence from the United States Department of Agriculture early in the New Deal. Although their relative power waned a bit during the middle of the 1930s, opponents proved strong enough to destroy the reform effort embodied by the Farm Security Administration when the opportunity arose during World War II. Finally, mistakes made by agricultural reformers proved fatal. This was particularly the case in the legislative and institutional origins of the programs and for the related problem of an inability to build sufficient political strength to weather the hard times that arrived in 1942.

This dissertation traces the political and administrative history of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and its predecessors, the New Deal agency most directly associated with eliminating rural poverty. In doing so, it argues that, because of both internal and external pressures, New Deal liberal thought (and action) about how to best address rural poverty evolved considerably throughout the 1930s. Early New Deal reform efforts varied widely, encompassing rural rehabilitation, land use reform, and back-to-the-land schemes bordering on the utopian. By 1937, the New Deal's approach to rural poverty had settled on the idea of rural rehabilitation, a

system of supervised credit and associated ideas that came to profoundly influence the entire FSA program. The New Deal, in most aspects, failed to consistently or adequately aid the poorest rural Americans, but by World War II the New Deal solution to rural poverty (as much as one can be said to have existed) was rural rehabilitation. This dissertation also shifts the historical emphasis to rural rehabilitation; while other FSA programs (in particular the resettlement program and the photography program) have received most of the praise and criticism since the New Deal, rural rehabilitation was by far the most important FSA program.

Additionally, this dissertation explores the efforts to remedy rural poverty, with an emphasis on farm security efforts (particularly rural rehabilitation) in the South, by looking at how the FSA's actual operating programs (rural rehabilitation, tenant-purchase, and resettlement) functioned. The FSA had a massive job in trying to solve the problems of rural poverty, and it did so with fairly limited resources and in an increasingly hostile political environment. Its modest success, in light of these handicaps, proves that the FSA had developed an effective program that could have ameliorated the enormous human cost of rural poverty, though not likely have solved it altogether. This is particularly the case for the South, where rural poverty and associated ills (such as poor tenancy practices) were the worst. The FSA's results also raise the question of what role the FSA might have played in the South's post-war agricultural revolution; the nation's poorest region went through a social and economic transformation of rural life which, generally speaking, benefitted the richest and largest farmers and left the poorest behind or even entirely eliminated their role in the rural economy.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that it is impossible to understand either element of the FSA's history – its political and administrative history or the successes and failures of its operating programs – without understanding the other. The functioning of individual programs at

the county or project level was hampered time and again by the administration at the top – the projects begun by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, for example, rarely went more than a few months without some new program-defining change in directions or upper administration. Then these failures, added to other problems with the Subsistence Homesteads and the general resettlement program, gave the Division of Subsistence Homesteads' successor, the Resettlement Administration (RA), a reputation for delay, incompetence, wastefulness, and bureaucracy that neither it nor its successor, the FSA, managed to shake. For an agency attempting to solve a difficult problem in the face of hostile opposition, such missteps proved insurmountable.

The administrative history of anti-rural poverty efforts during the New Deal deserves a brief explanation, as it played a large role in the FSA's operation and ultimate outcome. The history is convoluted. Between 1933 and 1946, two minor and three major organizational units were established to direct the rural rehabilitation, resettlement, and tenant purchase programs. The minor organizational units were the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, which was in the Department of the Interior between June 1933 and May 1935, and the Rural Rehabilitation Division, which was part of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration between April 1934 and June 1935. The larger units were the Resettlement Administration, which absorbed the previously mentioned two units and existed between April 1935 and August 1937 (changing status from an independent executive agency to a USDA administration in early 1937), its successor the Farm Security Administration, which existed between September 1937 and August 1946 in the USDA (though it bounced around in a number of wartime reorganizations of the Department), and its successor the Farmers Home Administration.

Such shifts of administration necessarily meant some contradiction or reversal in policy, and looking at these programs reflects some of the ironies of New Deal agricultural policy as



whole. New Dealers poured time, money and effort into improving production among both large and small producers while at the same time paying big producers to take land out of cultivation in order to reduce production and raise prices.<sup>2</sup> New Deal credit programs aided farmers in holding on to heavily mortgaged property, and homestead programs encouraged people to return to the farms and increase the farm labor population; at the same time the federal government was injecting capital into the agricultural market to encourage mechanization and efficiency – programs, in other words, that reduced the need for both farmers and farm laborers. In almost every case, when conflict arose among the interests of different groups or classes of farmers, the smaller and poorer farmers lost out, ultimately resulting in the destruction of the FSA in 1946.

This dissertation describes part of that journey. Chapter 1 considers the conditions of perhaps the poorest region in America, the rural South, prior to and at the beginning of the Great Depression, including the most important early New Deal agricultural program, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). In the South, tenancy, mono-crop agriculture, and the resulting poor agricultural techniques produced human misery and discontent. The New Deal's response to this, the AAA, generally worsened conditions for small farmers and particularly for tenants and sharecroppers, who often found themselves at a reduced status or even expelled from the land entirely.

Chapters 2 through 6 describe the origins of rural rehabilitation, resettlement, and the tenant purchase program, which collectively came to be known as “farm security,” and the various administrative changes and shifts they went through. Until the passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act in 1937, these efforts were something of an institutional mess, built on a variety of executive orders and with only the thinnest veneer of legislative sanction. From 1933

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<sup>2</sup> One example: government scientists developed a hybrid seed corn that improved yields by about 20% at the same time that the government was trying to reduce corn acreage. Donald C. Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture: The Growth of Federal Farm Aid* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1940), 124.

to 1935 the New Deal's rural anti-poverty efforts were a scattershot affair uncomfortably situated primarily in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Department of the Interior. Even when the Resettlement Administration consolidated the programs in 1935, it was as an independent executive agency. Only in 1937, after the RA's move to the USDA and the creation of the Farm Security Administration following the passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act, did the farm security program find a measure of stability.

Chapters 7 through 10 focus more closely at the operation of rural rehabilitation, resettlement, and tenant-purchase as mature, functioning programs. The most important of these by far was rural rehabilitation, which took up the largest share of the budget and personnel and which strongly influenced the operations of both the resettlement and tenancy programs. These programs operated primarily at the project or county level, so these chapters focus primarily on how farm security operated at the local level.

Chapter 11 looks at the FSA during World War II. Although by 1942 the FSA had developed effective anti-poverty programs, it had not built sufficient political strength to withstand a strong attack. This came during World War II, as anti-New Dealers and established agricultural interests, embodied by the American Farm Bureau Federation and its congressional allies, marked it for elimination. In 1942 and 1943, the FSA's opponents successfully reduced its appropriations to the point of impotency. The agency dragged on until 1946, when it was replaced by the Farmers Home Administration, effectively a rural credit agency intended mostly for veterans.

Understanding the FSA and its operations would be impossible without the work of previous scholars who have studied the FSA, rural rehabilitation, resettlement, and the New Deal-era USDA. Some of the most important, for the purposes of this work, were published

during the operation or very soon after the end of the FSA's program. Former FSA employee James Maddox's 1950 PhD dissertation, "The Farm Security Administration" and Olaf Larson's *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States* (1947) both provide a crucial view into the functioning of the FSA, especially the rural rehabilitation program. During World War II, Walter M. Kollmorgen, a Bureau of Agricultural Economics social scientist, and Paul W. Wager both wrote lengthy treatments of the homesteads around Birmingham.<sup>3</sup>

Among the most valuable secondary works on the FSA is Sidney Baldwin's *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (1968), the most comprehensive treatment of the FSA yet published. Baldwin uses the agency as a case study of the strengths and weaknesses of the American political system and the difficulties inherent in political efforts to address the poverty. Baldwin impressively untangles the confused administrative and political history of the various programs of the FSA. But this means that creating and changing goals, trying to build institutional legitimacy, and handling (or failing to handle) political and bureaucratic assaults become the primary focus of his work. As a result, Baldwin provides a rather limited description of FSA programs in action.<sup>4</sup>

Few other histories review the FSA in its entirety. A popular area of focus has been on the ideological and political background of the agency. Paul Mertz's *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (1978) primarily charts, as its title suggests, the shifts in ideological emphasis and political machinery within the federal government and the Roosevelt

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<sup>3</sup> Walter M. Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," in Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942); Olaf F. Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States* (Washington: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, 1947); James G. Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1950); Paul W. Wager, *One Foot on the Soil: A Study of Subsistence Homesteads in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: Bureau of Public Administration, University of Alabama, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963).

Administration about how to handle poverty in the rural South, focusing in large part on the hurdles put into place by its foes. Jess Gilbert studies the ideological make-up and background of the New Deal USDA in a number of different works, most notably in two articles, “Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture” (2000), and with Carolyn Howe in “Beyond ‘State vs. Society’: Theories of the State and New Deal Agricultural Policies” (1991).<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars have focused on a particular element of the FSA’s activity. Recent works by Michael Grant (*Down and Out on the Family Farm, Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945*, 2002) and Jarod Roll (*A Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South*, 2010) deal with specific difficulties that New Deal rural rehabilitation and resettlement programs faced and created. Their works put FSA programs within a larger context of what it meant to be a small farmer and farm laborer in the face of economic and political pressure toward mechanization and large-scale agribusiness. Michael R. Grey’s *New Deal Medicine: The Rural Health Programs of the Farm Security Administration* (1996) comprehensively details the rural rehabilitation’s efforts aimed at rural health. Brenda J. Taylor analyzes one particular element of supervision, the use of female home economists, in “The Farm Security Administration and Rural Families in the South: Home Economists, Nurses, and Farmers, 1933-1946” (2003). In *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal*

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<sup>5</sup> Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978); Jess Gilbert, “Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal,” *Agricultural History* 74.2 (2000): 162-80; Jess Gilbert and Carolyn C. Howe, “Beyond ‘State vs. Society’: Theories of the State and New Deal Agricultural Policies,” *American Sociological Review* 56.2 (April, 1991): 204-20. See also Jane Adams and D. Gorton, “This Land Ain’t My Land: The Eviction of Sharecroppers by the Farm Security Administration,” *Agricultural History* 83.3 (2009): 323-51; Lee J. Alston and Joseph P. Ferrie, “Resisting the Welfare State: Southern Opposition to the Farm Security Administration,” *Research in Economic History, Supplement 4, 1985: Emergence of the Modern Political Economy* (Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, Inc., 1985):83-120; Mary Summers, “The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74.2 (2000): 241-257.

(2007), Sarah T. Phillips considers the New Deal's efforts at conservation and land use reform.<sup>6</sup> And dozens, if not hundreds, of scholars have devoted works entirely or in part to the FSA's well-known photography section.<sup>7</sup>

The New Deal resettlement programs have received quite a bit of scholarly attention. In particular, Brian Q. Cannon's *Remaking the Agrarian Dream: New Deal Rural Resettlement in the Mountain West* (1996), Paul Conkin's *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (1959) and Donald Holley's *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (1975) deal more fully with the shortcomings of particular programs. Concentrating on a small group of resettlement communities allows for a deeper understanding of the ideology behind the programs and how well they functioned. Such focus, however, can overshadow the rehabilitation and tenancy programs, which were both considerably more important aspects of the FSA's work.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Johnston Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Michael R. Grey, *New Deal Medicine: The Rural Health Programs of the Farm Security Administration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, this Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Brenda J. Taylor, "The Farm Security Administration and Rural Families in the South" in *The New Deal and Beyond: Social Welfare in the South since 1930*, ed. Elna C. Green (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003): 30-46. See also Jess Gilbert, "A Usable Past: New Dealers Henry A. Wallace and M.L. Wilson Reclaim the American Agrarian Tradition" in *Rationality and the Liberal Spirit: A Festschrift Honoring Ira Lee Morgan*, edited by the Centenary College Department of English ([Shreveport, La.]: Centenary College of Louisiana, 1997): 134-142; Jess Gilbert and Alice O' Connor, "Leaving the Land Behind: Struggles for Land Reform in U.S. Federal Policy, 1933-1965," *Who Owns America?: Social Conflict over Property Rights*, edited by Harvey M. Jacobs (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998);

<sup>7</sup> Recent works include Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Michael Carlebach and Eugene F. Provenzo, *Farm Security Administration Photographs of Florida* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996); Birmingham Historical Society, *Digging out of the Great Depression: Federal Programs at Work in and around Birmingham* (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Historical Society, 2010); Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration*. Edited by Peter Bacon Hales (Boston: David R. Godine, 2009); Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003); Linda Gordon, "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist." *Journal of American History* 93.3 (December, 2006): 698-727; Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006); Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Q. Cannon, *Remaking the Agrarian Dream: New Deal Rural Resettlement in the Mountain West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959); Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The*

The pull of wartime defense industry and postwar urban prosperity and the push of mechanization resulted in a massive change in the structure of rural America during and especially after World War II. The vast majority of rural southerners left the farm. The remainder generally fell into two groups: a more prosperous set took advantage of mechanization and expansion, while the poorer lower classes, lacking the skills and capital necessary to take up the practices of modern agriculture, continued to scratch out a living just as impoverished southerners had done before World War II. The result was that more than ever, farming was a large-scale operation.<sup>9</sup> High levels of poverty persisted, particularly the rural South, which remained the nation's poorest region. After fifteen years of Depression and war, traditional rural American culture, as Pete Daniel described the end of the old cotton culture, "caved in, crushed by the untimely confluence of government intrusion and mechanization."<sup>10</sup> With the defeat of the FSA, the federal government gave up its efforts to alleviate the human costs of the changes it had done much to accelerate.

What role the FSA might have played in the postwar agricultural revolution is unclear. One might even argue that the FSA and its predecessors were, if anything, too conservative in trying to preserve an older style of agriculture based on small farms owned and operated by a single family. In a consumerist age, as Joseph Eaton wrote in 1943, not only did reformers have to consider "people who have always been poor or who got poorer during the depression," but

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*New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975). See also Joseph L. Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971); Edward C. Banfield, *Government Project* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1951); William R. Johnson, "Rural Rehabilitation in the New Deal: The Ropesville Project," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 79.3 (1976): 279-295; Cathy D. Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge, 1995), 122-31; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985), 239-298; Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington, Ky., 1984), 180-225; Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University, 1994), 88-173.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 156.

also the fact that “their demands and goals have expanded. The advance of technology has whetted their appetite for material, educational, recreational and artistic advantages which make even the best ‘good old homesteads’ appear to have been a primitive way of life.”<sup>11</sup> The rural poor were seemingly less able than ever to afford a comfortable lifestyle, just as the average conception of that lifestyle was expanding. Possibly the FSA might have been completely ineffective in the face of such enormous economic and cultural change.

This may be true, but to many in the government, it was not worth finding out. As FSA Assistant Administrator Robert Hudgens asked about a hypothetical rural rehabilitation client, “Is it desirable to keep him on the farm or is it not?”<sup>12</sup> The answer appeared to be that it was not, at least not desirable enough to make a concerted effort to keep farmers on the land or to ease the dispossessed’s transition into urban life. Small farmers produced a decreasing portion of American agricultural output, and poor southerners left behind by the shift to commercial agriculture remained on the outside of political, economic, and cultural influence. Whatever goals FSA reformers might have had for a different vision of the post-plantation rural South could not alter the course being set by the South’s economic and political elite and by economic and technological changes. Instead, in the South as in the rest of the country, agriculture became dominated by large-scale, industrial agribusiness that allowed little space for the small farmer to survive.

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph W. Eaton, *Exploring Tomorrow’s Agriculture: Co-Operative Group Farming – A Practical Program of Rural Rehabilitation* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1943), 3.

<sup>12</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 193, 194.

## PART I

### FINDING SOLUTIONS: THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF NEW DEAL ANTI-RURAL POVERTY POLICY

Rural poverty was a problem across the country, particularly in the South, when the Great Depression hit the United States in 1929. Agricultural incomes had been falling since the end of the World War I agricultural boom. The Great Depression made conditions even worse. Small farmers lost their farms, tenant farmers dropped into the ranks of farm laborers, and farm laborers found themselves without work. Chronic rural problems like overcrowding, bad tenancy practices, soil erosion, and social isolation intensified. The New Deal's response to these conditions left much to be desired. The most important program for agriculture was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. At best, the AAA provided little aid to the rural poor; at worst, it made things more difficult for small farmers, particularly tenants and laborers.

But many New Dealers saw an opportunity to improve the lives of rural Americans, in both the short and the long term. An idealized picture of rural life motivated many of their efforts. Relief administrators, in both state and federal governments, imagined the farm as inherently self-sustaining and believed that with just a little help farmers could get back to taking care of themselves. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration created the Rural Rehabilitation Division in the spring of 1934 to replace relief to struggling farmers with a program of expert help and government loans based on a home and farm management plan. Administrators hoped this would be not only more effective than relief, since it drew on the



inherent advantages of farm living, but also less expensive, as loans would be for a limited duration and be repaid.

At around the same time, the Department of Interior was at work on a series of back-to-the-land projects through its Division of Subsistence Homesteads. Motivated by people like Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead, Jr., the subsistence homesteads program was founded on the notion of the farm as an unassailable refuge against the modern industrial economy. More than simply rehabilitating existing farmers, as the rural rehabilitation program hoped, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads intended to improve the lot of small farmers and the masses of unemployed or underemployed industrial workers by demonstrating a new way to live. Uncertain when, if ever, the industrial economy would recover, proponents of subsistence homesteads wanted to combine modern farming techniques with part-time industrial employment at new, government-created communities around the country. These communities, supporters hoped, would become models for a new way of industrial-subsistence living.

Other federal agencies and departments during the early New Deal took a variety of different approaches to rural poverty – for example, the Farm Credit Administration looked to improve farmers' immediate financial situation with a debt adjustment program, while the Federal Emergency Relief Administration took a long-term approach with its program of land use reform. But all of these efforts, particularly the two most important for the direction of New Deal anti-rural poverty efforts (subsistence homesteads and rural rehabilitation) faced similar handicaps. Created in a period when the back-to-the-land movement was at its peak, early programs operated under the belief that rural life was inherently self-sustaining and could provide, if not a life of luxury, then at least a guarantee of food, shelter, and a comfortable

existence for any family willing to work hard for it. This led to unrealistic ideas about how successful, and how easily implemented, an anti-poverty program could be.

A second problem was that the federal anti-rural poverty effort lacked political, institutional, and ideological focus. This was true among the various programs (for example, a number of different agencies operated resettlement and community-building programs of some type) and within them (the success of rural rehabilitation varied greatly from state to state and even county to county, depending on local policy and personnel). By 1935 that set up was no longer viable, and New Dealers increasingly believed that a new approach was necessary. Reorganization resulted in a new agency, the Resettlement Administration; much of its work (and that of its successor, the Farm Security Administration) involved solving problems created by those earliest flaws in the New Deal's anti-rural poverty program.

## CHAPTER 1

### TENANCY, POVERTY, AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN THE RURAL SOUTH

Beyond the enormous degree of human misery, perhaps the outstanding feature of the rural South between the end of Reconstruction and World War II was an obstinate, self-destructive refusal by the region's leaders to recognize reality. Sometimes this sprang from crass self-interest, though it was no less destructive as a result. Sharecropper Arnold Berry, for example, described in the 1930s how as far back as he could remember, his bill at the plantation store was the same every year: \$234, the exact amount of his maximum allowed yearly credit. Berry reasonably decided, after realizing this, to use all the credit his landlord made available up to its limits, as he would be in debt for the same amount no matter what. Berry considered himself fairly lucky in this regard, as he was at least getting some cash income; friends on adjoining plantations received payment in scrip.<sup>1</sup>

As result, caught in an economic vise, tenants and sharecroppers like Berry generally had little motivation to produce a good crop or maintain their property. Interest rates were high, any gain in profit by the tenant would be wiped out by the store bill, and merchant or landlord credit remained easy to get no matter what, so tenants became discontented, produced bad crops, and took a leisurely view of making repayments.<sup>2</sup> Between the generally poor agricultural situation

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<sup>1</sup> Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Viking Press, 1937), 51-54. The story of the landlord who had to re-figure an account upon learning of an extra bale of cotton, in order to maintain a renter's debt, was so common in the post-Civil War South as to reach folkloric status. See Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and W. W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys 1933-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 8-11.

<sup>2</sup> T. K. Woofter Jr., *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation* (Washington, DC: Works Progress Administration, Division of Social Research, 1936), 62-63.

and the usurious interest rates, most tenants had little chance of making a consistent and sufficient income. “What is earned at the end of a given year is never to be depended on,” James Agee wrote, “and, even late in a season, is never predictable.”<sup>3</sup> Both landlords and tenants therefore had, in L. C. Gray’s words, “a disinclination to develop a long-time program for farm improvement.”<sup>4</sup>

A similar self-destructive streak can be seen in much of the pre-World War II South’s insistence, bordering on an obsession, on growing cotton, despite the fact that doing so was impoverishing generations of southerners. This was particularly true as the Great Depression hit: the 1932-33 cotton crop only sold for about a third of that for 1929-30. By that point, writer W. J. Cash noted, “Men everywhere walked in a kind of daze” as the old southern cotton economy died in front of them.<sup>5</sup> Still, southern farmers were committed to the idea of cotton as the key to prosperity, and many believed that one strong season would get them out of debt for good. Even as extension agents begged them not to grow cotton and explained that the world cotton market was glutted, even as they went hungry, southerners continued to plant cotton and “dream of selling their ‘white gold’ at twenty or twenty-five cents a pound. Then,” James Edward Rice wrote of tenant farmers’ intentions, “they can buy plenty of food and clothes.”<sup>6</sup> Ben Robertson’s memoir sums up the reverence for the plant and stubbornness for planting it he acquired growing up in South Carolina: “We always grew cotton for our living in our valleys – cotton that in spite

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<sup>3</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939; 1960), 118.

<sup>4</sup> L. C. Gray, “Our Major Agricultural Land Use Problems and Suggested Lines of Action,” in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 407. For example, those who did work hard might see any gains go to the benefit of the property’s owners, not for themselves. Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 146.

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941; Vintage Books, 1991), 362.

<sup>6</sup> James Edward Rice, “On a Tenant Farm,” *The New Republic*, April 15, 1931, 234.

of droughts and freshets and boll weevils still yields for us a bale to an acre. A heaven-given crop.”<sup>7</sup>

Rural poverty was a problem across the country well before the Great Depression.<sup>8</sup> It was perhaps worst in the South, particularly for small farmers and tenants. The concentration of poverty was greater in the South, and unlike the rural poverty in the rest of the country, the South had a long history of an impoverished agricultural caste, and its poverty had deep historical roots. While small farms, bad soil, rural overpopulation, and depleted resources were common throughout most areas of rural poverty, the South was plagued by a devotion to one-crop farming, an unbalanced credit system, racial problems, and high levels of tenancy, especially in the cotton-heavy Southeast. One agricultural economist wrote in 1937 that “consideration of farm tenure in the United States might well be made on the basis of contrasting situations, comparing the South with the rest of the country.”<sup>9</sup> Historian David M. Kennedy describes the South as characterized by “a relatively small number of baronial landlords [who] owned vast tracts of land” worked by tenants, renters, and laborers.<sup>10</sup>

The difficult conditions of the rural South, as in the rest of the nation, intensified when the Great Depression hit. The desperation and economic instability that dominated the lives of the rural poor came to characterize the whole of American agriculture. The New Deal’s earliest responses to this catastrophe, however, by and large held little hope for tenants and small farmers. If anything, the New Deal-era USDA’s first major response to the Depression, the

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Crowding and poorly handled irrigation troubled farmers in the arid Southwest. The Northwest plains suffered through drought and the over-cutting of timber. The cutover Lake States faced overpopulation in rural areas, depleted soils, and vast disappeared forests. Agricultural problems predated the Great Depression by years and, in some regions, by decades. Most American farmers simply did not make enough income to maintain an average standard of living. See Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture*, 2-27.

<sup>9</sup> Howard A. Turner, “Farm Tenancy Distribution and Trends in the United States,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 426.

<sup>10</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 195.

Agricultural Adjustment Administration, worsened conditions for the poorest farmers, particularly southern tenants. Its failures would give greater urgency to voices calling for the federal government to undertake new reform efforts aimed at helping the poorest American farmers.

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There were three major classes of renting in the South, all of which might mingle on the same plantation or even within the same family. Under sharecropping, the owner provided the land, home, fuel, tools, work stock, seed, half the fertilizer, and feed, while the tenant furnished labor and usually half the fertilizer; the tenant and landlord then split the crop in half.<sup>11</sup> Share renting meant the landlord provided the land, home, fuel, and a quarter or third of the fertilizer, while the tenant provided labor, work stock, tools, feed, seed, and the rest of the fertilizer. In that case, a third or quarter of the crop went to the landlord and the tenant got the rest. In cash renting, the landlord furnished the land, house, and fuel, taking in return a fixed amount of cash or lint cotton while tenant got everything else.<sup>12</sup> In 1930, about 1.1 million southern operators, about 44% of the total number of southern farmers, owned their farms. About 1.3 million southern farm operators were tenants of some kind.<sup>13</sup> About 646,000 of these, or 27% of all southern farm operators and 48% of all tenants, were sharecroppers.<sup>14</sup> Relatively few southern

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<sup>11</sup> Some scholars argue that it is more accurate to think of sharecroppers as a form of laborer, just one paid with part of the crop, and that recording croppers as tenants masks “that piling up at the foot of the tenure ladder” that was just as significant, if not more so, than the increase in the rate of renters and true tenants. See John D. Black and R. H. Allen, “The Growth of Farm Tenancy in the United States,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 51.3 (1937): 406-07; also Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 140-42.

<sup>12</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Works Progress Administration, *Farm Tenure Statistics in Southeastern States* [Birmingham: Works Progress Administration, 1938], 30-35. A statistically insignificant number (about 11,400 in 1930) were farm managers, most prominently in the black belt and citrus and vegetable regions of Florida.

<sup>14</sup> Works Progress Administration, *Farm Tenants in the Southeast, 1920-1935* [Birmingham: Works Progress Administration, 1938], 5-6.

farmers (about 238,000 in the census-defined South in 1930, up from 182,000 in 1925) were cash tenants, the highest grade of tenant.<sup>15</sup>

As a practical matter, the difference between a sharecropper and a share-renter did not have much real impact except for how a landlord could enforce a claim and the ease with which that could be done. In either case, tenants found themselves at a legal disadvantage in any contest with their landlords; local government and landlords operated under the assumption, in attorney A. B. Book's words, that tenants of all kinds were "a class which would default in its obligations if the slightest opportunity existed."<sup>16</sup>

Tenancy knew no color line. The growth of the number of white tenants in the cotton South had actually increased more than had the growth rate of tenancy overall. Between 1920 and 1930, the number of white tenants in the cotton states increased by 200,000 families, about a million people; the number of African-American tenant families decreased by about 2,000 due to urbanization.<sup>17</sup> Social scientists went out of their way to point out the interracial nature of tenancy, to overcome the still-widespread belief that cotton picking was mostly a black job. Just as American agriculture began to decline in the 1920s, scholars struggled to dispel the notion that southern farm tenancy was "mainly a black man's problem."<sup>18</sup> Still, in the years leading up to and during the Great Depression, racial conceptions of tenancy remained, despite the fact that it had been decades since southern tenants had been majority black. This misconception had a practical impact on policy and public opinion, as potential reform efforts ran into hostile defenses of white supremacy and apathetic disregard for black poverty. As sociologist Charles S.

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *15<sup>th</sup> Census of Agriculture, 1930* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1932), vol. 3, *Type of Farm*, part 2, *The Southern States*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> A. B. Book, "A Note on the Legal Status of Share-Tenants and Share-Croppers in the South," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 541.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> E. C. Branson, "Farm Tenancy in the Cotton Belt: How Farm Tenants Live," *Journal of Social Forces* 1.3 (1923): 213. Tenancy was not "confined to Negroes, as was often supposed." David Eugene Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 2

Johnson put it, “it has been impossible to bring about any change, even to get the poor white workers to take a stand, since any movement for reform is immediately confused with the race issue.”<sup>19</sup> Even those who had little interest in improving the position of black tenants had to point this out: Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead assured a correspondent that “our primary interest is in the white tenants, and it may surprise you to know that a majority of the farm tenants in Alabama are white.”<sup>20</sup>

Tenancy rates continued to grow in large part due to the South’s tendency toward mono-crop agriculture, mostly cotton but also tobacco and rice, as southern agriculturalists had recognized for decades prior to the Great Depression. Southerners had depended on world agricultural markets (again, especially cotton) for income since before the Civil War. Further, the South lacked the urban markets that made fruit, vegetable, and dairy farming so profitable in other regions. A shortage of transportation and storage facilities further discouraged diversification.<sup>21</sup>

The cotton market that nearly a quarter of southern families depended on for survival was a gamble, and it was not a good bet. Only once in the previous decade had the price of cotton changed less than 10% between harvests.<sup>22</sup> Southern cotton production added billions to the world markets, but cotton farmers were among the poorest of any large producers in America. This was particularly true if one looked beyond the big producers. Cotton tenants lived at or below subsistence levels. Worse, cotton prices fluctuated wildly; sociologist Rupert Vance called

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> John H. Bankhead to J. L. Edwards, [early December 1936?], Folder 1, Box 5, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>21</sup> George C. Osbourne, “The Southern Agricultural Press and Some Significant Rural Problems, 1900-1940,” *Agricultural History* 29.3 (1955): 115-18; Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 36-37.

<sup>22</sup> National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938), 45.



cotton “the humpty dumpty of commodity crops.”<sup>23</sup> The Great Depression accentuated and aggravated the problems, but it did not create them.<sup>24</sup>

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Farm life is difficult, and for tenant farmers in the first decades of the twentieth century, it was especially so. For the average farmer in 1930, life had not changed very much over the preceding five or so decades. Most farmers still used animal power. Mechanical improvements like combined reapers and threshers introduced during the nineteenth century had reduced the need for labor in some fields, but in 1930 only a small portion of southern farmers used such implements. Tractors, which would rapidly expand farm productivity in the 1930s and after, were neither small nor cheap enough for most southern farmers to consider using until the late 1920s or after, a period in which most producers found themselves in no position to make outlays for expensive new equipment.<sup>25</sup>

The limited evolution of farming practice was particularly noteworthy. Sociologists Arthur F. Raper and Ira D. Reid were exaggerating, but not by much, when they wrote that “field tools used by the typical tenant farmer would not seem strange to Moses and Hammurabi.”<sup>26</sup> Or, as Paul Conkin observes less hyperbolically, life “on the farm in 1930 was closer to that of 1830 than 1960.”<sup>27</sup> In growing and picking cotton, tenants used one-horse gears, single stock plows, long-handled hoes, double blade axes, and sacks. While mechanization had begun to increase production in parts of the South, especially in the Southwest, tradition and poverty meant that most southern tenant farmers in, say, 1925 used the same farming methods as their parents and

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<sup>23</sup> Rupert B. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 108.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture Since 1929* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 4-19.

<sup>26</sup> Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 49.

grandparents. In their study of one small southern farming community in the 1930s, rural sociologists Paul W. Terry and Verner M. Sims found only three tractors, ten trucks, and two stationary engines among 189 farm families.<sup>28</sup>

Farming was a family affair; 70% of children aged 10-15 in the United States who were gainfully employed in 1930 did agricultural work.<sup>29</sup> Despite having to raise their children, cook, wash, sew, clean, tend the garden, and other housekeeping obligations, poor farm women also had work in the fields. Depending on the number and age of other members of the family, on cotton farms women did almost a full-time job in the fields during hoeing, chopping, and picking times, in addition to their responsibilities in the home. Similarly, on tobacco farms, women worked in particular during the time-sensitive tasks of priming, stringing, and curing tobacco. Women tended to prefer field work by a large margin, where social interaction was more common and where one could actually see the end of a day's work (as opposed to the never-ending demands for cooking, cleaning, and similar tasks). Age, poor health, and child care tended to change women's minds about field work, or force them to stay at home. Farm life for women, no matter what the crop, was, in Melissa Walker's words, "dominated by ceaseless labor."<sup>30</sup>

For all their hard work, farmers in general and tenants in particular did not make very much money. Debt and credit were necessary lifelines for most southern tenant farmers (and for impoverished farmers across the country) because they had such low incomes. By the 1930s,

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<sup>28</sup> Paul W. Terry and Verner M. Sims, *They Live on the Land: Life in an Open-Country Southern Community* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1940; 1993), 46.

<sup>29</sup> Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler, and E. L. Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture*, Social Research Report No. 8 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and Bureau of Agricultural Economics Cooperating, 1938), 26.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Jarman Hagood, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939; First Greenwood Reprinting, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 77-91. See also Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 20-24, 21 (quote).

cotton had gone, in the words of a Tennessee Extension Service administrator, from a “cash crop” to a “credit crop.” Almost the entire agricultural credit system of the cotton states had been bent toward cotton. Growing cotton on credit meant planting the maximum amount, no matter how the market went, because of the need to pay off the crop. Instead of responding rationally to low prices (by reducing production), the need to repay cotton loans demanded planting even more.<sup>31</sup> The unsurprising result was overproduction. In 1931, for example, southern cotton farmers produced a 16 million bale crop to go along with a 10 million bale carryover from the year before, a total of 26 million bales that was more than twice the usual demand.<sup>32</sup>

Most tenant farmers fell well below any expectations for a comfortable or living wage. A 1937 poll by George Gallup’s American Institute of Public Opinion found that, nationally, Americans believed that \$1,560 a year was necessary for “decency,” with \$1,950 as a “Comfort Standard.”<sup>33</sup> One USDA report estimated that if a farm family’s income was below \$1000 in 1938, then about 60% of its budget went to food alone, and about 93% to purely physical needs like clothing and shelter, excluding health care costs. At \$600, a family could not come close to covering food, clothing, and shelter. Nationally, about half of all farm families had an income below \$1000, almost a third below \$600, and 15% below \$400.<sup>34</sup> The South had among the lowest farm incomes in the country. In one study of medium and large southern plantations, the average yearly net income of laborers was \$180, croppers \$312, and tenants \$417, for a total

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<sup>31</sup> C. E. Brehm, “Making Cotton a Cash Crop Instead of a Credit Crop,” *Extension Service Review* 2.2 (1931): 27.

<sup>32</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 40-41.

<sup>33</sup> *American Institute of Public Opinion*, July 11, 1937. Approximately half the U.S. lived below this “decency” standard.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, Wheeler, Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture*, 8-9. On Depression-era rural poverty in the North, one first-hand account is Louise V. Armstrong, *We Too Are the People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938; New York: Arno Press, 1971).

average of \$309. But subtracting advances for sustenance throughout the year, the cash income average was only \$122 for croppers and \$202 for tenants.<sup>35</sup>

These low incomes were necessary for the southern tenant system to survive; to maintain them (and the resulting dependence on credit), landlords and merchants used a combination of economic and social means. Woofter described tenancy in the South as “not only a method of making a living but also a way of living.”<sup>36</sup> Tenants (and landlords) had both short and long term debts. Short-term debts were treated as essentially advances on the season’s income. Even in good years, a large number of tenants failed to pay back their advances, and some owners and merchants encouraged or even required tenants to spend whatever cash they did at settling time. More debt resulted from the “furnish” – additional food, feed, machinery, and other farming necessities, provided by the landlord and to be repaid from the tenant’s share of the crops. A tenant often was unaware of what he was being charged even in a rationed system. But tenants were frequently in such bad shape that they had no choice but to take credit on any terms. Annual interest was high – 10% on cash advances, 20-25% on goods, in part because the average duration of all loans was for the growing season, only about six months. The practice for most merchants was to provide farmers credit and charge as high an interest as possible without completely crushing the debtor. The crop was the lien, and it was turned over to the creditor, who kept the books and set the interest, for disposal. Even if a creditor was fair, the tenant might still be in debt; rarely did a tenant ever get a detailed statement of debts and credits.<sup>37</sup> Living in debt was the rule for tenants: in describing their habits purchasing groceries and supplies, one third of families in Gorgas, Alabama, reported that they never paid cash, but bought only on credit, to be

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<sup>35</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 83-86. Tenant income was also, as in the rest of the South, irregular: two-thirds of the yearly income came after selling crops.

<sup>36</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 49-62; Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 38-39; Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 26-29.

paid up with their landlord when cotton was sold.<sup>38</sup> As a result, possible gains were minimal; possible losses were catastrophic. Alabama farmer Ned Cobb described seeing his father twice “stripped of everything he had had [...] and he never did prosper none after that.”<sup>39</sup>

Even defenders of the system of sharecropping, like William Percy, conceded that it offered “an unusual opportunity to rob without detection of punishment.”<sup>40</sup> A tenant could not, for example, argue whether or not his landlord had fairly calculated his debt at the end of the season, as doing so would be construed as a criticism of, or even an attack on, one’s social betters. Even when tenants and owners were in largely the same economic state, southerners saw landholding itself as worthy of respect. During the Depression, for example, while less than half of northern tenants believed that landowners got more respect than did tenants, more than three-quarters of southern tenants believed they did.<sup>41</sup>

In part landlords could maintain this system because relations between southern landlords and tenants were almost entirely informal. Detailed agreements were not usually worked out and contracts were almost always of the oral or “handshake” variety. The landlord usually kept any records of advances and repayments. Even if the sharecropper had maintained such records, few would have been willing to challenge the landlord. Tenants did not even have to threaten their landlords directly to find themselves in trouble; simply making too much money, and looking too successful, would bring down the wrath of the landlords and their allies in local government. If

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<sup>38</sup> Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 282. Percy wrote that “Share-cropping is one of the best systems ever devised to give security and a chance for profit to the simple and the unskilled.”

<sup>41</sup> E. A. Schuler, *Social Status and Farm Tenure – Attitudes and Social Conditions of Corn Belt and Cotton Belt Farmers*, Social Research Report No. 4 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, the Farm Security Administration, and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Cooperating, 1938), 9.

they did manage to save any money, tenants might find that local landlords would refuse to sign a lease the next season.<sup>42</sup>

At its worst, the combination of tenancy's legal structure, racial mores, and customs favoring big landlords and planters led to a system of debt peonage not far removed from slavery. The poorest sharecroppers who fell into debt or onto the wrong side of local planters or authorities dropped into a place where, through contract or simple intimidation, they were forced to continue working in a particular place to pay off impossible debts. Mostly black, these poor southerners found themselves trapped by debt and opposed by the entirety of the formal and informal power structure in rural southern communities. Ned Cobb remembered that his father "wasn't a slave but he lived like one. Because he had to take what the white people gived to get along."<sup>43</sup> Cobb may have thought less of his father for accepting it, but challenging the system meant arrest (as Cobb himself discovered), beatings, and possibly death, particularly for black tenants and sharecroppers.

Just as the system encouraged many of the supposed class sins of tenants, so did it create and exacerbate the worst tendencies of creditors.<sup>44</sup> Big land owners too claimed that they "hated bankers" and "hated merchants" because "they had robbed us."<sup>45</sup> They struggled to make mortgage payments and purchase manufactured goods. Landlords, merchants, and planters by the time of Great Depression had become trapped in a system of their own creation. Planters

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<sup>42</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 11; H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union* (1979; paperback edition, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 22-23; Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 120-23; Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 26.

<sup>43</sup> Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 33; A form of near-slavery was particularly common on cotton plantations in the southern backcountry, where big planters and their allies in local government operated almost without regard to outside law or authority. The problem still existed during the Great Depression, and the Justice Department continued to investigate (however ineffectively) debt peonage cases for decades after World War II. See Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), especially 19-42 and 170-92; Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Rural Negro* (Washington, DC: The Association for the Study of Negro life and History, Inc., 1930), 67-88.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 30-31.

<sup>45</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 82.

themselves by keeping their workers so dependent. If they had any property, the former tenants could help share the financial risk and work more efficiently. But without credit, votes, and friends in court, tenants found security through debt, which made them valuable in a small way. Farm tenants were costly because they were inefficient, and they were inefficient because landlords and planters ensured they had neither the capacity nor the reason to be better workers.<sup>46</sup>

The Depression struck landlords and merchants almost as hard as it did tenants. As Edwin Embree pointed out, because of the Depression one could no longer defend southern tenancy even on the grounds that only laborers suffered. Hardships for the landlords and merchants generally trickled down, meaning hardships for their tenants and debtors as well. H. L. Mitchell, one of the founders of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), dealt with a landlord in Cross County, Arkansas, named C. H. Dibble, who had been forced against his will to evict twenty-one sharecropping families from his land; word had reached the local bankers that Dibble was in negotiations to sign a contract with the STFU. If he had refused to evict the tenants that bankers saw as troublemakers, then no ginner would accept his cotton; the bank even threatened to foreclose on his mortgage. Nor did merchant or landlord status protect a grower from economic downturns; Robert Hudgens reported that in a community he visited while a regional director with the Resettlement Administration, all of the merchants had gone bankrupt, despite charging 30-50% interest to tenants. The Depression ruined even some of those creditors who charged the outrageous fees and wielded great power.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> T. Roy Reid, "Public Assistant to Low-Income Farmers of the South," *Journal of Farm Economics* 21.1 (1939): 188 (however, crop lien laws protected landlords and merchants at the expense of tenants (and, essentially, everyone else)); Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 36-37.

<sup>47</sup> Edwin R. Embree, "Southern Farm Tenancy: The Way Out of Its Evils," *Survey Graphic* 25.3 (1936): 152. See also House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 67; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 142-43; Robert W. Hudgens, "Rural Problems – The Present Situation in the South," [March 9, 1937], Folder "161-Speeches," Box 11, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP, 2.

However much planters and merchants complained, the situation was the worst for the already impoverished tenants and poor farmers of the South. Poor housing conditions were perhaps the most obvious sign, particularly as the Depression wore on. In 1938, some four million southern families, accounting for about half the total number of families in the South, needed to be rehoused.<sup>48</sup> The President's Special Committee on Tenancy reported that many southern homes were "of poor construction, out of alinement, weather-beaten, and unsightly [...]. Often the roofs are leaky. The surroundings of such houses are bleak and unattractive."<sup>49</sup> Charles Johnson was blunter: "The drab ugliness of tenant houses might be condoned if they were comfortable."<sup>50</sup> One observer described the average tenant home as "a mere shell."<sup>51</sup> The Farm Security Administration found that most client houses were in such poor shape that it was cheaper to build new ones than to try to repair the old ones.<sup>52</sup>

A 1938 study of housing found that about half of southern white farmers lived in painted frame houses, and the other half in unpainted ones; 86% of black farmers lived in unpainted frame houses. In comparison, 89% of northern white farmers lived in painted frame houses, and another 5% in brick houses. This was not simply a matter of regional preference, either – only 4% of southern white farmers and 5% of black farmers reported that they would prefer to live in unpainted frame houses.<sup>53</sup> Stucco, brick, stone, or concrete dwellings were almost unknown

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<sup>48</sup> National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy: The Report of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1937), 7-8.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> A. E. Parkins, "Southern Agriculture," *Culture in the South*, ed. W. T. Couch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 67. James Agee used the same word a few years later; Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 207.

<sup>52</sup> Will W. Alexander, "The Problem of Rural Housing," February 15, 1939, Folder "85-163-01 Articles & press releases, July, 1938 thru December, 1938," Box 2, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>53</sup> Schuler, *Social Status and Farm Tenure*, 54.



among southerners in the 1930s, and the homes lacked even the most basic amenities. Only 30% of tenant homes had window screens, for example.<sup>54</sup>

The situation inside the home was sometimes even worse. One contemporary description of tenant living conditions in tobacco country found homes that, outwardly, looked modest but livable, with a “respectable mien.” Inside, however, the floor sloped such that one side of the bed had to be propped six inches higher than the other. Newspaper tacked onto the wall failed to prevent mud from crumbling from exposed logs. Repairs to the house made it impossible to close the window.<sup>55</sup> Most rural homes also lacked electricity. No southern state, and only four states nationwide, saw more than half of farms receiving central station electricity in 1935. Florida had the highest percentage among southern states, at 7.8%; in Mississippi the number was less than 1% of all farms. Compared to a national average of 34%, only 13.7% of southern homes had a telephone in 1930.<sup>56</sup> Farmers in the cotton South also lived in primitive sanitary conditions; a 1934 study found that more than two thirds of southern farmers had unimproved outhouses. One in five white farm owners (economically, the best off) lacked any sanitary facilities at all; the number was almost one in three for black tenants. Only 4.6% of white owners, 1% of white tenants, .2% of black owners, and .1% of black tenants had indoor flush toilets.<sup>57</sup> Extensive overcrowding meant the problem was even worse than it appeared.<sup>58</sup>

All of this combined for housing of very little worth. Home values in 1930 for the southeastern cotton states were lower than those for any other geographic region. In 1930, the

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<sup>54</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 97-98.

<sup>55</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> Morris Llewellyn Cooke, “Electricity Goes to the Country,” *Survey Graphic* 25.9 (1936): 510; *15<sup>th</sup> Census of Agriculture, 1930*, vol. 2, *Reports by States*, part 2, *The Southern States*, 56-57.

<sup>57</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 101. The South was much worse off, with regards to sanitation, than was the rest of the country, even in urban areas with relatively better economic conditions. Twice as high a percentage (26%) of southern city or town households lacked indoor flush toilets as did the 13% of city and town households in the country as a whole. See National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 6.

value of farm operator dwellings in the census-defined South was \$623, compared to \$1,316 for the West and \$1,723 for the North. Only one non-southern state, New Mexico at \$526, had an average so low, and if Oklahoma (at \$859) is included among the southern states, no other non-southern state had an average farm home value below \$900.<sup>59</sup>

The average southern tenant farmer, then, lived in an unpainted frame house with two or three rooms, lacking both indoor plumbing and electricity. Roofs were galvanized iron or wood shingles. The average house could not, in any meaningful sense, be considered weather-proofed. A wooden stove in the kitchen provided heat. The windows had neither glass nor screens.<sup>60</sup>

Despite living on abundant land in generally good growing areas, southern tenants and sharecroppers in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century had the worst diets of probably any large group in America. One 1941 FSA report asserted that even among their non-relief rural clients, more than half had inadequate diets.<sup>61</sup> Devotion to cotton meant few or no food crops, which were often discouraged by landlords. Strikingly, tenants had to spend as much money on food in the summer, when a vegetable garden would be most productive, as they did throughout the rest of the year. Tenants instead purchased and ate the three Ms: meat (fat salt pork), meal (usually corn but sometimes wheat), and molasses. Even this may overestimate the variety of a tenant's diet throughout the year; for example, pork is difficult to store, and it may have been eaten almost all at once, during slaughter in the late fall and early winter. Some of the poorest rural southerners apparently ate virtually no vegetables in the summer and winter. Saying that tenants ate a great deal of wheat bread or cornbread may conjure up images of hot, fluffy and fresh loaves filling the house with the smell of hot toast; as often, especially for the poorest

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<sup>59</sup>15<sup>th</sup> *Census of Agriculture, 1930*, vol. 4, *General Report, Statistics by Subjects*, 40, 60.

<sup>60</sup> A long consideration of an average tenant house can be found in Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 125-220.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 33.

sharecroppers, the bread was heavy and mealy, cooked every few days and consumed cold and crumbling.<sup>62</sup> Rural southerners generally had enough to eat, but they lacked the variety necessary for healthy living: One woman recalled that her average breakfast was cornbread and syrup, and her average lunch was pancakes made out of cornbread.<sup>63</sup>

Clothing for tenants was generally purchased once a year, at settling time if cash was available. Often the lack of clothing kept kids out of school and adults out of church or other public gatherings.<sup>64</sup> The President's Committee on Tenancy neatly summed up the physical and social aspects of tenant life, saying, "Clothing is often scarcely sufficient to afford protection to the body, much less to help maintain self-respect."<sup>65</sup> For men, the general work uniform was ready-made denim overalls (perhaps three sets), a work shirt, ordinary cheap work shoes or bare feet, and some kind of hat. The popular conception was of a straw farmers' hat, but James Agee reported that of the three tenant families he met, none of the men wore such hats, favoring workmen's caps or felt hats. Rural tenant men often had cheap suits or trousers and dress shirts for the weekends. Women day-to-day usually wore home-made cotton dresses with floral prints (owning perhaps two to five, with one or a couple nicer ones saved for special occasions and the weekends), made from either purchased materials or whatever was available – perhaps older clothes or even fertilizer sacks. For shoes, they wore cast-offs, light slippers, or no shoes at all. Children dressed much the same as their parents but less often had shoes.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 16-17; Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 101-03; Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 100-02; Woodson, *The Rural Negro*, 4-5; Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South: A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 423-33.

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *Remembering the Great Depression in the Rural South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>64</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 100.

<sup>65</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 272-73; for a general discussion of clothing, see 257-86.

As was often true for clothing, usually tenants made household items at home or went without. Poor rural southerners remained almost entirely outside the national economy. As the National Emergency Council Report stated, given their extremely low incomes, “It is hardly surprising, therefore, that such ordinary items as automobiles, radios, and books are relatively rare in many southern country areas.”<sup>67</sup> Southerners, particularly tenants, simply could not afford consumer goods. Southern farmers and tenants needed more money for shoes and food and housing before they could consider electricity or running water, much less automobiles or manufactured consumer goods. The absence of such possessions hurt the social lives of tenants as well, in ways both obvious and less so. Families lacked enough knives, forks, and plates to set a simple table for the family and a guest, much less several. Tenants not only lacked the clothes to go to church; they lacked the money to make an offering or the furnishings to invite the preachers into their homes.<sup>68</sup>

Unsurprisingly, bad diets, bad sanitation, and a low standard of living led to bad health. The South as a whole had inferior medical care compared to that of the rest of the country. Rupert Vance summarized conditions in the mid-1930s; “the South is too rural, too sparsely settled, and too poor to possess the best medical facilities.”<sup>69</sup> Much of this was related to the conditions of tenancy: pellagra and other nutritional diseases were common, the result of a failure to produce enough vegetables for home consumption in favor of cotton production. Other shortcomings were common to all rural areas. As O. V. Wells wrote in 1940, for Americans living in rural areas and small towns, medical care, “measured in terms of number and character of doctors, dentists, and nurses and the hospital space in relation to population,” was “in general

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<sup>67</sup> National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 376.

definitely inferior to facilities available in larger towns and cities.”<sup>70</sup> Farmers had access to fewer, and less qualified, doctors, nurses, and dentists than did urban workers.

And simple poverty also caused health problems. Part of the reason that tenant income and production were so low was health-related, creating an ugly cycle. Southerners were too poor for screens to stop mosquitoes or the medicine to treat malaria. In 1938, the South had about two million cases of malaria.<sup>71</sup> As a result, malaria “reduced the industrial output of the South one-third,” according to the National Emergency Council estimate; as “for medical schools, the South does not have the facilities to educate sufficient doctors for its own needs.”<sup>72</sup> One observer noted that it was easier for a tenant to find a veterinarian in the South than a doctor.<sup>73</sup>

The conditions of childbirth were often nightmarish. In some cases, dirty or old quilts and cloths were collected because they could be thrown away or used to avoid staining expensive new clothes or mattresses. Only boiling water was available on hand as an immediate antiseptic, although some poor families did have Lysol. Doctors and midwives were rare. Lacerations, infections, and other serious conditions resulted. Miscarriages were sometimes even more dangerous, as they happened without warning and thus without anyone nearby to help. Unsurprisingly, attitudes toward childbearing were ambivalent; in general, poor mothers were proud of the children they had had, but hoped to avoid future pregnancies. Farm women, at least, approved of contraceptives, even if most did not use them regularly or use the more effective methods.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> O. V. Wells, “Agriculture Today: An Appraisal of the Agricultural Problem,” in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 388.

<sup>71</sup> Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 29-30, 27.

<sup>73</sup> Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 108-27

Contributing to the health problems was the lack of medical knowledge. When poor families had little or no access to doctors or hospitals, patent medicines, home herbal remedies, or folk magic had to do. Turpentine and castor oil were particularly common, used to treat almost any malady. As a result, in many cases the rural poor simply had to live with painful and often debilitating diseases. Chronic illness was common, as were serious handicaps.<sup>75</sup> At any given time, perhaps one in ten rural southerners in, say, 1930 were permanently disabled or too acutely ill to get about normally. Another large portion of the population had some chronic or manageable affliction.

Since southerners were so poor, schools and other public services were grossly inadequate. In one study, a third of adults in a thousand southern farm families were functionally illiterate. Rural southern children received less education, of lower quality, with fewer going to school, and for less time a year, than children elsewhere in the country. The situation was even worse for black southerners.<sup>76</sup> Southern schools failed to live up to national educational standards, as one study of an Alabama county in the mid-1930s demonstrated. Using the Strayer-Englehart rating, which determined the values of a school's physical infrastructure, school buildings in Depression-era Coffee County, Alabama, had an average score of 256 out of a possible 1000. It would not even be economically feasible to convert the current structures into useful buildings (for comparison, a school scoring above 400 might still only be a frame building with no artificial light, no drinking fountains, and with outdoor toilets; it was recommended that schools scoring below 200 be abandoned).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 192-96; Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 110-27.

<sup>76</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 125-28.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Shafer, *A Basis for Social Planning in Coffee County, Alabama*, Social Research Report, No. 6 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Farm Agriculture, the Farm Security Administration, and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Cooperating, 1937), 28-29.

Even the better schools in the rural South were substandard. In Gorgas, Alabama, white residents were proud of their high school, perhaps the most substantial structure in the entire community. But it was poorly laid-out and lacked teaching materials such as maps, globes, and dictionaries. The high school science lab failed to meet even the low requirements set by the Alabama Department of Education. Pay was so low that teachers were always looking for other jobs, despite the fact that they were among the highest paid teachers in any rural schools in Alabama, earning around \$60-70 per school month. African-American students in the community had only a poorly built one-room wooden schoolhouse, heated by an unjacketed wood stove. That school offered courses only for the first four grades.<sup>78</sup>

Terry and Sims' study of Gorgas, Alabama, in the mid-1930s shows how politics shaped rural life. Elections were often a source of excitement in the small rural community; the months-long campaigns, with their speeches and rallies, greatly interested the often-bored citizens. But of the 330 eligible white householders, only 37% qualified to vote, and 81% of these were either landowners or their related tenants. No qualified black voters existed. The yearly poll tax of \$1.50 per person (\$3.00 if both a husband and wife wanted to vote) was economically out of reach for many residents, and the tax accumulated so that one could not vote unless the entire amount was paid. Even for those who could vote, the process itself was intimidating. In Gorgas, there were 22 candidates for the 9 county offices; overall there were 71 candidates seeking 30 positions. The ballot with all the names and offices printed was over two feet long. Further, while the state supposedly had a secret ballot, no voter could be sure it would remain so.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 189-95, 210-11.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-78. See also National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 23. On the poll tax, see V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 578-618. Key estimated that the poll tax eliminated 5-10% of white voters in most southern states.

This was the backbone of the “Solid South”: counties where almost no blacks and few whites voted. But even where white tenants formed a majority, they had little influence on local government. The courts, relief agencies, and other government functions were controlled by planters – the tendency of relief agencies to quit giving relief during cotton-picking season did not originate during the Depression. The result, as V. O. Key wrote in 1949, was that “electoral apathy in the South generally assumes colossal proportions.”<sup>80</sup>

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The term “agricultural ladder” came into popularity in the 1910s and 1920s, although it reflects a much older conception of agricultural life as a series of steps whereby a farmer moves from the bottom of the farming hierarchy, through hard work and native intelligence, to the top. A 1919 description identified four rungs. In the first, the unpaid laborer works, usually on a family farm, to learn the basics of farm life. On the second rung was the hired laborer; on the third, the tenant farmer; finally, the owner stood at the top on the fourth rung.<sup>81</sup>

With the decline in southern agricultural fortunes during the previous decades, the agricultural ladder had become an agricultural slide – 60% of southern farm laborers reported that their current status as laborer was somewhere below their highest previous status attainment. For black farmers the numbers were particularly bad; some 60% of black farm laborers by the mid-1930s had started farming somewhere higher on the agricultural ladder than where they currently stood.<sup>82</sup> The Great Depression made a difficult situation even worse, and the best

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<sup>80</sup> Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 504. Key’s description bears fuller quotation: “Absence of presidential contest, the nature of suffrage restrictions, and Negro disenfranchisement result in a low turnout of voters. The habit of nonvoting grows and the electorate by custom becomes limited” (508). To this, in rural areas dominated by tenancy, one could add the influence (direct and indirect) and the landlord-merchant monopoly on political and economic power.

<sup>81</sup> W. J. Spillman, “The Agricultural Ladder,” *The American Economic Review* 9.1 Supplement (1919): 170; Olaf F. Larson and Julie N. Zimmerman, *Sociology in Agriculture: The Galpin-Taylor Years in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1919-1953* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 149.

<sup>82</sup> Schuler, *Social Status and Farm Tenure*, 108-112.



tenants struggled. One farming family with “an excellent reputation” locally was forced in 1934 to live in a tobacco barn; even this meager housing was only temporary.<sup>83</sup> Agricultural economist William T. Ham pointed out that whatever the overall picture of farm labor, “it is clear that there has been a piling up of farm laborers at the base of the tenure structure.”<sup>84</sup> Many more had fallen off the ladder altogether. In 1934, some 1.7 million rural families, making up somewhere between 6.5 and 7 million people, were on some form of relief. Many of these were residents of small towns, or were families in which the primary breadwinner was dead or unable to provide, but the large majority were families of farmers, tenants, sharecroppers, and rural laborers who could not make a living.<sup>85</sup>

Government policies did not always improve things for tenants. The impact of the Agricultural Adjustment Act is the most obvious example. Government loans, based on prices, went to landlords, not tenants, who had to request loans from landlords at the usual rate. The various Debt Reconciliation Commissions took their time in getting landlords to scale debts from previous seasons, despite the fact that landowners had their own debts scaled. “It is but the blunt truth,” rural sociologists noted in 1935, “to say that under the present system the landowner is more and more protected from risk by government activity, while the tenant is left open to risks on every side.”<sup>86</sup>

With a reduced need for their labor, either due to government programs or simply the bad economy, tenants had unappealing options. They could work on farms too small to be profitable. They could become casual farm laborers, which meant a decline in status and income. Tenants

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<sup>83</sup> Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, February 14, 1934, in Lorena Hickock, *One Third of a Nation*, ed. Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 190.

<sup>84</sup> Ham, “The Status of Agricultural Labor,” 559.

<sup>85</sup> Josephine C. Brown, “Rural Families on Relief,” *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 176 (1934): 90.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 49-51.

might continue to live in a house on a plantation but get support only by relief. Others might leave for the city or another farm to escape discontent or harassment by the landlord, or simply be evicted – sometimes for trying to get relief.<sup>87</sup>

Some fought back, joining the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. But this was risky; tenants who joined the STFU often found themselves evicted or threatened with (and sometimes received) arrest or violence.<sup>88</sup> Even if tenants did agree on the need for resistance, most white tenants held traditional views about race and black inferiority that other southern whites did. In one case, an observer found that white families ignored even the physical signs of black presence and did not consider them part of a shared community; one researcher asking directions found that one white woman pointed to the “third house on the left,” but did not count houses owned by black families, and another claimed that a road had no schoolhouse, because that particular school was for black students.<sup>89</sup> This did not prove to be a solid foundation for interracial organization, a practical necessity for any successful tenant movement.

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Even before the Great Depression, agriculturalists in the United States Department of Agriculture saw a role for the federal government in improving the lives of farmers. Prior to the 1920s, this meant the State Extension Agencies. The Hatch Act of 1887 funded agricultural experiment stations in each state, overseen by the USDA’s Office of Experimental Stations. By the 1920s, federal funding for agricultural experiment stations in some states topped \$1 million dollars. Because most farmers lived far from the state agricultural college or any of its regional

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<sup>87</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 57-59.

<sup>88</sup> Sherwood Eddy to Henry Wallace, March 23, 1936, Folder “Tenancy,” Box 2439, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP; Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 154-76.

<sup>89</sup> Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 178.

branches, farmers' institutes in most rural counties carried the latest agricultural advances to smaller farmers via weekend training, lectures, and similar methods.<sup>90</sup>

The Extension Service existed informally for over a century before it was institutionalized in the Smith-Lever Act in 1914.<sup>91</sup> Under the Act, the USDA worked with agricultural colleges to channel information from agricultural research agencies to farmers. Agricultural extension agents taught farmers, usually landowners, better ways to farm, including the latest advances in soil conservation, hybrid seeds, fertilizers, and new equipment. Home demonstration agents, usually women trained in home economics, taught housewives how to garden, provide a good diet for their families, preserve food, and make clothes or other home accessories. Supporters of the program pointed to reduced costs, increased production, and the general expansion of agricultural knowledge as proof of its value.<sup>92</sup>

These benefits were hardly shared equally. The problem, as extension agents admitted, was that the educational nature of the Extension Service meant that it only really aided those who were capable of using such advice.<sup>93</sup> In other words, it focused primarily on more prosperous farmers. As Lawrence Westbrook, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration's Rural Rehabilitation Division, wrote in 1934, an extension "county agent can make a farmer want a cow, sow, and hen, but he cannot always ferret out the means by which the want may be

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<sup>90</sup> Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 19-25; Everett E. Edwards, "American Agriculture—The First 300 Years," in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 247-256.

<sup>91</sup> A general political history of the extension service during this period can be found in William J. Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service: Political Issue in a Federal System* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1960). See also Gladys Baker, *The County Agent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 1-94.

<sup>92</sup> Melissa Walker, *Southern Farmers and Their Stories: Memory and Meaning in Oral History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 21-22; M. S. McDowell, "What the Agricultural Extension Service Has Done for Agriculture," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 142 (1929): 251-55.

<sup>93</sup> H. G. Seyforth, "Helping Low-Income Farmers," *Extension Service Review* 8.3 (1937): 35; M. L. Wilson, "Problem of Poverty in Agriculture," *Journal of Farm Economics* 22.1 (1940): 10-11.

fulfilled.”<sup>94</sup> Even though some low-income farmers *could* use its help, the Extension Service generally served those who already had larger incomes, since large producers could most easily implement the kind of changes or farming practices that Extension Service workers recommended. Even these relatively well-off farmers faced increasingly difficult economic circumstances every year, especially in the 1920s, and soon their demands alone were too great for the Extension Service to try to reach the poorest farmers, who would have little benefited from its advice anyway.<sup>95</sup> Even black extension agents, dealing with a relatively poorer and needier group of farmers, tended to emphasize helping the most prosperous black farmers.<sup>96</sup>

At times the Extension Service seemed not to recognize that smaller producers even existed. One state assistant extension director, for example, advised in 1930 that county agents should send a letter or make a phone call before visits, and that the county agent should expect to call upon the same farmers year after year.<sup>97</sup> This necessarily limited agents’ perspective to larger farms: in the 1930s one could not count on tenant farmers or small operators having telephones or being literate, and tenant farmers moved too frequently to be available for visits over multiple years.

It was not only the Extension Service, however, that occupied itself mostly with larger producers; it was part of a web of federal agencies and legislation that primarily provided assistance and aid to those farmers who, relatively speaking, needed it the least.<sup>98</sup> Agricultural policy during the 1920s largely concerned prices; with the Depression, agricultural experts and

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<sup>94</sup> Lawrence Westbrook, “Relief Supports Live-at-Home Program,” *Extension Service Review* 5.5 (1934): 67.

<sup>95</sup> Reid, “Public Assistant to Low-Income Farmers of the South,” 189-90; John L. Shover, *First Majority – Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural life in America* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 232. On the relationship between the structural, institutional development between the USDA and more prosperous farmers, and the class tensions in rural society that promoted the capture of the USDA by large farmers, see Gilbert and Howe, “Beyond ‘State vs. Society.’”

<sup>96</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Arthur L. Deering, “Farm and Home Visits,” *Extension Service Review* 1.8 (1930): 116.

<sup>98</sup> James G. Maddox, “An Historical Review of the Nation’s Efforts to Cope with Rural Poverty,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 50.5 (1968): 1355.

lobbyists expanded their interests to include credit. It “is remarkable,” Grant McConnell writes, “how rarely the agricultural spokesmen exhibited any awareness of problems outside these two orbits.”<sup>99</sup>

The basic problem with American agriculture was also its greatest strength: enormous productivity. American farmers produced far more than the American market could absorb. Overproduction dropped prices; this encouraged farmers to plant more, further pushing down prices. For over a decade, agriculturalists had tried to solve the problem of overproduction with voluntary reductions or dumping the excess overseas, all to no avail. As the agricultural situation worsened with the Great Depression, the conviction that something had to be done grew stronger, a sense masterfully encouraged by farm interests playing up notions of the family farm as the basis for American prosperity. Many New Dealers came to believe that agricultural recovery would be the basis for a general American recovery, a belief heavily encouraged by agricultural spokesmen.<sup>100</sup>

The first and most important piece of New Deal legislation aimed at agricultural recovery was the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.<sup>101</sup> It created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration within the New Deal, replacing the old Farm Board. New Deal policy, in general, worked on the principle that agriculture must be brought into balance with industry by increasing

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<sup>99</sup> Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 84. Ideas for better marketing and disposing of crops also floated around agricultural circles, but McConnell’s point – that the welfare of actual farmers, especially small producers, was entirely outside the concern of agricultural spokesmen and policy makers – is entirely correct.

<sup>100</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 199-202.

<sup>101</sup> The role of the AAA in worsening the plight of tenants has been carefully studied. The most important works remain Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers* and Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971). See also Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 30-148; Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 98-109; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 20-44; Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 60-67; Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 94-109; and Donald H. Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 59-74.

and stabilizing the purchasing power of the nation's farmers. The AAA began a long process of trying to increase agricultural income by controlling production. Production and distribution controls were an old idea, pushed in various forms by the Grange, Farmers' Alliance, Farmers' Union, and other agrarian, populist groups. The notion started to gain in popularity in the 1920s, and it was popular enough by 1932 to get at least some support by both parties.<sup>102</sup>

The AAA rested on a single essential premise: American farmers must match their production to the American market. This was the thinking behind the idea of parity, to create or restore a fair exchange of value between agricultural goods and manufactured items. Farmers would have to receive higher payments for their crops until the price was the same as prices received in the five years before World War I, popularly held to be the time when industry and agriculture were in balance. George N. Peek introduced the idea in 1921, and two main approaches followed. Peek wanted government to subsidize foreign sales, even if it meant selling at a loss. A second approach, which eventually came to dominate agricultural circles, was the idea of limiting production. By growing less, farmers would reduce supply and thereby raise agricultural prices. The idea had appeared frequently in the South when large cotton crops lowered prices disastrously, especially in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>103</sup>

The AAA approached influencing farm prices (and aiming for parity) by developing marketing agreements between farmers and through the use of the domestic allotment system for large commodities (in 1933, cotton, wheat, and hogs; tobacco and corn were added in 1934). The voluntary domestic allotment program was the most controversial aspect. Farmers cut production

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<sup>102</sup> Douglass V. Brown et al, *The Economics of the Recovery Program* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1934), 139-59; Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture*, 39-41; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 34-39.

<sup>103</sup> On the politics of parity and the man behind it, see Gilbert C. Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954). Even unorthodox thinkers like Rexford Tugwell agreed that the best way to end the Depression was to lift the prices of products that had flexible costs (like agriculture) and increase the production of those with rigid cost (like industry). See Rexford G. Tugwell, "The Road to Economic Recovery," *Extension Service Review* 5.3 (1934): 33-34.

of certain crops by assigned percentages, with the idea that reducing supply would increase price. Those farmers who reduced their acreage received compensation from the AAA based on a five-year average of their production. Farmers policed themselves to ensure compliance: local participating farmers elected committees to determine quotas for each farmer and the production for an area. These early assessments took on a life of their own; well into the next century, the base acreage or marketing quotas for a particular piece of land continued to net its new owners farm payments.<sup>104</sup>

Despite efforts by its sponsors, it took several weeks of votes and hearings to get the bill passed. If the AAA, created in May 1933, were to have any impact on cotton prices for the 1933 market, it required immediate action. The AAA would have to destroy the already-planted cotton (and, it turned out, over six millions hogs and piglets) to bring down the yield of those commodities that had already begun production. Only one existing organization was capable of overseeing such a project: the Agricultural Extension Service. County extension agents set up the local machinery responsible for the administration of the allotment system. The AAA's ties to the Extension Services and its allies in the farm bureaus and land grant colleges meant that it would necessarily be strongly influenced by the conservative agricultural elite.<sup>105</sup> In George Tindall's words, "its result was to entangle the program with the interlocking politics of land

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<sup>104</sup> Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 63-66. On the response by the leaders of the three major farm organizations to the plan (which they generally opposed, although they could not get united behind any of their own plans), see William R. Johnson, "National Farm Organizations and the Reshaping of Agricultural Policy in 1932," *Agricultural History* 37.1 (1963): 35-39.

<sup>105</sup> Edwin G. Nourse et al, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1937), 53-54, 78-81; Henry I. Richards, *Cotton and the AAA* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1936), 74-79; Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 40-41; Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 206; James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1956), 1:193-94; Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture*, 169-71. For a fuller discussion of the vote on and debates about the AAA, see Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 22-36

grant colleges and farm bureaus, both closely associated with the county agents.”<sup>106</sup> The closely allied American Farm Bureau Federation took on much of the administration of New Deal agricultural programs while acting as unofficial recruiters for the AFBF, of which membership more than doubled between 1933 and 1938.<sup>107</sup>

While social scientists and liberals supported the program in its early days, the AAA from the beginning was primarily concerned with what its administrators saw as practical farm economics and politics, not improving the lot of small farmers. This is evident in the selection of George Peek to head the new agency. Peek had experience working with agricultural leaders and interests. He was well respected from his role in the debates on farm relief during the 1920s, when he emerged as a strong proponent of tariff equality for farmers and as a friend of agricultural interests. The selection of Peek assured established farm interests (and some in the Roosevelt administration) that pragmatic concern for production and income, not theory and idealism, would animate the new agency.<sup>108</sup> As Theodore Saloutos wrote of the AAA’s top staff, “None of these appointments even remotely suggested that the leadership of the AAA had designs on undermining the capitalist system and eliminating profits [...] The key appointments were men with commercial, administrative, and academic backgrounds who believed in the capitalist system.”<sup>109</sup> Only the AAA’s rapidly expanding legal division had any significant liberal or leftist influence (for lack of a better term, they were often called the urban liberal

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<sup>106</sup> George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*, A History of the South, vol. X (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967) , 394.

<sup>107</sup> Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* 1:351.

<sup>108</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 65-66. On if it was unrealistic to expect the AAA to do much for small farmers, see Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 261-66; Theodore Saloutos, “New Deal Agricultural Policy: An Evaluation,” *The Journal of American History* 61.2 (1974): 403-04, 09-10; see also Nourse, et al, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration*, 345. For the counterargument, that the government inserted itself into the situation and changed the relationship between tenants and landlords to the latter’s favor, see Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 101.

<sup>109</sup> Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 58. For a general look at staffing the AAA, and some of the difficulties thereof, see 50-65.



group), which would lead to conflict with the agency's leaders. It did not help matters that Peek and the leader of the urban liberals in AAA, Jerome Frank, were long-time rivals whose dislike and distrust of one another went back a decade.<sup>110</sup>

The AAA cotton contracts for 1933 were of two types. The first was a straight rental – the cotton grower leased no more than 40% of his cotton land to the government to be taken out of production. In return the government paid a rental based on the average yield of the leased land. The higher its recent productivity, the higher the rentals. The other plan combined rental with the granting of options on government-owned cotton; the land would be leased for a certain amount (lower than the straight rental plan) based on how productive the land was, with an option of six cents a pound on as much cotton as would ordinarily be raised on the land leased to the government.<sup>111</sup>

The 1933 cotton contract did not even mention tenants, instead requiring producers to get consent from lien holders and any person who had an interest in the crop before agreeing to the plow-up. Only landowners were allowed to sign the contracts. It seemed natural to send the money to the landlords, who would provide their tenants as their traditional paternalistic relationship required. The AAA's Cotton Section had essentially the same view of tenants and sharecroppers that the landlords did, that they were incapable of handling their own affairs and that the better classes, the landlords, would best take care of them. Further, from a practical standpoint, getting the approval of the landlords was more important than getting the approval of the tenants. The program could function without the voluntary cooperation of renters, but

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<sup>110</sup> Alger Hiss, "Memorandum for Mr. Jones," August 11, 1933, and Alger Hiss, "Memorandum to Mr. Frank," August 16, 1933 both in Folder "Department of Agriculture – Resettlement Administration. 1933-35," Box 31, Baldwin Papers; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 88.

<sup>111</sup> Chester C. Davis, "Production-Control Measures Under Adjustment Act are Offered to Farmers," *Extension Service Review* 4.4 (1933): 49-50.

without the owners' approval, it would fail.<sup>112</sup> As Harold Hoffsommer wrote, landlords did not direct their opposition "against the government aid as such, but rather at any system of aid which comes between the landlord and the cropper."<sup>113</sup>

The AAA tried to increase agricultural spending power by reducing acreage. For cotton producing landowners in the South, this brought some benefits, largely because, as Charles Johnson noted, the federal "government under the AAA has assumed many of the risks of the landowners, and thrown them on the tenant."<sup>114</sup> For the 1934-35 cotton contracts, benefits changed and were divided into rental payments and parity payments. Landlords got the entire rental payment, and the parity payment was split in proportion to the previous division of the crop between landlords and tenants. This meant that the payments overwhelmingly favored even the landlord who dealt entirely fairly with his tenants and sharecroppers. For sharecroppers, for example, this meant receiving a parity payment of half a cent per pound for cotton not grown in 1935, while the landlord received 3.5 cents per pound for the rent and half a cent for the parity payment.<sup>115</sup> For a sample farm unit that had a 15 acre base of cotton, with 6 acres rented to the government and 9 acres planted, resulting in 200 pounds of cotton, under the 1934-35 cotton contract, a sharecropper working on halves would receive \$6.00 in government payment, compared to \$48.00 for the landlord.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 52-56.

<sup>113</sup> Harold Hoffsommer, "The AAA and the Cropper," *Social Forces* 13.4 (1935): 496.

<sup>114</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 50.

<sup>115</sup> William R. Amberson, "The New Deal for Share-Croppers," *The Nation*, February 13, 1935, 185. Various example of just how little a tenant could expect to receive can be found in Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 19-20; Hoffsommer, "The AAA and the Cropper," 498; Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1936; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 29; Nourse et al, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration*, 95-100.

<sup>116</sup> Richards, *Cotton and the AAA*, 141-42. Richards argues that to a degree, the way that the contracts so strongly favored landlords discouraged the displacement of tenants or reduction of their status – they were getting so little already that there was little reason to try to remove them,. The biggest danger was in places where such a shift would make no practical difference, like large cotton plantations where wage hands already supplemented the work of tenants.

The cotton production code was almost entirely designed for the landlord's benefit, and if not, the actual administration of it took care of any problems the landlord might have had. Landlords used a variety of means to avoid paying their tenants their share of the government payments. Most simply, landlords simply kept payments for themselves. Some landlords required tenants to have payments credited to old debts, with the tenants receiving nothing. Landlords fought to decide for themselves the status of their tenants. A "managing tenant" as defined by the AAA received rental as well as parity payments, while those who were regular tenants or sharecroppers received just parity. In other cases, landlords changed their relationship with those renting their land. Tenants became sharecroppers and sharecroppers became laborers. Most gravely, some landlords evicted their tenants entirely. If a landlord reduced by a large amount the acreage cultivated but kept on tenants, operating costs were almost as high as actually growing crops. If he evicted his tenants, the landlord did not have to pay their furnish, split the government benefit checks with them, or let them make any decision on how he used the rest of his acreage.<sup>117</sup>

The apparatus for addressing abuses left much to be desired. Regarding AAA's efforts to handle complaints about abuses and breaking contracts, observers reported that for "some cases the investigations were so utterly superficial as to be valueless" because, even when not entirely made up of landlords, the committees and investigators were still largely sympathetic to them.<sup>118</sup> Disputes at the local level went to local committees dominated by big planters and their allies. In many cases, complaints sent to the USDA were sent to AAA administrators, then to county agents, then to the landlord against whom the complaint was made; a complaint might then result

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<sup>117</sup> Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 64-82; Gordon W. Blackwell, "The Displaced Tenant Farm Family in North Carolina," *Social Forces* 13.1 (1934): 67-69; Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 51-56.

<sup>118</sup> William R. Amberson, "The New Deal for Share-Croppers," *The Nation*, February 13, 1935, 186. See also Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 92-105.

only in more problems for the unhappy tenant.<sup>119</sup> David Conrad estimates that there is “no way to determine the extent of landlord chiseling in 1933,” because “the machinery for processing complaints in 1933 was inadequate and many tenants did not understand their rights or were afraid to assert them.” He goes on to conclude that the “AAA failed to benefit great numbers of Southern tenants and even harmed many of them.”<sup>120</sup>

Particularly insulting for tenants was the fact that not all of these landlords taking away their benefits and livelihoods were even real farmers. As one tenant, Lillie Harthcock of Delia, Texas, wrote to the USDA, her landlord was “a practicing medical doctor” who lived “in town and seldom sees this farm.” She also noted that “there is no use in appealing to the Limestone Co. Board, as our landlord is chairman of that Board and everything goes as he says go.” Harthcock estimated that most tenants in the area would get a dollar per acre, while the landlords would get five to seven dollars per acre.<sup>121</sup> The USDA favored the landlord in such disputes. As of June 25, 1934, landlord-tenant field representatives investigated 617 complaints and found 419 to not be justified – conclusions that, even if technically correct, only underline further had titled the system was toward landlords.<sup>122</sup>

The AAA proved painful even for those tenant farmers who did stay on the land or managed to become landowners. The AAA relieved them of their dependence on furnishing merchants and landlords demanding the cultivation of cotton or else a refusal to extend credit. But government payments also accelerated the trend toward industrialized agriculture, where

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<sup>119</sup> Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 43-44; Hoffsommer, “The AAA and the Cropper,” 497; Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmer*, 40-42; Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 51-56. On how local disputes played out in Texas, which was also further along in the process of mechanization than most of the cotton South, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 163-82.

<sup>120</sup> Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 66, 209. See also Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 27-28.

<sup>121</sup> Mrs. Lillie Harthcock to Mr. Geo. Bishop, March 21, 1934, Folder “Tenancy,” Box 2081, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP. The archives of the USDA contain hundreds of such letters.

<sup>122</sup> D. P. Trent, “Memorandum for the Secretary,” July 2, 1934, Folder “Tenancy,” Box 2081, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

large scale agribusinesses began to influence smaller producers as much as big landowners had. In upcountry Georgia, for example, poultry production replaced cotton, and poultry growers began to enter into fixed contracts with large-scale “poultry integrators” who provided the chicks and feed with a guarantee to purchase the broilers. Farmers who “imagined that they were securing independence for their families,” in the words of historian Monica Richmond Gisolfi, soon found simply “that they had traded one cash crop for another.”<sup>123</sup>

Despite the fact that planters received 90% of AAA payments, tenants, historically trod upon, had little ability or will to protest. Any further efforts to fight back on the part of tenants and sharecroppers resulted in immediate and often violent counter-attack.<sup>124</sup> The situation seems to have been worst for black tenants and sharecroppers, already near the bottom of the social and agricultural ladder. John P. Davis described the results as a “story of wholesale robbery of [...] tenants, of wholesale tenant evictions, of terrorization against the organization of Negro and white agricultural units [and] of the lowering of the standards of living of the masses of the farm population.”<sup>125</sup>

The agriculturalists in the AAA recognized that the program would favor landlords at the expense of tenants, but they also saw the entire program as a risky and uncertain business. From their perspective, to introduce social change into an economic program would invite disaster. For this reason, Chester Davis came to believe that if the AAA was going to survive, it would be necessary to remove the influence of the urban liberal group so committed to just that sort of change. Jerome Frank and other liberals in the agency found AAA Director George Peek and his

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<sup>123</sup> Monica Richmond Gisolfi, “From Crop Lien to Contract Farming: The Roots of Agribusiness in the American South, 1929-1939,” *Agricultural History* 80.2 (2006): 183.

<sup>124</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 209-12; for the story of the biggest single effort to organize tenant resistance, the STFU, see Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in the Land*.

<sup>125</sup> John P. Davis, “A Survey of the Problems of the Negro Under the New Deal,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 5.1 (1936): 6.

successor Chester Davis, despite their different levels of sympathy to liberal aims, to be equally convinced that the purpose of the AAA was to raise crop prices, not change the social structure of rural America. The conflict came to a head in early 1935. Frank had, following the recommendations of his subordinate Alger Hiss, issued a legal opinion calling for landlords to retain their tenants for the life of their AAA contracts. Angry over the Legal Division opinion, Davis removed numerous liberals from the agency, including Frank.<sup>126</sup>

Beyond the difficulties it created for tenants and the political ramifications, the AAA had other problems. Most notably the AAA proved to be more or less ineffective. Cotton prices rose temporarily after the plow-up, but they soon declined again. Instead, cotton farmers found relief in government loans, primarily from the Commodity Credit Corporation, established under the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. The Bankhead Cotton Control Act in the spring of 1934 provided further quotas.<sup>127</sup> And it was in the tobacco and cotton producing sections of the country that the AAA did, relatively, the best – it was an even greater failure nationally.<sup>128</sup>

Then too the AAA clashed with other government agencies. As sociologist T. J. Woofter put it at the time, “we have the strange spectacle of one Government agency, the AAA, blocking the entry of displaced tenants and young adults to commercial agriculture, and another agency, the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, trying to replace them in subsistence agriculture.”<sup>129</sup> The AAA at times even seemed to be working against itself. The agency’s Program Planning had a

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<sup>126</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 100. On the purge, see Raymond Gram Swing, “The Purge at the AAA,” *Nation* vol. 140 (February 20, 1935): 216-217; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 139; Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 393-409; Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 56-58, 140-50; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 101-05; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 110-123; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, Oral Research Office, Columbia University, 1975 (microfiche), 316-331; John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: Norton & Company, 2000), 154-57.

<sup>127</sup> Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 395-96.

<sup>128</sup> Nourse et al, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration*, 325.

<sup>129</sup> T. J. Woofter, “Southern Population and Social Planning,” *Social Forces* 14.1 (1935): 21.

Rehabilitation Section that coordinated activity with the FERA program, the state extension services, and the AAA. It provided temporary aid, particularly in situations involving natural catastrophes like droughts in the northern plains. Its clients were more or less equipped for farming but needed help to reach self-sufficiency. Some urban unemployed transferred to small plots of land for subsistence farming.<sup>130</sup> Thus, even within the same division of the same agency, the government worked in opposite directions: while the Rehabilitation Section hoped to raise production of small farmers, the Land Policy Section and the Production Planning Section (also in the Program Planning Division) tried to determine and withdraw from production unnecessary acreage.

The AAA was also unpopular with many segments of the American farm population. For example, Kenneth Bindas found, reviewing 600 interviews with rural southerners discussing the impact of the New Deal on their lives, that the AAA was one of the least frequently mentioned New Deal programs; at the time, and in their memories, most rural southerners felt that the AAA did little for them.<sup>131</sup> The program suffered from several of problems, but it was the Supreme Court that finally killed it. In *United States v. Butler* (in January, 1936), also known as the Hoosac Mills case, the Supreme Court struck down the AAA as unconstitutional due to its processing tax. But this apparent defeat actually benefited the AAA. The decision gave the program a new start of sorts as it allowed agricultural economists in the Planning Division to institute new measures they had developed over the previous three years. The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 and the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 continued the

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<sup>130</sup> H. R. Tolley, "The Program Planning Division of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration," *Journal of Farm Economics* 16.4 (1934): 588-89.

<sup>131</sup> Bindas, *Remember the Great Depression in the Rural South*, 58-59.

practice of offering price supports in return for crop reduction (under the guise of soil conservation) and introduced new features like federal crop insurance.<sup>132</sup>

The AAA did not help impoverished farmers in the South or across the country, driving tenants from their farms and pushing them down the agricultural ladder. But this was only part of a larger process in the South, as the old system was collapsing under the weight of the Great Depression and economic change. It was obvious that the AAA was not a solution for the rural poor living through this transformation. Instead, those interested in rural reform looked to other government programs to preserve the well-being and place on the land of impoverished southerners. “Even as the old tenure system deteriorated,” Pete Daniel writes, “liberal New Dealers tried to patch it up.”<sup>133</sup> They believed that they found these patches in government efforts to rehabilitate and resettle tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and the rural poor. These projects, mostly taking place in the South, appeared to offer a different route to saving farmers from the problems of tenancy, poverty, Depression, and the difficulties created by their own government.

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<sup>132</sup> Wayne D. Rasmussen, “The New Deal Farm Programs: What They Were and Why They Survived,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 65.5 (1983): 1158; Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 404.

<sup>133</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 105.



## CHAPTER 2

### FROM RELIEF TO REHABILITATION: THE ORIGINS OF RURAL REHABILITATION

The New Deal's earliest responses to the rural Great Depression, particularly the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), reflected the emphasis among traditional agriculturalists on helping big producers. During the early New Deal, when the Roosevelt Administration was first grappling with the problem of rural poverty, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), one of the largest departments in the federal government, played little part in providing relief, despite the enormous numbers of impoverished farmers. The USDA created only one of the three most important federal programs dealing with poor farmers in the early New Deal, the AAA, and it had the worst record of helping them. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads, created in 1933, had its home in the Department of the Interior, and the Rural Rehabilitation program was part of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).<sup>1</sup> Those latter two were in part responses to not only the catastrophic proportions of rural poverty in the 1930s, but also to the federal policies and programs that made that conditions of the rural poor even worse.

Aid of some kind was obviously necessary, particularly in the South. Poor farmers there had the largest families, the least education, the smallest farms, and the least operating capital and income.<sup>2</sup> A Works Progress Administration (WPA) official described the typical cotton belt

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<sup>1</sup> McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 85-86.

<sup>2</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 157-58. This statistic refers more specifically to those would become rural rehabilitation clients. The other end of the scale were borrowers in the West (Regions IX, X, and XI),

farmer on relief in the summer of 1935. He was an unemployed but able-bodied sharecropper or farm laborer, about forty years old. He, his wife, and two or three children had to get by on relief grants of \$10 a month if he was white, \$7 if he was black. Essentially illiterate, the farmer owned no livestock or machinery, and his family lived in an unpainted frame shack. Their traditional three Ms diet of meat, molasses, and corn meal was sometimes supplemented by a small, poorly tended vegetable garden. The family had been on relief at least five consecutive months and out of work in four of the previous six months before going on relief.<sup>3</sup> Reformers believed that this farmer, and the millions like him throughout the South and across the country, needed help, and that some sort of new federal agency was the best vehicle for that help.

But just as the traditional agriculturalists fashioned a response (the AAA) that suggested they had little understanding of the situation facing impoverished rural Americans, so too did the reformers within the Roosevelt Administration. They introduced programs that had less to do with the realities of rural poverty and more to do with their own idealized, even sentimental notions of life on the farm. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration's Rural Rehabilitation Division and the Department of the Interior's Division of Subsistence Homesteads reflected the same misconceptions, in both the arguments for their creation and in their operations: administrators simply could not imagine large-scale, long-term poverty among the nation's farmers.

For FERA, this misunderstanding about the nature of rural poverty took the form of repeated assurances that not only could small farmers, with a little help from the federal government, get back on their feet and out of poverty, but that it could be done at a much reduced cost, perhaps even a profit in some cases, for the federal government. Ideally, a tax

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who had generally the smallest families, most education, and highest incomes, with the Northeast (Region I) close behind. The Midwest, Lake States, and Plains were somewhere in between.

<sup>3</sup> Howard B. Myers, "Relief in the Rural South," *Southern Economic Journal* 3.3 (1937): 283.

burden would be turned into a tax base, and the government would find most of its expenditures repaid before the program ended. This would be accomplished via a program of rural rehabilitation: targeted loans and expert supervision for the rural poor who proved themselves to be the most capable of taking advantage of it. In shaping how the new federal rural rehabilitation program would work, misconceptions about the relative ease of alleviating rural poverty would shape the long-term future of rural rehabilitation and the larger federal program to reduce rural poverty.

Another long-term impact of the Rural Rehabilitation Division's early days involved its legislative and political underpinning. The Rural Rehabilitation Division was, like the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, something of a bureaucratic orphan. Its most natural home, the Department of Agriculture, remained dominated by hostile influences. Instead, conceived of as a replacement for rural relief, the Rural Rehabilitation Division instead found itself oddly settled in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The result was a scatter-shot program whose effectiveness varied greatly on a state-to-state, even county-to-county, basis as local social workers, relief agents, and rural rehabilitation experts grappled with how best to implement the program. As they did so, the answers they found would become the most important part of the larger federal anti-rural poverty program.

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Public relief was not new during the Great Depression. American poor relief and social work began in the nineteenth century along the East Coast, where in large cities the plight of the poor was obvious to every observer, and where there were greater resources (in terms of wealth, knowledge, and people willing to do the job) to deal with poverty. Furthermore, city governments began to recognize that it was impossible to rely on individual assistance from

those personally acquainted with the poor. In rural areas, most of these factors were lacking, and, as rural sociologist E. L. Morgan aptly put it, relief had not become institutionalized; instead, Americans expected immediate emotional appeals, neighborly good will, and kinship to cover the plight of the rural poor, and as a result no welfare institution with trained social workers developed in rural areas. These broader cultural misconceptions about rural poverty in turn influenced the planning of federal anti-rural poverty programs.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, despite years of obvious hardship, most people did not think of farmers as being poor at all. To many, such as those sympathetic to the back-to-the-land movement, the very existence of a farm and thus the means to sustain oneself meant, if not luxury, then at least safety and security for the farmer. Those with influence in the government who had the best understanding of farm life might have punctured this image. Instead, they concerned themselves with the needs of large producers or had their own reasons to support the kind of programs such misconceptions inspired.

One of the first significant federal relief efforts for the rural poor came in the Federal Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1933, which easily passed Congress early in Franklin Roosevelt's first hundred days. It authorized the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to make direct relief grants to the states. To deal with the problem of some twelve million unemployed Americans, FERA had half a billion dollars to spend in direct aid and another \$3.3 billion to be spent for public works. Half of the money was spent on a matching basis, with three federal dollars for every state dollar spent, and the other half was spent at the administrator's discretion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> E. L. Morgan, "National Policy and Rural Public Welfare," *Rural Sociology* 1.1 (1936): 8-12.

<sup>5</sup> Robert P. Post, "Relief Policies," *New York Times*, March 4, 1934.

FERA's first administrator was Harry L. Hopkins, a former New York social welfare worker and state relief director. FERA provided money to state Emergency Relief Administrations, which controlled their own programs with a bit of federal oversight. Federal funds were intended to supplement state funds, but in the cash-strapped South, with its tight-fisted state governments, the federal government contributed most of the money spent to alleviate poverty. In November 1933 FERA formally started the Civil Works Administration (CWA), which operated a program of work relief instead of providing direct relief.

At first, FERA did not make any special effort to improve the lot of farmers in general, and initially government aid did not differentiate between unemployed workers and poor farmers. Farmers had long been considered autonomous, self-sustaining independents who needed less aid than the rest of the population.<sup>6</sup> Even well after the rural rehabilitation program had begun, this conception remained. "Rural families can be more easily rehabilitated," a pamphlet describing FERA's "Purpose and Activities" vaguely claimed, "because, with the proper help, they can be put in a position to supply themselves with food and other necessities of life."<sup>7</sup>

New Dealers explicitly contrasted this supposed notion of the farm as a bastion of security with the declining position of industrial workers, who could not fend for themselves. David R. Williams, Chief of the Planning Section of the Rural Rehabilitation Division, argued in 1934 that even in their depressed state, America's farms could be a refuge for those displaced by the declining industrial sector. It would be so long until the "general revival of business" could "alleviate conditions," he said, that "some remedial action on the part government" was

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<sup>6</sup> Olaf F. Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, 1947), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Federal Emergency Relief Administration, *Purposes and Activities of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935), 4.

necessary – specifically, providing a home for jobless and underemployed workers.<sup>8</sup> Going further, the official journal of the rural rehabilitation program in FERA published an informal talk by Irish poet George W. Russell, who told rural rehabilitation staff members that a “race dies out within two or three generation of city life,” comparing the physical deterioration of the contemporary Londoner with the health and vitality of his rural forebears.<sup>9</sup> This idea of the rural life as self-sustaining, immune to the vagaries of the economy, was also evident in the justification for the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, which was already engaged in the construction of resettlement communities centered around the idea of subsistence farming.

In addition to this belief in the stability and inherent safety of farm life, practical concerns limited how useful FERA’s earliest efforts were for the rural needy, particularly for the worst-off rural poor in the South. As a system designed to help the unemployed, did not really fit the agricultural South, with its traditional slack seasons. Further, many landlords believed that their tenants were always employed, no matter how much pay or support the landlord provided. And with living conditions already so bad, defining a standard of living to be met by relief was difficult. For the first few months, relief was broadly aimed, encompassing a variety of groups in dissimilar situations: the urban unemployed, the rural poor, and the simply unemployable. For farmers, this meant that relief was in a practical sense non-existent: local relief was organized in towns and cities, often at a distance that made participation impossible. For those who did manage to get on relief, the depressed agricultural economy meant that there were fewer options when local relief ran out, no local charities or casual neighborly aid.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David R. Williams, “Rural Industrial Communities,” *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.1 (1934), 4.

<sup>9</sup> “The Spiritual Side of Rehabilitation,” *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.2 (1935), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 46-47; Harry L. Hopkins, *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1936), 140-42.

There was also the fear that rural relief could prove counterproductive. Hopkins was hesitant, for example, to take responsibility for migrant agricultural workers, whom he feared would be taken advantage of by farm owners foisting support for their employees onto the federal government.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, landlords heavily influenced (or even operated) the various relief programs, with the result that to get relief, tenants had to have lost virtually everything. One study of farm families in December 1933 showed that about 30% of the 1,022 families on relief in Alabama were helped by landlords to get on relief in order to ease the landlords' own financial responsibilities. In addition to using relief as a way to save themselves money, landowners also influenced relief agencies to maintain a pliable supply of labor, with the result that some rural relief offices closed during the two months of cotton picking. This helped both the relief officials, reducing their expenditures, and the landlords, by not disturbing the low local rates for cotton picking. Furthermore, rural relief might not even reach those who needed it most. Many landlords opposed relief because they believed it would spoil their tenants or weaken their influence over them, while at the same time making it impossible for tenants to survive any other way besides relief. Black farmers were kept off relief rolls because of discrimination, but also because landlords kept them around longer. Additionally, with black standards of living already so low, conditions rarely got much worse. African Americans also tended to be concentrated in the best soil areas, which were relatively less hard hit by the Depression.<sup>12</sup>

There was even evidence that local relief was being used against groups that challenged the power of big planters. The Alabama Relief Administration, for example, undermined efforts by sharecroppers and tenants to organize themselves. In 1933, as the cotton crop was being

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<sup>11</sup> Katie Louchheim, ed., *The Making of the New Deal: The Insiders Speak* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 179.

<sup>12</sup> Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 25; Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 57-59; Woofert, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 150-53.

plowed under because of the AAA, the Share Croppers' Union (SCU) called for strikes on several plantations in a few Alabama counties. Despite the general failure of that first effort, sharecroppers began to turn in larger numbers to the SCU for help. By the summer of 1934, the SCU had begun to prepare a large-scale strike in Lee and Tallapoosa counties for all cotton pickers. As soon as the SCU announced its plan, however, relief director Thad Holt declared that all able bodied workers who did not voluntarily pick cotton for wages would be dropped from the relief rolls.<sup>13</sup>

Even taking into consideration these risks and costs, it was evident that the rural poor relied heavily on any kind of relief and absolutely needed additional help. One USDA employee described "a remarkably widespread recognition" as the Depression wore on that in a profoundly changed world, agriculture faced new and significant problems.<sup>14</sup> A wide spectrum of rural clients depended on relief for survival. Farmers who technically qualified as landowners often labored under a heavy burden of tax liens and mortgages. On the basis of the actual realization value of their property, an owner's net equity was often nonexistent. These owners generally lacked the necessary work animals and farm implements for the depleted soils of their small acreages. A second group, farm tenants, depended on the production of staple crops, but the production and prices of these had dropped so much that their landlords simply could no longer maintain a normal work force. Third, families who had abandoned farm work, either as laborers or tenants of some kind, generally drifted to nearby towns and villages. These migrants lived in substandard conditions that effectively constituted village or rural slums. Finally, relief agencies dealt with families in stranded communities, those who formerly worked in rural industries like

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<sup>13</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 54-55.

<sup>14</sup> Gove Hambidge, "Farmers in a Changing World – A Summary," in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 3.



timber or mining. These enterprises collapsed with the Depression, leaving rural families without any means of moving or gaining income. All of these groups had been under economic strain for several years, and even the minimal resources available to impoverished city populations were unavailable to them.<sup>15</sup> Relief, for these, felt like a godsend. Many tenants would have rather stayed on relief than risk going back to farming; it was the highest standard of living they had ever known.<sup>16</sup>

FERA officials discussed whether the agency should add raising the standard of living or curing poverty to its mandate to provide unemployment relief. The expense of relief and the enormous, chronic poverty in rural areas carried the argument that something further had to be done.<sup>17</sup> Federal administrators looked to the states for solutions. The emerging idea of rural rehabilitation, which appeared to be successful in certain southern states, seemed to be the key. Starting with Alabama and Texas, cotton states began to provide tools and livestock to relief clients. They were cheaper than relief and encouraged farmers to continue to produce. FERA officials saw this shift from relief to rehabilitation as the grounds for a new long-term agricultural policy.<sup>18</sup> The similarities between the rural rehabilitation programs in these states and the eventual national program indicate something of their influence. The Alabama Relief Administration's rural rehabilitation program, among the closest to what the national FERA rural rehabilitation model would be, was designed as a mass program to provide loans and seeds in conjunction with farm management expertise via "farm foremen," who traveled across the state teaching clients how to budget, harvest, and other necessary agricultural skills.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, "Rural Families on Relief," 91-92.

<sup>16</sup> Lorena Hickock to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 6, 1934, *One Third of a Nation*, 272.

<sup>17</sup> Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Rural Southern Poverty*, 47-67.

<sup>18</sup> USDA, "History of the Farm Security Administration," pp. 2-3, October 10, 1940, Folder "85-160 Public Relations, July thru December, 1940," Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>19</sup> Alabama Relief Administration, "Rural Rehabilitation Program for 1934," pp. 2-13, Folder 4, Alabama Relief Administration Papers.

More than state and federal governments were involved in this sort of program. Robert W. Hudgens helped organize a rural rehabilitation program in South Carolina during his time working with the Red Cross. He convinced bankers that it made the most sense to loan poor farmers money and provide for a farm management supervisor, to insure that their farms were being run properly. Not for the first time for a rural recovery program, Hudgens ran into trouble with local business leaders who, fearing that this would create a permanent relief class, pressured the Red Cross to discontinue the program.<sup>20</sup>

The goal of rural rehabilitation was to find a more cost-effective and long-term solution for the problem of thousands of rural families in need of immediate relief. To use only direct relief payments to solve these problems would be ruinously expensive and probably impossible. The solution lay in making the poor self-sustaining by putting them back into a position to grow enough food to support themselves, providing credit to purchase necessities, and giving supervision to ensure that the money was well spent. In a larger sense, FERA was the beginning of a new national program designed to deal with the problems of rural poverty. It would take farm families off the relief rolls, get them farming again, and create self-supporting rural citizens.<sup>21</sup>

The imminent expiration of the CWA, at any rate, made some kind of replacement program necessary. Thus in “February 1934,” historian Paul Mertz writes, “the idea of rural rehabilitation was at hand and gaining acceptance within the FERA” just as a new program had to be developed.<sup>22</sup> The time and ideas were right, and federal officials decided on a transition to the new program. Aubrey Williams of FERA announced that the new approach would replace

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<sup>20</sup> *Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, Oral Research Office, Columbia University, 1957 (microfiche), 116-22.

<sup>21</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 67. On the shift from the CWA to FERA and the WPA, see Bonnie Fox Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration 1933-1934: The Business of Emergency Employment in the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 213-59.

the temporary CWA. Relief efforts would be divided into three groups. For the rural poor, the government would focus on providing the materials and knowledge necessary to operate their farms. For stranded populations (such as coal miners working worn out mines or inhabitants of mill towns with faltering mills), relocation, community-building and training would be the keys. And for the urban unemployed, a new work program would allow workers to survive and prosper until the economy got going.<sup>23</sup>

Hopkins began making moves toward formally creating what became the Rural Rehabilitation Division of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in the spring of 1934. It had, he said, three aims: to get farmers self-supporting again, to move farmers from bad lands to good ones, and to establish self-sustaining communities of stranded industrial workers.<sup>24</sup> He gave responsibility for the program to Lawrence Westbrook, Relief Administrator for Texas. Hopkins intended the Division as a federal-state project in which the states would administer programs based on federal policies and recommendations. FERA delegated administration to the state relief administrations, which created Rural Rehabilitation Corporations to act as the financial agency of each state administration. FERA administrators served on these corporations' (mostly advisory) Boards of Directors, along with state and extension service officials, to have a measure of influence. The only direct control that FERA would have would be control of funds and the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator's possession of all capital stock of the various corporations. Federal rural rehabilitation efforts officially began on April 1, 1934, when work and direct relief clients from rural areas moved to the rural rehabilitation program. The federal government advanced \$70 million to finance these corporations.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Aubrey Williams, "The New Relief Program: Three Great Aims," *New York Times*, April 1, 1934.

<sup>24</sup> Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 143.

<sup>25</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 10-11; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 62-63; Lawrence Westbrook, "The Program of Rural Rehabilitation of the FERA," *Journal of Farm Economics* 17.1 (1935): 91-93;

This new rural program differed from urban relief in two significant ways. First, rural rehabilitation was conceived as a solution or even a preventative to at least some of the problems of rural poverty. While most urban unemployment relief was designed to help those already in need of relief, the rural FERA program ideally took on borderline cases to keep them from going on relief. Second, work relief to urban and industrial workers was a cash wage, a payment for certain work done, while the money given to the rural needy was a loan to be repaid (at least in theory; in practice, a number of loans had to be written off as unrecoverable).<sup>26</sup>

FERA officials promoted their program in part as a way to save money (a general emphasis in all FERA self-promotions; Harry L. Hopkins, for example, titled his 1936 account *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief*). It was in most ways a new program, but it was building on and replacing some of the work of another program, direct federal public assistance for the unemployed. When describing its work in late December 1934, Westbrook noted that rural relief differed significantly from regular relief, and that “there existed in rural areas opportunities for rehabilitation which could be taken advantage of at relatively small cost.” He went on, noting that “many thousands of destitute farmers [...] could be made self-sustaining by an investment in equipment and supplies which would not exceed the cost of extending relief over a period of several months. Obviously, it was more desirable to furnish these farmers with such equipment and supplies than to continue to give them relief indefinitely.”<sup>27</sup> As Paul V. Maris, Supervisor of Field Service, wrote, Rural Rehabilitation meant not simply “getting people off the relief roll,” but rather “making it possible for them to get off the relief roll.” He went on

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USDA, “History of the Farm Security Administration,” p. 3, October 10, 1940, Folder “85-160 Public Relations, July thru December, 1940,” Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>26</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 29-30.

<sup>27</sup> Westbrook, “The Program of Rural Rehabilitation of the FERA,” 89.

to assert that “Rural Rehabilitation is not a program of public charity” and that every expenditure was to be repaid.<sup>28</sup>

The program would, supporters claimed, not only reduce public expenditure, but in some cases it would make money. FERA’s *Rural Rehabilitation* magazine, for example, described an “actual instance” of a rural rehabilitation client moving from the ranks of the “tax-eaters” to the “tax-payers” thanks to supervision and a farm plan, debt adjustment mediation, and a small loan.<sup>29</sup> The program also reflected the widely held view that government hand-outs contributed to the demoralization or decline of its recipients. “The government is providing them with the necessities of life,” Westbrook wrote of stranded rural workers on relief, “but not with the necessities of living.”<sup>30</sup>

At the national level, the Division of Rural Rehabilitation had a fairly small set of responsibilities. It formulated rehabilitation policy, which was then implemented through the various State Emergency Relief Administrations. The national Division also approved the rehabilitation plans and budgets created by the states. This limited list of duties meant the national staff was fairly small – only sixteen as late as mid-November 1934.<sup>31</sup>

The national Division of Rural Rehabilitation did not make the loans directly to clients; instead the Federal Emergency Relief Administration made loans via the State Emergency Administrations. The state relief agencies organized their own rehabilitation divisions and selected their own directors. Because the program was under state control, the activities and procedures varied a great deal. In most states, federal funds were reallocated to counties, and the

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<sup>28</sup> Paul V. Maris, “Rehabilitation Policies,” *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.1 (1934), 21. On the New Deal’s early emphasis on economizing as well as battling the Depression, see Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR’s Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), especially 84-108.

<sup>29</sup> “Making Tax Payers out of Tax Consumers,” *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.2 (1935), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Westbrook, “The Program of Rural Rehabilitation of the FERA,” 97.

<sup>31</sup> Larson *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 62.

county relief administrators handled whatever relief activities they considered necessary. National instructions called for the states to appoint a county rehabilitation supervisor in each county with at least fifty rural relief cases. By March 1, 1935, this activity was large enough that it was consolidated into the State Rural Rehabilitation Corporations, designed to handle the loans to relief families. FERA organized forty-six such corporations, forty-three of which received federal relief. The broad, undefined nature of the decentralized, state-based rural rehabilitation and farm security programs was evident from the beginning of FERA's rural efforts. Rural projects developed in three different directions, embracing rural rehabilitation via loans and supervision, community creation and resettlement, and land reform.<sup>32</sup>

The use of home and farm management plans, which would become the centerpiece of the overall farm security effort, began under the Rural Rehabilitation Division of FERA. Paul V. Maris wrote, "Rural Rehabilitation seems to be very correctly described as a form of 'Supervised Credit.'"<sup>33</sup> The home management plan fulfilled more than the obvious practical needs of stretching a family's food supply. One home economics specialist wrote that all "members of the family should have a part in making rehabilitation plans, and thus assure united support in putting the plans into effect."<sup>34</sup> Home management plans, then, helped meet the psychological as well as the physical and economic needs of a client family.

The early FERA loans were generally restricted to promote subsistence-level farming. Inexperienced and determined to get the program into place in a hurry, FERA local agents tended

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<sup>32</sup> W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume II*, no date; Box 3, FSA Historical Record, RG 96, NACP; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 62-65; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 64-65. In some cases this decentralized structure could hinder rehabilitation efforts. South Carolina, for example saw its Rural Rehabilitation Advisory Committee limit rehabilitation loans to \$500, compared to averages in other states between \$2,500 and \$3,000. Jack Irby Hayes, Jr., *South Carolina and the New Deal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 132.

<sup>33</sup> Paul V. Maris, "Policy Interpretations," *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.2 (1935), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Claribel Nye, "Every Member of the Family Should Take Part in Planning Rehabilitation," *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.1 (1934), 10.

to underestimate the size of loan needed; as a result, loan advances were both small and frequent: the 397,000 family cases received almost 1.27 million individual advances.<sup>35</sup> Many states required that all loans be paid back in one year, so loans were often made with that goal in mind, rather than in consideration of what the most effective or useful loan amount would be. A family might get, for example, a \$200 loan, that being the largest amount it could pay back. But that almost certainly necessitated a loan the next year for almost as much money, because the initial loan was insufficient to get a family-sized farm started efficiently and profitably.<sup>36</sup> And especially in the first few months, loans were made with neither the client nor the agent entirely sure of what they would be used for, a practice that created problems and encouraged more careful planning when the program moved to the Resettlement Administration (the independent executive agency which became the Division of Rural Rehabilitation's successor in 1935).<sup>37</sup>

In most states, the funds for loans and grants were reallocated to the counties, to do whatever rehabilitation activities county relief officials felt best suited their caseload. In Arkansas, for example, canned goods were the most common source of repayment after 1,200 community canning centers had been set up, producing almost 300,000 cans of fruits and vegetables weekly. In September alone, the government took in repayments of about four million cans, which were then given to other needy families.<sup>38</sup> Particularly in the South, credit took the form of groceries, feed, fertilizer, work stock, and other goods, perhaps building on the southern tradition of the landlord or merchant furnish. County supervisors were aided by assistant county supervisors, sometimes called "farm foremen" and imagined as part-timers selected among the

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<sup>35</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 154.

<sup>36</sup> FERA, "Note [Form FRR-20]," *Rural Rehabilitation Forms. Section II, Forms FRR 20 – 27*, 7, NAL ; F. E. Patch to Paul V. Maris, April 22, 1936, Folder "RR-101-03 P Reports," Box 6, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>37</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 200-02.

<sup>38</sup> "80,000 Families End Direct Relief," *New York Times*, October 6, 1934.

best farmers in the community, and home rehabilitation assistants, generally women trained in home economics and whose primary responsibility was periodic home visits to help plan budgets, food production, meals, and similar concerns. The supervisors worked on a per diem basis and were to visit the farmers a certain number of times each month. One measure of the program's success in Alabama, as Lorena Hickock reported, was that these supervisors often became "so interested that they [were] working way overtime, without pay."<sup>39</sup>

At first, the rural rehabilitation program was primarily a southern affair. Many states had made a total transfer of rural cases from general relief to rural rehabilitation, and in the South many states already used a loan basis for their relief programs. The South also already had a strong credit tradition – rural rehabilitation loans easily slid into the place of landlords and merchants in the furnish system (sometimes with the previous creditors' approval, sometimes not), especially as the Depression had resulted in a decrease in credit available from these traditional sources. Finally, the generally small-scale nature of southern agriculture made the problems of rural poverty in the South appear relatively straightforward: give money to these poor farmers already on the land they cultivate. At the start of the 1935 crop year, thousands of drought relief cases were transferred to the rural rehabilitation program.<sup>40</sup> The overall southern emphasis of the program is evident in that half of the total loan amount expended went to only six southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas).<sup>41</sup> At some points this was even more extreme – in February of 1935, more than half the number of cases

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<sup>39</sup> Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, June 7, 1934, *One Third of a Nation*, 272-75, 274 (quote); Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 62-65, 153-54; Monroe Oppenheimer, "The Development of the Rural Rehabilitation Loan Program," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 477-78.

<sup>40</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 32-33; Oppenheimer, "The Development of the Rural Rehabilitation Loan Program," 475-76; Berta Asch and A. R. Magnus, *Farmers on Relief and Rehabilitation* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1937), 17-19.

<sup>41</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 155.



receiving advances were in Alabama and Louisiana alone.<sup>42</sup> Even as the program developed a more national scope, many of the rules and procedures developed to address southern problems remained – for example, the requirement that landlords had to sign a waiver to the effect that they would not seize any of this year’s profit or crops for tenant’s debt.<sup>43</sup>

Although preparation of applications was not quite as rigorous as it would become under the Resettlement Administration, the Rural Rehabilitation Division did demand a good bit of background before taking into consideration a poor farmer. Applicants had to list the size, type, condition, and value of the farm they currently worked or their history of farm labor, along with their possessions (both agricultural and personal) and outstanding debts. The entire family was considered in the application. Potential clients needed to describe the family, particularly in terms of capacity to work – children were grouped by those over or under sixteen years of age, a common dividing line for a full day’s worker, and applicants had to list any family member at least “16 years of age who are unable to work,” family members “especially qualified for supplemental industrial employment,” and any military disability by the family head.<sup>44</sup> Recognizing the credit situation of small farmers, the rural rehabilitation application asked about seven possible debts – first and second mortgages, chattel mortgages, past due interest on other debts, delinquent taxes, store bills, and borrowings against life insurance.<sup>45</sup>

Most state relief administrators assigned selection to their social service divisions, since caseworkers were already familiar with the farm families on relief rolls in the state and with the techniques of family investigation. Beyond the few minimum standards of age, health,

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<sup>42</sup> Theodore E. Whiting, dir., *Final Statistical Report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1942), 67, 233-34.

<sup>43</sup> “Rehabilitation Makes Progress in Alabama,” *Extension Service Review* 5.7 (1934): 104; Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, June 7, 1934, *One Third of a Nation*, 272-73.

<sup>44</sup> FERA, “Application for Rural Rehabilitation” and “Family Rehabilitation Plan,” *Rural Rehabilitation Forms – Section I, Forms FRR 1, 2, and 3*, NAL.

<sup>45</sup> FERA, “Application for Rural Rehabilitation,” p. 3, *Rural Rehabilitation Forms – Section I, Forms FRR 1, 2, and 3*, NAL.

experience, and intelligence, in most cases caseworkers had freedom to select the best families for each project. This was often a long process. Caseworkers told families about the projects during their interviews but did not tell them they were being considered; based on their responses to the interview questions, families were rejected or recommended. Eligible families were told about the possibility and given time to consider, then interviewed further for information about less quantifiable factors like their initiative or farming ambition. Desire for life in a rural environment was the most important consideration; other qualifications included farm experience and health. Recommended families were informed of their eligibility and re-investigated. Caseworkers met with interested families, who then went into conference with farm experts, social workers, and personnel experts. A five-person local committee then reviewed the entire record and decided. Approved families were notified and got physicals.<sup>46</sup>

Measuring these sorts of intangibles proved difficult, and case workers struggled to assess them. Usually they attempted to do so by in-person interviews, recommendations, and similar methods, but some relief workers adopted less orthodox approaches. In Alabama, for example, relief workers used oxen to determine who was serious about becoming a rehabilitation client. From the relief workers' perspective, the use of steer provided, in the words of an Alabama Relief Administration report, an "acid test" for "an applicant's sincerity and purpose. Acceptance of a steer by an applicant was proof to the Relief Administration that the farmer wanted to earn his own living, for the steer has the reputation of being the most 'ornery' of all work 'critters'."<sup>47</sup> Originally Alabama administrators looked to oxen because of their costs relative to the farm animals they were to replace, mules. The new director of rural rehabilitation, R. K. Greene, was

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<sup>46</sup> John B. Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, Social Research Report, no. 1 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, the Farm Security Administration, and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Cooperating, 1937), 39-43

<sup>47</sup> Alabama Relief Administration, "Rural Rehabilitation Program for 1934," p. 5, Folder 4, Alabama Relief Administration Papers.

frustrated with the Alabama relief program's lack of progress and became one of the main spurs behind the decision to use oxen.<sup>48</sup> Mules cost between \$50 and \$75 a head, versus \$20-\$25 a head for steer; additionally, oxen were cheaper to keep, as they could graze and needed only about \$2 a month for food, compared to \$10 for mules.<sup>49</sup> Administrator's insistence that clients use oxen initially raised a great deal of debate. Mules were considered so integral to southern agricultural that a common way of describing the size of the farm was how many mules it took to operate it; a small owner might have a two-mule farm, while a larger one might have an eleven-mule one.<sup>50</sup> Not all farmers appreciated the importance of using oxen; one reportedly claimed, "Hell! This ain't no New Deal if we-all got to go back to plowin' steers!"<sup>51</sup> Clients who would overcome that traditional attachment to using mules, relief workers believed, were truly committed to the program.

But who was willing or not to use mules or oxen could only provide a very limited answer to questions about eligibility, and FERA rural rehabilitation administrators found themselves with a problem that would face their successors for the next decade in deciding who would be the ideal client. Providing loans for the neediest farmers meant burdening them with loans that might never be repaid, risking the Rural Rehabilitation Division's reputation by making bad loans and wasting a good bit of money. Raising the eligibility level for loans and grants meant ignoring those who needed them most and increasing the number of farmers on the relief rolls, the reduction of which had been part of the initial justification for the program. In general, FERA tended to select from higher up the agricultural ladder; one study found that only

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<sup>48</sup> "Field Notes," *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.1 (1934): 16.

<sup>49</sup> Alabama Relief Administration, "Rural Rehabilitation Program for 1934," p. 7, Folder 4, Alabama Relief Administration Papers; "The Steer Aids in Farm Relief," *New York Times* January 20, 1935.

<sup>50</sup> Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, April 7, 1934, *One Third of a Nation*, 210-11. That farmer, though, was an owner. Tenants appeared to have few problems actually using oxen.

about a fifth of clients were wage hands, and a third of the rest were sharecroppers. Farm families “in a better financial situation,” Woofter reported, were taken into the program more often than sharecroppers and day laborers.<sup>52</sup>

The rural rehabilitation program considered both a family’s farm income and its personal well-being, things which had previously been discrete elements of American rural life. For example, in the South, the credit system had been seen as akin to an act of God, something outside of human control that simply had to be dealt with. It was not really a part of farm life, but an interruption or danger to it. As Robert W. Hudgens, who had long been involved with rural rehabilitation and would be until after World War II, put it, when rural southerners had thought about their expenses, “The banker was in competition with the family living.” Credit threatened a family’s well-being, the same way locusts or a heat wave might be. The FERA rural rehabilitation program was the first agency to put the farm budget and family living together.<sup>53</sup> Bringing together and integrating unrelated activities led to some early mistakes, but it changed the relationship between creditor and client. It also made rural rehabilitation, at least in theory, much more effective – unlike banks or credit agencies which would lend money to a bad farmer with good credit, or an extension service giving good advice to farmers who could not afford to implement it, the rural rehabilitation program could consider the whole farm family and thus better tailor its approach.

The Rural Rehabilitation Division was quite popular with clients, social scientists, administrators, and the press. Indeed, some early reports were almost hyperbolic – an *Atlanta Constitution* headline praised the “pioneer spirit” awoken by the “amazing rural rehabilitation

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<sup>52</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 174.

<sup>53</sup> *Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 188; see also 262-64; see also Laurence Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 73-74.

plan.”<sup>54</sup> While the program was not large enough to put a significant dent in rural poverty, one observer, looking at the results in individual cases, claimed that “the results have been gratifying” in that the “condition of many individual families has been materially improved,” which raised morale not only for those who took part, but those who saw the program in action.<sup>55</sup> Farmers who prided themselves on their independence found that loans and even grants had less social stigma than did direct relief, and loans had the added benefit of costing the government less than direct or even work relief.<sup>56</sup> One reporter claimed that to the relief workers, “the rural rehabilitation program offers more hope than anything else these days.”<sup>57</sup>

The general public favored the principle and goals of the program, although they sometimes questioned the methods. Part of the reason for its popularity may have been its scope; in its busiest month (April 1935), FERA had just short of 210,000 cases involving over a million people.<sup>58</sup> FERA advanced rehabilitation funds to 397,130 cases between April 1934 and June 1935, most of which would have been considered non-standard loans or grants by its successors – that is, loans unlikely to be paid back.<sup>59</sup> Rural rehabilitation money was particularly valuable for the poorest farmers. In the tenant-heavy cotton areas, 97.9% of southern clients received “subsistence goods” loans – for food, clothing, medical care, and similar needs, in contrast to the northern Hay and Dairy Region, where less than a third of clients needed subsistence loans.<sup>60</sup>

The program was heavily concentrated in the cotton South, where the furnish had provided funds

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<sup>54</sup> Julian Harris, “Pioneer Spirit Is Awakened in Georgians by Amazing Rural Rehabilitation Plan,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 10, 1935.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, “Rural Families on Relief,” 94.

<sup>56</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 18; Paul V. Maris, “Rehabilitation Policies,” *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.1 (1934), 21.

<sup>57</sup> Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, April 7, 1934, *One Third of a Nation*, 210.

<sup>58</sup> Whiting, *Final Statistical Report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration*, 65; USDA, “History of the Farm Security Administration,” October 10, 1940, Folder “85-160 Public Relations, July thru December, 1940,” Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>59</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Asch and Magnus, *Farmers on Relief and Rehabilitation*, 28-29.

to tenants and sharecroppers, and to a lesser extent in the drought-stricken Plains and Great Lake States – in other words, in those areas of the country where farmers were in the worst shape.<sup>61</sup>

That is not to say that the program helped every, or even most, families in need; but although it only helped a relatively small number of families, it was easy for observers to imagine the possible impact if the program could manage on a large scale what individual projects did for the families involved. The Cumberland project twelve miles north of Scottsboro, Alabama, for example, only helped 250 people while administered by the Alabama Relief Administration, but each farmer moved, in one reporter's words, "from servile sharecropper to proud land-owner."<sup>62</sup> This kind of success, many supporters hoped, could provide a foundation for the future.

Despite this popularity and apparent success, however, observers recognized that a loan program alone could not solve the problem. In fact, to some degree, it made the problem worse. Federal loans gave farmers the opportunity to borrow money, but not the capacity to repay it. Their land was so poor that many farmers could not make a living, much less repay their loans. A farmer often borrowed against the farm and, unable to repay the loans, risked losing it altogether.<sup>63</sup> Nor was it always clear to farmers that they had even incurred a debt; many had viewed the rehabilitation loan as a grant or relief, and only gradually realized after a year or two that they now had debts to the federal government. That the early loans were so small, poorly linked to work relief for repayment, and generally ineffective only made the situation worse: all of a sudden a family found itself with yet another debt and with little to show for it, a situation most reminiscent of the old-fashioned furnish system.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 84.

<sup>62</sup> Clyde Cruse, "Forty Acres and a Home and It's Mine!" *Birmingham Post*, October 30, 1935.

<sup>63</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 52; Brown, "Rural Families on Relief," 90-91.

<sup>64</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 17-18.

Intended in part to remedy some of the shortcomings of the Rural Rehabilitation loans, FERA also engaged in various community-building and resettlement programs along the same line as those developed by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. This aspect of the FERA program aimed at two different kinds of stranded rural citizens. First, a number of rural people (perhaps a quarter of the nation's population) found themselves stranded in areas lacking employment prospects for half or more of the potential workers living in the area. Some had their old jobs eliminated through mechanization or the Depression (or both). Lumber and mine workers found less demand for their work because of the Depression and exhaustion of resources. Natural disasters, loss of markets, and acreage reduction across the country reduced agricultural production and thus demand for agricultural labor. In these cases, FERA tried to both better the situation of local residents by improving their communities and to cut down on relief costs by paying locals for the construction of such improvements. In most cases this meant working at the level of individual farms, but in others, FERA aimed to reconstruct entire rural communities.<sup>65</sup>

For stranded families left behind by the economy and who had little chance of finding any kind of meaningful employment or advancement, much less self-sufficiency, in their current location, FERA administrators hoped to create new rural-industrial communities or revitalize existing towns or villages to such an extent that they became an entirely new community. These new communities would combine, ideally, the production of food and raw materials for home use with industrial activities aimed at producing products for outside sale. Residents would live on small tracts where they could grow small amounts of food for their families. Social and economic centers – including facilities for trade, industry, cooperatives, and professional work – would surround and intermingle among the residential areas. Between one hundred and one

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<sup>65</sup> Westbrook, "The Program of Rural Rehabilitation of the FERA," 95-99.

hundred and fifty such communities, composed of perhaps up to one thousand families but no less than two hundred each, would dot the American landscape. Part-time farming and decentralization of industry, two trends that supporters were certain to continue in light of the Depression, were the backbone ideas of the plan.<sup>66</sup>

Rural Rehabilitation Director Lawrence Westbrook intended these communities to operate much the same way that the rural rehabilitation program did. The states had leeway to run their own programs. Residents could get small loans for things like mules, chickens, or farm equipment. Westbrook hoped that industry would move close to the projects, but he made no effort to directly encourage it. In all cases, keeping the government out of the way was paramount: FERA administrators wanted only to provide an opportunity. “We are not trying to do all the thinking for these unfortunate people,” Westbrook said about a project carried out by the Texas Relief Administration. “We are trying to give them an opportunity. They’ll accomplish more for themselves than we could in the long run. I think that we who plan, often plan too much.”<sup>67</sup>

The new communities selected families much as the rural rehabilitation program did, with local decision-making, usually carried out by social workers who best knew the families and the needs of the communities. In the resettlement projects, however, there were additional decision-making layers. The 105-unit Irwinville (GA) project is a good example. Here, the Georgia Rehabilitation Corporation put W. P. Bryan, a member of the corporation’s board of directors, almost entirely in charge of organizing the project. He selected the land for the project, handled purchases, and chose the families who would start the project. These families all carried

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<sup>66</sup> Lawrence Westbrook, *Rural-Industrial Communities for Stranded Families: An Outline of Suggested Procedure for the Guidance of State and County Public Relief Administration and Cooperating Public Agencies* (Washington, DC: Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Division of Rural Rehabilitation and Stranded Populations[, 1934?]), 1-4.

<sup>67</sup> “U. S. Speeding Plans to Form Relief Towns,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 1934.



with them case reports from their time on relief, and Bryan used these and personal interviews to select the residents. This personal influence carried some benefits; Bryan even loaned the residents his own money until they got settled. But this sort of entirely local, individual-driven approach also created problems, most notably in how slowly the program got started. It was not until two years after the project began, and under a new and more centralized agency (the Resettlement Administration), that new houses and farm buildings were finally built, farm and home management plans were created, and a medical program had begun.<sup>68</sup>

These resettlement projects had a much worse reputation than did the rural rehabilitation program. Many were badly planned. The Coffee County farms project, scattered throughout Coffee County and five other Alabama counties, was begun in 1935 by the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation to aid families heavily in debt and facing foreclosure. It was an example of how FERA hoped to aid trapped families living on submarginal land that simply could not provide a sufficient income, by helping them move to more suitable farmland. Coffee County certainly needed such aid. Bad crop years, eroded soil, and low produce prices had resulted in 60,000 acres of foreclosure. The state government bought most of the foreclosed farms and turned them over to the RA soon after. After surveys, submarginal lands were planted with pine trees and the remainder was divided into family-sized farms.<sup>69</sup> The original purpose of the project in Coffee County was, in the words of one agricultural economist, “to raise the standard of living of rural people whose standard of living has been almost unbelievably low.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “Irwinville Farms Project,” pp. 7-11, Folder “Farm Security 3 Projects Jan-April 21,” Box 77, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>69</sup> Westbrook, “The Program of Rural Rehabilitation of the FERA,” 99-100; W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume 1*, no date; Box 3, FSA Historical Record, RG 96, NACP. A good discussion of the project can be found in Shafer, *A Basis for Social Planning in Coffee County, Alabama*.

<sup>70</sup> Paul H. Johnstone, “Memorandum for Mr. M. L. Wilson,” p. 1, March 8, 1939, Folder “Farm Security 2 (Projects),” Box 3019, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

But FERA's good intentions were not enough. R. W. Hudgens asserted in 1936 that "there was no sound economic basis for the project as it was originally conceived."<sup>71</sup> The Coffee County project appears to have been started in large part because Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation was able to get so much land at such a low cost.<sup>72</sup> Ernie Pyle described the project's start as "not by design, especially, but because government people and the local agencies got enthusiastic, and it just grew up under them."<sup>73</sup> The RA described "the most undesirable aspect of the project" as being "the fact that the land is decidedly poor, is seriously subject to erosion and the farm plans suggested for use in the area contemplates the use of an economy based on cotton, peanuts, and hogs," which would only make the problem of erosion worse.<sup>74</sup> Nor was construction of the project handled much better; many of the men working on the construction phase the project mistakenly believed that their homes and farms would be provided for free, as an additional payment for their work at the Alabama Conservation Camp.<sup>75</sup>

Skyline Farms, in Alabama, also created headaches for FERA and its successors. It was developed to ease the relief burden in northeastern Alabama as well as provide homes for resettled families forced to move by the Tennessee Valley Authority. It and similar projects prompted fears that the federal government would compete with private industry, or would promote one business at the expense of another. The community had existed because of now-defunct local industry. Critics feared (correctly, as turned out to be the case) that the government would get more directly involved in promoting opportunities for industrial employment if local

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<sup>71</sup> R. W. Hudgens to R. G. Tugwell, November 3, 1936, Folder "AD-AL-17 (060) Coffee Farms," Box 52, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>72</sup> "Agricultural and Economic Brief of Coffee County Farms, RF-AL-17," Folder "Coffee County, RF-AL-17," Box 67, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>73</sup> Ernie Pyle, *Home Country* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1947), 365.

<sup>74</sup> Resettlement Administration, "Request for approval of final plans and authorization of funds to complete the development of the Coffee County Project, Coffee County, Alabama," p. 2, in "Final Budget: Coffee County Homesteads, Coffee Co., Alabama, RF-AL-17," Box 62, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>75</sup> W. L. McArthur to J. B. Kasten, November 5, 1936, Folder "AD-AL-17 (060) Coffee Farms," Box 52, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

industry failed to revive on its own and if the project failed to attract new employment opportunities.<sup>76</sup> Less remarked upon at the time was that Skyline Farms reflected a frankly racial conception of what made a good candidate for resettlement. The families living there, a report explained, were “some of the purest Anglo-Saxon strains in the country” but had been “handicapped for generations by low incomes and lack of normal opportunities.” Being white, it seems, was proof enough that clients could make a project work.<sup>77</sup>

Business leaders in particular resented the resettlement program, especially the implication that private businesses had any sort of responsibility to ensure the success of new communities. Henry I. Harriman, president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, claimed that such changes should develop gradually because business was “in a pretty hot spot.” He argued that removing factories to the fringes of a subsistence community was unrealistic, but that conditions could change in the future. “As their plants wear out and replacements are needed,” he said, industry might consider a transition to the kind of development FERA had in mind, but it was unrealistic to expect such expansion while the economy was so bad.<sup>78</sup>

Besides operating the rehabilitation and resettlement programs, FERA was part of a related, larger effort toward general land reform, which was actually an effort to address a series of related problems. FERA, the Soil Erosion Service, the AAA, the National Park Service, the Forest Service, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, and a variety of other government agencies and divisions had a role in creating and undertaking new land use policies. The

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<sup>76</sup> USDA, “Skyline Farms,” August 20, 1940, Folder “85-10-16-060 Projects,” Box 18, Project Construction Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>77</sup> USDA, “Skyline Farms” [no date], p. 2, Folder “85-01-16-060 Projects,” Box 18, Project Construction Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>78</sup> “Two Units Push Stranded Aid, Relief Plans,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 1934. Harriman did, however, support the similar work of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, apparently because he saw it as the beginning of a long-term process that would promote private ownership of land and industry without too much burden on the government. “Harriman Praises Homestead Project as Key to Stability,” *Washington Post*, July 30, 1934; Henry I. Harriman, “A New Pattern for Industrial America,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1934.

purchase and retirement of submarginal land, the improvement of land, promulgation of soil erosion techniques, reforestation, and other programs had been an interest of Roosevelt's since his time as governor of New York. This program was designed to cope with the 100,000 acres of American land believed to be unfit for farming.<sup>79</sup> Nor was it just the liberal New Dealers and other reformists who saw the need for such a program; even the *Extension Service Review*, oriented to the mindset of traditional agricultural leadership and the land grant colleges, dedicated articles to promoting it.<sup>80</sup> Some planners, like L.C. Gray, saw sound land use planning as the most important and valuable thing the government could do for rural America. Describing pre-New Deal federal land policy, for example, Gray compared the "progressive elements" of reservation and land management systems with the "obsolete homestead system" promoted in the West, and he praised the government's willingness to implement a better land use system during the New Deal.<sup>81</sup>

The need for such a program certainly appeared great. For example, one reason for the South's poverty was its poor farm lands. Cotton and tobacco rapidly took nutrients out of the soil, and most southern farmers did not know, did not care, or could not afford how to replace them. Erosion not only ruined the soil, but it also created engineering problems like silted reservoirs, filled-up navigation channels, and difficult flood control.<sup>82</sup> While erosion was a problem across the country – the dust storms that cut across the Great Plains being a good example – it was particularly bad in the South. Run-off cut gullies throughout the South. The

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<sup>79</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 65.

<sup>80</sup> For example, even before Roosevelt's election: Arthur M. Hyde, "Needed—A Land Policy," *Extension Service Review* 2.12 (1931): 177-78; "Recommendations of Land-Utilization Conference," *Extension Service Review* 3.1 (1932): 8-11.

<sup>81</sup> L. C. Gray, "The Social and Economic Implications of the National Land Program," *Journal of Farm Economics* 18.2 (1936): 257. Gray's emphasis on land-use reform led some RA employees to complain that he was "primarily interested in land, not in people." Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 81.

<sup>82</sup> G. W. Forster, "Progress and Problems in Agricultural Planning in the Southern States," *Journal of Farm Economics* 18.1 (1936): 92; Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 43-44.

enormous Providence Gully in Georgia was in spots two hundred feet deep and six hundred feet wide. It meandered along for several miles, and had by 1934 swallowed a barn, church, schoolhouse, graveyard, some homes, and several farms.<sup>83</sup>

The problem of poor land use was inseparably tied up with rural poverty. The most soil-damaging crop, cotton, was most likely to be grown by those who least cared about soil damage, tenant farmers. As of 1930, tenants operated 73% of farms that relied primarily cotton for income.<sup>84</sup> Over 60% of those engaged in cotton production in the ten biggest cotton-producing states were tenants.<sup>85</sup> Tenants had no economic incentive to improve the land; on the contrary, it made the most sense for them to take as much as they could. Likewise, landlords had little reason to repair or improve housing, other buildings, fences, or wells on land they rented, as these had little direct impact on their own well being. Furthermore, even if the tenant did want to improve the land, most could only afford to plant cash crops, not soil-improving cover crops (much less let the land lie fallow); if they purchased fertilizer, it was only for the purposes of a short-term increase in production.<sup>86</sup>

The South's treatment of its other natural resources followed a similar pattern. Urban growth created a growing demand for lumber, and the South, like the rest of the country, responded with an enormously wasteful destruction of timber. Forests were removed almost entirely. Timber companies crossing the country left deserted mills, standard part-time farmers, and completely cutover forests. This not only encouraged erosion and limited future sources of timber from local farmers, but it also contributed to the problems of low income, submarginal

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<sup>83</sup> Owen P. White, "All Washed Up," *Collier's*, September 29, 1934, 12-13; H. H. Bennett, "Our Soil Can Be Saved," in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 430.

<sup>84</sup> Howard A. Turner, "Farm Tenancy Distribution and Trends in the United States," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 427.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 4-5.

<sup>86</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy*, 7.

farmers: a number of the rehabilitation families in the 1930s would be those trying to make a living on farms that were originally designed for part-time farming combined with timber and other rural industry.<sup>87</sup>

A number of New Dealers saw the land use program, despite its halting start, as the key to ending such abuses and restoring agricultural prosperity. Ideally, as Rexford Tugwell saw it, this was to be the foundation for a long-term federal land program in which the federal government would take possession of land that was unprofitable or marginally profitable and put it to other uses like parks, forests, wild life preserves, and so on. The most efficient farmers would remain on the best lands, continuing to increase their efficiency in meeting America's agricultural needs without overwhelming the markets. This was, in Tugwell's view, the only realistic option – wholly private ownership of agricultural land had proved itself inadequate, while large-scale restriction of land use to reduce agricultural output only created more expense without addressing the fundamental problems of American land use. A land program, combined with programs to raise standards of living (and thus consumption) would provide for long-term stability.<sup>88</sup>

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Despite high hopes, the total FERA rural program was essentially a holding effort, designed to keep farmers on their farms at a subsistence level during troubled times. That work relief was still available for many of them to repay their loans makes it clear that early administrators did not think of these farmers as entirely self-sufficient or as being able to support themselves solely from agricultural pursuits. Further, many FERA administrators saw rural poverty as a temporary problem, brought on by the Depression or natural disaster, and

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<sup>87</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 56-57.

<sup>88</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, "The Place of Government in a National Land Program," *Journal of Farm Economics* 16.1 (1934): 58-63.

correspondingly believed that their work would be temporary. It was not a surprise, then, that so much of their early supervision was simply not very good.<sup>89</sup> Many of the principles set down in this early period, however, would prove to be enduring, including the connection between credit and supervision, along with related or complementary programs like resettlement, land reform, and debt adjustment to ensure that clients remained good candidates for agricultural success and the repayment of loans.

These various FERA efforts also created a wave of criticism and opposition from conservatives who opposed it on ideological grounds, business and agricultural leaders who resented the intrusion and regulations of FERA as a whole, and within the federal government as new agricultural programs stepped on the toes of established departments and agencies.<sup>90</sup> Many in the Extension Service believed, as the West Virginia state director wrote in 1930, that if Congress introduced a land retirement program, “extension work will undoubtedly have to shoulder much of the responsibility of interpreting it to the rural people and enlisting their cooperation.”<sup>91</sup> The creation of a new agency outside the Department of Agriculture did not fit into this vision.

In addition to other problems and criticisms, FERA as a whole was hindered by the lack of permanency – it was part of no major executive department and lacked institutional protection and defenders. Despite all this, New Deal officials could point out FERA was successful. The rural relief rate in the Southeast began to decline in the early months of 1934 and continued to do so irregularly during the life of the FERA programs, as opposed to the generally increasing relief

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<sup>89</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 151.

<sup>90</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 66-68.

<sup>91</sup> Nat T. Frame, “Larger Objectives in Extension Work,” *Extension Service Review* 1.5 (1930): 67.

rolls in the rest of the country.<sup>92</sup> Beyond any quantitative success, the rural rehabilitation program also seemed to point toward a new way of approaching rural poverty. As the New Deal got underway with a second round of reform and agency-making in 1935, liberals considering the problems of agriculture and the rural poor sought to incorporate the program into a new effort at national planning and reform.

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<sup>92</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 66-68; Myers, "Relief in the Rural South," 282. Myers also provides a brief history of non-RA relief between the start of the FERA program and 1937.



## CHAPTER 3

### GOING BACK TO THE LAND ON A SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEAD

The Rural Rehabilitation Division and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) were not the only New Deal efforts to deal with rural poverty. John H. Bankhead, Democratic Senator from Alabama, was one of the earliest influential supporters of subsistence homesteads. Various colonization efforts had been proposed over the years, but subsistence homesteads had considerable appeal as the idea drew on long-held cultural notions of self-supporting individualist farmers.

The subsistence homesteads program was a far cry from the most influential part of the early New Deal's agricultural program, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which had been planned almost exclusively for the benefits of larger producers and generally worsened the position of small farmers and pushed tenants off the land. Like President Franklin D. Roosevelt and millions of other Americans both in and out of government (including the planners who were at the same time getting the FERA rural rehabilitation program underway), Bankhead believed strongly in the notion of the farm as a refuge against the uncertainties of the industrial economy. He hoped that a new federal program could take advantage of the natural advantages of rural life to better the condition of those trapped in poverty and unemployment.

This conception drew on a curious mix of extreme pessimism about the economy in general and an extreme optimism about the restorative powers of rural living. Planners and supporters had an almost panicked feeling that a return to industrial prosperity would not happen

for years, maybe even decades, or perhaps never. Some alternative had to be found for the mass of unemployed who had, from this perspective, no future in their current occupations. The solution would be a new form of living, perhaps even a new form of community, that would reflect the budding back-to-the-land movement capturing imaginations across the country. These new subsistence homesteads would provide everything that a rural or semi-rural citizen needed for survival. Some would provide everything necessary for farmers moved from submarginal lands, or for former industrial employees like stranded coal miners. But the most hope lay with communities that would combine the best of rural and urban life. Historian Donald Holley describes how the “industrial-type projects became the best examples of what subsistence homesteads were supposed to be,” a modern combination of mechanized farming techniques and small subsistence farms that still provided the opportunity for seasonal or part-time industrial employment.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, nothing about the subsistence homesteads worked out as hoped during the year-and-a-half existence of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. From the very beginning – even before the beginning, when subsistence homesteads was still just a legislative goal – unexpected delays and obstacles made it impossible to legislate, plan, construct, and operate the homesteads as anticipated. As the homestead projects around Birmingham, Alabama, illustrate, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads would not even begin construction of most of the projects it planned. Instead, that would be left to its successor agency, the Resettlement Administration, which also struggled under the burden of the mistakes made and obstacles not overcome by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads.

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<sup>1</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 53.

The back-to-the-land ideal undergirding the early subsistence homesteads program had an apparent basis in observable action. Starting in 1930, the trend toward rural migration to the city reversed itself. Instead, jobless people in cities left to go back to the supposed security of the farm to avoid paying rent, to live with relatives, to squat, to grow food to keep from starving, and to become independent and self-sufficient. By 1930, eight states and numerous localities had started back-to-the-land programs to harness this new movement.<sup>2</sup> The Depression seemed as never before to strengthen the agrarian, back-to-the-land belief. As historian Donald Holley writes, “‘back to the land’ had never before so engaged the imagination of people.”<sup>3</sup>

Subsistence homesteads looked like a good middle ground between rural and urban concerns. Land utilization experts argued that perhaps a third of the country’s farms should be removed from cultivation due to the poor soil and instead be converted to woodland or pasture. This meant moving farmers off the land, a process that would only accelerate with improvements to farm machinery. Yet unemployment in the cities, proponents of subsistence homesteads argued, indicated that industrial centers were over-populated. Farmers could not go to the cities; in fact, urban workers needed to move out. Subsistence homesteads would be the place to send these excess workers, making them neither farmers nor factory workers, but something in-between.<sup>4</sup> Or better: as one writer explained, “Midway between factory town and typical farm lies the Promised Land – a land of comfortable subsistence for everyone willing to work.”<sup>5</sup>

On these plots, marginally employed workers or farmers would produce a substantial amount of food needed for their family’s consumption. Cash income would come from home

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<sup>2</sup> Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Back-to-the-Land Movement,” in Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942), 11-13. For a summary of back-to-the-landism in America prior to the New Deal, see Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 11-36.

<sup>3</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> J. Blaine Gwin, “Subsistence Homesteads,” *Social Forces* 12.4 (May, 1934): 522.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Edison Williams, “Roosevelt Expects Farm-Factory Plan to Cut Down Doles,” *Christian Science Monitor* February 5, 1934.

production and industrial or other outside employment. The acreage would be fairly small – bigger than that needed for just a yard and a vegetable garden, but considerably smaller than that required for a commercial farm. In part this was because the would-be homesteader, with outside employment, would not have time to cultivate a large plot, and in part because it takes a fairly small bit of land – between one and five acres, depending on how much cash income is available for supplementary food – to produce enough food to supply a single family. Administrators expected some small surplus farm produce to be sold, but this would only constitute a minor part of the family’s overall budget.<sup>6</sup>

Two relatively conservative back-to-the-landers who gave the movement political strength were New York Governor, soon to be U.S. president, Franklin D. Roosevelt and agricultural expert and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administrator M . L. Wilson of Montana. Roosevelt seems to have had an inherent distrust for urban living and efforts toward urban reform, and he, in William E. Leuchtenburg’s words, “responded with much greater warmth to chimerical plans to remove slum dwellers to the countryside than he did to schemes for urban renewal.”<sup>7</sup> FDR had a strong sense, as did many back-to-the-land proponents, that it was simply impossible to encounter real physical hardship in rural areas. “I think it is fair to say,” he claimed in a radio address, “that with certain exceptions most of these people in the country are not faced with actual starvation or actual eviction [...] actual distress and starvation and lack of fuel and lack of clothing exist primarily in the cities of the nation.”<sup>8</sup>

In his inaugural address, Roosevelt noted the “overbalance of population in our industrial centres,” calling for “a national scale in redistribution” as part of his “endeavor to provide a

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<sup>6</sup> Philip M. Glick, “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program,” *Yale Law Journal* 44.8 (1935): 1327.

<sup>7</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 136.

<sup>8</sup> FDR, *PPA*, 1:516-17. For similar sentiment as candidate and governor, see Roosevelt, *PPA*, 1:142-43, 699-700. See also 1:701-02, 813-15, where he discusses his concerns about the farm mortgage problem, which endangered a farmer’s position on the land.

better use of the land for those best fitted for the land.”<sup>9</sup> Technological changes, he believed, would make the family farm more efficient than it had ever been. Thus some kind of homestead program could be a solution to the problems of urban employment as well.<sup>10</sup> Food production, FDR believed, was so cheap and easy that the problem could not lie with cost. Instead, those who lived in the city were “in the very places where it is most inconvenient and expensive for society to help them.”<sup>11</sup> Urbanites moving to the country would live both cheaply and more healthily – getting more milk and fresh vegetables, at a lower cost, than was possible in the city.<sup>12</sup>

Roosevelt introduced a subsistence farming program while governor of New York, and he told the state legislature in January 1932 that it was more than a mere “back to the farm” plan. The “distribution of population during recent years has got out of balance,” FDR explained, and “a readjustment must take place to restore the economic and sociological balance.”<sup>13</sup> He presented the idea as the next step beyond the immediate, urgent needs of short-term relief, crafting an argument that combined rational economic sense with notions of the superiority of rural life. “They may secure through the good earth,” FDR announced, “the permanent jobs they have lost in overcrowded, industrial cities and towns.” He went on to claim that unemployed relief families could find “a position at least to partially support themselves in healthy surroundings, of which many of them are now deprived” and telling listeners that, while “in our mechanical age” citizens of the state had forgotten, New Yorkers should look back to their past as one of the most important agricultural states in the land, as “living from the land is still in the heritage of the New Yorker.”<sup>14</sup> Later, Roosevelt called the subsistence homesteads, then under

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<sup>9</sup> “Text of the Inaugural Address; President for Vigorous Action,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1933.

<sup>10</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Brains Trust* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 178-79; Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Back to the Land,” *Review of Reviews* (October, 1931): 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt, *PPA*, 1:507.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:511.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:116.

<sup>14</sup> “Roosevelt Begins Providing Jobless With Land to Work,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1932.

heavy criticism, “my own pet children.”<sup>15</sup> He was also heavily influenced by Eleanor Roosevelt, who reportedly, after a visit to a Pennsylvania coal field, recommended subsistence homesteads.<sup>16</sup> Her impact on the subsistence homesteads program, “while indirect,” in Russell’s Lord’s words, “was intense.”<sup>17</sup>

M. L. Wilson was active behind-the-scenes promoting the subsistence-homesteads idea long before it reached the point of legislation. He was one of the few leading homestead advocates who was actually a farmer; he had long been active in developing and promoting farm improvements and was an early expert in the use of multiple hitches for horse-drawn heavy machinery. Wilson also had the requisite educational qualifications, having graduated from the State Agricultural College at Ames, Iowa, and studied postgraduate agricultural economics at Wisconsin. Wilson was widely recognized as an expert on subsistence-farming as well as large-scale wheat production. He had been one of the chief authors of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s domestic allotment plan. He had also seen in person the possibilities for very small plots – he had organized just such a development in Montana based on the success of small farmers in the Cache Valley, Utah, working on farms barely larger than two acres.<sup>18</sup>

Wilson was a proponent, as were Bankhead and others, of a mixed farming-industrial homestead. As late as 1940, he said that to those who saw the need for a cash income among subsistence or small-time farmers, “it seems that in a national economy there would be room for a combination of part-time industrial employment with part-time farming. [...] Nothing seems

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<sup>15</sup> Leon Dure, Jr., “Evolution of Nation Without ‘Revolution’ Is Aim of Roosevelt,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 1934.

<sup>16</sup> “Roosevelt Chides Nation for Not ‘Thinking Ahead’; Scores 30-Day Panaceas,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1934.

<sup>17</sup> Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa*, 428.

<sup>18</sup> The Unofficial Observer, “‘M.L.’ Another New Deal Natural,” and “Perfect Prefecture of New Deal” *Washington Post*, March 2-3, 1934; Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Back-to-the-Land Movement,” *A Place on Earth*, 20-21; Gwin, “Subsistence Homesteads,” 523-24. See also Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 11-15; 22-49.

more rational than to combine seasonal industrial activity with this kind of part-time farming, a combination which worked well in some older cultural patterns.”<sup>19</sup>

Wilson and Roosevelt shared the belief that American cultural and economic changes made the moment ideal for the government to create a back-to-the land program, as did many of the administrators under them. Oscar M. Dugger, a regional supervisor in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, believed that a move back to the land was a result of both the new Depression-era environment and something inherent in humanity. After the crass materialism of the Jazz Age, he claimed, it was only natural that the yearning for home and security should come to the forefront, a reflection of mankind’s true values. “Sentiment for home is deeply rooted in the heart of the human creature,” Dugger claimed. Reflecting the sentimentalized view of the family farm and home, he also said, “A man, no matter how strong he may be in professional or business qualifications is always a man-child who wants to go at the end of the day to a home and a woman to mother him.”<sup>20</sup>

The back-to-the-land movement even had something for those Americans thinking about international trade. Southern Agrarian John Crowe Ransom told readers of *The New Republic* that emulating Germany and England by creating capitalist, export-driven economies dependent on foreign markets and free trade was a great error in a time when over-production had arrived. International competition was an error and unnecessary; thanks to its abundant land the US was “incomparably stronger” than other nations forced into relying on trade. Instead of fighting it out on the international stage, Ransom argued, the US could step out of the competition by moving its over-productive factory workers onto the land. There they could both feed themselves and live richer agrarian lives. Look at Europe, he concluded, which was sliding into an impossible

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<sup>19</sup> M. L. Wilson, “Problem of Poverty in Agriculture,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 22.1 (1940): 26.

<sup>20</sup> Frances Durham, “Homesteads South for State by Native,” *Birmingham News*, February 11, 1934.

situation because of too much capitalism and not enough land: an agrarian movement was America's best hope.<sup>21</sup>

Not everyone agreed. Like most of the other Brains Trust, Rexford Tugwell put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of agricultural recovery. The Depression had begun in agriculture, he believed, and it would be solved there. He found Roosevelt entirely too sentimental about rural life, but both men believed that one of the significant problems in the modern economy was a shift of influence and wealth away from agriculture and toward industry.<sup>22</sup> As he later wrote of his early discussions with FDR, "I differed sharply with him about remedies" even as both agreed about the basic problem.<sup>23</sup> Tugwell had little use for "common platitudes" about "the advantages of fresh country air and sunshine" which "never could fully hide the fact of cruelly long hours and short pay," as he wrote in 1935.<sup>24</sup> With this hard life in mind, he opposed one of the more popular ideas, the subsistence homesteads. In particular, he found the idea of manufacturers establishing factories near the homesteads to be ludicrous; "People go to employment," he told Eleanor Roosevelt, "not employment to people."<sup>25</sup>

But the fact that FDR's particular back-to-the-land ideal ran contrary to such expert advice was not especially important. It was a politically potent idea, and it followed him from Albany to Washington, especially as the national mood seemed to favor such a program. Across the country, a back-to-the-land movement had support. For example Columbus, Georgia, began a local back-to-the-land project in January 1932, moving more than a thousand people to farms.

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<sup>21</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "The State and the Land," *The New Republic*, February 17, 1932, 8-10.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 123-24.

<sup>23</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, *In Search of Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 123.

<sup>24</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, "National Significance of Recent Trends in Farm Population," *Social Forces* 14.1 (1935): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Tugwell, *The Brains Trust*, 178.



Organized by the local welfare department, the project cooperated with local community groups and organizations to furnish provisions and market produce.<sup>26</sup>

In March 1933 Bankhead first introduced a bill to move the supposed surplus industrial population from urban centers to subsistence farms. It would have provided loans, via a \$400 million grant to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, for unemployed industrial workers with farming experience who had recently worked in agriculture or wanted to return to a farm. The homesteader who fulfilled the purchase contract would then have twenty years to repay the loan at no more than 4% interest. This bill died under the hostile eye of South Carolina Senator “Cotton Ed” Smith in the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. Bankhead tried again. On April 17, he introduced a second bill, with two main differences from his first proposal. Most notably, it was much smaller than the first – the initial appropriation of \$400 million was reduced to a \$25 million grant for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Second, it called for the slightly different “subsistence homestead” instead of “subsistence farms” (as the first bill did) and recognized that these could include colony or communal settlements as well as individual farms. This bill too failed to get out of committee, this time the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency.<sup>27</sup> The considerable opposition to the bill came with claims that it was “too socialistic,” despite that (or because) it had the support of many social scientists; T. J. Woofter

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<sup>26</sup> “A Back-to-Farm Plan That Works in Georgia,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1933. Similar ideas, all struggling to deal with the vastness of the Great Depression, did not directly involve agriculture. The theory of “decentration” held that breaking up large industrial units into smaller ones scattered across the countryside would protect against economic depression and promote craft pride among more independent workers. This idea did not directly include something like subsistence homesteads, but it certainly fit the model. Rader Winget, “Smaller Units in Industry Planned,” *Birmingham News*, December 17, 1933.

<sup>27</sup> S. 69, 73rd Cong., 1st sess. (introduced March 10, 1933), and S. 1503, 73rd Cong., 1st sess. (introduced April 27, 1933), both in Box 10, Bankhead Papers; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 69; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 87-89; Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, 26-27.

called it “one of the most common sense approaches to actual needs of tenants which has been proposed.”<sup>28</sup>

Bankhead, with the support of Roosevelt and like-minded New Dealers, then opted for a less direct approach. With little fanfare, a subsistence homesteads program was practically snuck into the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) as Section 208, to “provide for aiding the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers” by “making loans for and otherwise aiding in the purchase of subsistence homesteads.”<sup>29</sup> The 1933 Act empowered the president to create an agency to make loans for the purchase of subsistence homesteads with an allocation of \$25 million to finance the program, with repayments from the homesteaders intended to finance its continuing operation. On July 12, 1933, Executive Order 6209 authorized the Secretary of the Interior to administer the provisions of Section 208, Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act.<sup>30</sup>

Going about creating the subsistence homesteads program in such a way had considerable impact on its administration. Bankhead’s program was only connected to the rest of the NIRA in two ways: it was in Title II, which created the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the program received \$25 million of the \$3.3 billion allocated for it. Additionally, labor regulations laid down for relief labor had to be used, which caused a number of problems in the operation of the homesteads.<sup>31</sup> The rather tricky legal underpinning required administrative maneuvers that contributed to the Division of Subsistence Homesteads’ reputation for violating legislative intent (which would follow as it became part of the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security

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<sup>28</sup> Woofler, “Southern Population and Social Planning,” 20.

<sup>29</sup> National Industrial Recovery Act, H.R. 5755, 73rd Cong., 1st sess. One need only compare the fairly simple language of Section 208 with the other, far more detailed sections of the Act to see how unrelated Section 208 was to the rest of it.

<sup>30</sup> FDR, Executive Order 6209, 1933.

<sup>31</sup> Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Drive for Legislation,” in Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942), 39.

Administration). For example, at the Bankhead homesteads in Jasper, Alabama, planners had to take creative steps to build a school. The law funding construction of the project established a community center but had no provisions for a public school. Thus the public school building was named the Bankhead Farmsteads Community Center. Except for the auditorium that could host other community functions, it was primarily used as a school, but the name and official purpose alone seemed to have satisfied the letter of the law.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the lack of care in crafting the program created other long-term problems. As a relief program, the subsistence homesteads program had to be put together in a hurry. There simply was not time for careful reflection or study. Rural sociologists at the time noted that as a result of this lack of planning, the program did not get off to a good start. One wrote that “the policies of the Division were consistent with neither the new population trend nor the prevailing pattern of part-time farming.”<sup>33</sup>

This haste also obscured the fact that the purposes of the subsistence homesteads remained unsettled. The discussions over the initial homestead bills indicated that some supporters imagined subsistence-homesteads as relief for the industrially unemployed who needed immediate food and housing. Others saw a more long-term project. M. L. Wilson noted that the very term “subsistence homestead” caused problems, evoking notions of a program other than the one which would (in his conception, at least) hearken back to an older tradition of agricultural workers with part-time employment.<sup>34</sup> In any case, no clear ideas emerged on what the program should actually look like. Bankhead (like many supporters) straddled these two main ideas, writing, “the only form of permanent relief” is getting “people out of the industrial centers

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<sup>32</sup> Ray Rutledge, “The Development of the Bankhead Farmsteads Community,” (M.A. thesis, Auburn University, 1951), 15-18.

<sup>33</sup> Leonard A. Salter, Jr., “Research and Subsistence Homesteads,” *Rural Sociology* 2.2 (1937): 208.

<sup>34</sup> M. L. Wilson, “The Subsistence Homestead Program,” *Proceedings of the Institute of Public Affairs* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1934), 158.

and get[ting] them on small farms where they can dig out of the ground a living for themselves and their families.”<sup>35</sup> There were no hearings or debates over the way Subsistence Homesteads got into NIRA in 1933; the result was that the differing, contradictory, vague ideas of the movement went on unresolved.<sup>36</sup> In the words of rural sociologist Carl C. Taylor, even discussing the planning was difficult, as “no one has yet come forward with a satisfactory definition of what a subsistence homestead is or should be.”<sup>37</sup>

Had further reflection taken place, homestead advocates might have recognized their own negativity about the possibilities of their program. High and rising unemployment and growing relief rolls, along with over a decade of agricultural stagnation, meant that some New Dealers worked in what they considered a rather hopeless situation. Bankhead asked, in 1932, “Can we reasonably expect an early return of [...] reemployment by industry of the great army of the unemployed? [...] How many years lie ahead of us before industry can again employ all the idle workers?”<sup>38</sup> M. L. Wilson asserted simply, “Industry in the United States [planned or not] will never again be able to absorb the total available manpower at full time.”<sup>39</sup> J. Blaine Gwin, of the American Red Cross, remarked in 1934, “Those phases of the farm movement related to the depression represent a belief that the machine age has gone as far as it can. It is an admission that we have a permanent condition of poverty and must move in the direction of security at the expense of a richer living.”<sup>40</sup> A political scientist wrote in 1944 that Subsistence Homesteads

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<sup>35</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to H. H. MacCormack, December 11, 1934, Folder 5, Box 4, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Drive for Legislation,” *A Place on Earth*, 35-36.

<sup>37</sup> Carl C. Taylor, “Research Needed as Guidance to the Subsistence Homesteads Program,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 16.2 (1934): 310. Taylor later defined five main divisions among supporters of the subsistence homesteads: back-to-the-landers, those who wanted a low-cost housing program, those who wanted to decentralize industry, those promoting “a recrudescence of the simple handicraft life,” and those who simply thought it was being done wrong. See Carl C. Taylor, “Social and Economic Significance of the Subsistence Homesteads Program,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 17.4 (1935): 722.

<sup>38</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., “Back to the Farm,” Folder 2, Box 13, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson, “The Subsistence Homestead Program,” 166.

<sup>40</sup> Gwin, “Subsistence Homesteads,” 522.

developed when the “country was in a state of despair and fear, or at best had only begun to emerge from that state of mind, and was groping for something stable to hold upon.”<sup>41</sup> As Paul Johnstone explained, many early advocates of the subsistence homesteads program “had become convinced that full industrial employment was never to be expected again.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite his reservations, M. L. Wilson believed that subsistence homesteads could provide a new solution to the problems of poverty and unemployment. Roosevelt brought Wilson out of the Department of Agriculture, where he was head of the Wheat Section in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, to become director of Subsistence Homesteads Division when the program was officially established on August 23, 1933.<sup>43</sup> Similar to Roosevelt’s general approach to New Deal planning – the idea of saving capitalism from its own excesses – Wilson saw the Subsistence Homesteads as a way to chart a middle course. In a world “where natural resources have been largely appropriated [...] where labor power is increasingly abundant and even harder to sell,” pure capitalism was out of date. A completely planned economy, however, would not suit the “individualistic traditions of the American people.” Wilson argued that planning did not equal socialism, and it had a place in the American economy.<sup>44</sup> But given America’s specific, and capitalism’s general, anathema to planning and government intervention, national planning had to be developed carefully.

The early 1930s, Wilson believed, was the perfect moment for such planning. With widespread interest in the back-to-the-land movement, changes in technology (like the automobile) that made part-time farming economically viable, a lessening of the factors that had

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<sup>41</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Johnstone, “Introduction,” *A Place on Earth*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> The Unofficial Observer, “‘M.L.’ Another New Deal Natural,” and “Perfect Prefecture of New Deal” *Washington Post*, March 2-3, 1934.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, “The Subsistence Homestead Program,” 163.

promoted the centralization of industry in the past, and a Depression-era reversal of the trend toward urbanization, the old idea of subsistence farming had a new value.<sup>45</sup>

Wilson appointed Clarence E. Pickett, a Quaker social worker, as his deputy. Robert W. Hudgens left an investment firm in Greenville, South Carolina, to become regional director for the South.<sup>46</sup> Wilson's goal was a decentralized, grass-roots sort of organization. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes generally disapproved, but he wanted to avoid the delays that might arise from the usual departmental system and to encourage local variations.<sup>47</sup> This meant taking voluntary applications, which arrived in overwhelming numbers: in the first three months applicants submitted proposals that would have cost \$3 billion, and by February 1934, it was \$4 billion. Wilson later reported that \$750 million worth of projects merited serious consideration.<sup>48</sup>

The answer to how to organize a subsistence homesteads program seemed to be a government-owned corporation; to facilitate decentralization, each project was to have a separate corporation whose stock was owned by the parent corporation. Wilson and most of his staff believed the projects could only be successful if supported, planned, and run locally, so they wanted strong, autonomous local corporations.<sup>49</sup> Philip Glick, who first worked with him at Subsistence Homesteads, called Wilson "a great decentralist" and "a thorough-going democrat of

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<sup>45</sup>Wilson, "The Place of Subsistence Homesteads in Our National Economy," 74-76.

<sup>46</sup> Clarence E. Pickett, *For More than Bread: An Autobiographical Account of Twenty-Two Year's Works with the American Friends Service Committee* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 41-64; *Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 1, 116-24.

<sup>47</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Johnstone and Goodwin, "The Administration of the Subsistence-Homesteads Program," in Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942), 41; "\$4,500,000,000 Asked for Homestead Aid, With Federal Fund Limited to \$25,000,000," *New York Times*, February 18, 1934. As Clarence Pickett pointed out, the voluminous number of ideas did indicate that the concept of subsistence homesteads caught something in the American imagination. Pickett, *For More than Bread*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 422-23; Johnstone and Goodwin, "The Administration of the Subsistence-Homesteads Program," *A Place on Earth*, 44-45.

the small ‘d’ as well as with a capital ‘D.’”<sup>50</sup> “Democracy,” historian Paul Conkin writes, “was the nearest thing to an absolute to Wilson.”<sup>51</sup> If planning did not start at the bottom, on a solid foundation of democratic opinion, it would necessarily fail. This meant that Wilson wanted both gradual change (because any change in democratic opinion would be gradual) and a local-oriented program.

Because the appropriation for the program was so small, from the beginning administrators decided to focus on creating homestead communities rather than providing aid and loans to individual families. The project was so small in comparison to the problem at hand that it could be little more than experimental (as the *Christian Science Monitor* put it, “scarcely more than a demonstration of the soundness of this type of population decentralization.”)<sup>52</sup> A successful community would be a much better demonstration than would individual homesteaders. Further, many administrators believed that a social organization, which could promote a feeling of local responsibility and group sentiment, might be more effective.<sup>53</sup>

This explicitly experimental approach did raise criticisms, most publicly from a Dr. William A. Wirt. A school superintendent from Gary, Indiana, Wirt testified before a House Investigating Committee that M. L. Wilson and others had discussed in his presence that the \$25 million appropriated for the subsistence homesteads had been “expended for some other purpose,” namely, “a planning of some communities in America as demonstration centers of what might be accomplished toward getting the richer life for American people.” This, Wirt asserted, was a violation of the government’s main goals of relief and recovery.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *The Preparation of the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law: An Interview with Philip M. Glick* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 6, 15.

<sup>51</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 96. See also Gilbert, “A Usable Past,” 138-40.

<sup>52</sup> “Federal Funds for Farms Only Drop in Bucket,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 1933.

<sup>53</sup> Glick, “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program,” 1332-33.

<sup>54</sup> “Dr. Wirt’s Testimony on His ‘Brain Trust’ Revolt Charges,” *Washington Post*, April 11, 1934.

Such complaints did not deter Wilson, who envisioned three different kinds of communities. First, and most common, would be part-time farming communities near already-existing industrial employment. A second group would be rural colonies for farmers removed from submarginal land. A third, heterogeneous group included the most experimental and controversial programs, such as the communities for stranded coal miners.<sup>55</sup>

The plan was put into action on December 2, 1933, when the Secretary of the Interior created the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation (organized under Delaware law), which in turn set up subsidiary corporations for each project. At the first meeting of the directors of the new corporation, eleven subsidiary corporations were set up, each issuing \$1,000 of common stock, all owned by the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation. By owning the entirety of the stock of each subsidiary corporation, the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation could influence the policies of each.<sup>56</sup>

The parent corporation acted as the Division's administrative branch in Washington, while a subsidiary corporation, its stock entirely owned by the parent company, existed for each project. The stock of the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation was to be held in trust by Ickes. Despite the fact that the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation owned the stock for each company, the purpose of such an arrangement was local control.<sup>57</sup> Each local company did have some responsibility to the parent Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation – it had to expend advances on loans as laid out in the fairly general "Project Book" created for each project to roughly lay out its purposes, planned construction, and organization.<sup>58</sup> But the subsidiary

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<sup>55</sup> Gwin, "Subsistence Homesteads," 524; Wilson, "The Subsistence Homestead Program," 172-74; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 104-05.

<sup>56</sup> Glick, "The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program," 1334-35.

<sup>57</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 23-24; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 105-07.

<sup>58</sup> Many of these still exist among the records of the Farmers Home Administration housed in the National Archives, Record Group 96, National Archives at College Park, Maryland.



corporation did most of the local work. It owned the title to the land acquired for each project, retained attorneys, created contracts, selected homesteaders, and supervised the communities. The original directors were to be local citizens with representation of influential local groups: agricultural and business leaders, government officials, labor groups, and eventually the homesteaders themselves.<sup>59</sup>

Sponsors of several projects, like the ones planned around Birmingham and Jasper, Alabama, were optimistic about the possibilities for immediate results (John H. Bankhead, for example, wrote in the summer of 1934 to the director of the Subsistence Homesteads Division with plans to start producing tomatoes for the fall).<sup>60</sup> And they had reason to be; Birmingham seemed like the ideal place for subsistence homestead projects. Its metro population of 400,000 was among the most industrialized in the South. The large numbers of families on relief living in the apparently overpopulated city center (some 17% of Jefferson County families were on relief, a total of about 18,700 cases) could move a few miles away, where they could farm. The loamy soil could be worked easily for intensive, small-scale cultivation. Planners hoped that the land would need very little clearing, as most of the land had been at some point cultivated in the previous few years. Further, planners pointed to the existing trend in subsistence homesteading and community gardening in Birmingham; they would only be building on what industrial leaders in Jefferson County already encouraged.<sup>61</sup> The need was obviously great, and sponsors assumed that since rapid growth meant that many of industrial workers were recently from rural

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<sup>59</sup> Glick, "The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program," 1335.

<sup>60</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Charles E. Pynchon, July 26, 1934, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>61</sup> "Subsistence Garden Homestead Project in Birmingham, Alabama," Folder "Alabama No. 3 Birmingham 310," Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

areas, the unemployed had enough farming experience to produce food both for themselves and for those on relief.<sup>62</sup>

But the projects quickly ran into problems. One of the most difficult was client selection. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads' methods for approval were influenced by the decentralist Wilson. Local Corporations determined family selection, relying on certain basic requirements and procedures. The Division in Washington prepared applications, which it sent out to locals. Director Wilson recommended the creation of local Homesteaders' Selection Committee, the use of experienced investigators, a description of the project to the individual in both its advantages and disadvantages, and general recommendations that settlers meet certain qualities of health, family background, stability, attitude, financial status, and similar qualifications. But the decision-making rested at the local level, and as such methods varied from project to project in the early months. To take some of the local pressure off, a Washington Committee on Approvals was created as the final word on settler selection.<sup>63</sup>

A significant problem was that planners never really defined the ideal candidate. In many cases, in part a result of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads' hurried creation, planners for local projects had competing ideas about qualifications. The delayed construction of the homesteads around Birmingham, for example, reflected a fundamental division among planners over the exact nature of the Birmingham homesteads.

The National Industrial Recovery Act implied that families had to be from industrial areas and with low incomes, and administrators at first hoped that low-income people with \$50-100 monthly incomes would be the average occupant, with an expected high monthly income of

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<sup>62</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 66.

<sup>63</sup> Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, 36-38.

about \$125 as the limit.<sup>64</sup> The description of the merits of the Palmerdale project in 1934 neatly encapsulates the thinking of many of those planning the Birmingham homesteads. The project, planners wrote, would “relieve the concentration of population in the industrial area of Jefferson County, Alabama, by shifting a portion of the industrial employees and ‘white collar’ workers” away from their homes, which had “unattractive surroundings, where housing conditions are not satisfactory.” Instead workers would move to new, attractive homesteads, “located reasonably near existing industries.” Those living in these homesteads would gain income from “part time industrial employment and employment of ‘white collar’ workers with part time agriculture.” This living situation provided “a combination of the best elements of both city and country living.”<sup>65</sup>

Residents would not produce for the market: “The homesteaders,” planners asserted, “will get their subsistence vegetables, berries, fruits, poultry, meats, and milk which they themselves produce. The individual homesteads will be too small for any type of commercial farming and they will not be encouraged to produce farm products for the market.” Instead, homesteaders would earn money (expected to be something like \$1,000 in annual income) from part-time industrial employment.<sup>66</sup> This small income would allow them to pay cash expenses and to repay their mortgages. The properties were expected to cost some \$2,500, to be repaid over a period of twenty years.<sup>67</sup>

But many observers, early on, recognized the possibility that residents would be middle-class and white collar rather than poor, semi-employed industrial workers. Erskine Ramsey wrote

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<sup>64</sup> Kollmorgen, “The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham,” *A Place on Earth*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> “Economic and Social Merits of Proposed Project,” p. 1, in “200 – Plans – Project Book AL-3,” Box 10, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>66</sup> Schedule XII in “Subsistence Garden Homestead Project in Birmingham, Alabama,” Folder “Alabama No. 3 Birmingham 310,” Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson, “The Subsistence Homestead Program,” 173.

in April 1934, considering the type of housing to be built for the project, “a large proportion of the houses we build will be taken over by ‘white collar’ people, who will require a good house and they will be able to pay more for a homestead than the poorer class.”<sup>68</sup> And initial planning favored such a result; most of the projects were completed by the Resettlement Administration, but had the project been completed under the policies of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, it is likely that the clients would have been even better off. The Division planned to run the program as a revolving fund for loans to the local corporations. This would have created more stringent demands on purchase price, and the middle-man local corporations likely would have raised interest rates – the Division of Subsistence Homesteads was going to loan money to the corporations at 4%, which means that homesteaders could not have had rates much lower than 4.5%, which would have made it difficult for poorer clients to afford payments. The Division planned to offer no subsidies, but it would have been virtually impossible to have such policies and still reach the poor industrial worker that was the intended clientele. At any rate, the RA took over before the Division could deal with that predicament.<sup>69</sup>

The conception of each project often changed over time. The Bankhead Project at first had in mind a slightly different clientele from the homesteads closer to Birmingham. American coal production, like American agricultural production, had produced more than domestic demand for years. American mines at peak production had the capacity to produce close to a billion tons of coal annually, but even at the heights of World War I, the country needed less than 600 million tons.<sup>70</sup> The result around Birmingham and Jasper was stranded miners with farming backgrounds. Initially planners believed that the Bankhead homesteaders would have the

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<sup>68</sup> Erskine Ramsey to Oscar M. Dugger, April 19, 1934, Folder “843 Birmingham General,” Box 15, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>69</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 151-52.

<sup>70</sup> Glick, “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program,” 1325-26.

opportunity to grow marketable crops, perhaps even cotton, for cash.<sup>71</sup> However, they increasingly emphasized self-sufficiency as the farming goal as planning moved along. Only a year later, planning documents used almost identical terminology to that used for the other Birmingham projects to describe the purposes of the Bankhead Homesteads (to “demonstrate the advisability of decentralizing over-balanced population groups”) and its intended beneficiaries (part time industrial workers, in this case coal miners).<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps the best example of how these homesteads were begun without clear objectives could be found in the Cahaba project. The land for the homesteads was purchased without careful study; it was originally intended to be a subsistence homestead like the other communities around Birmingham. Once purchased, it became clear that the land was not suited to such a purpose, and for three years it went unused. The project changed into a suburban community similar to the greenbelt program almost by accident. Rexford Tugwell was visiting in 1936 and casually heard of plans developed by the property manager. He was so impressed with the idea that the project was underway two weeks later.<sup>73</sup>

Such confusion had particular importance for deciding acreage allotments for each community. Low-income industrial workers were the ideal occupants for the projects near Birmingham, but the question was how many acres could this kind of worker operate? How much could a part-time worker with an irregular schedule devote to farming? What about a full-time but low-income worker? Decisions had to be made before answers could be found. Agricultural experts claimed that a full-time subsistence farm in Alabama needed ten acres; after more discussion, it was decided that Palmerdale, Mount Olive, and Greenwood projects should

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<sup>71</sup> C. L. Burton, “Schedule of Preliminary Information for Proposed Jasper Subsistence Homesteads Unit,” pp. 1-3, December 30, 1933, Folder “200-Preliminary Plans AL-12,” Box 31, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>72</sup> Oscar M. Dugger, “Jasper Homesteads Jasper, Alabama Project #34,” December 5, 1934, Folder “200-Preliminary Plans AL-12,” Box 29, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>73</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 190-91.

get 3-4 acres for each homesteader, thinking that even full-time industrial employees could farm that small an area, perhaps divided into an orchard, hayfield, pasture, or garden. Bankhead Farms was planned for irregularly employed miners, so its occupants were expected to have a well rounded program of subsistence farming on units of 9-25 acres, the average being 20 acres.<sup>74</sup> But as it turned out, these kinds of residents failed to materialize, and many of the homesteads became middle-class housing projects.

In part this resulted from confusion over the nature of the projects and their construction. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads believed that local corporations, including some of the business and industrial leaders of the cities of Birmingham and Jasper, could carry out the construction and administration. But these men had no precedent to follow, and there was no clear understanding of the purposes at the beginning when critical decisions were made. In this period of haste and confusion, the project sites were chosen far away from local industry and mills, selected to be close to the city water supply, sewage systems, and cheap transportation facilities. Some local sponsors, looking to when Birmingham would be a larger city and favoring the English garden-home ideal, wanted the projects to be part of a ring of subsistence homes all around the city, to be completed through zoning or an expansion of the subsistence homesteads projects. The local board responsible for picking the Birmingham sites also had little idea of what type of projects would be undertaken. Individual board members thought they would be able to carry out their own ideas, which varied: one anticipated the project to be for destitute relief charges living in simple Civilian Conservation Corps-type shacks; another assumed that

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<sup>74</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 70.

residents would find cash jobs near the projects with no need to travel far; others expected factories to be located nearby.<sup>75</sup>

Trying to overcome differences in outlook, Subsistence Homesteads administrators also had to keep in mind the intense scrutiny it was under as an experimental program. Critics like those who claimed that new residents would use bathtubs as coalbins were eagerly watching the program. On the one hand, the need to succeed meant that administrators looked for those families most likely to make a successful go of homesteading; on the other, it was the poorest families who really needed such a program. There “was some conflict,” Clarence Pickett (M. L. Wilson’s assistant at Subsistence Homesteads) admitted, “between these two justifiable desires.”<sup>76</sup>

This tension was never really resolved, because the Division went through so much change so quickly in its brief lifespan. The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation was similar to most other government corporations; its real strength was that it was able to cut through red tape and adapt quickly because it was not under close control by the General Accounting Office. But in January 1934, Roosevelt issued an order that all agencies and corporations of government had to follow GAO accounting procedures. It was not entirely clear that the program would have to be completely centralized (Wilson believed that some method of local planning could be devised) until March 1934, when word spread that the various local corporations could no longer continue.<sup>77</sup>

The official decision came in May 1934, when Ickes abolished local control and federalized the program. He found the administration of the decentralized system to be unwieldy,

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<sup>75</sup>Kollmorgen, “The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham,” *A Place on Earth*, 67-68; Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 18-19.

<sup>76</sup>Pickett, *For More than Bread*, 53-54.

<sup>77</sup>Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Administration of the Subsistence-Homesteads Program,” *A Place on Earth*, 46-47; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 118-20.

and local control meant that it was very difficult to keep a clear picture of how money was being spent, risking not only waste and corruption but also a scandal that could harm his work in the Interior. So, Ickes abolished the subsidiary corporations and centralized authority in his own department.<sup>78</sup> As he wrote in his diary, local corporations allowed too much local control by those who had no financial interest in success or failure; he would instead insist “on having authority if there is to be responsibility.”<sup>79</sup> The secretary officially placed all projects into a single Division of Subsistence Homesteads, which initially had three main sections: Planning, Construction, and Operations. To replace the local boards of directors of the subsidiary corporations, local boards of sponsors and advisers were established, sometimes but not always with the same personnel as the earlier board of directors – many were offended by the government’s intrusive administrative changes and refused to continue serving.<sup>80</sup>

This upset Wilson, who saw it as an end to grass-roots democracy. Ickes did not trust or have confidence in the abilities of Wilson or his local appointees, believing him to be a poor judge of personnel.<sup>81</sup> Wilson naturally disagreed, but he also put much less emphasis on efficiency; democracy and self-determination were more important. No matter how wasteful his methods appeared, Wilson believed that no centralized planning could properly administer and direct the various communities. Planning and management had to be local, or they would at some point fail because the interests of a distant, centralized bureaucracy would diverge from the interests of those actually living in the communities.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 73, Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 120-21.

<sup>79</sup> Harold Ickes, *The Secret Diaries of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. 1: The First Thousands Days, 1933-1936* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 160.

<sup>80</sup> Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Administration of the Subsistence-Homesteads Program,” *A Place on Earth*, 48.

<sup>81</sup> Ickes, *Secret Diaries*, 1:218.

<sup>82</sup> Johnstone and Goodwin, “The Administration of the Subsistence-Homesteads Program,” *A Place on Earth*, 46; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 121-22. Wilson may also have been so upset because, in large part, he and his supporters recognized that the subsistence homesteads program, as it stood, was experimental. \$25 million simply could not finance a subsistence homesteads program on anything like a national, or even regional, scale. The



Wilson was not alone in his opposition to the move. John H. Bankhead, who received a number of complaints regarding the Subsistence Homesteads, wrote in February 1935 that he was “dreadfully disappointed with the administration of the Subsistence Homesteads. It has been made bureaucratic and been so centralized that it is practically broken down from my view point.”<sup>83</sup> As it turned out, although Wilson had been more concerned with local control than with efficient operation, the one had led to the other. Administrators reported that the federalization of the program simply did not work. The local corporations could not function with so much oversight.<sup>84</sup> For example, Robert Hudgens, who joined Subsistence Homesteads after the centralization, was put in charge of the creation of three South Carolina subsistence projects that were never built – hamstrung by red tape that magnified small obstacles, like a \$250 cost overrun or plans for an unnecessary well, into project-killing problems.<sup>85</sup> Smaller opportunities, such as working with a good local tomato producer for the Jasper homesteads, similarly slipped away.<sup>86</sup>

In June 1934 Wilson left, soon followed by much of the staff. With them went most of the more idealistic goals of the Subsistence Homesteads Division. Charles E. Pynchon, a former steel and business equipment executive from Chicago, replaced Wilson as administrator of the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation in an effort to complete the various projects that had already begun, though he proved to be a disappointment in Harold Ickes’ estimation. The ambitious hopes and plans for new projects of Wilson and his associates were replaced by an

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program, then, was a demonstration of a particular way of life as much as it was a relief program. From this perspective, changes in administration or philosophy were much more significant than just their effect on these few projects: it threatened everything the program could be.

<sup>83</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Hugh MacRae, February 14, 1935, Folder 6, Box 4, Bankhead Papers. Bankhead received voluminous correspondence asking for help with some aspect of the work of the Subsistence Homesteads Division in Alabama.

<sup>84</sup> Bruce L. Melvin, “Emergency and Permanent Legislation with Special Reference to the History of Subsistence Homesteads,” *American Sociological Review* 1.4 (1936): 626.

<sup>85</sup> *Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 142-47.

<sup>86</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Charles E. Pynchon, July 26, 1934, Folder 5, Box 4, Bankhead Papers.

effort to create a more effective administrative organization and simply complete construction.<sup>87</sup> By mid-September, 117 families occupied homesteads, and another 47 were living temporarily in barns and other out-buildings while their homes were completed. Another 149 homes were almost ready for occupation, and 163 were under construction.<sup>88</sup> More and more, administrators thought and acted just to get projects finished.

Part of this shift in emphasis was practical. The situation became increasingly difficult for the Subsistence Homesteads Division and Pyncheon. The factories that supporters had hoped would provide part-time work for homesteaders never materialized near most of the communities. One solution was government-owned factories, but both business groups and Congressmen already argued that the government was unfairly promoting industrial activity at the expense of private efforts.<sup>89</sup> Another issue was competition: when FERA and the AAA began to organize rural rehabilitation programs in 1934, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads stopped creating new rural projects.<sup>90</sup>

Another problem arose from the Division's NIRA origins. To more quickly get relief to the unemployed, projects began before full plans could be completed, raising costs. Work relief wage-rate and working-hour provisions applied to the use of labor on subsistence-homesteads projects. Delays resulted from not being able to hire the kind of workmen needed and raised building costs by about a third, meaning subsidies or something else had to be added to sell the

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<sup>87</sup> "Pyncheon Takes Over Federal Homestead Job," *Washington Post*, May 27, 1934; Ickes, *Secret Diaries*, 1:206, 219; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 24-25.

<sup>88</sup> "Progress Made in Homesteading," *New York Times*, September 16, 1934.

<sup>89</sup> See also Johnstone and Goodwin, "The Administration of the Subsistence-Homesteads Program," *A Place on Earth*, 49-51.

<sup>90</sup> Stanley W. Brown and Virgil E. Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96)* (Washington, DC: National Archives, 1959), 1, 18.

homes at rates the homesteaders could afford. Will Alexander estimated that these sorts of burdens raised the cost of projects overall by one third or a half in most cases.<sup>91</sup>

For example, construction on the units at Palmer Station, the first of the Birmingham area homesteads, fell behind schedule. Bids for construction were not called for until August 1934.<sup>92</sup> Locals in Birmingham worried about Palmerdale, as a *Birmingham Post* reporter noted: “The reason for the delay is not quite clear here;” moreover, the paper continued, “The idea seemed to be a good one,” hinting that perhaps locals had already changed their perceptions of the project.<sup>93</sup> Construction did not begin until February 1935, and planners expected it to take six months. In reality, the homesteads did not approach completion until October, when officials announced that families could begin moving in on November 15. The actual selection of Palmerdale applications was not finished until May 1935.<sup>94</sup> As the *Birmingham Post* reported, “For nearly a year and a half it seemed only a nebulous idea as it found itself enmeshed in red tape. A lot was talked, but there was nothing on the surface to show for it.”<sup>95</sup>

From the very beginning, using relief labor (as required by NIRA) caused problems – in the first month of construction, requisitioning of workers was held up because an announcement that the Civil Works Administration (CWA) would not be hiring any new workers in Alabama was mistakenly applied to the federal project.<sup>96</sup> Architect D. H. Greer explained to the Division of Subsistence Homesteads’ Chief of Construction that planning the location of the houses could

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<sup>91</sup> Henry A. Wallace to FDR, March 19, 1937, and Will W. Alexander, “Memorandum to the Secretary, March 17, 1937, Folder “Resettlement 2 (Projects) (Jan.-Jul),” Box 2630, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP; House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 76, 84, 95-96.

<sup>92</sup> “Government to Call Bids Soon,” *Birmingham News*, August 10, 1934. The Jasper Homesteads, expected to be constructed at about the same time, did not select a contractor until January 1935. “First Homestead Units at Jasper Will Be Erected,” *Birmingham News*, January 20, 1935.

<sup>93</sup> Harold Helfer, ““Tomorrow’s Town’ Is Full of Homes that Jack Built,” *Birmingham Post*, January 12, 1935.

<sup>94</sup> “Model Colony Work Started,” *Birmingham Post*, February 11, 1935; “First Homesteads Near Completion,” *Birmingham Post*, October 10, 1935; “Applications for Homesteads Set,” *Birmingham News*, April 30, 1935.

<sup>95</sup> “Utopia Comes True to Many Homesteaders,” *Birmingham Post*, July 6, 1935.

<sup>96</sup> “Workers Called for Homestead,” *Birmingham News*, January 21, 1934.

not commence until the surveys were completed, and surveying 2,000 acres of land with a small, CWA adjusted force meant it would take longer.<sup>97</sup> When construction began, administrators found it difficult to hire the kind of skilled workers they needed, resulting in yet more delay. One administrator described the Palmerdale unit's haphazard construction as the result of inexperience on the part of the contractor and the difficulty in matching specifications set by the Construction Section of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads.<sup>98</sup> And the Birmingham homesteads did relatively better than many other projects. The Casa Grande project in Arizona, for example, included homes built out of adobe bricks. The 120,000 bricks could have been produced by machine, but the need to use WPA and create jobs meant that administrators decided to use hand-made bricks; overall such requirements added about \$100,000, or some 15% of the final cost.<sup>99</sup> For the Birmingham homesteads it became necessary to write the value of the houses down to well below their cost (in order to make up for the use of relief labor) enough to raise the concerns of the editors of the *Birmingham Age-Herald* that the federal government was involved in "an unfair competition with the sale of private property."<sup>100</sup>

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As the Division of Subsistence Homesteads struggled to get the projects started, its supporters considered improvements. FERA, the Subsistence Homesteads Division, and other agencies were all doing the same kind of things in 1934, a sign of the organizational confusion which had resulted from uncertain goals. Tugwell, Wilson, and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace considered moving the program to the USDA, to make it more agricultural and where it might find common cause with the submarginal land program. Wallace, for his part, thought the

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<sup>97</sup> D. H. Greer to J. H. Jenkins, April 17, 1934, Folder "843 Birmingham, General" Box 15, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>98</sup> Albert Maverick, Jr., to John H. Bankhead, Jr., June 8, 1935, Folder 7, Box 4, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>99</sup> Banfield, *Government Project*, 34. For similar, see *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 148.

<sup>100</sup> "Tugwell Dream Fades," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, May 3, 1937.

broader effort was faulty; he favored pulling the resettlement program out of the hodgepodge and placing it in its natural home, the USDA (and where Ickes would have less influence). Tugwell too agreed that a back-to-the-land program for unemployed industrial workers only hindered any effort to ameliorate rural poverty.<sup>101</sup> In November 1934 FDR considered moving the Subsistence Homesteads Division to FERA, where it could join related projects (supported by several influential Homesteads allies, including John H. Bankhead, who appreciated the work Hopkins' Rural Rehabilitation Division had done), and where it would be happily out of Ickes' hair, but Harry Hopkins and other FERA officials did not want it.<sup>102</sup>

In part FERA administrators objected because the program simply had not been effective: in spring of 1935, as reorganization became increasingly likely, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads had only spent \$8 million of its \$25 million appropriation.<sup>103</sup> As a result of such delays, the Division was losing support. Its poor performance, in the words of one former Chief of its Research Section, was “sickening to those who labored night and day within the Division” and “engendered bitterness in a public that seemed” to have had such high hopes for it.<sup>104</sup> The comparison with the similar work being done by FERA was painful. By October of 1934, the *Washington Post* reported, “Only \$4,000,000 has actually been spent” of the \$18 million allotted while the Division began development of its 63 planned communities. “Unrestricted by requirements imposed on subsistence homesteads,” in contrast, FERA could claim it was “now caring for 80,000 families” in 42 states.<sup>105</sup> What money the Division did spend was often wasted – Cumberland Homesteads, in Tennessee, tried a sorghum plant that went under after two years,

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<sup>101</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 74.

<sup>102</sup> Ickes, *Secret Diaries*, 1:227; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 142-43; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 74-75. John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Thomas W. Gilmer, December 26, 1934, Folder 5, Box 4, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>103</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 129-30.

<sup>104</sup> Melvin, “Emergency and Permanent Legislation with Special Reference to the History of Subsistence Homesteads,” 623.

<sup>105</sup> Leon Dure, Jr., “Housing Plan to Be Pushed by President,” *Washington Post*, October 18, 1934.

a coal mine that mined very little coal, a \$55,000 cannery that failed, and an unsuccessful cooperative association that required a \$550,000 government payment to avoid collapsing only seven months after its creation.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to bureaucratic delays, the Subsistence Homesteads Division faced other problems. As with other government land-use programs the purchase of enormous tracts of land to be removed from local tax rolls while bringing perhaps hundreds of new constituents caused budget problems for local communities.<sup>107</sup> The centralization also hurt relations with the rest of the community. Federally owned land could not be taxed. Thus, residents of the homesteads were citizens of the local county or city government but were not subject to property taxes.<sup>108</sup> It was easy to see why local residents might disapprove of their neighbors getting all the benefits from both the state and federal governments, but not paying their fair share. Furthermore, the emotional appeal of the back-to-the-land movement and of small homesteads began to dry up by 1935, and the sense of immediate catastrophe eroded after two years of the New Deal. Within the Department of the Interior, the initial objective of removing surplus industrial population was seen as less and less worthy.<sup>109</sup>

The Arthurdale project, near Reedsville, West Virginia, exemplified the failures of the Subsistence Homesteads for many critics. The need for some help to the impoverished coal miners was plain to everyone from Eleanor Roosevelt down. Planners had high hopes for it – Wilson described stranded workers “eagerly taking part in the planning and construction” of the project that would mean “gaining of a new conception of a genuinely more satisfactory way of

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<sup>106</sup> Warner Ogden, “Paradise Lost: or the Sad Story of Another Utopia That Failed,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 1950.

<sup>107</sup> Glick, “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program,” 1345-47. On the question of whether the federal or state government exercised civil and criminal jurisdictions over the homesteaders, see 1360-67.

<sup>108</sup> Melvin, “Emergency and Permanent Legislation with Special Reference to the History of Subsistence Homesteads,” 627.

<sup>109</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 130; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 73.

living.”<sup>110</sup> Almost from the beginning, however, administrators recognized there might be problems, due to the haste in construction. Ickes wrote presciently on December 2, 1933, “that we are due for some criticism for our work there.”<sup>111</sup>

Intended for stranded miners and glass-workers, Arthurdale was the first project started by the Division. Houses, budgeted at \$2,500 apiece, ran to an average cost of \$7,000, with the government paying for \$2-3,000 of the price. Plans were changed repeatedly, and fifty houses were built, torn down, and rebuilt because they could not handle the cold West Virginia winter. Prefabricated houses were chosen, in order to build them quickly, but then construction was delayed for six months. Chimneys were not planned, so houses had to be rebuilt, or expanded to where a poorly-planned chimney was built ten feet away. Occupants were carefully chosen for their capacity as subsistence farmers, but the increased costs and twenty-year mortgage meant that they needed a cash income some \$1,500 above subsistence.<sup>112</sup> Various proposals and efforts to create local industry – manufacturing post office boxes, shirts, and such – failed.<sup>113</sup> Replies from supporters that the project was a “laboratory” did little to assuage critics; the government, they might ask, had to experiment to discover basic, fundamental construction principles?<sup>114</sup>

Additionally, legal problems for the Division began to mount in late 1934 and into 1935. The Solicitor of the Department of the Interior ruled in November 1934 that Section 208 specifically provided aid to industrial workers, not resettled farmers; this essentially forbid the rural colonies. In February, the Comptroller General challenged the legality of the expenditures made by the local corporations, asserting that no legal authority existed for the creation of such

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<sup>110</sup> Wilson, “The Subsistence Homestead Program,” 171.

<sup>111</sup> Ickes, *Secret Diaries*, 1:129. An extremely critical view can be found in C. J. Maloney, *Back to the Land: Arthurdale, FDR’s New Deal, and the Cost of Economic Planning* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011).

<sup>112</sup> Calvert L. Estill, “Blunders at Arthurdale,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 1934.

<sup>113</sup> Pickett, *For More than Bread*, 55-56.

<sup>114</sup> “Answers Attacks on Reedsville Plan,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1934.

corporations or for their actions. In May, a further ruling held that the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, only a temporary part of the NIRA, would automatically go out of existence in June, 1935, with all remaining funds returned to the Treasury.<sup>115</sup>

This only exacerbated the problem of over-centralized bureaucracy. As a result, every detail, from larger planning to the purchase of sand paper, had to be handled in the Washington office. That anything happened at all came as a surprise to some. “I am profoundly grateful that I did not know how many things one cannot do under government regulations,” Clarence E. Pickett, Wilson’s assistant, later wrote. “If I had known all the restrictions, I doubt whether the four homesteads for stranded miners would ever have been built.” The net effect, he said, “made the handling of a program such as Subsistence Homesteads complicated, difficult, and expensive.”<sup>116</sup>

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At the end of 1934, after nearly two years of experimentation and effort of the New Deal, the Depression had not ended. At first the Democrats benefited from the sense that doing something, anything, would help. But on both his left and his right, Roosevelt found that frustration and disillusionment threatened his programs. Republicans and unhappy Democrats believed FDR had gone too far. This group, however, was for the time being politically unable to do much; Roosevelt continued to freely move reformist legislation through Congress throughout 1935 and 1936. But, more threatening to his position as leader of the liberal movement in America, many progressives and liberals had become disaffected, threatening to fragment the

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<sup>115</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 128-30. Glick, the former General Counsel of the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Division, believed the Comptroller General was incorrect about this decision, arguing that similar set-ups had been found acceptable in the past and that the “almost frankly experimental” nature of Section 208 indicated that it was better to err on the side of a more liberal grant of charter powers. See Glick, “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads Program,” 1337-39.

<sup>116</sup> Pickett, *For More than Bread*, 44.



New Deal coalition or at least reduce Roosevelt's ability to control events. Public demand for increased federal spending escalated throughout the early years of the New Deal. Overwhelmed state and local governments, organizations for the unemployed, labor and agricultural leaders, economists, and others demanded more federal action.<sup>117</sup>

Roosevelt ably handled pressure from the left: he pointed to his program as a bulwark against radicals, a common-sense middle between intransigent conservatives and dangerous radicals. In what would become known as the Second New Deal, starting in 1935, Roosevelt went beyond the idea of recovery to reform. The New Deal would not just return society to its previous condition, but make it something better.<sup>118</sup> There was more to this than ideological change, however; some of it was simply opportunistic. The political timing was right and the groundwork for a push for long-term reform had been laid in the period of experimentation and institution-building since 1933. At the same time, a new group of younger New Dealers came to the fore as Roosevelt was less willing to make concessions to his opposition.<sup>119</sup>

The need for a rural program of some kind was obvious. Poverty in rural areas remained as crushing as it had been in 1930, or generations before that. "Relief" to sharecroppers and the rural poor, wrote one relief worker, "has meant not a pittance to drag them through till they might be restored to the normal standards of a few years back, but a godsend of plenty such as in all their lives for generations back they have never known before."<sup>120</sup> There was also evidence that more and more landlords were shifting their responsibility toward tenants to relief agencies; Harold Hoffsommer found in a December 1933 study that about a third of tenants had been put

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<sup>117</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 216-27; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Random House, 1995), 74-75.

<sup>118</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 243-48.

<sup>119</sup> Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Hill and Wang, 1989; Chicago, Ivan R. Dec, 2002), 95-97.

<sup>120</sup> Lillian Perrine Davis, "Relief and the Sharecropper," *Survey Graphic* 25.1 (1936): 22.

onto relief rolls with the aid of their landlords.<sup>121</sup> And the agencies handling rural poverty certainly needed to continue – the Subsistence Homesteads Division indicated it had a place for another half billion dollars, especially for erosion control, which Ickes claimed was costing the nation \$400 million a year.<sup>122</sup>

But it was simply impossible, both economically and politically, for direct federal relief to support the unemployed, and the federal government was rapidly decreasing its direct relief efforts in late 1934 and 1935. Roosevelt repeatedly insisted that he wanted the government to move away from “this business of relief” and toward recovery.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, local and state relief would not suffice; as late as 1937, only Alabama had a permanent state relief organization. Some New Deal officials believed that the rehabilitation program needed to go further, to change the entire social and economic system of the South; at any rate, for the short term, an enormous number of rural southerners –between one- and two-fifths – were neither self-sufficient nor able to find permanent employment.<sup>124</sup> To handle these problems facing rural Americans, many New Dealers came to believe that a reorganization of the current efforts was in order.

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<sup>121</sup> Harold Hoffsommer, *Landlord-Tenant Relations and Relief in Alabama* (Washington, DC: Division of Research, Statistics and Finance, Federal Emergency Relief Administration), i.

<sup>122</sup> “Subsistence Plans Ask \$500,000,000,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1934.

<sup>123</sup> R. L. Duffus, “Vast Drive ‘To End Relief’ Gets Under Way,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1935.

<sup>124</sup> Myers, “Relief in the Rural South,” 284-91.

PART II  
FROM RESETTLEMENT TO FARM SECURITY

By 1935, New Dealers had come to agree on the need for a fresh approach to rural poverty. Rexford Tugwell took over the new Resettlement Administration, which combined the government's various resettlement, rehabilitation, and land use reform programs. Tugwell lacked the illusions of the back-to-the-land movement and its ideal of moving millions of industrial workers to subsistence homesteads. In their place he had a different set of illusions about the ability of the federal government to effect rapid, mass social change and, more importantly, about his own ability to oversee that change in a contentious bureaucratic and political framework.

Tugwell's self-assurance and vision helped turn a collection of widely spread and often ineffective federal programs into a massive and effective national agency. It was far from the all-powerful and unified behemoth that its critics imagined, but Tugwell successfully made the RA into a coherent, organized bureaucracy by the time he decided to resign in late 1936. By that point, the RA had a strong sense of its purpose, responsibility, and general administrative shape.

The RA lacked, however, a firm political foundation. Its reputation for bureaucracy and for skirting the dictates of Congress, not to mention its ambitious reform goals, made enemies. And as an independent executive agency, the RA lacked permanency; its ability to withstand the attacks of those enemies was uncertain. Three major changes in 1937 promised to improve its political position. First, Will W. Alexander, who was more effective as a politician and less of a

lightning rod for criticism, replaced Tugwell as RA Administrator. Second, the RA moved into the United States Department of Agriculture. And, most importantly, in 1937 the Bankhead Jones-Farm Tenancy Act created a new set of responsibilities for the federal anti-rural poverty program: a program of federal loans for tenant farmers to enable them to become farm owners. For RA administrators, the tenant-purchase program held out the hope that its disparate clump of emergency programs might become part of a long-term, comprehensive program by the federal government to address rural poverty.

In the fall of 1937 the RA became the Farm Security Administration, the product of years of institutional and ideological struggle. It represented what the New Deal approach to rural poverty, which had been evolving for years, would be. The FSA conducted programs of rural rehabilitation, tenant-purchase, and resettlement (in that order of importance). In the pre-war years, the FSA put into place an effective set of programs to address rural poverty, centered on rural rehabilitation and more specifically supervised credit, as it ably made its way through the political terrain of the pre-war USDA. If the New Deal solution to rural poverty was going to undergo any further dramatic changes in its policy or institutional shape, as it had dramatically done so over the previous years, those changes were cut short when World War II led to dramatic changes in the rural economy and the political climate.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNIFYING ANTI- RURAL POVERTY EFFORTS: THE RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION

The purge of the liberals from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in early 1935 seemed to stand as the conclusion of the story of liberalism in New Deal agricultural policy, just as the defeat of FDR's court-packing plan indicated the waning influence of New Deal liberalism more generally. This impression is only half-true. Reform-minded liberals may have been ousted from the country's most important agricultural agency, but New Deal policymaking continued to include debates over if or how much the federal government and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) should concern themselves with rural reform.<sup>1</sup> This was evident in several programs and ideas, such as the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, but it was most obvious in the Resettlement Administration (RA) and its successor, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) – which, tellingly, originated outside of the USDA and the influence of traditional agricultural interests.

In late 1934 and 1935, the confusion over how the federal government would handle relief encouraged FDR to reorganize his rural anti-poverty efforts. The enormous new Emergency Relief Appropriation Bill asked for the largest peacetime appropriation in American history. The government would be getting out of the relief business. Instead, FDR emphasized work relief, handled by the new Works Progress Administration (WPA).<sup>2</sup> For the approximately

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<sup>1</sup> Summers, "The New Deal Farm Programs," 249-250.

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 249-54; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 123-24; Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture*, 150-51.

1.24 million rural Americans on relief, this meant a shift to several other forms of support. The vast majority moved into the WPA or found some sort of private employment; a substantial percentage, perhaps around 10-15% in the South, moved to the new RA.<sup>3</sup>

A variety of factors led Roosevelt to create the new agency. One involved the position of Rexford Tugwell, who believed that it was a good time for a move. Unrest in the USDA over the AAA “liberal purge” had poisoned the atmosphere. It was, in the words of Henry Wallace biographers John C. Culver and John Hyde, a “sobering reminder of the limits imposed upon idealism by political reality.”<sup>4</sup> Liberals who were not expelled began to move away from the USDA. This included Tugwell, who was eager to find a position in a new, independent agency.

Immediate agricultural crises also influenced Roosevelt’s decision. Sharecropper and tenant unrest demanded a federal response. Poor farmers in 1935 appeared to be facing two disasters, one natural (the drought conditions throughout the Midwest and Plains States), and one man-made (the expulsion of tenants, croppers, and laborers from the land as a result of the AAA’s acreage reduction and payments). The RA was designed in part to deal with the aftermath of these events.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Roosevelt and Tugwell recognized that programs to eliminate or ameliorate rural poverty had been isolated from one another, resulting in all sorts of administrative problems. Some sort of organizational cooperation was necessary if the New Deal was going to make progress on controversial goals. The obvious solution was to create a separate agency into which all current activities trying to remedy rural poverty could be united. It had to be outside the USDA for the time being, as that organization had its own concerns and conservative ideas and

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Farnham and Irene Link, *Effects of the Works Program on Rural Relief: A Survey of Rural Relief Cases Closed in Seven States, July through November 1935* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1938), 96.

<sup>4</sup> Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 156. It would take several applications for Tugwell to learn this lesson.

<sup>5</sup> Maddox, “An Historical Review of the Nation’s Efforts to Cope with Rural Poverty,” 1356-57.

so Roosevelt could avoid a conflict with established USDA policies and personalities. The creation of the RA, then, was intended not only to streamline and improve federal relief of rural poverty, but also to improve administrative harmony within the Roosevelt administration and among the agricultural agencies of the federal government.<sup>6</sup> It did not entirely manage to do so – the submarginal land program, for example, overlapped with the Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service – but it was a start.<sup>7</sup>

The Resettlement Administration consolidated rural anti-poverty efforts into a single agency, but it still reflected the ad hoc nature of the New Deal's efforts thus far. The RA was an executive creation, without a solid bureaucratic or legislative foundation. It took over the efforts of similarly confused programs, and uncertainty over how all of it fit together lasted for almost the entire (albeit brief) life of the agency. Exacerbating that problem was political hostility, some aimed at its controversial administrator Tugwell, some springing from established agricultural interests who resented the threat to their power base, and a small but growing criticism from anti-New Dealers who opposed the creation of (in their view) yet another massive, unnecessary, big-budgeted bureaucracy.

Despite these problems, Tugwell laid the foundation for a long-term government anti-rural poverty effort. The national structure he created outlasted his tenure as administrator and the RA itself, and the RA and FSA's institutional vision was largely Tugwell's own. He left to his successors the equally difficult process of creating a political and administrative structure.

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On April 30, 1935, Executive Order 7027 created the Resettlement Administration.

Citing the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, Roosevelt established the agency with

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<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 90; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 26-27; Tugwell, "The Resettlement Idea," 159.

<sup>7</sup> House, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects*, 8-12.

Tugwell, at the time Under Secretary of Agriculture, as its Administrator. FDR tasked the new agency with three primary goals: to administer “approved projects involving resettlement of destitute or low-income families from rural and urban areas;” to create and manage projects to recover the land, including preventing soil erosion, reforestation, flood control, and similar projects; and to make loans “to finance, in whole or in part, the purchase of farm lands and necessary equipment” as authorized under the Emergency Relief Act. The RA received an initial allocation of \$250,000, with future allocations to be made as necessary. Illustrating the still uncertain direction of the new agency, the first order establishing the RA did not include the phrase “rural rehabilitation.”<sup>8</sup> That was amended by executive order on September 26, 1935, expanding “projects involving resettlement” to “projects involving rural rehabilitation, relief in stricken agricultural areas,” as well as the resettlement duties listed before.<sup>9</sup> The RA was to have new goals and methods, although what exactly those would be remained up in the air.

The bounds of the RA’s responsibilities were broad and vague, encompassing a variety of problems that a *Washington Post* editorial described as “A Staggering Task.”<sup>10</sup> Getting them organized took time and effort. One former employee recalled that those involved nicknamed the agency the “Unsettlement Administration” during its early days.<sup>11</sup> Laurence Hewes, Tugwell’s assistant, wrote, “For months we had no regular life; we ate and slept as we could. Office hours were a bedlam of telephones, visitors, hourly crises; evenings and weekends were devoted to accumulated paper work spewed forth by our infantile field organization.”<sup>12</sup> The RA inherited

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<sup>8</sup> FDR, Executive Order 7027, 1935. See also Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 1-2; “Text of Executive Order,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1935; Leon Udre, Jr., “Senate Orders Inquiry of Hopkins’ Demands Upon States on Relief,” *Washington Post*, May 2, 1935.

<sup>9</sup> FDR, Executive Order 7200, 1935.

<sup>10</sup> “A Staggering Task,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 1935.

<sup>11</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 32.

<sup>12</sup> Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 68.



something like forty-six separate programs, and they integrated into the new agency unevenly.<sup>13</sup> Initially the agency had three major divisions (Land Utilization, Rural Resettlement, and Rural Rehabilitation), all adopted from previous efforts. The first two had the (relatively) smoothest bureaucratic transition. On the same day the RA was created, Executive Order 7028 transferred the Land Utilization Program from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Executive Order 7041, on May 15, 1935, transferred the Division of Subsistence Homesteads to the RA, where it became the basis for the Rural Resettlement Division.<sup>14</sup>

These changes led to problems both practical and philosophical. In imagining its planned communities, for example, the RA expected them to be essentially self-sufficient. The subsistence homesteads for which it was assuming responsibility, however, had been created with the assumption that the projects would attract outside employment to provide settlers with supplemental employment.<sup>15</sup> Wrangling all this together caused considerable administrative headaches, and it also led to public image problems. For example, late in the summer of 1936, it was reported that the RA had accidentally been paying some employees two paychecks at a time, leading to an overpayment of approximately \$181,000. This took thousands of hours of work to recover, further fostering the image of the agency as a bureaucratic mess.<sup>16</sup>

The Rural Rehabilitation Division of FERA moved to the Resettlement Administration on June 30, 1935, but it proved a more challenging transfer. Initially the Resettlement Administration was to carry on its work, as FERA had done, via the State Rehabilitation Corporations, but the Comptroller General on June 22, 1935, informally ruled against this

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<sup>13</sup> *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 16. The number depends on how one counts projects. Not even RA administrators were quite sure what they had picked up.

<sup>14</sup> FDR, Executive Order 7028, 1935; FDR, Executive Order 7041, 1935.

<sup>15</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, Oral Research Office, Columbia University, 1972 (microfiche), 505.

<sup>16</sup> Sidney Olson, "RA Employes Paid \$181,000 Extra in Error in Early Days," *Washington Post*, August 21, 1936. The RA's effort to quietly solve the problem only made it look like administrators had something to hide.

practice.<sup>17</sup> Grants to the states, or agencies thereof, were forbidden. Instead, the program had to be carried out, in both its rehabilitation and resettlement aspects, as an entirely federal activity.

Federalization would not have posed much of a problem had the program relied on direct relief, in which case the state projects could have simply continued and eventually the federal government would have stepped in to take over operations. But these were complicated constructions projects, many in the middle of planning or building; loans had been promised and projects begun based on the assumption that grants to the state corporations would provide funds. The new agency could not simply start anew without ignoring loan commitments already made to clients and abandoning partially constructed projects. To coordinate the federal program as the state efforts wound down, the various state corporations gave the Resettlement Administration management powers for an interim period, before the transfer became official. This required both a resolution by the board of directors for each state corporation and approval by each state attorney general, since funds had technically become state money. Thereafter, the states transferred their rural rehabilitation programs to the RA. The funds were not directly transferred to the Treasury but rather were placed in a trust fund to ensure that the state involved would get those rural rehabilitation expenditures by the federal government. This new process had the Comptroller General's approval.<sup>18</sup>

Once the RA took over administrative responsibility, planners had to deal with the fact that the various state Rehabilitation Corporations operated in a variety of ways. Some were essentially rural relief programs; others operated solely as credit agencies; some already had rural rehabilitation programs up and running. Just figuring out what was going on was difficult.

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<sup>17</sup> House, *Activities of the FSA*, 64-67; House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part 1, 116.

<sup>18</sup> W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume I*, no date; Box 3, FSA Historical Record, RG 96, NACP; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 95-96; Oppenheimer, "The Development of the Rural Rehabilitation Loan Program," 480-82.

The state rural rehabilitation corporations were slow to transfer authority and funds to the RA, and doing so required a full audit of the corporation books and clarifications of various legal responsibilities. A uniform procedure in handling the transfer was impossible, due to the variety among the state corporations; some had poor records and incomplete inventory of everything from fence posts to heads of cattle. Additional difficulties arose from bringing in the small AAA Program Planning Division effort at rural rehabilitation, which had been organized just differently enough to cause problems when transferred.<sup>19</sup>

All told, the RA operated at some point through five different kinds of corporations. There were the previously described state corporations inherited from FERA and the thirty-one Subsistence Homesteads Corporations (one Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation and thirty subsidiary corporations) that had been operated by the Secretary of the Interior in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, both of which had been ruled invalid by the Comptroller General. There were also twelve community resettlement projects operated by twelve homestead corporations, twelve other community resettlement projects administered by and receiving federal loans through cooperative corporations, and fifty-eight cooperative corporations that received federal loans as part of the rural rehabilitation program.<sup>20</sup>

Well into 1937, employees of the various corporations remained confused about their responsibilities and administrative structure. For example, a January 1936 memorandum to the Regional Custodians of Corporations explained that, while the Corporations still owned the title to their projects, the RA had already taken over partial management to secure repayment of loans the RA made to rural rehabilitation clients (advances made so that the clients could fulfill their

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<sup>19</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part 1, 117; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 16; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 339-40.

<sup>20</sup> Henry A. Wallace to Louis Brownlow, February 3, 1937, Folder "Resettlement," Box 2629, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

obligations to the Corporations, which still owned the project properties).<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the Washington office developed a small corporation trust staff, which oversaw the work of a corporation custodian in each office.<sup>22</sup> The process went smoothly enough in most cases, but there were exceptions. In North Carolina, for instance, complications involving personality struggles in the Board of the State Rehabilitation Corporation made it impossible to accomplish the transfer quickly, and it continued to operate in parallel to the RA (and, eventually, the FSA, as it took over two years to resolve).<sup>23</sup>

Organization and management in the new agency were chaotic. Despite difficulty in finding qualified staff, the RA expanded rapidly. On May 1, 1935, the RA employed 12 people; by the end of the year that number jumped to 16,386. Of these, 3,524 worked in Washington, and 12,862 worked in the various local and regional branches. Only the major executive departments matched or exceeded its size and budget within the federal government.<sup>24</sup> This rapid growth and resulting controversy over the enormous new program prompted Tugwell to announce plans to cut 7-8,000 jobs.<sup>25</sup> Still, the agency remained large. In 1936, it had more employees than the Farm Credit Administration or the Social Security Board (two other new “independent agencies of departmental rank,” similar creatures to the independent RA) and the Departments of State,

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph L. Dailey, Memorandum “Relationship between Resettlement Administration and Rural Rehabilitation Corporations,” January 27, 1936, Folder “Cooperation R RR-070,” Box 4, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>22</sup> *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Will W. Alexander, “Memorandum for Mr. M. L. Wilson,” pp. 1-4, November 19, 1937, Folder “Resettlement 1 (Rural Rehabilitation),” Box 2629, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>24</sup> John A. Overholt, et al, “Report and Recommendations on key positions in the Resettlement Administration in two parts: Part I as of July 1, 1935, Part II from July 1, 1935 to March 1, 1936,” p. 2, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Resettlement Adm. – Report and Recommendations on Key Positions. 1935-1936.” Box 31, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>25</sup> “Tugwell to Drop 8,000 from Staff,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1935.

Justice, Commerce, and Labor.<sup>26</sup> At the end of May, 1937, the RA had about 1,900 employees in Washington and about 11,800 in the field.<sup>27</sup>

These new employees were busy, but the exact scope and institutional order of the resettlement and rehabilitation efforts remained unclear. FERA, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, and the AAA's Land Policy sections had all handled loans and administration in different ways, and this variety of approaches would have to be reconciled. Created from bits and pieces of different agencies, the RA inherited personnel who had worked in various departments and units, many of whom had little interest in resettlement, rehabilitation, or rural poverty. As a result, many of the RA's employees had little understanding of the goals, methods, and leadership of the new agency, especially at first. That Tugwell was technically subordinate to the Secretary of Agriculture but heading his own agency only encouraged disputes among the transplants from other agricultural agencies.<sup>28</sup>

Tugwell put together a national staff with a varied background. He selected Will W. Alexander, a widely respected authority on southern agricultural and social problems, as his Deputy Administrator, a position comparable to that of Assistant Secretary in an executive department. Tugwell chose a broad range of thinkers and public officials to be Assistant Administrators. The most important of these, for the future of the FSA, was Calvin B. "Beanie" Baldwin, who came from Henry Wallace's staff at the USDA to take charge of program operations and administrative work. Almost as important for the agency's direction was the future head of the tenant-purchase program, Paul V. Maris, who was also one of the few professional agriculturalists in the RA's upper levels. Maris for the time being assisted the head

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<sup>26</sup> John A. Overholt, et al, "Report and Recommendations on key positions in the Resettlement Administration in two parts: Part I as of July 1, 1935, Part II from July 1, 1935 to March 1, 1936," p. 19, Folder "Dept. of Agriculture – Resettlement Adm. – Report and Recommendations on Key Positions. 1935-1936." Box 31, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1938* (1937), 423.

<sup>28</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 28-31.

of the Rural Resettlement Division, Carl C. Taylor, a rural sociologist who had worked in both the Subsistence Homesteads Division and the Land Policy Section of the AAA.<sup>29</sup> Many of these assistants, most importantly C. B. Baldwin but also others further down the line like Laurence Hewes, entered into a sort of pupil-mentor relationship with Tugwell.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the Department of the Interior's Subsistence Homesteads Division, which attempted to operate at a remove through state agencies, or FERA's reliance on state corporations, the Resettlement Administration was a national organization. The enormous numbers of applications for assistance and for the new tenant purchase program demanded the staff operate with speed and efficiency. The recognition of hostility from multiple directions encouraged a more hierarchical system. The results of the Extension Service's federal-state collaborations seemed to RA and FSA leaders to produce only an absence of responsibility. Entirely local administration would only be putting power in the hands of those who had caused problems in the first place. Furthermore, Tugwell had personally been involved in a number of federal programs addressing rural poverty, and he was well aware of how confused the government's responses to date had been. The overlap of work between the Forest Service and the Soil Erosion Service, the abuses created and encouraged by the AAA, and the irregular availability of funds for FERA's Land Program, among other problems, to him signified that a single, coordinating force was necessary.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Biographical Sketches of Brown, Black, Alexander, and Gray," n.d., Folder "Tenancy 1 (Farmer's Home Corporation)," Box 2663, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP; Calvin Benham Baldwin, "Personnel Questionnaire" November 4, 1939, Folder "Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration – Personnel, 1933-1943," Box 31, Baldwin Papers; John A. Overholt, et al, "Report and Recommendations on key positions in the Resettlement Administration in two parts: Part I as of July 1, 1935, Part II from July 1, 1935 to March 1, 1936," pp. 27-32, 49-52, 106-07, Folder "Dept. of Agriculture – Resettlement Adm. – Report and Recommendations on Key Positions. 1935-1936." Box 31, Baldwin Papers; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 95-98; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 146-55.

<sup>30</sup> Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 53; *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 470.

<sup>31</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 95, 244; Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 263.

The new RA was thus hierarchical, directed from Washington. In the national office, along with Administrator, the Executive Assistant, and the Assistant to the Administrator, a variety of groups and individuals worked to achieve the agency's goals. A Policy Board, made from the upper leadership and directors of several divisions, formulated and oversaw policy. A number of divisions in Washington dealt with finance, procedures, planning, legal issues, and similar obligations. Rural Rehabilitation, Resettlement, and Suburban Town Divisions oversaw the agency's field activity.<sup>32</sup>

Below the central Washington office, the RA divided the country into twelve Regional Offices, determined roughly according to agricultural production and generally along state lines. Each region had a regional director and usually two assistant regional directors, one each for the land program and for rural rehabilitation (which included the resettlement and subsistence homestead projects). The state offices were further divided into districts, which usually included between six and twelve county offices as well as the various project offices. These project offices were directly under regional offices, while each county office was part of the district, state, and regional hierarchy. The Washington office planned programs, made policy, and devised procedures, while the regional offices carried out the agreed-upon programs. The major division staffs in Washington had no direct command over their functional staffs in the various regions, but the regional directors unified and coordinated the programs.<sup>33</sup>

A centralized organization had two political advantages. Most obviously, it avoided the threat that the Comptroller General would rule its structure improper, as had happened to FERA

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<sup>32</sup> R. G. Tugwell, Memorandum, "Functional organization of the Resettlement Administration," June 11, 1935, Folder "(AD-101. And. Gen.) Organization Charts, Etc," Box 26, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>33</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 129-30; "Regional Offices of the Resettlement Administration," [no date], Folder "Department of Agriculture – Resettlement Administration. 1933-35," Box 31, Baldwin Papers; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 32-33; R. G. Tugwell, Memorandum, "Functional organization of the Resettlement Administration," June 11, 1935, Folder "(AD-101. And. Gen.) Organization Charts, Etc," Box 26, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 247.

and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads.<sup>34</sup> Second, the set-up helped avoid political pressure. The state director was not particularly important, acting more as a field operator between the regional and district supervisors. This made it difficult for state politics to grab hold of the agency's local operations. A state supervisor could say to an annoying politician that he did not make policy – he only carried out what came from his supervisors, either in Washington or in the regional office. Additionally, since regions covered multiple states, no single state politician could hold absolute sway over regional appointments.<sup>35</sup>

A number of critics objected that the RA was over-organized. Instead of simply having four divisions for its four main tasks of rural relief, rural resettlement, land utilization, and suburban resettlement, Tugwell created twelve divisions. This led to overlapping responsibilities, unclear lines of authority, and higher administrative costs.<sup>36</sup> These critics included some within the RA. The Management Division's LeRoy Peterson contended that the "confusion and overlapping of functions" of the RA's various division led to a "duplication of effort, divergence of opinion, division of responsibilities and conflict of powers, provoking inter-divisional friction, delays, misdirected expenditures and ultimate lack of fruition of plan." He recommended that one division handle the entire developments of projects.<sup>37</sup>

Part of this confusion resulted not from organization, but from institutional unrest. The broad and shifting range of responsibilities, along with unexpected problems and expenses, made

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<sup>34</sup> *Interim Report of the Resettlement Administration*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 281-84; *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 514-16.

<sup>36</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 155-56.

<sup>37</sup> Untitled memorandums from LeRoy Peterson to C. B. Baldwin, November 12, 1935, Folder "Department of Agriculture – Resettlement Administration. 1933-35," Box 31, Baldwin Papers. This worked itself not through reorganization, but through the development of consensus on how to approach the problems facing the agency and a tightening of the relationships between personnel. The clunky organization persisted into the FSA, but by that point it appears that administrators and their subordinates knew each other well enough, at least in the Washington office, to work out personally any remaining divisions.



it difficult to focus on the original goals of land reform and resettlement.<sup>38</sup> For example, even by the spring of 1937, when most of the farm security functions of the federal government had been rolled into the RA for almost two years, in many counties farmers still did not understand the various functions of the different (and constantly changing) government activities taking place in their counties.<sup>39</sup> Within the RA, the field responsibilities eventually settled into four “program” or “operating” divisions: Rural Rehabilitation, Land Utilization, Resettlement, and Suburban Resettlement.<sup>40</sup>

The Rural Rehabilitation Division came to the RA mostly from FERA, but it expanded rapidly in the new agency. From the beginning it was the largest in the RA, with not quite 3,100 employees by the middle of 1935; however, 3,000 of these were field agents.<sup>41</sup> The division had five separate, but closely related, operations: a loan program built on farm and home management; an emergency grant program; feed and seed loans; a farm debt adjustment program (from the FCA); and a cooperative loan program. At first a Rural Resettlement Division handled both rural rehabilitation and resettlement, but in December 1935 the two functions were separated into different administrations.<sup>42</sup>

The most important part of rural rehabilitation was the loan and grant program for rural rehabilitation and relief to low-income farmers, farm tenants, and sharecroppers who could not secure credit elsewhere. Clients received loans for the purchase of feed, seed, fertilizer, animals,

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<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 105-06.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond A. Pearson to M. L. Wilson, June 25, 1937, Folder “Resettlement,” Box 2629, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>40</sup> The *Resettlement Administration Program* treats the suburban resettlement program as a piece with the rural resettlement program, but they were different projects with different goals and methodologies, and the suburban resettlement program had its own division. A complete list of the RA’s community projects as of spring, 1936, organized in a variety of ways, is available in Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 25-58.

<sup>41</sup> The Land Utilization Division had the largest Washington staff of 200, with another 2,500 in the field. “Force of 6,090 Hired in Tugwell Program,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1935.

<sup>42</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 7-10; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 54-56; *Interim Report of the Resettlement Administration*, 8-13; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 9.

equipment, and tools. With these loans and grants came a supervised home and farm plan; thus these recipients were known as “farm plan” clients. Grants were used for emergency cases (“emergency” clients); sometimes loans and grants arrived together, and a family often received grants to get into shape to become borrowers. The loan and grant program was by far the largest aspect of the RA program: within the first year of its existence, about 780,000 farm families received aid.<sup>43</sup>

While the rehabilitation program was the largest of the RA’s operating divisions, Land Utilization was probably the program in which Tugwell had the most confidence as a long-term solution to rural poverty. The RA Land Utilization program involved the purchase of millions of acres of land and resettling the tens of thousands of displaced farmers.<sup>44</sup> In Tugwell’s view, rural rehabilitation was a necessity during the depression. Resettlement was probably going to accomplish very little in the long run. But land use reform could be the key to long-term agricultural improvement, finally curing the disease instead of simply treating the symptoms. With a national land program in mind, Tugwell foresaw a “a different future, a planned rather than a muddled one, to which we can look forward with new hope of prosperity for agriculture and of protection for the greatest of all our resources – the land.”<sup>45</sup>

The federal land use program had a varied history, and since it had national importance, its work was spread out, administratively speaking. At times, responsibility for planning might be in one agency, purchasing land under a second agency, survey and improvement another, and resettling the current inhabitants in yet another. It is little surprise that the program should be so

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<sup>43</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Tugwell, “The Place of Government in a National Land Program,” 55. See also *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 384-87; C. B. Baldwin, interview by Richard K. Doud, microfilm, February 24, 1965, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, D. C.; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 156-60, 166; Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, 265-66.

scattershot. Moving the program to the RA was supposed to unify these efforts, just as it was hoped moving the various resettlement and rehabilitation programs to one agency would centralize them.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to purchasing and retiring land, the program aimed to improve the way land was used. It developed, for example, land classification schemes that proved to be the basis of much planning.<sup>47</sup> On some of the newly purchased land, the RA commenced a program of land development, such as planting trees, building fire towers, or building dams. As of May 1, 1936, these efforts employed almost 60,000 people on 134 land development projects.<sup>48</sup>

By the time the RA moved to the USDA, it had 206 land utilization projects going, although calling them “projects” is a bit imprecise. Each “project” indicated a particular administrative unit, an area in which the RA acquired a great deal of land in order to put it toward what was seen as more desirable purposes. Thus projects could vary greatly in size. The largest projects involved millions of acres, primarily in the west; smaller ones covered just a few hundred.<sup>49</sup>

Practical and administrative hurdles hindered the land use program. The process of retiring land was lengthy. RA land specialists, working with other agricultural experts and agencies, defined “problem areas” by looking at the current economic use of the land, the situation of those living on it, and public need for it, and the condition of the soil and current plant growth. After determining if the land could be obtained at a reasonable price and if the

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<sup>46</sup> Even the definition of what the federal land program actually included it a bit fuzzy. L. C. Gray’s definition is “the broad objective of effecting changes in the use of any type of land where the change appears desirable from a public or social point of view, rather than merely as a program of agricultural adjustment.” Gray, “The Social and Economic Implications of the National Land Program,” 261. Much planning was still done by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, but it and the RA’s Land Use Planning Section worked together much more efficiently than had the earlier incarnations of the land program.

<sup>47</sup> Robert W. Hudgens, “Rural Problems – The Present Situation in the South,” p. 4 [March 9, 1937], Folder “161-Speeches,” Box 11, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>48</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 3-4.

<sup>49</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1938* (1937), 429-33.

proposed project might help relieve unemployment, the agency began the time-consuming process of finding the clear title to the land, satisfying the Comptroller General that the purchase of each tract was legal, and clearing out roadblocks like mineral reservations. With all this, it was no surprise that purchasing and payment often faced lengthy delays.<sup>50</sup>

Many projects involved technical questions and knowledge that, in essence, meant that the project had to start over each time the administrator or organization changed, as happened (for example) to the migratory waterfowl restoration programs. J. N. Darling contacted the Washington office in June 1935 complaining about the effort: it had begun a year and a half earlier, under the old FERA land program. At first, Darling said, “we were forced to coordinate through [John S.] Lansill who didn’t know the difference between a migratory waterfowl and a mammalian environment but was willing to learn.” Then the program moved under L. C. Gray, “who was as remote as the Llamba of Tibet from any knowledge of either our program or the funds under his administration.” While Gray tried to figure out what was going on, weeks passed. Finally the construction of reservoir dams began, but then “the able but virginal Barlett” turned down the waterfowl projects on the tracts where the dams were constructed “without any possibility of knowing either the merits of the cases or the consequences of his acts.” Darling ended his missive with a threat to quit altogether if some speedy clearance of these old projects could not be achieved.<sup>51</sup>

Besides problems of administration, the federal land program faced other difficulties, most notably that it was at times very much an empty-the-ocean-with-a-spoon operation. Social scientist Noble Clark estimated that for every family the government moved off of submarginal

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<sup>50</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 2-3; House, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects*, 12; Gray, “The Social and Economic Implications of the National Land Program,” 265.

<sup>51</sup> J. N. Darling telegram to Benham Baldwin, Attention R G Tugwell, June 22, 1935, Folder “Department of Agriculture – Resettlement Administration. 1933-35,” Box 31, Baldwin Papers.

land (at great effort and expense), five more moved onto poor lands. Something like 600,000 new farms were established in the first years of the program, the majority of which were started on bad soil unable to support farming. Even worse, many of the families moved off submarginal land did not find a better economic situation when they moved; some became homeless, others found themselves on relief. Without any other options, some returned to farming on even worse land than they had left.<sup>52</sup>

To deal with just such displaced farmers, the RA operated the Resettlement and Suburban Resettlement Divisions. The Resettlement Division took over more than thirty subsistence homestead communities from the Department of the Interior and roughly a similar number of planned communities from FERA. Tugwell, who did not think highly of the subsistence homesteads program, apparently agreed to accept them into his new agency in large part to keep them from tangling up his efforts from the outside.<sup>53</sup> Additional land was bought and new projects were started for families taken from submarginal lands by the land utilization program.<sup>54</sup>

The first duty of the resettlement program was to complete the subsistence homesteads already under way. Only \$7 million of the \$25 million allocated for the construction of the homesteads had been expended or committed when the RA took over. By May 1936, after taking over 33 projects, it had completed 18, was in progress on 11, and was still planning 4. The RA was also busy with seventeen other subsistence homesteads projects that were funded by sources other than the Division of Subsistence Homestead's original appropriations.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Noble Clark, "The Social and Economic Implications of the National Land Program: Discussion," *Journal of Farm Economics* 18.2 (1936): 276-77.

<sup>53</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 387.

<sup>54</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 53-54. A detailed, first-person look at one such project, at Casa Grande, Arizona, can be found in Banfield, *Government Project*.

<sup>55</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 5.

The RA also began construction on migratory labor camps in California. The creation of such a program raised debate within the RA. A smaller group questioned whether the RA should undertake such a project. The feeling was that if the RA built migratory labor camps, the camps would either turn into a weapon used by local producers to keep labor in line, or they would become centers of radical labor organization that would make impractical demands. In any case, the camps would be a source of labor trouble and political pressure. But most administrators had become so concerned with the conditions faced by migratory laborers that they favored creating the camps even if the RA could provide laborers living there no protection from the big producers. The situation was simply so bad, this faction argued, that any change would be an improvement.<sup>56</sup>

The RA's suburban resettlement program on the surface resembled rural resettlement, but it served different residents, functions, and goals.<sup>57</sup> Suburban resettlement was more modest than rural resettlement; initially, eight projects were planned, compared to the 151 rural resettlement programs. The initial allocation for the more intensive suburban housing program (expected to complete 3,700 dwellings) was at \$31 million less than third of that for the rural resettlement program. Allocations for the project were only half of what was requested, so planning began on four "greenbelt" communities. Due to a court decision and shortage of funds, the planned community near Cincinnati was scrapped, and only three of the suburban projects were actually constructed: Greenbelt, Maryland; Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin.<sup>58</sup> These projects were designed as complete communities, not simply housing projects: they had stores, post

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Garst to Laurence Hewes, September 20, 1935, Folder "Department of Agriculture – Resettlement Administration. 1933-35," Box 31, Baldwin Papers; Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> See C. Kline Fulmer, *Greenbelt* (Washington, DC: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941); Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*; Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland*, for a fuller discussion of the greenbelt program.

<sup>58</sup> "Government Begins A New Town Today," *New York Times*, October 12, 1935; Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 7; *Interim Report of the Resettlement Administration*, 17-21; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 305-25.

offices, schools, parks, and community centers. While built near already existing cities, the suburban projects were separate communities, as the very name “greenbelt” suggests – a protective ring of farm and woodland surrounded each project to prevent further development near the communities. The Division of Suburban Resettlement also took over 22 projects started by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, although some of these were found to be unsuitable for suburban resettlement projects and were moved to the Special Plans Division for re-planning or liquidation.<sup>59</sup>

The greenbelt communities never really fit well with the rest of the RA. They were suburban solutions to urban problems, when the large majority of the RA’s work involved rural issues. Moreover, they overlapped with other government programs: the Public Works Administration, Federal Housing Authority, and local agencies (like, in D.C.’s case, the District Alley Dwelling Authority) all had similar programs. The small start to the program raised some issues. Baltimore leaders, for example, had expected the RA to begin a low-cost housing project in the city, and its refusal to do so on the basis that the city had reached its maximum growth led to defensive protests by civic leaders.<sup>60</sup>

The Greenbelt program also prompted criticism even from allies. John H. Bankhead, still interested in what happened to the projects in Birmingham after they transferred to the RA from the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, felt left out. He had heard reports, he wrote to Tugwell, “that the Suburban Resettlement Division is trying to hog the whole program and spending practically all of the money in four or five cities in the East” while the projects in Birmingham and Jasper, “among the very first approved under the Subsistence Homestead Law,” went neglected. Moreover, Bankhead felt personally mistreated. “I have also been embarrassed from

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<sup>59</sup> *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 4, 48-49.

<sup>60</sup> “Civic Leaders Assail Claim Baltimore Has Passed Prime,” *Washington Post*, October 18, 1935.

the fact that much local publicity was given to the location of these projects and I was given some credit as author of the original program for securing the establishment of Homestead Projects in this mineral district,” he wrote. “Nearly two years have passed since the original announcement of these projects, and now I hear that some people in your organization are resisting their implementation.”<sup>61</sup>

In addition to those four “operating” divisions, two others played a significant role in the creation and administration of the RA program. The Construction Division handled land improvements and construction for all other divisions except for land utilization. It began as part of the Suburban Resettlement Division as the Engineering and Construction Section, but administrators soon felt that the technical detail and labor required for the various projects could best be handled in a single division. So on December 1, 1935, administrators established the Construction Division. The Construction Division had perhaps the most difficult time of all when it began operation, taking over a variety of projects in different levels of completion and planning, with little uniformity in standards or methodology even after several months of RA management. The Management Division was responsible for the administration of those projects already completed, in particular in recovering to the extent possible government funds spent on those projects. It handled family selection, property maintenance, rent collection and other payments, educational and social activities development, and similar tasks related to managing RA projects. It at first operated directly over the various projects, but this proved cumbersome, and it soon adopted the regional method of operation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Rexford G. Tugwell, November 11, 1935, Folder 7, Box 4, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>62</sup> *Interim Report of the Resettlement Administration*, 23-27; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 63-79.



By the summer of the 1936, the RA had become a more-or-less mature organization. While it did not always run efficiently, the greatest difficulties of reorganization had been faced and overcome. The administrative structure and regional hierarchy was in place and would survive the move to the USDA and change into the FSA. Administration leadership, at least, had a firm idea of their goals and responsibilities.<sup>63</sup>

However, the RA still had some important, related problems. First, Tugwell and other leaders in the RA from the beginning knew they faced enormous political and organizational hostility. From the beginning the RA suffered from an image problem – its emphasis on central planning and organized agriculture reminded critics of Soviet farming. Although the RA did cooperate with the Extension Service, for example, to develop veterinary services for local farmers, it was not popular with the administrators of the Extension Service and established agricultural interests. The program as a whole was criticized for its alleged revolutionary tendencies. More practically, as RA administrators recognized, the agency was both broad and intensive; it contained a variety of different programs with significant RA activity, each of which was objectionable to some large constituency.<sup>64</sup>

The criticism that the RA had too much power and too little oversight was perhaps best summed up in reporter (and longtime RA critic) Felix Bruner's four-part series, "Utopia Unlimited," published in the *Washington Post* in February 1936.<sup>65</sup> Calling it "one of the most far-flung experiments in paternalistic government ever attempted in the United States," Bruner

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<sup>63</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 40-41.

<sup>64</sup> Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 48-49; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 113-20; "New Cooperative Idea," *Extension Service Review* 7.12 (December 1936): 190; John A. Overholt, et al, "Report and Recommendations on key positions in the Resettlement Administration in two parts: Part I as of July 1, 1935, Part II from July 1, 1935 to March 1, 1936," p. 2, Folder "Dept. of Agriculture – Resettlement Adm. – Report and Recommendations on Key Positions. 1935-1936." Box 31, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Felix Bruner, "Utopia Unlimited," *Washington Post*, February 10-13, 1936. Bruner also wrote a three-part criticism of the Greenbelt project specifically, emphasizing its impressive quality but more its expense and experimental nature: "Tugwelltown: Uncle Sam – Landlord Super De Luxe," *Washington Post*, August 2-4, 1936.

drew attention to the RA's independent, almost rogue status, free from congressional oversight. The RA, "really a government within the Government," operated by "executive order" without "Congressional sanction or approval" as it "directly affects, virtually rules over, the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who are told how much they can spend for food, for clothing, for rent [...] how they shall conduct the most minute details of their lives." Tugwell, with "every power possessed by both [the President and Congress] except the power to declare war," administered this "huge experiment" along with an enormous work force of 13,045 people.<sup>66</sup> While admitting that Tugwell did not initiate the homestead program, Bruner nevertheless criticized Tugwell for his plans to improve it and for planning additional communities. The suburban housing program, most assuredly Tugwell's idea, came across as perhaps a nice idea, but most fitting with the utopia theme Bruner pushed – an idea that simply could not economically work in the US.<sup>67</sup>

Worse for the RA's reputation for over-bureaucratization, Bruner pointed out that the agency had thus spent about \$46 million, but almost \$20 million of that went toward administration – meaning that some 40% of the money actually spent, and at least 20% of the total amount the RA was obligated to spend, would go toward "supplies and desks and traveling expenses and all the innumerable items that go to set up Utopia." This was an amount almost equal to the sums spent on FERA land purchasing (\$24 million) and for loans and grants to individual families (\$23 million). If this was an experiment, between its high overhead and the number of wasted loans and grants given to bad risk clients, it was an experiment that was failing.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Felix Bruner, "Utopia Unlimited," *Washington Post*, February 10, 1936.

<sup>67</sup> Felix Bruner, "Utopia Unlimited," *Washington Post*, February 11-12, 1936.

<sup>68</sup> Felix Bruner, "Utopia Unlimited," *Washington Post*, February 13, 1936.

What supporters praised made critics uneasy, as a *Dallas Morning News* editorial cartoon showed. It depicted the RA with the title “Modern Gulliver Helps the Little People.” An enormous man (looking suspiciously like FDR in a farmer’s hat) with the words “Resettlement Administration” across his back picks up in one giant left hand a seven-member family labeled “impoverished families.” He is crouching down to plant them on “productive soil” around “better homes.”<sup>69</sup> This idea of a powerful, effective behemoth moving the poor to better lands may have been appealing to the rural poor, the RA, and its supporters. But the same cartoon (with slightly different labeling) could have served exactly the same purpose for the RA’s opponents, as it demonstrated just what they feared: an uncontrollable entity too large to be harnessed by normal means.

The RA was popular enough among farmers, at least with the small number who knew about its activities. W. R. Altstaetter, an RA official taking a trip through Tennessee and Kentucky in the fall of 1936, estimated, “85 to 95 per cent of persons in the small towns did not have the vaguest idea what Resettlement is trying to do.” Many had “heard of Resettlement without knowing anything about it.” As a result, “the sentiment in this group was not friendly.” When Altstaetter asked where the local RA office was, on two separate occasions the response was to ask in return if he “meant that ‘land thing.’” However, where projects had been undertaken and were in fairly good order (avoiding the delays and frequent changes of plans that plagued many RA projects), opinion was fairly positive.<sup>70</sup> One report published in 1938 found that somewhere between two thirds and three fourths of all white American farmers favored the RA, but only about half of black farmers did. Part of the problem was, again, publicity: a large

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<sup>69</sup> Knott, “Modern Gulliver Helps the Little People,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 17, 1936, in Folder “Clippings,” Box 13, Farmers Home Administration, General Correspondence, 1935-42, Record Group 96, NACP.

<sup>70</sup> W. R. Altstaetter to W. W. Alexander, September 11, 1936, Folder “Department of Agriculture – Resettlement Administration 1936,” Box 31, Baldwin Papers.

number (about half of respondents) did not have enough knowledge to answer one way or the other. “Negro farmers,” the report explained, “on the whole know too little about it to express either their approval or disapproval.”<sup>71</sup>

Of course, black farmers also had more tangible reasons to be displeased with the RA. Joseph H. B. Evans, in an address before the Joint Committee on National Recovery in 1935, spoke at length on the general history of southern agriculture and on the federal government’s progress in farm security activities over the last two years. But when it came to specific benefits for African Americans, he could point only to the general advantages for tenants, programs that would primarily benefit already all-black towns and regions, four projects that would “include Negro participation,” and the few “qualified Negroes” employed by the RA. But even that only underlined the limited role of African Americans in the agency. Most of their jobs were low-level or service: 30 custodians, 36 messengers, five chauffeurs, and a garage foreman far outnumbered the twelve clerks, nine typists, eight “professional employees” like engineers and architects, and the one administrative employee.<sup>72</sup>

A related problem was that often farmers read more into the RA than it actually accomplished. The RA’s and Red Cross’s activity in southeastern Missouri after the flooding there, for example, appeared to be a result of local protests and requests for aid. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the NAACP had been active in demanding government help (since much of the flooding was the result of destruction by the Army of levees in Illinois), and local activists insisted the government clean up its own mess. When the RA got involved and later

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<sup>71</sup> Schuler, *Social Status and Farm Tenure*, 82-83. This was also, incidentally, the case with many politicians. At a hearing on the RA, Minnesota Congressman Harold Knutson thought the RA administered a slum-clearing program operated by the PWA, and Georgia’s John W. McCormack was unaware that the RA was an independent government agency. House, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects*, 14-15.

<sup>72</sup> “Address by Joseph H. B. Evans, Advisor to the Director of Rural Resettlement, Resettlement Administration, before the annual meeting of the Joint Committee on National Recovery, Washington, D.C., Saturday evening, November 23, 1935,” pp. 13-14, Folder “E AD-163-01 Press Releases,” Box 31, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

when the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act created the FSA's tenant-purchase program, however, locals began to think they had more influence than events warranted. The result was an unrealistic demand for action by the federal government. The 1939 sharecropper demonstration in the Missouri Bootheel was motivated in part by a belief that the demonstrators could force the federal government into action. Overall, the local sharecroppers developed an unrealistic sense of how the federal government (as well as other national or regional organizations like the CIO and STFU) could and would help them.<sup>73</sup>

The RA also raised concerns due to its sometimes harmful impact on local government. When the RA purchased land for projects, this decreased the local tax base, making it difficult for many to meet expenses or maintain rural schools. On the other hand, the removal of land from cultivation sometimes helped local government meet expenses. Of the 9.5 million acres purchased by the RA by the summer of 1936, more than half had been tax delinquent for more than two years. The removal of populations from scattered areas also reduced the need to provide roads and schools for rural citizens. In some cases (especially among the scattered farmers of the Lake states), real estate agents had intentionally sold land in dispersed plots, to force the government to build roads and schools, thus increasing the value of their land. The RA, in resettling these farmers who could barely afford to contribute to the tax base, did save local government some money.<sup>74</sup>

This was not enough to completely offset the impact of the RA on local tax revenue. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics studied the issue, and as a result of its recommendations, the RA agreed to make payments to local tax districts to replace the lost revenue. The Management

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<sup>73</sup> Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 108-13, 133-39, 145-53. The FSA did make a large number of emergency grants to the demonstrators, but politics intervened; local officials lodged a complaint with the House of Representatives, and the FSA was forced to stop its grant payments to the area.

<sup>74</sup> House, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects*, 19-20.

Division's successor, the Project Management Division, would also take responsibility for payments made for the purpose of supplying local public or municipal services to citizens living in nontaxable projects, as authorized by the Bankhead-Black Act of 1936.<sup>75</sup>

The RA, along with the rest of the federal agencies dedicated to relief, had a bad reputation for too much bureaucracy. Critics made much of the agency's reputation for delay and paper-pushing; particularly harmful was the announcement in late 1935 of the size of the RA's staff. The *Washington Post* editorialized, "If there is any doubt that bureaucracy has reached a new pinnacle in this country that doubt is likely to be dissipated by a survey of the Resettlement Administration's pay roll." It went on to commend Tugwell for hiring relief workers when needed, but mostly criticized him for creating a vast administrative organization, with a fleet of cars and huge payroll, when the RA's projects "are just getting under way."<sup>76</sup> And even supporters saw a problem. The relatively friendly *New York Times* published a front-page story on the RA's 12,089 person staff that only created 5,012 relief jobs (ignoring, Tugwell responded back, the 354,000 rural rehabilitation cases, and the fact that many of those loans would be repaid).

This article, as Tugwell's response hints at, also indicated a common misunderstanding of the purposes of the RA. In all this bureaucracy, the *Times* claimed, the RA still failed to make its contributions to the work relief program. The RA's "administrative force numbers more than twice as many persons as the relief workers hired to date," it claimed, "and the amount paid to this directing is about five times as great as the sum paid to relief workers." The *New York Times* writer Frank Kluckhold, like many others, thought in terms of the RA as a jobs program, not a

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<sup>75</sup> Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 23; House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 105-11; Gray, "The Social and Economic Implications of the National Land Program," 266.

<sup>76</sup> "Fruits of Bureaucracy," *Washington Post*, November 18, 1935.

rehabilitative agency. As such, it is no surprise that it seemed to be so wasteful, even to a sympathetic observer.<sup>77</sup>

The criticism that the RA made loans that were in danger of being lost (because they were unsound, made to borrowers who did not need or deserve the loans or who would somehow be made dependent on government largess) even edged over into a literal concern about the safety of the physical loan notes. Before the 1936 elections, the Republican National Convention attacked RA regional headquarters as unguarded “fire traps” where the millions of dollars worth of notes could be destroyed or stolen. Further, the RNC charged, a report detailing this situation was suppressed by the RA. Assistant Administrator C. B. Baldwin both charges, stating that multiple copies of both proof of the loans and the allegedly suppressed report were made.<sup>78</sup>

Humor, however, might have provided the best example of the RA’s reputation for bureaucracy, delay, and unnecessary activity. An imagined series of letters and memorandum between the fictional Mr. Torkad Sill and various officials of a State Emergency Relief Administration, County Emergency Relief Administration, and State Resettlement Administration in a 1936 edition of *Survey Graphic* revolved around a three-month debate over Mr. Sill’s efforts to return “ajitater cows” to the government. Various comedic bureaucratic spats over jurisdiction, case histories of the animals involved, and discussions as how to convince Mr. Sill to lead the cow to an “accidental” death followed. The story ended with the impossibly honest Mr. Sill unintentionally shooting the cow and giving the meat to local “reliefers” in Cooper County.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Frank L. Kluckhohn, “Tugwell Has Staff of 12,089 to Create 5,012 Relief Jobs,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1935; for the response, see “Tugwell Protests Published Figures,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1935.

<sup>78</sup> “Calls ‘Fire Traps’ Peril to RA Loans,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1936; “Farm Loan Laxity Again Is Charged,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1936.

<sup>79</sup> Louis Towley, “Gover’ment Cow,” *Survey Graphic* 25.12 (December, 1936): 647-651, 696-98.

In partial response to such negative publicity, Tugwell organized the Information Division, with five sections. The Editorial Section and the Information Section sent out press releases, bulletins, and similar material. A Special Publications Section sent information and articles to magazines, yearbooks, journals, and similar periodicals. The Historical Section, also called the Photographic Section, recorded the lives of tenants for both artistic and propagandist purposes. Tugwell hired Roy Striker as the first head of the Historical Section, which was primarily concerned with acquiring and distributing photographs. From within and outside the government, Stryker put together a talented and diverse group of photographers, including Walker Evans, Marion Post-Walcott, Russell Lee, John Vachon, and Dorothea Lange.

From 1935 until 1943, Stryker's group took thousands of photographs across the country. While many of these were official portraits of successful government projects and the like, many (including the most famous photographs) sprang from a commitment on the part of Stryker and his photographers to documenting the lives and times around them. Because of the agency's willingness to provide, free of charge, whatever photographs were requested, the most popular images became widespread very quickly; as a result, the Historical Section's work has become for many the image of the Great Depression.<sup>80</sup>

The attempts to portray the agency in a good light did not always succeed and sometimes backfired. RA photographs that repositioned the same bleached cow skull when cataloging the western drought situation created another mini-scandal involving the agency. While the RA was ultimately vindicated in that case, the conclusion that the photographer had only repositioned a

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<sup>80</sup> The Historical/Photographic Section of the RA/FSA is by far the most well-studied area of the agencies' work. Works dealing entirely or in part with RA and FSA photography include C. B. Baldwin interview with Richard K. Doud, 13-28; Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America*; Carlebach and Provenzo, *Farm Security Administration Photographs of Florida*; Cohen, *The Likes of Us*; Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty*; Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*. As with the resettlement projects, the aspects of the farm security program that have found the most historical and critical approval received the most contemporary criticism; Stryker's section was roundly attacked in Congress and the media as wastefully expensive and overly political (accurately, at least in terms of political goals; see Gordon, "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist").



skull, and did not carry one around for pictures, did not help the agency's image.<sup>81</sup> For his part, Will Alexander found Tugwell's entire PR operation unwieldy and ineffective, too concerned about making a big splash and not concerned enough with making connections. Alexander fired many of the Information Division specialists when he became administrator and replaced them with people who knew local reporters.<sup>82</sup>

Had the institutional and political support for the RA been stronger, these image problems would have been less consequential. However, the RA's major bureaucratic problem was that it had no real home. As an independent agency, the RA had no natural allies, and even after it moved to the USDA, Congress never regarded it as a full-fledged equal to other departments and agencies in the federal government. As Tugwell wrote later, the RA "never attained the status of a respectable and permanent addition to the family of Federal organizations."<sup>83</sup> Much of this was Tugwell's fault. Operating, as he saw it, outside of or above politics, and with little interest on his part in building political alliances, Tugwell's RA lacked support. As journalist Marquis Childs wrote, "the fact was inescapable that the planners had been planning in a political vacuum," and without building up that necessary political backing, the RA was doomed in the long run.<sup>84</sup>

One result was that the RA still depended on the president to make allocations from the Emergency Relief Appropriations acts.<sup>85</sup> Aside from the uncertainty, these funds arrived irregularly, a serious hindrance for an agency making nationwide grants and loans with long-

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<sup>81</sup> "Candid Camera Is Less than Candid, RA Critics Claim," *Washington Post*, August 30, 1936; "Explains Cow Skull Use in Drought Pictures," *New York Times*, August 30, 1936; Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough," *Washington Post*, September 2, 1936; "Retracts 'Fake' Charge," *New York Times*, September 6, 1936.

<sup>82</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 548-52.

<sup>83</sup> Tugwell, "The Resettlement Idea," 159.

<sup>84</sup> Marquis W. Childs, *I Write from Washington* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 14.

<sup>85</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1938*(1937), 414; for the 1936 fight, see "Only WPA Survives in New Relief Bill," *New York Times*, May 3, 1936; "President to Keep PWA," *New York Times*, May 16, 1936; Felix Bruner, "Senate Group Delays Action on Relief Bill," *Washington Post*, May 16, 1936; "Aid Bill Signed, Work Assured for 2,300,000," *Washington Post*, June 23, 1936.

term plans for ameliorating rural poverty.<sup>86</sup> Throughout early 1936, for example, Tugwell and his staff had to struggle with the White House to keep loans from being retransferred back to the Treasury and to obtain funds already promised but not yet allocated, and they kept in contact with Congressmen in an effort to get further allocations from existing funds or a new appropriations bill.<sup>87</sup> There was even the possibility that the RA, as an independent agency created by executive decree, could be replaced by another independent. Rumors arose in spring of 1936, for example, that a proposed secret bill would absorb or replace the entire RA with a “Farmers’ Home Corporation” funded by \$50 million in government capital.<sup>88</sup>

While the political atmosphere grew more threatening, other changes were happening in the RA and the executive branch. In the fall of 1936, it was obvious that Tugwell was soon to leave the agency. There had been talk for almost a year that he was planning to quit government work because of the frequent criticism and because he was not really cut out for administrative work.<sup>89</sup> Republicans hoped to make him (and, therefore, the RA) an issue in the 1936 elections – there was the attack on the RA’s storage facilities, and Republican Senator William Warren Barbour (NJ) insisted that Tugwell fill out a questionnaire for the Senate in the spring of 1936.<sup>90</sup> Tugwell had also drawn attention and criticism to himself with his calls for a stronger alliance of rural and urban labor. His speeches, in fact, became prime materials for Republican speakers

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<sup>86</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 40-41.

<sup>87</sup> See numerous related letters and memos, Folder “Allocations General Fiscal Years 1935-1936, AD-410-01,” Box 46, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>88</sup> “Tugwell Substitute in Doubt,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1936.

<sup>89</sup> Ickes, *Secret Diaries*, 1:475.

<sup>90</sup> “Senate to Probe Tugwell – Sets Resettlement ‘Exam’,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 1936. At the time, Tugwell and his allies in Congress were eager to get the whole thing out of the way, too, to let things quiet down before the elections.

looking for easy campaign targets.<sup>91</sup> Unlike Harry Hopkins, who was doing a similarly large and experimental job, Tugwell simply did not know how to be discreet.<sup>92</sup>

Never one to hide his disdain for those with whom he disagreed, Tugwell had become a lightning rod for criticism. He proved unable to tone down his rhetoric or to build a politically savvy group around him. Baldwin and Alexander became effective (in very different ways) at some of the administrative and political aspects of the job, but this was apparently an afterthought on Tugwell's part. More representative was Laurence Hewes, who wrote that his "ignorance of American government and politics was appalling" when he was hired as Tugwell's assistant. Hewes had, for example, voted for Herbert Hoover in 1932 only because he was (like Hewes) a Californian, and some of his friends knew Hoover. Yet Hewes had been hired in large part to take over some of the political burden from Tugwell, to handle as much of the "uncongenial Congressional and political duties as [Hewes] should prove capable of managing."<sup>93</sup> Such decisions gave Tugwell (and his RA) a bad reputation even among supporters. As Paul W. Ward wrote in the *Nation* in November, "As a man of action he proved to be a fumbler, and for more than a year the RA was a scene of administrative turmoil that defied the descriptive powers of pen, brush, or camera."<sup>94</sup>

During the 1936 presidential campaign, Roosevelt and his political adviser, James A. Farley, did their best to keep Tugwell out of the papers. Despite the Democrats' easy victories in 1936, Tugwell increasingly understood that he had no place in the administration. At best, he was seen as a valuable administrator but a political liability, and the constant criticism made it impossible for the RA to function. His association with what his critics considered "a fancy idea

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<sup>91</sup> "Mr. Tugwell Retires," *New York Times*, November 19, 1936.

<sup>92</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 401.

<sup>93</sup> Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 55.

<sup>94</sup> Paul W. Ward, "The End of Tugwell," *Nation*, November 28, 1936, 623.

devised by intellectuals,” he later explained, meant the program had little chance.<sup>95</sup> Despite electoral returns that apparently vindicated his arguments for a greater government role in the economy, soon after the 1936 election, Tugwell resigned, succeeded by Will Alexander – tellingly, on the same day that FDR announced the creation of a committee to study the problem of farm tenancy.<sup>96</sup>

Tugwell had been calling for the RA to move to the USDA for months. With his departure imminent, Tugwell recommended directly to Henry Wallace that the RA be moved into the USDA, where, presumably, he believed it would be safer. Many in the USDA (particularly Chester Peek, remembering the experience of the AAA purge) feared that such a move would bring controversy that the Department did not need; similarly, some RA members thought that the USDA would shut down their most ambitious programs and force them to work on behalf of the planters, commercial farmers, and farm organizations which had the most influence in the USDA. At the same time, many believed the two agencies had similar goals and hoped that the RA and USDA would balance and improve each other.<sup>97</sup>

Henry Wallace in particular had become convinced of the need for the USDA to do more to address rural poverty. In late 1936, he was trying to decide what to do with the Resettlement Administration; most officials in the Department told him to get rid of it. For his part, Wallace was still reluctant to make the move.<sup>98</sup> At the suggestion of Tugwell and Alexander, Wallace spent time in the South observing poverty first-hand. He was shaken by what he saw, poverty he

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<sup>95</sup> Tugwell, “The Resettlement Idea,” 161.

<sup>96</sup> Robert C. Albright, “Tugwell Appeals to President to Establish a Permanent RA,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 1936; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 118-22; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 180-82. On the development of Tugwell’s bad reputation, see Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, 223-250. Tugwell’s critics got in a final shot about Tugwell’s final report as RA Administrator, a relatively slick publication described as too flashy and expensive: Felix Bruner, “Tugwell Report Sets New Highs for Gaudiness,” *Washington Post*, December 25, 1936.

<sup>97</sup> “Tugwell Urges RA Be Placed in Department,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 1936; “New Storm Rises Around Tugwell,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1936; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 121-22.

<sup>98</sup> “New Storm Rises Around Tugwell,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1936.

could not imagine existing in the United States. Wallace went out and spoke anonymously with impoverished rural southerners and was shocked – he compared their situation, unfavorably, to that of European peasants. More importantly, from the perspective of RA supporters, Wallace saw clients whose lives had measurably changed for the better thanks to the RA (even if they remained in grueling poverty) and many more who wanted to become RA clients.<sup>99</sup> Wallace called the RA’s work a “marvelous job” in “reducing tenancy among the underprivileged farmers of the South and toward arresting further destruction of its greatest resource, the soil,” an accomplishment all the more impressive for having been done with emergency funds.<sup>100</sup> Tugwell met with Wallace while he toured, part of a successful effort after his resignation to convince Wallace that the RA belonged in the USDA.<sup>101</sup>

On January 1, 1937, the Resettlement Administration was transferred to the Department of Agriculture. The RA carried on much as before, and the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1937 and Executive Order 7649 essentially continued the program unchanged. Director Will Alexander maintained much of the same authority in the USDA as he had when the agency was independent: issuing instructions for routine procedural matters, authorizing budgets, and holding ultimate (in theory, though not always exercised in practice) authority over approval of

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<sup>99</sup> Lord, *Wallaces of Iowa*, 459-62. Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 169-71; “Wallace, Aide Will Make Tour of RA Projects,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 1936; Felix Belair, Jr., “RA Job Marvelous, Declares Wallace,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1936. Wallace made a tour earlier in the summer of 1936 to visit twelve drought-ridden states in the West, which likely also strengthened his view that the RA had valuable work to do. See “Wallace to Tour Big Drought Area,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1936. Observers at the time certainly recognized that the weather was strengthening the case for more relief spending (see Sidney Olson, “Rain – Or Relief Millions – May Deluge the Drought-Ridden States,” *Washington Post*, July 5, 1936; “Drought May Upset New WPA Program,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1936).

<sup>100</sup> Felix Belair, Jr., “RA Job Marvelous, Declares Wallace,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1936.

<sup>101</sup> “Tugwell Resigns His Post; Acceptance Today Likely; Plans Return to Columbia,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1936. Wallace was not alone in being moved by the experience; Howard R. Tolley, an AAA administrator, also went, and he too was shaken by what he had seen. Tolley, who was never terribly impressed with Tugwell, found that seeing and experiencing the poverty had a much greater impact than any convincing talk could. See *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 396-400.

loans to both individuals and groups.<sup>102</sup> Despite the move, the agency still lacked a sense of permanency – it did not get appropriations in the 1938 agricultural appropriation bill because it remained unclear if the RA would even exist in the next year, or be replaced by some other agency like the proposed Farm Security Administration in the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act.<sup>103</sup>

In early 1937, during the move to the USDA, the agency worked out routine bureaucratic and procedural details. Baldwin, then Assistant Administrator of the RA, and Paul H. Appleby, then Special Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, arranged most of it. Accounting moved in part to the USDA's Office of Budget and Finance, under William A. Jump. Personnel management moved to Warner W. Stockberger's Office of Personnel. The USDA's Office of the Solicitor, led by Mastin G. White, took over most of the legal responsibilities. In some places, RA personnel moved to other USDA positions; most notably, Dr. Lewis C. Gray, a well-known land planner called "one of the nation's foremost land economists" moved with the Land Utilization Program to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics.<sup>104</sup>

Other than these relatively minor personnel moves, the RA had matured into the agency that would carry out the heavy lifting of farm security. Between 1935 and 1937, the Resettlement Administration had become (under Tugwell's guidance) a large and efficient organization dedicated to alleviating rural poverty, culminating with its move to the USDA. The RA's basic administrative shape, in other words, was more or less set by the time it moved to the USDA and

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<sup>102</sup> FDR, Executive Order 7530, 1936; "To Absorb Forces of Resettlement," *New York Times*, December 22, 1936; W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume I*, no date; Box 3, FSA Historical Record, RG 96, NACP; Henry A. Wallace, "Memorandum No. 710," February 2, 1937, Folder "U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1937," Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>103</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1938* (1937), 413; House, *Supplemental Estimate of Appropriation, 1938* (1937).

<sup>104</sup> Clark, "The Social and Economic Implications of the National Land Program: Discussion," 274 (quote); Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 231-32; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 57.

would undergo only minor evolutions before the strains of World War II dramatically changed the farm security program

The full scope of RA responsibilities, however, remained uncertain. Though the RA had been intended as a consolidation of rural anti-poverty efforts, it was increasingly becoming clear (as reflected in the RA's move to the USDA) that the current set-up of the agency was only one stop in a continuing bureaucratic and ideological transformation. Rural rehabilitation remained an important part of the RA's program, but approaches to rural poverty like land reform and resettlement were increasingly pushed to the side. Replacing them was a new concern about the problems of tenancy and its connections to rural poverty. RA administrators took a great interest in this new issue and in the slowly-developing legislative response, which held out of the hope of boosting their anti-poverty efforts and strengthening the RA's political position.

## CHAPTER 5

### SEEKING A LEGISLATIVE SOLUTION TO TENANCY: THE BANKHEAD-JONES FARM TENANCY ACT, 1935-1937

As the Resettlement Administration reorganized and expanded, Senator John H. Bankhead, Jr., and Congressman Marvin Jones sought to enact legislation specifically to address chronic rural poverty and particularly poverty associated with farm tenancy. RA administrators were from the beginning very interested in such proposals. Tugwell believed that a long-term tenancy program might lend some institutional backing to the RA; its hodgepodge of arguably emergency measures would become part of a deliberate, comprehensive effort to solve the problems of farm tenancy. The Resettlement Administration was already involved in a project aimed at improving tenant security. Its Farm Tenant Purchase Project, which eventually found a home in the Rural Resettlement and then the Rural Rehabilitation Divisions of the RA, selected 1,000 farm tenants to receive aid in obtaining home ownership. Working with state extension services, the RA selected counties in ten southern states and developed a more intense home management plan to go along with a long-term loan for 40 years at 3% interest.<sup>1</sup>

Bankhead, familiar with the ups and downs of the legislative process, no doubt remembered how difficult the creation of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads had been, not to mention how the concessions necessary to create it had compromised its performance. In that case, the result had been an enormous decrease in funds, from \$400 million to only \$25 million,

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<sup>1</sup> Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 73; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 37; Felix Belair, Jr., "Tugwell Is Seeking 500 Million to Help Tenants Buy Farms," *New York Times*, November 15, 1936; "New Farm Program Mapped by Tugwell," *Washington Post*, November 17, 1936.



and the burden of functioning as part of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which meant goals and regulations not in keeping with the Division's purpose. The new tenancy bill faced a similarly uphill battle. It would take over two years to pass the act, and (like the Division of Subsistence Homesteads) the long legislative fight would reduce its scope and weaken its provisions. The reasons for the delay were clear. Established agricultural interests and their congressional allies were in a strong position to make sure that any bill substantially threatening the status quo could not be passed. Even with full presidential support, the kind of comprehensive reform bill that Bankhead envisioned was unlikely. As it happened, the legislative effort hit unexpected obstacles, like the continuing controversy over an anti-lynching bill which derailed any number of proposed bills, and Roosevelt did not make his direct presence felt until after several months and much diminishing of the bill's original scope.

Bankhead and Jones' bill did have some advantages in the fight, however. Most importantly, the specific problems of tenancy, exacerbated in many ways by the federal government, had become more widely recognized, particular among government leaders. Influential politicians and thinkers had gradually come to a consensus by the end of 1936 that the government had to address the problem of tenancy. The result was a new, popular responsibility for the Resettlement Administration (soon to become the Farm Security Administration) and at least a measure of legislative legitimacy for part of the farm security program.

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The most important single figure behind the legislative push was Bankhead, the son of Alabama congressman and senator John H. Bankhead, Sr. The younger Bankhead had been elected to the state legislature and ran one of the largest law practices in Alabama before going to the Senate. Winning office in 1930, he became one of the most influential voices for cotton

interests. While Bankhead was undoubtedly close to the traditional agriculturalist element, as his Bankhead Cotton Control Act indicated, he was genuinely, if inconsistently, concerned with the plight of the poor.<sup>2</sup> His conception of a tenant purchase program was more than simply a favor to American agriculture. As he later wrote, he did not see the program as “solely a financial credit agency of the government.” Instead, he believed it involved “moral and social elements, as well as financial ones,” and that “the heart of that program goes far beyond any banking loan program.”<sup>3</sup>

J. Marvin Jones, a Texas Congressman and Chair of the House Committee on Agriculture since 1931, was similarly convinced of the need for legislation to help farm tenants become owners, but he took a more conservative approach. Jones was interested primarily in the more competent farm tenants; he opposed the idea of the federal government getting involved in actually purchasing and reselling. Jones also felt more political pressure in the House, where there was less interest in (and indeed, some hostility toward) any kind of tenancy legislation.<sup>4</sup> He was slower to act, less active in the early creation of the act, and generally not quite as widely associated with tenancy legislation as Bankhead.

Bankhead met with a variety of USDA officials, agriculturalists, economists, and lawyers to determine what the best approach to the problem might be. Rural sociologist Frank Tannenbaum had suggested to Secretary Wallace that the government sell land to tenant farmers from properties foreclosed by the Federal Land Banks. This would have been a fairly small-scale

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<sup>2</sup> Charles B. Crow, “John H. Bankhead, 2d., United States Senator from Alabama,” September 2, 1936, Folder 1, Box 1, Bankhead Papers; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 407-08.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Clinton P. Anderson, July 2, 1945, Folder 5, Box 7, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Irvin M. May, Jr., *Marvin Jones: The Public Life of an Agrarian Advocate* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 129-30, 151-53.

program, however, and would have depended on annual appropriations from the USDA to operate. Bankhead instead wanted a bigger, more immediate solution.<sup>5</sup>

Bankhead was fortunate, as a group of thinkers including Tannenbaum, Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and Will Alexander had been working on just the same problem. Styling themselves the Committee on Minority Groups in the Economic Recovery, they had met with USDA officials and drafted a bill. The bill was written in early February 1935, and M. L. Wilson (Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and formerly the head of the subsistence homesteads program) got into contact with Bankhead about sponsoring the bill. Bankhead did not write the bill (USDA attorney Philip Glick did most of the writing), but it was in line with his thoughts and he agreed to present it. The bill's creators were glad to have a respected name and New Dealer like Bankhead on board.<sup>6</sup> USDA officials, for their part, were also glad to have the act appear to come from elsewhere – such a potentially controversial measure would have a better shot if it were connected to an esteemed politician, and it would lessen the amount of criticism the USDA might expect. When the group presented the ambitious program to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, he laughed and told them to treat it as Bankhead's idea.<sup>7</sup>

In creating the tenant purchase program, some supporters appear to have had only white tenants in mind. Bankhead wrote to a constituent that there was no “cause for our friends in the Black Belt to be disturbed about the farm tenant bill,” as “our primary interest is in the white tenants.” After noting that most tenants in Alabama were white, Bankhead went on to write, “it will be impossible for the government to do more than aid the most worthy and reliable tenants”

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<sup>5</sup> Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 435-36.

<sup>6</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 390; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 93-105.

<sup>7</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 390.

– presumably, the white ones. Furthermore, local control of the application process would ensure that whites could “handle that end of it for their own protection.”<sup>8</sup>

On February 11, 1935, Bankhead first introduced his bill, S.1800, known as “The Farm Tenant Homes Act.” A Subcommittee of the Committee on Agriculture and held hearings on the bill. Only eight people appeared before the Subcommittee, and all of them spoke favorably. The Senate appeared much more sympathetic to a farm tenancy bill than was the House.<sup>9</sup> In the lower chamber, a variety of bills on farm tenancy had been proposed, but none went anywhere until Jones took an interest. He had long been a proponent of federal action to ease credit for farmers, and his approach to tenancy legislation reflected this thinking. As Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, he held a powerful position, and on February 25 he introduced H.R. 6151, the “Agriculture Bank Note Act.”<sup>10</sup>

The titles of each bill reflected early differences in approach to the problems of farm tenancy. Bankhead proposed a billion-dollar program to purchase land and resell it to tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers. Jones’ less ambitious bill would offer lower interest rates for mortgage loans to small farm operators, acting as a broader farm credit bill. Bankhead intended

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<sup>8</sup> John H. Bankhead to J. L. Edwards, [early December 1936?], Folder 1, Box 5, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>9</sup> *To Create the Farm Tenant Homes Corporation, Hearings Before A Subcommittee of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry on S. 1800*. 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1935; Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 436; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 112-16. Seeing it from the inside as Tugwell’s assistant and as an FSA Regional Director, Laurence Hewes believed that part of the appeal in these early years was the belief that a successful program like what the RA was doing might protect people like the Bankheads in Alabama, Robinson in Arkansas, and other moderates by eliminating some of the appeal of agrarian and southern demagogues like Huey Long. The danger of that strategy was that the idealism of the people running such a program might upset the status quo even more so than Long or similar outsiders. See Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 75. The tenant purchase program, in addition to reflecting a genuine concern for the conditions of poor tenants, can also be read as a bit of political posturing.

<sup>10</sup> Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 437; May, *Marvin Jones*, 128-30. There does not appear to have been much, if any, in the way of preparation or meetings between Bankhead and Jones (who did not particularly like each other, especially the prickly Bankhead toward Jones) before these bills were introduced. Given how much time was eaten by developing and then passing the compromise bill, this failure of preparation is as responsible as anything else for the initial failure to pass the bill.

his program to work through the USDA, while Jones would have his administered by the Farm Credit Administration.<sup>11</sup>

Over the next month, a compromise bill was hammered out, and Bankhead introduced S.2367, “The Farmers Home Act,” on March 26, the same day Jones introduced its companion bill, H.R.7018. The compromise bills would create a Farmers Home Corporation explicitly intended to meet the goal of “rural rehabilitation” but not clearly connected to the RA. But like the RA, the new Farmers Home Corporation would be outside any existing agency; its Board of Directors would include both the Secretary of Agriculture and the Governor of the Farm Credit Administration (FCA), a neat compromise putting it between the two agencies. This corporation would have capital stock of \$50 million, which the Board of Directors could increase. The act quickly became known as the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Bill.<sup>12</sup>

At first it looked like the bill had a good, even certain, chance of passing. It had the support of Majority Leader Joseph T. Robinson in the Senate, which gave it the appearance of Administration support. It also had the support of activist and social groups across the country, including various religious denominations, social welfare organizations, and organized labor.<sup>13</sup> The bill had support at the local level; for example, the Alabama Farm Bureau Federation endorsed it in order to make “it possible for worthy tenant farmers on good land eventually to become land owners” (preferring, as the original Bankhead-Jones compromise bill

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<sup>11</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 138-39; Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 437-38.

<sup>12</sup> *To Create the Farm Tenant Homes Corporation, Report (to accompany S. 2367)*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., 1935, Report no. 446. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 127-52, provides the most detailed look at the bill in Congress in 1935; see also Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 438; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 151-52; Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 41-44; May, *Marvin Jones*, 151-58; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Rural Southern Poverty*, 116-17.

<sup>13</sup> Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 438; “A.F.L. For Bankhead Bill,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1935.

recommended, that the federal government work through the Farm Credit Administration and the USDA).<sup>14</sup>

But unfortunately for the bill's supporters, the spring of 1935 was not an ideal time for tenancy reform legislation. Congress was tied up in a southern filibuster over anti-lynching legislation. The Senate debate on the tenancy bill did not begin until April 16, and it did not get off to a good start. The debate was colored by Colorado Senator Edward P. Costigan's efforts to take up an anti-lynching bill; southerners hoped to block it, and much of the debate was transparent time-killing. When the Senate took up the tenancy bill in earnest, the vote generally broke along party and regional lines, with southern and midwestern Democrats (regions that had the most tenancy problems), plus Nebraska Republican George Norris, in favor, while most of the other Republicans and Democrats voted against. After a few days of debate, the bill survived a violent attack in the Senate; Virginia's Senator Harry F. Byrd led a coalition of Republicans, eastern Democrats, and a few southerners determined to force the measure back to committee. Supporters of the bill thwarted this initial attack. However, the bill was sent back to committee, resulting in another crucial month wasted.<sup>15</sup> The bill finally passed the Senate on June 24, 1935.

For all that work in the upper chamber, however, the bill hit a roadblock in the House of Representatives. Jones' Committee on Agriculture held a brief hearing for the bill, less than three hours long, with little new said and little done to convince those who might be unsure about the proposal. After that, Jones never even brought the bill up for debate in the House. Recognizing that such a bill could never pass the House Committee on Agriculture, at least not with the

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<sup>14</sup> Walter L. Randolph to J. D. Pope, December 17, 1935, Folder "Cooperation A RR-070," Box 4, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP. The differences between how the various state farm bureaus generally favored the bill and how the national AFBF showed such disinterest raises questions about how much the AFBF even represented the state bureaus, much less their membership.

<sup>15</sup> "Stave Off Debate on Lynching Bill," *New York Times*, April 24, 1935; "Tenant Farm Bill Survives Test Vote," *New York Times*, April 23, 1935; "Senate Sidetracks Farm Tenant Bill," *New York Times*, April 25, 1935.

unanimous vote he thought necessary, Jones was reluctant to waste effort on a lost cause. Other bills he was interested in, particularly soil conservation and reforms to the AAA, took up his time. Jones also created his own distractions, introducing a revised Agricultural Bank Note Act during the debate.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, USDA officials' interest in the bill had declined along with their proposed role in the program. Unlike Bankhead's original Senate version, the compromise bill placed administration of the new agency outside the USDA; everyone knew that the RA would be organized outside the USDA, and that young agency (or more specifically, Assistant to the Administrator Brooks Hays) became the only active proponent of the bill in the House. Congress adjourned late in August, and the tenancy bill was defeated for the time being.<sup>17</sup>

In early 1936, a new version, introduced with Roosevelt's support and apparently Bankhead's reluctance (because, among other reasons, the new tenancy program would have been administered by the USDA and had smaller and less definite appropriations), sat for weeks before finally finding room on the House Agricultural Committee's schedule at the end of February. Again, the bill made little progress, especially with the now less-than-enthusiastic efforts of its sponsors. Jones was again reluctant to push the issue. By June, with adjournment approaching, most supporters had given up for the year.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the RA (now closely associated with the bill in some circles) had made enemies. For example, Congressman Walter Pierce of Oregon had been responsible for one of the bill's delays. He told RA officials that he had done so because, some months before, the RA had refused to move a county office to punish

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<sup>16</sup> House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 323-62; *Congressional Record* 79 (1935), 302; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 152-53; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 42-44; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 151-52; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 409-10; May, *Marvin Jones*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Maddox, "The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act," 439-40; Rex Tugwell, undeterred, put together four trial cases in Georgia, the Carolinas, and the Mississippi Delta, to buy and resell land to tenants under long-term loans. "To Move Farm Tenants," *New York Times*, November 27, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 156-61.

some of his political foes. Pierce had taken his revenge by helping to defeat the bill.<sup>19</sup> Similar sentiment, justified by perceived political slights or ideological concerns, cost the measure votes and support.

While politicians delayed, tenancy remained a problem, manifesting in dangerous and explosive ways. Many assumed that the purpose of the bill was to address what New Hampshire Congressman Charles Tobey called “the situation that has developed among the sharecroppers in certain sections of the South, almost bordering on civil war.”<sup>20</sup> Across the South, evicted tenants (often forced out by the AAA) migrated slowly across the highways. Thousands sent letters to practically every agency, department, and official of the federal government. Mob violence, organized by planters and landlords, met efforts to create sharecropper unions.<sup>21</sup>

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union organized in July 1934 to unite sharecroppers into a rural labor union. The STFU grew rapidly; within a few months, it had over 1,400 members (mostly in Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas), and locals formed faster than the union leadership could keep up with them.<sup>22</sup> This rapid, uncontrolled growth resulted in allegations of socialist and even communist influence that hurt the STFU’s public image.<sup>23</sup> Such allegations did not appear to hurt the STFU’s appeal to many tenant farmers, however; they had been willing for decades to vote for third parties, including the Socialist Party in the 1910s, and they were more

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<sup>19</sup> Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 324.

<sup>21</sup> “Share Croppers’ Plight Spurs Relief Agencies Into Action,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 1935; F. Raymond Daniell, “Tenant Law Clash Roils Cotton Belt,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1935; F. Raymond Daniell, “Arkansas Violence Laid to Landlords,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1935.

<sup>22</sup> Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 83-93. Other tenant resistance took place, but none to the extent of the STFU’s activity in Missouri and Arkansas; see for example Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, regarding communist-inspired agitation in Alabama. For a more personal view, especially on the risks involved to those personally taking action, see Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, 296-343, 390-92, 545-55. On the STFU, see Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*; Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*; Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*; Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, 82-104.

<sup>23</sup> F. Raymond Daniell, “Farm Tenant Union Hurt By Outsiders,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1935.



concerned about the effectiveness of the organization more than they were with its ideological orthodoxy.<sup>24</sup>

From its beginnings, the STFU was interracial. This only increased the opposition from planters. Organizers were arrested and beaten, churches and other meetings places were locked up or blocked, and tenants active in the union were threatened and evicted. At first sharecroppers and tenants armed themselves, but soon the STFU shifted toward a strategy of non-violent resistance. Emphasizing the legality of their activities, leaders insisted that their members attend open meetings unarmed and without secrecy.<sup>25</sup> This constituted a powerful moral argument, but it also made STFU members and meetings an easier target for reprisal.

After a few aborted attempts at intimidation and race-baiting, planters resorted to violence. Organizer Lucien Koch and another man were beaten by drunken deputies for trying to hold a union meeting in March 1935. Throughout the spring and early summer of 1935, violence raged across Arkansas as planters tried to smother the union. Meetings were broken up or banned, members were arrested, and homes and churches were shot up or set on fire.<sup>26</sup>

The situation only got worse in 1936. In May, tenant farmers and laborers in Arkansas again went on strike, demanding better pay. Violence increased, with additional charges of kidnapping and peonage against Arkansas planters.<sup>27</sup> Not only did the violence worsen, but it also became clear that planters and anti-unionists were using any means necessary to hide that violence. The best examples include the death of the black union member Willie Hurst, murdered apparently to keep him from testifying about the behavior of the STFU's opponents, and the

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<sup>24</sup> On the ideology of small southern farmers in the first half the twentieth century, including their willingness to vote Socialist and their attraction to the STFU (so long as it proved itself useful), see Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*.

<sup>25</sup> Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 56-63.

<sup>26</sup> "Misery in Arkansas," *The Nation*, March 13, 1935, 294; Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> "Tenant Farm Strike in Federal Inquiry," *New York Times*, June 4, 1936.

beatings of two union supporters, Willie Sue Blagden and Reverend Claude Williams.<sup>28</sup> Blagden, a white woman and the member of a prominent Memphis family, and Williams were on their way to investigate the case of Frank Weems, a striking black sharecropper allegedly beaten to death, leading to a brief federal inquiry. An Arkansas sheriff denied the story about both the flogging and Weems's death, as did Arkansas Governor J. M. Futrell, but the obvious support of the floggings by some Arkansans (like in the Earle (Arkansas) *Enterprise*'s claim that whippings were effective and that Blagden was to blame for her whipping) undercut the governing authority's assurances that violence was rare.<sup>29</sup>

Besides appearing in a number of national and regional newspaper accounts, complaints of mistreatment went directly to government officials, both in numerous letters and in person. Henry Wallace and farm relief administrators heard reports from tenants and agricultural workers invited by Gardner Jackson and the National Committee on Rural Social Planning. "Charges of misconduct on the part of State and local administrators," tenants and laborers claimed in a meeting on March 27, 1936, "ranging from petty thievery to deliberate and brutal terrorism," particularly in the plantation South.<sup>30</sup>

The situation in the South, particularly where sharecropper activity and violent responses were more visible such as in Arkansas and Missouri, created outrage. Socialist leader, orator, and presidential candidate Norman Thomas used the moment to demand presidential intervention.

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<sup>28</sup> T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 389; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening In This Land*, 94-95.

<sup>29</sup> "Trio Flogged, Thomas Asks Roosevelt In Crop Strike," *Washington Post*, June 17, 1936; "Investigation Into Floggings Ordered by U.S.," *Washington Post*, June 19, 1936; "Drops Flogging Inquiry," *New York Times*, August 13, 1936; "Sheriff Denies Sharecroppers' Flogging Story," *Washington Post*, June 18, 1936; "Flogging Case Inquiry Invited by Gov. Futrell," *Washington Post*, June 21, 1936; "Arkansas Editor Upholds the Lash," *New York Times*, June 24, 1936; Weems apparently did survive a severe beating; fearing for his life, he hid in the woods for a week before finding his way to Illinois. The floggings led to another national story when the Earle marshal arrested and forced to work dozens of sharecroppers, leading to charges of enslavement. "'Dead' flog Victim Alive in Chicago; Caused Upheavals," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 24, 1937.

<sup>30</sup> "Charge Terrorism to AAA Field Aides," *New York Times*, March 28, 1936.

The deprivations by planters and their allies in local government and law enforcement, he said, constituted a “reign of terror in the cotton country of eastern Arkansas.”<sup>31</sup> But more mainstream voices also began to demand some kind of action. The national concern about tenancy had begun in the early years of the Depression, when conditions among tenants had become worse. The violence and activity of the mid-1930s reinforced this sense that tenancy was a problem demanding a solution, one involving the federal government if necessary.

This concern about tenants and sharecroppers was relatively new. One rural sociologist wrote in 1923 that “the reading public in general, and students of farm problems in particular the country over know very little about farm tenancy in the South, and almost nothing about its social implications.”<sup>32</sup> The result was that in the 1920s, the near-total lack of awareness meant an absence of any sense that rural poverty was a problem that could be, or even needed to be, solved. Experts on rural standards of living argued, as Roland M. Harper did, that there was not “much encouragement to would-be ‘uplifters’” who would improve rural standards of living, partly because of the supposedly widely-known fact that “tenants are commonly more shiftless than farm owners in the same communities.”<sup>33</sup>

Starting in the late 1920s, however, government officials and agricultural experts began to recognize the serious impact of tenancy on American farming, including its impact outside the South. This was the result of political changes and intellectual currents whose origins were a decade earlier. The Smith-Lever Act in 1914 resulted in unprecedented levels of contact between farmers and agricultural college faculty by providing federal funding for cooperative

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<sup>31</sup> Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Branson, “Farm Tenancy in the Cotton Belt,” 213. This lack of concern is also evident in the relatively small legal framework surrounding landlord-tenant relations prior to the New Deal. See, for example, Cotton, “Regulations of Farm Landlord-Tenant Relationships,” 510-12.

<sup>33</sup> Roland M. Harper, “Rural Standards of Living in the South,” *Journal of Social Forces* 2.1 (1923): 13, 16. Harper also attributed the small holdings of the South and Southwest to “farmers with very simple tastes, like the [...] Mexicans peons, and the negroes in the Mississippi bottoms and on the sea-islands of South Carolina.”

arrangements between the USDA and land-grant colleges to offer instruction and demonstrations for rural Americans. The rural social sciences had only emerged as an independent discipline in the 1910s and 1920s, and its adherents looked to expand their field's vision. The call among sociologists in this period for a deeper study of rural life meant that, when the Depression hit, there were a large number of scholars interested in the field and ideally placed to explore it further. More than any previous period in American history, intellectuals and social scientists found a place in the New Deal; their ideas were heard by those with the power to determine policy.<sup>34</sup>

Literary depictions of poor farmers in a series of books and plays showed Americans the problems of tenant farming. Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre* introduced sharecroppers in 1932 and 1933; the stage adaptation of *Tobacco Road* by Jack Kirkland spread the message further. *Tobacco Road* presented a controversial picture of white southerners, trapped in a vicious cycle of tenancy, as utterly degraded by their circumstances: the main characters are greedy, deformed, and impoverished. Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, which put ungrammatical dialect into the mouths of its subjects, portrayed tenant and sharecropper poverty in photographs that were condescending but heartbreaking. Even after legislation had been passed, rural poverty remained a fertile ground for artists. In 1939, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* provided a well-received literary treatment of poor farmers who became migrants. In 1940, James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* purported to show how most tenants really lived.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On the, in retrospect, surprising slowness of agricultural experts to recognize the significance of tenancy and its relationship to erosion and soil quality, see William H. Harbaugh, "Twentieth-Century Tenancy and Soil Conservation: Some Comparisons and Questions," *Agricultural History* 66.2 (1992): 95-101. On the early history of rural sociology, see Larson and Zimmerman, *Sociology in Government*, 11-22. On the trend of intellectuals active in government during the New Deal, see Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*.

<sup>35</sup> For more on rural poverty in popular culture (especially regarding migrant workers in the Plains states and the West), see Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 415-17; Watkins, *The Hungry Years*, 455-59.

A variety of scholarly works provided a more intellectually rigorous, but still appalling, picture of life among the rural poor. Charles S. Johnson, in 1934, produced *Shadow of the Plantation*. With Edwin R. Embree and Will Alexander, he published a short but compelling summary of the problems of southern tenancy, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, timed to encourage the enacting of some kind of tenancy legislation by Congress and apparently influential in shaping FDR's views about how to approach the problem of tenancy. Rupert Vance's *How the Other Half Is Housed* in 1936 showed the sub-standard living conditions of southern farmers. Howard W. Odum, in 1936, produced the massive *Southern Regions of the United States*, describing tenancy among a host of issues. Arthur Raper in 1936 presented the story of Georgia sharecroppers in *Preface to Peasantry* (and followed up in 1943 with *Tenants of the Almighty*). T. J. Woofter, Jr., looked at medium and large plantations in the Southeast in 1936, reported in *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*. Even after a tenant bill passed, things were little better when the National Emergency Council's *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, presented to the Members of the Conference on Economic Conditions in the South in 1938.<sup>36</sup>

By the mid-to-late 1930s, with the various popular and scientific studies, the Bankhead-Jones Bill, and the activities of the STFU, the American public was probably better informed about tenancy than it ever had been before. Even those who disagreed in general with the government's intervention in agriculture supported something like the tenant-purchase program. Years of unrest indicated that the entire rural social order was potentially under threat. The big

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<sup>36</sup> Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 214-16; Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*; Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*; Vance, *How the Other Half Is Housed: A Pictorial Record of Subminimum Farm Housing in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938); Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Arthur F. Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943); Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*; National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*.

landholders were loathe to see any action, but if something had to be done, ownership was the best option. The other possibilities were government protection of and aid to sharecroppers and tenants, which would make them more difficult to control, or to resettle them elsewhere, even off the land entirely, which would tighten the labor market. Better from the planter perspective, then, to move a small number into ownership. Even if they became competitors on the market, they would politically be allies as they settled in to the ownership class.<sup>37</sup>

In the South in particular, government action on tenancy had wide support, though not necessarily as a reflection of concern with the conditions of the tenants. Some southerners responded to the tenant strike as proof of the practical necessity of a farm ownership bill. The *Birmingham Post* called Bankhead's program a crucial fight against communism: the striking tenants, who "see no hope out of their present situation," had "turned in large numbers to the Marxian doctrine." Using an appropriately agricultural metaphor, the *Post* argued that the "best way to fight Communism is to remove the conditions which are fertile soil for its growth."<sup>38</sup> More specifically, the *Birmingham News* claimed, the bill would be crucial to "preventing the spread of Communism among Negroes in the South."<sup>39</sup> Henry Gee asserted in the *Southern Economic Journal* in 1936 that the "surest antidote to such revolutionary agitations is to mitigate the blighting effects of mounting tenancy ratios by making it possible for every worthy tenant farmer to step into the ultimate ownership of the farm upon which he is to live." He endorsed the version of the Bankhead-Jones tenancy act then working its way through Congress.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tugwell, "The Resettlement Idea," 162.

<sup>38</sup> "A Worthy Objective," *Birmingham Post*, June 22, 1936.

<sup>39</sup> "Eradicating A Breeder of Revolution In The South," *Birmingham News*, February 10, 1936. On the actual rather small-scale spread of communism among southern African Americans during the Depression, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson Gee, "Reversing the Tide toward Tenancy," *Southern Economic Journal* 2.4 (1936): 4, 9.

Other southerners claimed that the federal government owed the South. Journalist Jay Franklin blamed northerners for creating the problems of tenancy while at the same time criticizing the South. Since the Progressive Era, he argued, the North had taken title to southern land and hurt the southern economy with tariffs and other economic policies. Now northerners condemned planters, who were in Franklin's view as much slaves of the system as tenants were. Having created this monstrosity, the federal government had a responsibility to fix it; if Bankhead wanted a billion dollars, then the federal government had to pay it.<sup>41</sup>

By 1936, the belief that the federal government must do something to alleviate the problems of tenancy in American had become widespread. Simple politics was part of the equation. "The question of the redistribution of land," *The New Republic* noted in the summer of 1936, "is appearing everywhere in Southern primaries."<sup>42</sup> The USDA played a part in raising interest, in particular in its series of public hearings on farm tenancy. These had, as one scholar puts it, "a contagious effect" as state governors or their representatives, Extension Service state directors, field specialists, and federal officials met to iron out plans for what needed to be done.<sup>43</sup> Henry Wallace also became increasingly convinced of the need to promote more widespread farm ownership during a two-week trip through the South in 1936.<sup>44</sup>

There was also a sense that prosperity was to return; although millions remained out of work, increasing numbers of observers came to believe that this biggest threat to the economy had passed.<sup>45</sup> For those who believed that the government was spending too many tax dollars even during the Great Depression, that meant putting the brakes on federal spending. But others,

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<sup>41</sup> Jay Franklin, "We, the People," *Washington Star*, January 7, 1937.

<sup>42</sup> "Washington Notes," *The New Republic*, July 29, 1936, 352.

<sup>43</sup> Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 166.

<sup>44</sup> Felix Belair, Jr., "Wallace Leaning to One-Man Farms," *New York Times*, November 20, 1936.

<sup>45</sup> Sidney Olson, "Prosperity Has Turned That Famous Corner, But Dark Clouds Remain," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1936.

looking at the conditions in which so many impoverished Americans still lived, believed that now the federal government's focus could shift from the urgent to the merely important.

The evidence of the need for action culminated in the report of the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy, which was written in large by James Maddox.<sup>46</sup> The *Extension Service Review* informed readers that farm tenancy had become a hot topic in the news, describing the report of the President's Committee, the hearings, and various recommendations for fixing the problem.<sup>47</sup> Calling the tenancy situation "a challenge to national action," Roosevelt created the committee in November 1936; Henry Wallace served as chairman and L. C. Gray as his secretary. FDR specifically asked Wallace to keep in close contact with Bankhead and Jones, in light of their work on proposed tenancy legislation.<sup>48</sup> Appointing Secretary of Agriculture Wallace to the Committee on Farm Tenancy reflected FDR's concern for the issue and its high importance in his administration.<sup>49</sup> Roosevelt was perhaps motivated to take this approach in light of the difficulties that earlier efforts to create a tenant-purchase program had faced. Even critics of New Deal experimentation applauded this more deliberate method. One writer, after deriding the "ill-conceived, hasty and slipshod" methods of his first administration, praised Roosevelt for showing a new "keen critical faculty" by taking a more careful approach to the problem of tenancy.<sup>50</sup>

As FDR described in his transmittal letter, the Committee called for four types of action. First, action had to be taken to open ownership up to tenants who had experience and ability but lacked capital and needed credit and advice. Second, to prevent more farmers from losing

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<sup>46</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy; The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 392. See also Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 168-77; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 47-48; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 167-76.

<sup>47</sup> "What They Are Saying ... About Farm Tenancy," *Extension Service Review* 8.6 (1937): 87, 93.

<sup>48</sup> "Roosevelt Orders Study of Tenancy," *New York Times*, November 18, 1936.

<sup>49</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 45-46, 408-16.

<sup>50</sup> Franklyn Waltman, "Politics and People," *Washington Post*, November 18, 1936.



ground, small loans must be made to small owners, tenants, croppers, and laborers. Third, the government should retire land unsuitable to farming and assist those living on submarginal land in the move to better farms. Finally, in cooperation with state and local government, something should be done to improve the lease system. Being so closely related, these actions should be undertaken by a single agency.<sup>51</sup> The Committee, then, essentially recommended long-term legislative support for activities very similar to what the RA was already doing; it even asserted that the RA “may well serve as a nucleus” for the organization that the Secretary of Agriculture tasked with its suggestions, although it offered the title of “Farm Security Administration” to better describe the recommended activities.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than focusing on its ostensible subject of tenancy, the Committee looked at “the problem of insecurity of farm families, a much larger, harder, and more important issue,” in the words of agricultural economist T. W. Schultz.<sup>53</sup> Pointing to the instability of farm prices and farm income, excessive mobility, land speculation, exploitation of the soil, and other problems, the report asserted that “security has become of increasing concern to American farmers.”<sup>54</sup> Traditionally, it was through owning land that Americans found security, but in recent years, fewer and fewer farmers could reach that goal. Not only did fewer own their farms, but the number of owners with some kind of debt meant that hundreds of thousands of farm families had only the “semblance of ownership.”<sup>55</sup> Thus the Committee looked not just at tenants and sharecroppers, but also poor laborers, small operators on land too poor or plots too small (or both) to make a living, and farmers in such debt that they might as well be considered tenants. These kinds of struggling farmers made up about half of all farm families. While it limited its

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<sup>51</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy*, iv.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Schultz, “A Comment on the ‘Report of the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy,’” 207.

<sup>54</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

recommendations to solving the problems of farm tenancy, the report pointed out that improving the balance between agriculture and the rest of the economy, and among producers, was necessary for any sort of long-term solution.<sup>56</sup>

The most important specific recommendation the Committee made was for the federal government, working through a Farm Security Corporation, to purchase land to be sold to worthy tenants on long-term contracts, with a trial lease to ensure the capacity and character of the potential owner. Variable payments and a 40-year lease would ease repayments; requiring a minimum of twenty years before total repayment would avoid speculation and promote stability. The ideal purchaser would be one selected for character and industry from one of the disadvantaged rural classes, preferably already living on the lands to be purchased. The farms would be family-sized, larger or smaller as the region and type of farming required. Cooperative ownership of machinery and stock could obviate some of the economic disadvantages of small farming. Financing should start out small, to avoid early mistakes and rising farm prices.<sup>57</sup>

While the tenant purchase aspects were most important, they were not the entirety of the Committee's recommendations. The report called for loans and grants to rehabilitate the 420,000 farm families living at or below subsistence level and the 500,000-600,000 families who, due to disaster of some sort, had entirely exhausted their capital and credit. Another large group, perhaps the majority of the 1.8 million tenant families in the South and other small farmers across the nation, had no access to traditional forms of credit. These families needed government loans on easy terms and technical assistance (similar to what the RA was already doing). Tenure reform and better leasing contracts would create stability. For farm laborers, continuing the RA's migratory camps would provide better circumstances until the general improvement of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 11-14.

agricultural system allowed migrants to find a place on the land as tenants or small operators. Underlying these recommendations was the need to retire submarginal land, particularly the 100 million acres too poor to provide a living but still occupied by half a million families. Unless that poor land was removed and retired, more poor families would just take the place of those moving on to better farms.<sup>58</sup>

Most of what the Committee described would best be done through a federal agency, but because it took such a broad view of the problem of rural insecurity, it also had recommendations for action by the state governments. State governments, for example, could do much more to improve the leasing system than could the federal government. In many states, changing the system of taxing land and homesteads could protect small farmers. Recognizing the recent outbreaks of violence, the report called on states to protect the rights of tenants and rural laborers to organize, and it recommended that the states repeal laws making it a misdemeanor to quit a contract while in debt, a law that frequently tied debtors into a sort of peonage.<sup>59</sup>

Given the different interests and viewpoints, it is no surprise that not everyone on the Committee agreed with these recommendations. W. L. Blackstone, the STFU's representative, for example, disagreed with the proposal to place the Farm Security Administration in the USDA. The STFU remained wary of domination by large-scale, influential farmers and landowners. Experience with the AAA taught Blackstone that employees of the USDA were often effectively employees of large landowners. Blackstone and the STFU wanted the new program to investigate and resolve the problems faced by tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers in the same way that industrial workers had different regulatory protections. He also wanted to expand the Wagner Act and Social Security Act to cover agricultural labor. Charles S. Johnson

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 15-18.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 19-22.

offered a similar critique, largely agreeing with the report but recommending that safeguards be introduced for black farmers, who by hard experience had learned that decentralized federal programs would not fully benefit African Americans.<sup>60</sup>

While Blackstone and Johnson believed the report did not go far enough, a couple of members of the Committee claimed it went too far. Ed O'Neal, President of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), had a number of his own objections. In general, O'Neal could not approve of the report because so many of its positions went against the announced (though unstated in O'Neal's letter) policy of the AFBF. Henry C. Taylor, concerned about the impact of such a program on the work habits of tenants and workers, claimed that the proposals should only be carried through "on a strictly experimental basis until their merits had been thoroughly tested," going on to say that the program threatened to undermine "thrift" and edged too close toward relief.<sup>61</sup>

As a forum for discussion and a spur to action, the report did its job. There were specific criticisms that could be made. But a larger problem with the report indicates something of the difficulty with which anyone approaching agricultural reform in the 1930s had to wrestle. American agricultural was enormously diverse. It was almost impossible to treat American farming as a unified whole (as the report itself noted). The large number of recommendations by the Committee reflected this fact. Clashes between the interests of agricultural producers of different sizes and regions, the limitations of political necessity, and the vagueness of the complex and contradictory concept of "farm security" made a broad, coherent course of action a difficult task (as later events would show).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 24-28.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 27-28, 28 (quote).

<sup>62</sup> See especially the brief but pointed criticism (in a generally approving discussion) by T. W. Schultz, "A Comment on the 'Report of the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy,'" *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics*

In late 1936, the Roosevelt Administration signaled that, with the elections out of the way, it would help push a new farm tenancy act through Congress. The political pressure to do something had increased. Representatives of tenant farmers had been working on the Administration for years. Directly, journalist and labor consultant Gardner Jackson and Norman Thomas met with FDR and his advisers. STFU agitation was at a climax at the same time that Roosevelt was changing his public message to strongly support some kind of government action addressing tenancy.<sup>63</sup>

The political atmosphere in Washington was also ripe for action. Rexford Tugwell was gone. While it was still considered a bit troublesome, the RA (which many expected to be operating the new tenancy program) had gained a sense of permanency with its move to the USDA, smoothing the way for a bill.<sup>64</sup> The RA was obviously interested in the pending legislation, doing what it could to prove, for example, that its current Farm Tenure Security Program would be self-liquidating, paying for both the original cost of the farms as well as improvements in sanitation and housing.<sup>65</sup>

The administration got to work politically. Henry Wallace, the front man on the issue, had strong support from both farm and labor groups, lending strength to any recommendations the committee might have. And Roosevelt was involved, encouraging the primary actors. Before the 1936 election, he told Bankhead and Jones to get together to prepare plans for a federal

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13.2 (1937): 207-08. Some believed that American agriculture and tenancy was simply too big to be handled by national policy; in light of the potentially vast sums and variety of agriculture, for example, Albert H. Cotton recommended taking a state-by-state approach and focusing on the less expensive method of creating and improving regulation between landlords and tenants. See Albert H. Cotton, "Regulations of Farm Landlord-Tenant Relationships," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 508-10.

<sup>63</sup> Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 143-45. Grubbs argues that the actions of the STFU representatives and the unrest in the Delta strongly influenced the Roosevelt Administration to move toward some action on farm tenancy.

<sup>64</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 45-46, 408-16.

<sup>65</sup> J. C. Walker to Will W. Alexander, June 10, 1937, Folder "Resettlement Division AD-184-047," Box 42, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

solution to the problem of tenancy.<sup>66</sup> After the election, FDR made it clear to supporters that he was behind them; in early 1937, for example, he promised Bankhead that he would, as Bankhead described it, “permit nothing to be done that will be hurtful” to the bill while Bankhead was in Arizona.<sup>67</sup>

Observers expected some kind of bill to pass; it was clear to virtually everyone involved in agriculture and familiar with the problems of tenancy that something needed to be done, and the federal government would be doing it. There was still some significant criticism, however, much of it from the political left, especially among those who worried that the proposed agency would have little power to aid or protect black farmers. One writer, noting the “vague hopes of the liberals as absolutely utopian and unreal,” accurately pointed out that whatever form the final bill took, it could not correct for the influence that local officials would still have.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, NAACP Special Counsel Charles Houston wrote to Will Alexander about his “gravest misgivings” over the “despotic power” given to committees in selecting clients and asked, “Can you tell me whether any county committees with similar power over selecting beneficiaries of Federal beneficences have made it a practice to give Negroes fair consideration?”<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, those with similar concerns saw the BJFTA as a way to resolve some of the inequities of the RA. The Southern Policy Association made recommendations along these lines to the then-deliberating President’s Special Committee on Farm Tenancy. Arthur F. Raper argued a new program could and should focus on the best farmlands, where a racist, feudal system held sway. Rupert B. Vance criticized the RA’s “conflicts of authority, their indefensible

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<sup>66</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt to John H. Bankhead, September 17, 1936, Folder “Tenancy,” Box 2439, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>67</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Charles B. Crow, January 18, 1937, Folder 3, Box 1, Charles B. Crow Papers, LPR56, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

<sup>68</sup> Davis, “A Survey of the Problems of the Negro Under the New Deal,” 7.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Houston to Will W. Alexander, February 9, 1937, Folder “AD-140,” Box 26, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

overhead, the dictatorial techniques of certain project managers,” and other shortcomings that a new, properly structured agency could resolve.<sup>70</sup>

The most important criticism by those who favored the bill or its general goals, however, involved funding. At the Farm Tenancy Hearings in 1935, Wallace pointed out that it would take \$160 million a year for the program just to buy farms for the annual increase in tenant farmers.<sup>71</sup> The amount needed was far beyond what Congress was likely to support. Likewise, a smaller amount would not only fail to help sufficient numbers of tenant farmers, but it would also have political repercussions in that such a big effort had resulted in so small a program with so little impact.<sup>72</sup> This prompted some criticism that the BJFTA was impractical and that there were easier ways to solve the problem. A number of proposals for modifying the property tax system, for example, floated around during the debates over farm tenancy.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps reflecting this uncertainty about the direction any proposed tenancy legislation would take, the opening of the 75<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1937 saw a number of bills introduced that supported and promoted farm ownership, the RA, and other efforts to eliminate tenancy. Texan Tom Connally and Kenneth D. McKellar of Tennessee both introduced bills in the Senate. Representatives John A. Martin (Colorado) and Carl Vinson (Georgia) introduced bills in the House. However, only Marvin Jones, with H.R.8, and John Bankhead’s S.106, both titled “The Farmers Home Act” had serious legislative intent and hope of actually being passed.<sup>74</sup> The two

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<sup>70</sup> Southern Policy Association, “Recommendations regarding Tenancy Legislation submitted to the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy,” December 14, 1936, Folder 2, Box 8, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>71</sup> House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 243.

<sup>72</sup> Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 152-53.

<sup>73</sup> Russell J. Hinckley and John J. Haggerty, “Taxation in Aid of Farm Security,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 546-58. The authors argue that most proposed tax changes would be both ineffective and led to other negative consequences. One might wonder if, as recently-minted PhDs working for the government agency most intimately concerned with the issue of farm tenure (both were agricultural economists with the FSA), they had a personal stake in rejecting such proposals.

<sup>74</sup> “Farm Tenant Bill Filed by Bankhead,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1937; “Administration Farm Tenant Bill Sponsored in Congress,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 1937; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 177. Several people

had identical titles and nearly identical content, with the only significant difference being program management: Jones' bill would establish a Farmers Home Corporation with a three-person board of directors as designated by the President, while Bankhead's Senate version placed the Agriculture Department's Secretary, Assistant Secretary, and Under Secretary on the board, tying the agency closer to the USDA.<sup>75</sup>

Both bills authorized an appropriation of half a billion dollars with the same amount each year for ten years. This was only half of what Bankhead had wanted the Corporation to be able to issue yearly in government bonds in 1935, but it was a necessary concession to the widespread opinion, among both the public and members of Congress, that government debt was rising too fast.<sup>76</sup> The biggest problem had been keeping the tenant purchase program large enough to make a meaningful impact on the South. By May 1937 Bankhead was insisting, in response to talk that the bill would be reduced to \$10 million, that he would rather the proposal fail again rather than become only "a gesture."<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Marvin Jones claimed he would rather see no tenancy bill at all rather than a "skeletonized" measure.<sup>78</sup>

In addition, the initial program was in other important ways a much more limited program than the 1935 Bankhead bill or the recommendations of the Farm Tenancy Committee. It had no bond-issuing power, and it depended on annual appropriations. The fact that local farmers approved borrowers was ripe for abuse and favoritism. It had few safeguards against

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who had or who planned to introduce tenancy bills, including Connally, Texas Congressman Luther A. Johnson, and Nebraska Congressman C. G. Binderup, made an appearance where the real action was happening: the hearings on Jones' H. R. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Maddox, "The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act," 441-42; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 179-83.

<sup>76</sup> Maddox, "The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act," 441-42.

<sup>77</sup> Leroy Simms, "Bankhead Fights for Original Farm Bill," *The Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, May 23, 1937.

<sup>78</sup> "President Urges Tenancy Bill Cut," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 5, 1937.



speculators and no provision for migrant laborers. It also did not specifically sanction the RA's rural rehabilitation, land reform, and resettlement programs.<sup>79</sup>

Still, Bankhead and Jones went to work with what they had. "Cotton Ed" Smith, chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, decided to see what happened in the House before taking action, so debate began in the lower chamber. There Jones, who chaired the House Committee on Agriculture, hoped to earn its unanimous consent. The difficulty lay in that the most important members of the committee were single-interest voters who only cared how the bill influenced their particular crop or region.<sup>80</sup> Little happened until the report of the President's Committee on Tenancy helped spur action in mid-February by placing the problem of farm tenancy in a larger context.

With the introduction of H. R. 8, Jones held hearings on farm tenancy before the House Committee on Agriculture throughout late January and February 1937. The hearings were conducted in a more-or-less supportive atmosphere, operating on the assumption that the bill would pass. The idea of farm ownership was, after all, popular with both Congress and the public, and the need to do something about tenancy had become pressing. Most of the testimony dealt with the size and administration of the planned tenant purchase plan, provisions for purchasing land, taxation and local government finances, differences between the bill and other proposals for solving farm tenancy, and similar issues.

The hearings were not, however, entirely friendly to the proposed farm tenancy program, the federal farm security program as it then existed, or the goals of the reformers and administrators who operated and supported those programs. In the discussion and planning stages, it had been those mostly friendly to those goals of the bill who were raising questions and

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<sup>79</sup> House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 208, 218-25.

<sup>80</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 178; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 180-87.

criticisms; now that the bill was actually before Congress its political opponents became more vocal. Some of the critical issues raised during the hearings pointed to troubles for the RA/FSA down the road.

The harshest criticism came from those who disapproved of the entire idea of a tenant-purchase program or the existing rural rehabilitation and resettlement projects. North Carolina's Harold Cooley was particularly prominent among this group. He questioned Will Alexander about what would happen to the various RA programs already in existence – resettlement, rural rehabilitation, and land use reform. Cooley seemed to believe that the entire thing was a way to sneak into existence legislative approval for the RA. “Is not the real effect of this measure,” he asked, “to continue the Resettlement Administration just as it is now operating?”<sup>81</sup> The apparent effort to avoid the directives of Congress, in this case by tricking Congress into supporting an unpopular program, would become a sore point for critics of the RA and the FSA.

South Carolina Congressman Hampton Fulmer wondered about the slippery slope; he assumed that the purchasing of machinery or facilities for individual farmers would eventually lead to the government buying threshing machines and warehouses for every client. Similarly, Scott Lucas of Illinois asked if the proposed bill meant “the beginning of Government ownership and control of land in America” and wondered if Wallace “would promote the welfare of one class of farmers to the detriment of another class?”<sup>82</sup>

Other critics took this kind of argument further. Tennessee Congressman John Mitchell saw some aspects of the program as downright un-American, especially the provisions for supervision of clients and government approval of tract purchases. “I do not think that the Government agents should be dictating how he is to do everything,” he proclaimed about a

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<sup>81</sup> House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 113-15.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86, 250 (quote).

hypothetical tenant purchase borrower trying to buy a new farm. “That is how this country was developed and made great. Our granddaddies built it up with individual initiative.”<sup>83</sup>

Reflecting the traditional agriculturalist view, a number of opponents argued that the proposal detracted from what should be the real goal of the USDA: raising crop prices. Fulmer asked if “the better way to approach this problem, if we are ever going to solve it, would be to bring about a better condition for tenants, sharecroppers, and farmers, through working out a system of better prices” and went on to assert that the low-income and high-income farmer had identical needs, “a fair price for their commodities.”<sup>84</sup> Oregon Congressman Walter Pierce thought the real problem was the lack of profit and capacity for advance, which led to tenancy and people leaving rural areas because there was no way to make a living.<sup>85</sup> Cooley argued that tenancy was only a symptom of low prices. “It seems to me that it is necessary to make farming profitable,” he reasoned, “and if you make it profitable the tenancy question will take care of itself.”<sup>86</sup> Cooley’s near-total lack of understanding of the situation of actual tenants and small farmers became more evident later, when he questioned whether “the white people of America” would accept a program that made them “wards of the Federal Government,” facing the prospect of “a farm agent coming to his house every day or every week” and no chance to “enjoy the pride and privilege of ownership”<sup>87</sup>

Another group of critics insisted that the program should be tweaked to favor those at the top of tenancy – those “able to acquire, free of debt, in addition to his household goods, the necessary work stock and equipment for ordinary operation” of a family-sized farm, suggested by Georgia Agricultural Agent J. F. Jackson while arguing that to open it to less qualified tenants

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 308-09.

would threaten the success of the program.<sup>88</sup> Dr. Wilson Gee, a professor of rural economics at the University of Virginia, was even more direct. He argued that the new agency should be separate from the existing Resettlement Administration, the goal of which was “quite dissimilar” to the proposed program. “The primary concern of the Farmers’ Home Corporation,” he said, “would be those at the top of the tenant pile,” while the activities of the Resettlement Administration dealt with poorer tenants and sharecroppers.<sup>89</sup>

To a degree even some supporters leaned this way. Marvin Jones and Henry Wallace differed, for example, over whether or not the loans should include worse-off farmers like rehabilitation clients. Even more significantly, Jones was joined by other Congressmen in questioning why the federal government felt it necessary to maintain supervision after a farmer had paid off the entirety of the loan, instead of the government simply providing the deed to the farm’s new owner and then getting out of the way.<sup>90</sup> Jones still had the mindset that the real need was simply to provide easier credit; the other problems associated with tenancy (and presumably, of rural poverty in general), would take care of themselves.

During these hearings, some criticism of the BJFTA came from those who approved of its goals, but who felt that the bill as written was insufficient. Gardner Jackson, chairman of the National Committee on Rural Social Planning and also representing the STFU, asserted that the bill was “wholly inadequate, that it is not nearly enough; that it limits the undertaking to a land purchasing operation for the top group and does not really touch the dispossessed mass in agriculture.”<sup>91</sup> M. W. Thatcher, of the Farmers’ Union and a member of the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy, touched on the bill’s limitations when he described the minimum

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 219-20, 224-30.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 179.

needs for poor farmers in 1937. Thatcher estimated that at least \$404 million dollars spent toward rehabilitation loans, grants, emergency aid, and drought relief would be necessary for the coming year just to meet the basic needs of the poorest American farmers, without even considering a farm purchase program.<sup>92</sup>

And it was not only supposed radicals and outsiders feel like the bill should have a larger appropriation; Senator Tom Connally, who had his own billion-dollar tenancy bill, claimed that the bill needed to be big, to show the public “that we are setting our hands to this plow in a substantial way and are not merely scraping around like we are doing with this Resettlement Administration.”<sup>93</sup> Coming from a different direction, several witnesses and members of the committee wondered if such a relatively small sum (which would get smaller) was going to best be used spread across a thin group of tenants. Kansas Congressman Clifford R. Hope asked if it might be more financially prudent, effective, and helpful to a larger number of people if the new program focused on making a larger number of smaller loans to the many farmers (somewhere between a half and one million people) who were currently farmers but on the edge of losing their farms – asking, essentially, for the money to be put toward a rural rehabilitation program for small owners.<sup>94</sup>

Even those who favored the bill admitted that it was insufficient to solve all or even a significant portion of the problem of tenancy. Will Alexander was forced to admit that the bill would not, over a ten-year period, lead to a significant improvement in the overall condition of farm tenants.<sup>95</sup> L. C. Gray said that “this bill, in the present magnitude of the problem, does not

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 300-03. Of that, Thatcher estimated that almost \$190 million would not be recoverable.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 276. The much-maligned RA took criticism as being too big and revolutionary, too small and ineffective, too radical, a tool of big agriculture, and everything in between.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 103-05.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 101.

make a very great change in the situation except perhaps to point the way.”<sup>96</sup> Similarly, Wallace agreed with those who said the proposed bill was not a complete solution, but he emphasized its pragmatism. He testified that while the bill fell short in some important ways (the funds proposed, he calculated, would mean that program would take 230 years to eliminate tenancy), the enormity of the problem required only that they start on the road toward a solution, not try to solve it entirely.<sup>97</sup> Marvin Jones agreed: admitting it was rather experimental, he asserted (unrealistically, as it turned out) that “if the program proves feasible and sound there will be no trouble about increasing the provisions for it.”<sup>98</sup>

Perhaps the most significant voice in the debate, as historian Grant McConnell points out, was the one that was not there: the American Farm Bureau Federation, normally busy in every facet of the passage of an agricultural bill, was almost entirely absent from the scene.<sup>99</sup> The Farm Bureau’s only significant presence came in a letter from the AFBF’s Washington Representative, Chester Gray, opposing the withholding of titles to farms that clients could pay off fully, and a statement by AFBF President Ed O’Neal, mostly restating points from his statements to the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy.<sup>100</sup> The Farm Bureau did not, at this point, openly oppose the program, but it did not support it. In part this silence resulted from the fact that AFBF leaders did not really think of the poor tenants that the bill was aimed at as farmers at all; more interested in prices, people like O’Neal were primarily concerned with making sure that the government spent agricultural dollars first and foremost on keeping commodity prices up. A tenancy bill seemed like a distraction at best.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 270-72.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>99</sup> McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 99

<sup>100</sup> House, *Farm Tenancy Hearing*, 315-16.

<sup>101</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 586-87.

In light of these hearings, the House Committee on Agriculture had to produce a bill that would take into account the President's Committee's recommendation while remaining acceptable to a majority of the Agricultural Committee's members, several of whom were obvious opponents. Most agreed with the goal of making owners out of eligible and worthy farm tenants; the main question was method. Bankhead's 1935 bill, Jones' current bill H.R. 8, the recommendations of the President's Committee, and most of the witnesses from the farm tenancy hearings favored the federal government purchasing, developing, and leasing land directly to tenants. But the Committee rejected this as having too much government involvement in land purchases. The compromise was instead for the government to provide long-term mortgages.<sup>102</sup> To this end, on April 8, Jones introduced H.R. 6240, the "Farm Security Act of 1937."

This act provided for three different programs: loans to assist tenants, sharecroppers, and farm laborers to become owners, financed by \$50 million a fiscal year until July 1, 1942; a rural rehabilitation program financed with \$75 million per year for the next two fiscal years; and a land retirement and utilization program with \$10 million the first year and \$20 million for the next three years.<sup>103</sup> This bill at first appeared unlikely to make it to the floor of the House, held up by the Rules Committee. As the bill made its way out of committee, USDA officials in particular worried about the bill's delegation of responsibility to local committees. On the one side, administrators like Paul Appleby saw this as an unnecessary abdication of federal power. Others like Alexander and Baldwin saw it as ripe for corruption and abuse. With supporters divided, the bill went back to the House Rules Committee, and there it died.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> "House Group Bards Roosevelt Project for Farm Tenants," *New York Times*, April 1, 1937; Maddox, "The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act," 443-444.

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Farm Security Act of 1937*, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1937, H.R. 6240; U.S. Congress, House, *Farm Security Act of 1937, Report (to accompany H.R.6240)*, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1937, Report no. 586. See also Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 182-85; Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 182.

<sup>104</sup> Maddox, "The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act," 444; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 183; May, *Marvin Jones*, 155-56; *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 602.

Jones proposed yet another tenancy bill, H.R. 7562, identical to the previous bill except that the appropriations were all reduced significantly: the tenant purchase program received appropriations for three years of \$10 million, \$25 million, and \$50 million per year. The rural rehabilitation loan program received no direct appropriations, although the president could allot sums from relief appropriations. The submarginal land purchase program was reduced to \$50 million. In debate, the House rejected a variety of proposed amendments (mostly ones limiting the program, reducing the appropriations or restricting what kinds of loans could be made).<sup>105</sup> This act passed the House, after a brief discussion, on June 29, 1937, by a vote of 308 to 26.<sup>106</sup>

The bill then moved to the Senate, where the atmosphere was much more favorable. Bankhead had been a strong advocate. Pointing to the success of earlier government agricultural loan programs like the Reconstruction Finance Corporations Bankhead stressed that the bill was not merely a “proposal to spend money.” Instead, he argued, it was “an investment of money that will return to the treasury.” Even those tenants who failed to repay their loans “can’t destroy the land. We’ll still have it for security.”<sup>107</sup> The Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry unanimously favored the bill<sup>108</sup> and was simply waiting to see what happened in the House. The bill passed the Senate effectively unopposed.

With slight changes from the Conference Committee, the compromise BJFTA easily passed both houses of Congress in July 1937. Some of the changes included the length of the mortgage note, rules for defaults, and provision for continued appropriations after the first year.

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<sup>105</sup> *Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act*, HR 7562, 1937, 75th Cong., 1st sess.; see also Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 183-85; Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 444; Paul V. Maris, “*the land is mine*”: *From Tenancy to Farm Ownership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1950), 5-8, discusses these amendments and what they reflected about Congressional views of the proposed bill.

<sup>106</sup> Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 445.

<sup>107</sup> Leroy Simms, “Bankhead Fights for Original Farm Bill,” *The Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, May 23, 1937.

<sup>108</sup> “Farm Tenant Bill Voted to Senate,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1937.



The most substantial changes involved clarifying activities implied or intended in the different versions – making explicit revisions for rehabilitation loans, for example.<sup>109</sup>

Title I of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act authorized the making of loans for the purchase and improvement of land. Only farm tenants, sharecroppers, agricultural laborers, and others who made their living from farming were eligible. The Secretary of Agriculture, who was empowered to make these loans, was instructed to favor married couples, those who could make an initial down payment, and those who already owned livestock and farm implements. The bill stipulated the purchase of family-sized farms; Title IV, section 46 specifically forbid making loans under the Act to private corporations for farming. County committees examined and approved applications for tenant purchase loans, which the Secretary of Agriculture could then move on. The final bill kept the greatly reduced amounts on which Bankhead and Jones had been forced to compromise: the tenant purchase program received appropriations for three years of \$10 million, \$25 million, and \$50 million per year, with only 5% a year allowed by statute to go toward administration expenses. This practically required a program emphasizing credit as opposed to a more expansive, rehabilitation-oriented effort.<sup>110</sup>

Title II authorized rehabilitation loans and debt adjustment, although it did not make appropriations for them. Instead, the Secretary (actually, the Resettlement Administration) had to rely on funds already put toward loans and relief for farmers and, in the future, on executive appropriations from the relief and work relief funds. These loans were required to have interest rates at 3% annually or less and a repayment period of no more than five years. Title III

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<sup>109</sup> *Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, Conference Report (to accompany H.R. 7562)*, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1937, Report no. 1198, 13-16; Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 445-46; Maris, “*the land is mine*”, 9.

<sup>110</sup> *Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act*, HR 7562, 75th Cong., 1st sess. Valuable analysis by FSA employees is found in W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume I*, no date; Box 3, FSA Historical Record, RG 96, NACP; Maddox, “The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act,” 446-50. See also Helen C. Monchow, “The Farm Tenancy Act,” *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 13.4 (1937): 417-18.

authorized the continuation of the land utilization program, with the compromise appropriation of \$10 million for one year and then \$20 million a year for the next two years.

Even though it enabled the government's tenant purchase program, the act also saw the end of one aspect of the farm security program. Title IV, in section 43, directed the Secretary of Agriculture to continue the activities as directed by Executive Order 7530 (which moved the RA to the USDA) only for the purpose of completing the RA's various and connected resettlement, land development, and land utilization programs already underway. New resettlement projects were no longer possible. Title IV also allowed for a variable repayment plan on loans, requiring higher payments in years of higher farm income and lower payments in years of less farm income. It was the first piece of federal legislation to allow such repayments.<sup>111</sup>

The BJFTA emphasized credit. There was little support, among the public or in Congress, for the government actually buying and selling land. Instead it would provide low-interest, easy-to-get loans to allow tenants to purchase their own farms. But while these loans were aimed at relatively poor borrowers, the Act specified that the farms should be large enough to function adequately as individual, family-sized farming units. The idea was that those individual tenant families who proved themselves capable farmers, but who lacked opportunities for credit and needed a little help and supervision, would be enabled to make the jump to farm ownership.

While there was joy over the passage of the BJFTA, there was also a sense of disappointment in it. Supporters had overcome political opposition by watering the bill down and drastically reducing its funding (and thus its significance). The final act was much closer to Jones' more conservative original House bill than Bankhead's more ambitious Senate version. It certainly did not meet Bankhead's original notion of a billion-dollar corporation carrying out a comprehensive farm security program. Nor did it follow all of the President's Committee on

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<sup>111</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 414.

Farm Tenancy's recommendations. It did not even specifically provide funds for a rural rehabilitation program. The other two responsibilities of land utilization and operating the resettlement projects had to be met with fairly small funds. It also promised to be regional in character: because the Act required funds to be distributed based on the farm population and tenancy rates of each state, about two-thirds of the money would go to the South, and about a quarter to the Midwest. More than regional, it would be local – Jones had insisted on county committees, which became the backbone of the program. Instead of a national program against tenancy and rural poverty, the new program would favor only a thin slice of relatively well-off tenants in only a few areas (though generally those areas most in need of it).<sup>112</sup>

Even as the BJFTA was being passed, however, it was becoming clear that the ownership of a farm, in and of itself, was not sufficient to protect poor farmers. The limited income of sharecroppers, tenants, and even some owners meant that farmers could not maintain substantial equity.<sup>113</sup> The bill failed to address even a fraction of the problems facing tenant farmers. North Dakota congressman William Lemke put this well during the final House debate. Expressing his surprise at the “fuss,” he said, “If ever a mountain labored and produced a mouse, this is it.” Estimating that the bill provided only about \$5.31 for every tenant in America, Lemke called it “a lot of lip service” whose best feature might be encouraging tenants in the future to put more pressure for action on the government. And yet, Lemke recognized that the BJFTA was probably about the best anyone could hope for. “I am going to vote for this bill, because it is a toehold,” he said, “in spite of the fact that it is camouflage and make-believe legislation.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 49; Banfield, “Ten Years of the Tenant Purchase Program,” 471; *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 601-02.

<sup>113</sup> Raymond C. Smith, “New Conditions Demand New Opportunities,” in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 819-820.

<sup>114</sup> *Congressional Record* 81 (1937), 6438. William Bankhead conceded this point but compared the proposed program with other federal activities (like rural free delivery and extension service) that had begun in small and experimental ways (6453).

The BJFTA had problems other than these most obvious ones. In places, a failure to clarify important points meant that the bill was open to differing interpretations. For example, as FSA administrators saw it, Title II of the BJFTA was an interim act – the BJFTA had authorized re-appropriation of existing balances, but contained no new authorization for direct appropriations by Congress. So, further funds for rural rehabilitation were available from relief appropriations through the Bureau of the Budget, to be spent by the FSA without reference to the limitations written in the BJFTA. This did not help critics’ perception of the RA/FSA as sneaking around congressional oversight and going far beyond any legislative or administrative intent in its activities.<sup>115</sup>

The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, created with the primary purpose of taking landless farmers and putting them on family-sized farms (more specifically, “efficient family-type farm-management units”), had a most significant omission – while it defined the loans and types of eligible applicants, it did not define the family farm. This was a practical impossibility, given the varieties of agriculture even within a particular region. FSA regulations eventually defined the farm, but even then it was the local committees who held clients to that definition. Many in the South, for example, ruled out a one-mule farm as an economic unit. In other cases, committeemen stuck to FSA recommendations in the face of changing farming practices. For example, lending to farmers with diversification in mind could cause problems if they continued to specialize, particularly in situations in which subsistence or for-home production could never meet the gap in home income. This eventually led some local agents to resignedly insist that it at least be well-planned specialization.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, part 1, 16-19; Lewis Meriam, *Relief and Social Security* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1946), 289.

<sup>116</sup> Maris, “*the land is mine*”, 117-22.

For all its shortcomings and all their disappointment, however, supporters recognized the BJFTA as a big step, or at least a crucial first one. Particularly interested were the employees of the Resettlement Administration, which would be handling most of the new act's responsibilities. The RA, now in the USDA, was about to see a small change in name and a big change (supporters hoped) in institutional stability. Even if the agency's goals had been reduced a bit and if its vision had become less radical, it finally appeared to be in a safe position to begin its long-term work toward improving the conditions of the rural poor.

## CHAPTER 6

### A MOMENT OF STABILITY: THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION BEFORE WORLD WAR II

Franklin Roosevelt had big ideas for the South in 1937, as his tenancy program and talk about the region as the nation's foremost economic problem hinted, but the political tide ran in the opposite direction. "A nationwide outbreak of labor unrest," writes journalist Robert Shogan, "and FDR's launching of a scheme to overhaul the Supreme Court would combine to generate a fierce public backlash that tarnished Roosevelt's mystique and drained the lifeblood from the New Deal."<sup>1</sup> In his "narrative history" of the Great Depression, T. H. Watkins titles the postlude to his history of the New Deal "Dismantling the Dream, 1939." He writes of the early years of the Roosevelt administration and the "structure of a new kind of interdependence between the citizenry and the government," however, "Such levels of involvement did not survive even the thirties [... and] the energy of reform slowly began to dissipate after the 1936 elections."<sup>2</sup>

The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act had been among the final legislative accomplishments of the New Deal, and the new Farm Security Administration (FSA) was to be among its last administrative creations. The Resettlement Administration (RA) officially went out of existence on September 1, 1937. Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace explained the change by noting that by that point, the RA carried out "resettlement activities as only a minor

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Shogan, *Backlash: The Killing of the New Deal* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Watkins, *The Hungry Years*, xvi.

part of its functions.”<sup>3</sup> As Wallace had noted earlier, “it would have been better if this work had been given a name more accurately describing it—Farm Security Administration, or the Tenant Security Administration, or something like that.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the initial response by some anti-New Deal critics (the RA “became the first New Deal agency to be voluntarily killed by the Administration,” claimed the *Washington Post*), the FSA was a continuation of the RA, with a few aspects transferred to other agencies and a few new responsibilities added.<sup>5</sup>

The FSA’s most important new responsibility was the Tenant Purchase Program, set up by the Secretary’s Memorandum No. 738 on September 30, 1937 under the authority of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937. The Pope-Jones Water Facilities Act of 1937 allowed the FSA to make loans to farmers, ranchers, and water associations in seventeen western states to help build, improve, or repair water facilities like wells, pumps, windmills, and irrigation systems.<sup>6</sup>

The legislative authority of the FSA, like its predecessors, had a confusing, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory basis. While the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act appeared to create legislative authority for the FSA, in reality it only authorized a small portion of the program. Titles I and IV directed the creation of a farm ownership program. Title II created standards for rehabilitation loans, but only in authorizing the president to make such loans from relief appropriations. The Act authorized completing resettlement projects, but, again, the funds were to be allotted by the president. Through the various emergency appropriation acts, Congress

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<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Wallace, Memorandum No. 732, September 1, 1937, Folder “Tenancy 1 (Farmer’s Home Corporation),” Box 2663, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>4</sup> Henry A. Wallace, “In Quest of Farm Security,” *Extension Service Review* 8.3 (March 1937): 34.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Olson, “Wallace Ends Housing Plans of Rex Tugwell,” *Washington Post*, September 2, 1937. The FSA also lost one major job. The Land Utilization Division, inherited from the RA, had taken over the Land Policy Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the land-utilization projects of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Wallace transferred this Division’s functions to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics on September 1, 1937. Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 3

<sup>6</sup>

provided some measure of control over farm security programs, but for most of the existence of the RA and FSA, specific requirements were broad and flexible.<sup>7</sup>

The RA had developed a hierarchical organizational structure that survived more or less intact to the FSA. Across the nation were twelve regional offices, a state office in most states, district offices, county offices, and project offices. The Washington office included an Administrator, two to four Assistant Administrators with responsibility for managing and coordinating various related programs, and a number of assistants, coordinators, and consultants. Directors in charge of the divisions answered to the appropriate Assistant Administrator.<sup>8</sup>

As with the RA, the Washington Office of the FSA was divided into two types of divisions. The nine Staff Divisions were technically separate from the Operating Divisions, but this was not much of a distinction; all divisions were involved in operations. A Business Management Division, for example, recommended and helped the Administrator create the procedures, rules, and instructions for the rest of the FSA, while the Finance Division developed and executed fiscal policy. The Information Division helped field agents create and maintain friendly relations with local communities and the press, the Personnel Division assisted with the creation and application of personnel policy, and so on. In addition, the USDA's Office of the Solicitor provided legal work and maintained a Regional Attorney in each regional office, the only people in the field who had authorization to provide county agents with legal advice.<sup>9</sup> Most of the activity of the Farm Security Administration was dedicated to the three Operating Divisions: Rural Rehabilitation, Tenant Purchase, and Resettlement (which included the migratory labor program). As with the Staff Divisions, this separation of responsibilities was

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<sup>7</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 91-93.

<sup>8</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 244-45.

<sup>9</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 130-35, 148-50.



often only on paper – the Rural Rehabilitation Division’s farm and home planning section, for example, served all three divisions.<sup>10</sup>

The efforts of these three divisions reflect the variety and evolution of ideas at work in federal farm security activities after four years of existence. The rural rehabilitation program was a relatively large-scale project aimed at providing a small amount of supervision and credit to as many families as possible. The farm ownership program, on the other hand, had a smaller number of carefully selected clients who received more money and much more supervision. Credit and supervision were the main tools of both programs, but the tenant purchase program used more of both for fewer clients. Resettlement similarly focused on providing more intense assistance to a smaller number of clients, but in contrast to the individualistic approach of the tenant purchase and rural rehabilitation programs, it also took into account the social and community needs of rural families.<sup>11</sup>

The Washington Office created policies, but agents in the field implemented them. The typical regional office was headed by a Regional Director with the aid of two Assistant Regional Directors, one for resettlement and one for rural rehabilitation. As in the Washington office, each regional office had dedicated staff to handle personnel, labor relations, information, and other similar issues. Unlike in the Washington office, however, the regional offices generally had only two Operating Divisions, Resettlement and Rural Rehabilitation (which included tenant purchase activities). Generally, Resettlement staff dealt with the management of resettlement projects and those living, farming, and working on them, while the Rural Rehabilitation Division handled

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<sup>10</sup> Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 81-83; 98-100.

everything else: debt adjustment, home and farm management, collections, water facilities, tenant purchases, and other projects.<sup>12</sup>

Because the Resettlement Division of each regional office dealt with individual resettlement projects, state offices consisted only of the State Rural Rehabilitation Director and staff; similarly, each state was divided into administrative units overseen by a District Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor and staff. State Directors generally coordinated the districts and dealt with the general public, state officials, state universities, and other organizations. District officials aided county agents in administering the rehabilitation projects, making loans, and supervision.<sup>13</sup>

County offices consisted of the County Supervisors and their staff. They directly supervised rural rehabilitation and tenant purchase activities, investigated applicants, oversaw debt adjustment efforts, visited regularly with clients, and related duties. A Community Manager in each resettlement project fulfilled a similar role, but only for that particular project and reported directly to the regional office. Community Managers helped plan and create resettlement projects, oversaw land acquisition and family selection, managed finance, and similar tasks.<sup>14</sup>

The 1940 and 1941 agricultural years provide a good benchmark for the FSA's achievements. Most of its programs were several years old by that point, and the agency was fortunate to act more or less unmolested by its political foes. Moreover, FSA administrators believed they had finally figured out their programs; as one administrator said in 1942, "We could go out now and set up a thousand subsistence homesteads, and 999 would be successful."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 141-45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-47.

<sup>15</sup> Johnstone, "Introduction," *A Place on Earth*, 2.

While this was certainly an overstatement, FSA leaders did have a growing confidence in their abilities and in the quality of their field agents. While FSA administrators felt the need to play up the agency's value to national defense as the threat of war increased, the shift to wartime was just getting underway in 1941 and had not yet changed the FSA's operations too dramatically. The FSA's peak year was probably fiscal year 1941; that year the agency spent about \$48 million on tenant purchase loans, \$125 million on rural rehabilitation loans and water facility development, \$5.6 million on resettlement projects, \$4.4 million on migratory labor camps, \$5 million for defense housing, \$17 million in grants, and \$38 million in administrative duties (including supervision of borrowers), for a total of about \$241 million.<sup>16</sup>

For rural rehabilitation borrowers during the 1940 crop year, annual net income increased by about \$75.3 million, a 35% improvement, and net worth increased by about \$75.6 million, a 20% improvement. As of June 30, 1941, about 1.5 million families were receiving loans or grants (and the associated farm and home plans), and the FSA had collected just over 80% of mature rural rehabilitation loans.<sup>17</sup> 178,737 families had been through the debt adjustment process, reducing loans by almost \$120 million and leading to \$5.6 million in back taxes repaid, by the end of 1941.<sup>18</sup> The other rehabilitation programs also showed results: in 1941, the medical and dental program covered about 117,000 families, or about 600,000 people, in over a third of the nation's counties.<sup>19</sup> And the FSA was doing all this with a limited budget and staff: in early 1941, the FSA had an average caseload of 205 families per farm supervisor (administrators estimated that 125 was the maximum that could be adequately handled by a single agent).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1941*, 22-27, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 28-30.

<sup>18</sup> "Summary of FSA Programs," Folder "Farm Security Administration, 1934-1941," Edwin G. Arnold Papers, Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick D. Mott and Milton I. Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1948), 392-93.

<sup>20</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 467.

Rural rehabilitation made up the majority of the FSA's work, but not the entirety. The tenant purchase program had nearly 21,000 borrowers by June 30, 1941. Almost \$120 million dollars in loans had been approved. Three million dollars had come due, but more than \$3.6 million had been collected.<sup>21</sup> By December 31, 1941, that number was 23,553 loans made or improved, with each loan averaging \$5,737.<sup>22</sup> And the program kept up an impressive rate of repayment. During 1942, borrowers paid back more than 50% more than was due. 78 borrowers had already repaid their loans in full, and another 91 repaid their loans when the government took over their farms for various military purposes. More than 2,000 of the borrowers made repayments above \$1,000 for the year.<sup>23</sup>

The FSA operated 151 homestead developments, including 15,687 units, as of June 1, 1941. The various resettlement communities, subsistence projects, and similar programs, including prior costs incurred by other agencies, covered 16,000 families with a total investment of \$139 million dollars. Another \$21 million went toward migratory labor camps, water conservation programs, and defense housing for almost 23,000 families. This left the resettlement's division grand total spent by June 30, 1941, at not quite \$160 million.<sup>24</sup>

These activities provide a picture of how the FSA, the last major hold-out of New Deal reform in the USDA, operated in normal, peacetime circumstances. It was a national organization using supervised credit to alleviate rural poverty on a mass scale. Smaller programs like tenant-purchase, resettlement, and the various rehabilitation programs (like the debt adjustment committees) functioned as supplements to or refinements of the main approach.

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<sup>21</sup> *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1941*, 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> "Summary of FSA Programs," Folder "Farm Security Administration, 1934-1941," Edwin G. Arnold Papers, Truman Library.

<sup>23</sup> "Farm Ownership Program," pp. 1-2, undated [1943?], Folder 2, Box 8, John H. Bankhead Papers, LPR 53, ADAH.

<sup>24</sup> FSA, "Farm Security Administration Homesteads," 1941, NAL; *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1941*, 33; "Summary of FSA Programs," Folder "Farm Security Administration, 1934-1941," Edwin G. Arnold Papers, Truman Library.

While organized nationally, the FSA's operations were essentially local, and employees as far down the bureaucratic hierarchy as county agents played a significant role in determining and implementing policy. The ideology and administration of New Deal anti-poverty efforts had evolved, by 1937, into the FSA. It had four short years of operation before World War II and the changing political and economic climate ended the last remaining New Deal effort to alleviate rural poverty.<sup>25</sup>

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Along with the move to the USDA came a new director, Will Alexander, Tugwell's first deputy and replacement in the RA. Alexander, a folksy southerner who preferred personal charm and face-to-face discussion as a means of getting things done, initially appeared to be poorly suited to running a large bureaucracy. As he put it, "I should never have been an administrator in Washington. I hate housekeeping and bureaucracy and having to run and see somebody every fifteen minutes and procedure."<sup>26</sup> He was, however, a surprisingly effective change from Tugwell, whose introversion and lack of charm had cost the RA political support. Alexander was much abler when it came to discussion, compromise, and selling a program than had been Tugwell, for all the latter's intellect and skill in planning. And Alexander, perhaps the foremost white southern liberal in the country, was ideally positioned to recruit the kind of reform-minded liberals the FSA hoped to employ.<sup>27</sup> Alexander's biographers noted the contrast between Tugwell and Alexander, that while Tugwell openly disregarded tradition and precedents,

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<sup>25</sup> Within the USDA, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Soil Conservation Service both had a strong liberal and reformist bent to their activities, but the BAE lacked the political heft of the FSA, and the SCS was less immediately concerned with rural poverty and reform. Neither had the desire or ability to directly confront rural poverty.

<sup>26</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 401.

<sup>27</sup> John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 91-98.

Alexander “never appeared to disdain custom, even while he was engaged in changing it.”<sup>28</sup>

Most importantly, Alexander was better at building political bridges. When the appropriations bill for the agency came up before Congress, for example, Alexander realized that Tugwell had done almost nothing to cultivate the support of Democratic leadership; he went and met with Senator Joseph Robinson of Arkansas, who was flattered to be asked for help.<sup>29</sup>

The FSA matured and prospered under Alexander, but he only lasted until June 1940, when he became vice president at the Rosenwald Fund. Alexander grew tired of dealing with what he called “sadistic” congressmen who enjoyed abusing their power during the interminable budget presentations and other congressional activity.<sup>30</sup> Although Alexander proved a better politician than his predecessor or his successor, he did not enjoy it much – he never learned how to deal with people like Pennsylvania Congressman Francis E. Walter, who had insisted that FSA employees contribute to his political machine; moreover, with the program in steady hands (particularly, as he saw it, with Paul Maris running the new tenant purchase program), Alexander believed that his help was less important.<sup>31</sup>

His replacement was C. B. Baldwin, who had attended Virginia Polytechnic before joining the USDA in 1933 at the age of thirty. Baldwin had operated an electric supply shop next door to Paul Appleby’s print shop; when Wallace brought Appleby into the USDA, Appleby in turn brought his friend Baldwin, who eventually accepted a job as an assistant in the USDA.

“Beanie” Baldwin was a crucial part of Will Alexander’s early success in navigating

Washington’s turbulent politics. Baldwin had overseen the financial and personnel side of the

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<sup>28</sup> Dykeman and Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change*, 217.

<sup>29</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 599-600.

<sup>30</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 663 (quote); Dykeman and Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change*, 247-48; Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 105-06.

<sup>31</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 665-66. Alexander was not the only idealist driven from government service by a dislike of the politics. It had played a part in Tugwell’s resignation, and a lower-level employees like Laurence Hewes frequently commented on the personal and moral toll caused by dealing with such a situation. See Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 102.

FSA under Alexander and was one of the most capable of the reformists still in the USDA.<sup>32</sup>

Alexander called him an “expert in organization,” saying, “Beanie could see administrative processes – the mechanics of getting something done. He could see it very quickly.”<sup>33</sup>

Baldwin was also the target of criticisms for his alleged radicalism, something that would cost the FSA during World War II budget fights. Baldwin was widely considered a radical in the vein of Rexford Tugwell; one congressman wrote in 1941, “Mr. Tugwell may be gone but it seems to me that his spirit still remains.”<sup>34</sup> The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) in particular opposed Baldwin, and attacks on the FSA overlapped with attacks on Baldwin.<sup>35</sup> And to a degree Baldwin *was* more militant about reform than Alexander had been; he was also less willing to accept criticism, which did not help the FSA’s relationship with its critics or with the rest of the Department of Agriculture.<sup>36</sup>

The USDA in the 1930s was split between those who supported its current emphasis on farmers, commodity prices, and traditional issues, and those who wanted to maintain the current balance of power within the agency, and on the other hand those who wanted the agency to try more ambitious social and political reforms. The traditional agrarians generally came from the Farm Bureau, the Extension Service, and the land-grant colleges. The reform-minded liberals were generally younger and from a more varied background. Many were lawyers, and at least at first followers of Tugwell. Agrarians saw the liberals as unrealistic and ignorant about

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<sup>32</sup> Calvin Benham Baldwin, “Personnel Questionnaire,” November 4, 1939, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration – Personnel, 1933-1943,” Box 31, Baldwin Papers; C. B. Baldwin interview with Richard K. Doud, 2-6; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 124-26.

<sup>33</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 476-77.

<sup>34</sup> Reid F. Murray to Paul H. Appleby, April 1, 1941, Folder “Farm Security Loans or Grants, Mar. 1 to Apr. 19,” Box 291, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>35</sup> Christiana McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal: A Study of the Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-40* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 173; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 127-28.

<sup>36</sup> Marion Clawson, “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Resettlement Projects,” *Agricultural History* 52.1 (1978): 3.

agriculture; the liberals saw the conservative agrarians as tied to traditional agricultural interests and unwilling to consider the plight of smaller farmers.<sup>37</sup>

The USDA was a vast and complicated collection of squabbling, overlapping fiefdoms, bureaus, and agencies even before the New Deal. In 1933 it was probably the largest research and regulatory organization in the world, with a budget over \$255 million and formally 26,544 employees, not counting temporary employees or those working in state or county extension services and experiment stations, who were paid with money appropriated by, but not directly from, the USDA. The New Deal added a number of new duties and more than tripled the number of direct employees.<sup>38</sup>

In 1937, four agencies were large enough to command serious power within the USDA: the Extension Service, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), Forest Service, and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS); together they accounted for almost a third of the regular annual budget. The FSA immediately joined that group, with a 1938 budget larger than any of them. After those five agencies, the Rural Electrification Administration, the Farm Credit Administration, and the Commodity Credit Corporation followed in importance in 1939.<sup>39</sup> By January 31, 1940, the FSA had a total of 15,444 employees, in the field (14,511) and in D.C. (933). Of the USDA's various bureaus and agencies, only the Soil Conservation Service had a comparable number (15,226). The AAA, in contrast, had 1,965 employees in D.C. and 1,185 field agents, for a total of 3,150 employees.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 105-07. The "agricultural conservatives vs. urban liberals" template should not crowd out recognition of the progressive "Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals" who maintained their belief in the family farm. See Gilbert, "Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals," especially 165-70.

<sup>38</sup> Paul H. Appleby, *Big Democracy* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1945, 1970), 12-19, 25. See also John M. Gaus and Leon O. Wolcott, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1940), 30-81.

<sup>39</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 236-38; Gaus and Wolcott, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 265-67.

<sup>40</sup> Gaus and Wolcott, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture*, 494.



Coordinating the policies and direction of all these various semi-independent agencies was virtually impossible. Each agency was mindful of any encroachment upon its bureaucratic territory. The Extension Service, for example, considered itself the sole legitimate contact between the USDA and farmers, and it resisted the various field activities of other agencies (the FSA, SCS, and AAA) which it saw as unnecessary and intrusive newcomers who had taken hold of activities that should rightly be channeled through the land-grant colleges and performed by Extension agents.<sup>41</sup> As FSA Assistant Administrator Robert Hudgens put it, extension agents and the land-grant colleges saw “the Farm Security people as a bunch of upstarts coming into a field they didn’t know anything about.”<sup>42</sup>

The land-grant colleges and State Extension Services across the country, but particularly in the South, felt threatened by the fact that the FSA could bypass them entirely. The regional offices of the RA/FSA (and other New Deal agricultural agencies, like the Soil Conservation Service) in particular raised concern – they threatened the pattern of state-level cooperation and organization that the Extension Services depended on. The Extension Service turned for help to its closest allies, the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). The AFBF had its own reasons to be hostile to the FSA. The FSA threatened in particular the position of the southern state farm bureaus, which faced the possibility of losing their status as the only influential farm organizations in that region, and the FSA’s efforts to organize poor tenants and laborers threatened the labor supply of the big producers so influential in the AFBF.<sup>43</sup>

The American Farm Bureau Federation developed out of the county agent system in the first decades of the twentieth century. State Extension directors acted at first as if they controlled

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<sup>41</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 478-79; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 240.

<sup>42</sup> *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 126.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 166-69; Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service*, 37. The AAA, SCS, and Forest Service, all heavily criticized by traditional agricultural leadership at various times, also had regional offices.

the new and suddenly large movement, encouraging its growth and providing sample constitutions and training, but the local bureaus began to organize beyond the Extension Service's control. In 1920 the national federation of farm bureaus was finalized. The AFBF developed into a kind of semi-governmental agency, connected to and overlapping with the Extension Service, but not identical to it.<sup>44</sup> It is not entirely accurate to say that the AFBF and the farm lobby in general controlled agricultural legislation, although its influence was enormous, especially in the House of Representatives. Instead, Congress and the AFBF operated as equal partners. The weight of the AFBF meant that in any particular case, as political scientist John Hansen writes, the AFBF's influence was such that Congress would always be certain "to hear the farm lobby's case, to debate the alternatives, and jointly to determine the course of" agricultural policy.<sup>45</sup>

Not all Farm Bureau members agreed with the national organization's hostility to the FSA, especially as it heated up in the early 1940s. The Executive Secretary of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, Murray D. Lincoln, in February of 1942 appeared before a congressional committee to argue that the AFBF did not represent his state on the issue. Murray commended the FSA as the only government program aimed at the poorest farmers and asserted that parity of income was more important than just parity of prices. The key to really reducing government expenditures, he told the committee, was to make poor farmers less dependent on relief, and the FSA did just that.<sup>46</sup> Emerson Hynes wrote to Georgia Senator Richard Russell in 1943, asking

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<sup>44</sup> McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 44-54.

<sup>45</sup> John Mark Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 83.

<sup>46</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 905-08.

him “to save the valuable functions of the Farm Security Administration” on behalf of “Farm Bureau members of this region who don’t like the attitude of our national organization.”<sup>47</sup>

The national Farm Bureau leadership, however, opposed the growing influence of the FSA. The AFBF had long considered itself not so much the only legitimate representative of American farmers so much as the only meaningful one. For example, Farm Bureau president J. R. Howard wrote in 1921 that the Bureau had learned from the past. “The costly mistakes of the Grange, the Alliance, the Wheel, and the Farmers’ Union may be avoided,” he wrote for AFBF members, “if officers and members but heed the plain lessons” of these “former organizations.”<sup>48</sup> That two of these were still large, respected agricultural organizations was not an important part of the AFBF narrative.

The relatively weak National Grange was no challenge to the AFBF’s claim as the preeminent national farmers’ organization; stricken with internal divisions over its political program and with a large but regional membership base, it could never match the AFBF as a national leader of the farm bloc.<sup>49</sup> But a third major farm organization, the Farmers’ Educational and Cooperative Union (usually shortened to just the Farmers’ Union), could. Begun in Texas in 1902, the National Farmers’ Union by 1940 represented more than 100,000 farm families in 40 states, with about 300,000 farmers taking part in its cooperative associations. Its president, Jack Vesecky, asserted that the organization’s “main objective is to safeguard family farm homes. All farm legislation must be built around the central idea of enabling farmers, whether tenants or owners, to become home owners.”<sup>50</sup> The Farmers’ Union operated as a self-consciously old-style

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<sup>47</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1107.

<sup>48</sup> James Raley Howard, “Introduction,” in Orville Merton Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), x-ix. Kile asserts that the Grange (being a social and educational agency) and the AFBF (being an educational and economic organization) had little direct competition (222).

<sup>49</sup> Hansen, *Gaining Access*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> DeWitt C. Wing, “Trends in National Farm Organizations,” in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 954, 957.

Populist organization, and its constant spats with other farm groups threatened the AFBF as the accepted voice for the farmers' perspective. The AFBF and the Farmers' Union had different views on the FSA. To the AFBF, the FSA showed the dangerous influence of urban liberalism; for the Farmers' Union, the FSA was an example of everything the government should be, in both practical and ideological terms. The FSA's closeness to the National Farmers Union, a major competitor of the American Farm Bureau Federation, therefore harmed the FSA's relations with the AFBF and its allies in the Extension Service.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond these more or less political divisions, part of the reason for the AFBF's antagonism toward the FSA was outlook: most American farm organizations, the AFBF in particular, came into existence in the period when farmers had begun to organize as a modern interest group. The AFBF was organized explicitly with the mindset of encouraging farmers to think of themselves as a political lobby and their operations as businesses. Some aspects of the rural rehabilitation program, such as an emphasis on recordkeeping and expert help, coincided with the AFBF's perspective. But improving the economic, social, and cultural lives of small and marginal farmers (much less keeping their barely, if at all, profitable operations in existence) was far outside the Farm Bureau's concern. Simply put, the AFBF saw farming as a business, and if the inefficient or incapable were forced out of business, that was simply the nature of the free market. The FSA, on the other hand, came from the perspective (going back to its FERA and Subsistence Homesteads roots) that farming had some value in and of itself, and that it was better

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<sup>51</sup> McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 68-69; Michael W. Flamm, "The National Farmers Union and the Evolution of Agrarian Liberalism," *Agricultural History* 68.3 (1994): 61; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 238-39. The Farmers' Union did not support the entirety of the FSA program, just to the extent to which it helped promote ownership of family farms. The Union was willing to support legislation, like the Farmers Home Corporation Act of 1944, that would effectively eliminate all other aspects of the FSA's program beyond the tenant-purchase division. House, *Farmers' Home Corporation Act of 1944, Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture on H. R. 4384*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1944, 17-18.

both for the farmers and for the community to help ensure that small farmers stayed on the land.<sup>52</sup>

The Farm Bureau Federation, then, had a variety of reasons to attack the FSA. The new labor program under FSA control meant that big growers could no longer easily hire and treat labor as they pleased. Perhaps most threatening was the possibility of an FSA-Farmers Union alliance. This would likely mean the creation of local cooperative associations for purchasing and marketing local produce, putting different classes of producers into direct competition and eliminating the Farm Bureau's claim to represent the entire agricultural class. The FSA's threat to AFBF allies in the Extension Service cemented the hostility.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to struggles against older agencies and outsiders, the New Deal agricultural programs also feuded with one another. The FSA was tied up in a number of these fights, most significantly with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. With the support of the major farm organizations and most traditional agriculturalists, the AAA sought to reduce production, limiting supply and thereby raising farm prices. But farm reduction had little meaning for FSA clients; their production was low, and a considerable amount of that went (in increasing amounts, with FSA encouragement) toward home use. As a result, price changes at the national level had little impact on their incomes. Similarly, the AAA's emphasis on increasing overall agricultural income was meaningless to low-income farmers if that increase went only to the largest producers. Other AAA programs continued to be actively harmful to the small farmers who made up FSA's clientele. AAA payments often went to the largest operators in relatively well-off agricultural areas, and their acreage control program generally meant that tenants, laborers,

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<sup>52</sup> On the AFBF's view of the FSA, see McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 97-111; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 244. On farmers as a self-conscious interest group, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 122-29.

<sup>53</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 496-97.

and other small-timers had fewer opportunities for income: laborers lost jobs, and sharecroppers and small tenants were dropped by their landlords to reduce acreage.<sup>54</sup>

Some small producers and tenants recognized that the FSA was in conflict with the AAA. In the summer of 1939, for example, 31 Alabama farmers petitioned Roosevelt and Wallace to stop evictions of tenants that took place over the winter, and to use the FSA to protect them and provide “decent shelter,” “relief during the winter months.” These tenants wanted legal changes; they asked Congress to require landlords to share benefit checks, to require tenants and sharecroppers to have received a living wage for their work before the landlord got benefit money, and to use written contracts.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, some farmers saw the programs as all part of one indistinguishable, hostile entity. Pike County (Alabama) Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor John E. Hydrick ran into trouble with a disgruntled rural rehabilitation client named Z. B. McLendon, who was upset that his brother had received a larger disaster benefits check (the result of an illness) and because his father had some trouble with AAA. McLendon then badgered or misled ten other local tenants to sign a petition asking the FSA to force Hydrick “to show our needs some consideration,” a vague request that ended up with the District Supervisor dismissing the complaint.<sup>56</sup> Notably, McLendon turned his displeasure with two different federal agencies toward the FSA, which to him (and apparently many others) were all closely related. McLendon’s confusion does not appear to have been unusual, as many rural Americans had troubled distinguishing the various agricultural initiatives.

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<sup>54</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 117-18.

<sup>55</sup> “Petition to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary Henry A. Wallace,” [summer 1939], Folder “85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>56</sup> John E. Hydrick to Homer D. Lee, March 12, 1940, and Homer D. Lee to D. H. Frazier, March 13, 1940, in Folder “85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

To a lesser extent, the FSA also found its programs in conflict with those of the Farm Credit Administration. Part of this was simply the FCA's disapproval of easy terms of credit to apparently undeserving applicants. In the eyes of the FCA, the FSA was extending loans to those who could not use them properly; FSA leaders in contrast believed that the FCA failed to help those who needed it the most, instead focusing on only the better-off farmers. Leading to more direct conflict, the FCA and FSA programs overlapped too much for comfort, especially when it was not clear that Congress or public opinion would continue to support even a single program to provide credit to farmers. FCA supporters saw the FSA as a direct rival; Congressman Reid F. Murray, for example, described the BJFTA as "starting up new loan agencies in competition to the Farm Credit Administration."<sup>57</sup> Had the FSA been able to expand its tenant purchase and rural rehabilitation loans, they would be a threat and competitor to the FCA program, and thus the FCA had pragmatic reasons of survival for hoping to see the FSA fail.<sup>58</sup>

Whatever their hostility toward each other, almost every USDA agency faced the threat of decreased funding, especially for those more closely identified with the New Deal. This was true for most New Deal agencies outside of agriculture; the National Youth Administration, as an example, was facing a 25% budget cut in the years before World War II, and even the Civilian Conservation Corps, another of Roosevelt's favorites, faced a cut of several billion dollars. Outside of the Army and Navy, everyone faced the threat of yearly budget cuts in the years before World War II. But administrators in the USDA believed that they had to fight over a specific, limited pie for the agricultural budget.<sup>59</sup> Every dollar, then, was crucial.

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<sup>57</sup> Reid F. Murray to Paul H. Appleby, April 16, 1941, Folder "Farm Security Loans or Grants, Mar. 1 to Apr. 19," Box 291, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>58</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 477-78; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 118; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 240. The overlap of rural rehabilitation and similar lending aimed at the rural poor with the lending activities of the FCA had been a source of criticism since before there was an FSA; see "Mr. Tugwell's Octopus," *Washington Post*, March 27, 1936.

<sup>59</sup> Ernest K. Lindley, "The Budget Slashes," *Washington Post*, December 11, 1939.

FSA leaders believed that they had certain advantages in the bureaucratic fight because they could count on high level support. Henry Wallace had proven his commitment to the FSA during the legislative struggle over the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. Under Secretary M. L. Wilson was concerned about rural poverty and had some experience in the Subsistence Homesteads Division. Paul Appleby, the Special Assistant to the Secretary, had considerably more influence than the title suggested and was perhaps the second most influential person in the USDA, after Wallace.<sup>60</sup> Will Alexander had claimed that the support of Appleby was practically as important as having Wallace's – Wallace may have been the boss in title, but the smarter and more capable Appleby (at least in Alexander's opinion) made the agency run.<sup>61</sup>

This relatively strong position in the USDA was precarious, however, since it depended on the support of a few key individuals. When the USDA's leadership changed, so did the FSA's support. The most significant such change came in 1940, when Henry became FDR's vice president. One bureaucrat fondly remembered the USDA under Wallace and Appleby as having an excellent "quality of membership, outlook, and identification with the managerial purposes of a top departmental career service."<sup>62</sup> And Wallace, in the words of his biographers, turned the USDA into "a powerful engine for progressive action."<sup>63</sup> However much liberals may have doubted his commitment, especially after the AAA purge, Wallace undoubtedly sympathized with their goals, increasingly so as his tenure as Secretary wore on.

Wallace's replacement, Claude Wickard, was both less sympathetic to the FSA and less capable of protecting it. Most importantly, with a coming shift to wartime production, Wickard was essentially passive, compared to the active and influential Wallace. Under the steady hand of

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<sup>60</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 242.

<sup>61</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 639-43.

<sup>62</sup> Charles McKinley, "Federal Administrative Pathology and the Separation of Powers," *Public Administration Review* 11.1 (1951): 21.

<sup>63</sup> Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 227.



Wallace and Appleby, USDA factionalism had been kept under control. Under Wickard, the USDA became a much more hostile and competitive environment.<sup>64</sup> This forced the FSA to search for new allies, but within the USDA, only the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Soil Conservation Service could be considered natural supporters of the FSA. Neither of these carried much political weight.

As far as finding allies elsewhere, the FSA had few good options. Roosevelt was less involved in questions of rural poverty, particularly after Rexford Tugwell left and world war threatened. The TVA was politically influential, engaged in the kind of community-building and rural improvement the FSA hoped to do, and had a similar base of support. Yet FSA leaders made little effort to cultivate a relationship, and outside of some resettlement efforts as a result of reservoir creation, there was little institutional connection between the two agencies.<sup>65</sup>

Much of Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, was hostile or apathetic. Part of the FSA's problem was that, even after its programs had been operating for years, many people simply did not know much about it. As one Congressman wrote to Appleby in early 1941, "There has been much confusion in my mind in regard to the Farm Security Administration."<sup>66</sup> These "undecided" politicians, as it were, could easily turn against the FSA. And the support of former defenders weakened; John H. Bankhead, for example, who had spearheaded the tenant purchase program, became increasingly concerned about cotton prices and parity in the early 1940s and, in particular, during World War II.<sup>67</sup>

To address its weakening position within the federal government, the FSA could look to outside allies. One approach, a method which had been used within the USDA by other agencies,

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<sup>64</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 643; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 527, 551-54.

<sup>65</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 302-05.

<sup>66</sup> Reid F. Murray to Paul H. Appleby, April 16, 1941, Folder "Farm Security Loans or Grants, Mar. 1 to Apr. 19," Box 291, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, voluminous correspondence in Boxes 6-7, Bankhead Papers.

was to live up to the fears of critics and develop its clientele as a constituency. This could be a powerful tool and make agencies essentially independent of the USDA's upper administration. As one agency official said after Wickard became Secretary, "We don't need the Department. We are perfectly able and willing to take care of ourselves."<sup>68</sup> And the FSA, like the other two enormous New Deal farm agencies (the SCS and the AAA) appeared to be perfectly suited to create such a base. As Wickard's biographer points out, "Nearly every county in the United States housed one or more FSA, SCS, or AAA offices. It took little imagination to see that whoever controlled these county organizations might control not only the farm programs, but also a preponderance of the rural vote."<sup>69</sup>

The FSA's political base appeared potentially large. By June 30, 1941, the FSA had aided about 1.6 million farm families through one or more of its programs, and there was room for growth as county supervisors collectively estimated that more than 600,000 more needed rehabilitation.<sup>70</sup> The strength of these relationships varied, however. Many clients were only temporary. More importantly, the FSA's constituency was at the bottom of the political and social ladder. The rural poor were socially isolated and politically impotent when New Deal rural rehabilitation and farm security efforts began, and they remained so despite the FSA's efforts. That 20% of the FSA's clients were black farmers meant that their clients had even less political strength and were in danger of turning on one another.

However much the FSA leadership may have believed in the necessity or desirability of organizing the rural poor, they faced the disapproval of other agencies in the USDA and of many

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted in McKinley, "Federal Administrative Pathology and the Separation of Powers," 22. A position of autonomy and self-reliance could at times overshadow other political goals. For example, the AAA's displeasure at being Wickard's choice as the tool for the planned Defense Boards in 1941 indicates that what Albertson calls "their clannish fraternity" was more important than greater access to and influence over the Secretary of Agriculture. Dean Albertson, *Roosevelt's Farmer: Claude R. Wickard in the New Deal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 229.

<sup>69</sup> Albertson, *Roosevelt's Farmer*, 122.

<sup>70</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943*, (1942), 274.

of their own personnel, particularly at the county level.<sup>71</sup> There is little evidence that the FSA meddled in local politics; as Howard Tolley (at the time head of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics) described it, the FSA “did not take on the character of a political machine at all.”<sup>72</sup> With regards to perhaps the best opportunity to create such an organization, the county committees, historian Sidney Baldwin writes, there is virtually no “evidence in the record to suggest that the leaders of the FSA ever seriously considered the use of committees as the basis for a consciously constructed constituency relation comparable to the AFBF or the system of associated Soil Conversation Districts.”<sup>73</sup>

This is not to say that the FSA made no effort to influence public opinion. Besides the obvious activities of the Information Division (which, though smaller than it had been under Tugwell, remained active), administrators wanted to make sure that the public received their work properly. In Region V, for example, both the Regional Information Advisor William H. Dent and Regional Director Robert W. Hudgens sent memoranda to employees urging them to make their work more visible. Dent recommended sending a short press release to local papers every time an FSA tenant purchase loan was approved or used to purchase a farm. Hudgens was even more explicit, noting that Congress and local officials of influence needed to know about the FSA’s accomplishments, since they made the laws and provided the funding.<sup>74</sup> And Congress noticed, if not exactly how FSA leaders hoped; during congressional hearings, Tennessee Senator Kenneth McKellar asked if the information service went toward “publicity purposes, propaganda purposes” and claimed that the real purpose was “setting up the propaganda showing

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<sup>71</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 295-98

<sup>72</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 446.

<sup>73</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 310.

<sup>74</sup> R. W. Hudgens to State Directors, District and County, Farm and Home Supervisors, Subject “Public Relations,” and William H. Dent to County Supervisors, State Directors, State Tenant-purchase Specialists, and District Supervisors, Subject “Publicizing approval of TP Loans and Purchase of Farms,” [undated, 1939-40], both in folder “Public Relations, July 1939 thru June, 1940,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

how necessary and proper your work is, is it not?”<sup>75</sup> However, the sort of organized politicking and lobbying that organizations like the AFBF engaged in was not a part of the FSA’s approach. Ultimately, FSA clients were not a solid foundation for a political base, and FSA administrators appear to have made little effort to use them as such.

Another tactic in building political support was to enlist allies from similarly minded agencies and organizations. However, many supporters probably hurt the larger FSA cause: the National Farmers Union, NAACP, STFU, AFL, CIO, and Urban League, all at times supporters of the FSA, brought as much political criticism as they did political strength.<sup>76</sup> It is difficult to imagine, for example, that the support of the FSA’s stand on the poll tax by the three major labor organizations did much to win influential friends in the South.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Oscar Johnston, president of the National Cotton Council, increasingly opposed the FSA after 1940 in part because he believed it reflected socialism and labor advocacy in the New Deal. As his biographer, Lawrence Nelson, writes, Johnston became convinced that “northern labor radicals [...] had formed something of an unholy alliance with the FSA socialists. Their agendas meshed.”<sup>78</sup>

The FSA also failed to make sufficient inroads with the staffs of individual land-grant colleges and state-level farm bureaus, despite the fact that, in the words of one USDA administrator in 1937, they were “friendly to the main purposes of the Resettlement Administration.”<sup>79</sup> With the state extension services and the state Farm Bureaus, the RA/FSA had something of a love-hate relationship. Local relations between Farm Bureau and FSA

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<sup>75</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 737.

<sup>76</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 298-302.

<sup>77</sup> N. Gregory Silvermaster, “General Memorandum,” March 27, 1942, Folder “85-160 Public Relations, July thru December, 1940,” Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>78</sup> Nelson, *King Cotton’s Advocate*, 212. Johnston also had more practical reasons to oppose the FSA.

<sup>79</sup> Raymond A. Pearson to M. L. Wilson, June 25, 1937, Folder “Resettlement,” Box 2629, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

employees often went extremely well, and AFBF members strongly supported some aspects of the FSA's program. While the land-grant colleges as a whole were hostile, the FSA and its predecessors did share some personnel and information with college staffs. Helen Kennedy, for example, went back to work with the Alabama Extension Service from her work as a farm security home supervisor during a furlough in February, 1936. She reported, "resettlement work has been both worth while and pleasant."<sup>80</sup> And the RA and FSA cooperated with the extension services in various undertakings.<sup>81</sup> For a few projects, especially in Coffee County, Alabama, and Greene County, Georgia, M. L. Wilson believed that the cooperation between the agencies had led to extraordinary results.<sup>82</sup> Robert Hudgens found "a very close collaboration" in the field between Extension agents and FSA employees.<sup>83</sup> This grassroots cooperation could not overcome the larger political enmity, however. As part of the agricultural establishment, land-grant colleges were, along with the state and USDA extension services, hostile to farm security efforts, at least among the leadership.

In terms of state and local politics, sometimes the best the RA and FSA could do was to simply maintain peace. In Region VI, for example, made up of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, regional directors T. Roy Reid and A. D. Stewart managed to deal with influential senators like Pat Harrison, Theodore Bilbo, and Joseph Taylor Robinson, and with difficult state officials like Louisiana Governor Richard W. Leche. But this generally only worked because RA/FSA officials managed to stay out of local politics.<sup>84</sup> In most cases, farm security officials could manage only non-aggression pacts, not alliances, with influential politicians. One good

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<sup>80</sup> Helen Kennedy to Connie J. Bonslagel, January 27, 1936, Folder "Correspondence K RR-032," Box 2, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>81</sup> "New Cooperative Idea," *Extension Service Review* 7.12 (1936): 190; H. G. Seyforth, "Low-Income Families Make Good: Agent Aids Rehabilitation," *Extension Service Review* 9.9 (1938): 131; "Cooperating with FSA," *Extension Service Review* 11.6-7 (1940): 90.

<sup>82</sup> Senate. *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 957-64.

<sup>83</sup> *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 126.

<sup>84</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 186-90.

example was in Louisiana, where Huey Long held sway. Both the Long and the anti-Long camps sought the RA as a patronage weapon. If a good compromise is one that leaves both parties unhappy, the RA was successful: when it worked on a strictly non-partisan basis, everyone was mad. Long tried to block Robert Hudgens' appointment as state director, and the anti-Long crowd eventually refused to have anything to do with the RA. But as it became clear that the RA would not become a weapon of their enemies, both factions were willing to let the agency work mostly unhindered. This was a cease-fire at best, not a political alliance from which the agency could draw strength and allies.<sup>85</sup>

Prior to Pearl Harbor, these problems of political alliance and bureaucratic turf wars were something to be concerned about but nothing to cause panic. Generally speaking, the FSA found itself able to handle most criticisms and attacks. These took two general forms: first, an ideological criticism that the FSA was a radical, subversive organization threatening to undermine American or regional norms; and, second, more practical complaints that the FSA was wasteful, ineffective, or even counter-productive. In the short term, when the FSA still had a good deal of institutional support, these inchoate fears and discomforts resulted in protest and scattered political criticism, but there was no coordinated attack on the FSA program itself.<sup>86</sup>

The FSA, like the RA before it, had a reputation as a progressive, some thought subversive program. Critics particularly linked FSA plans for the creation of government-backed industry to a socialist or communistic tendency in agency leadership. For example, in 1938, the FSA announced the creation of five homestead hosiery mills, to be owned jointly by the homestead associations and Dexdale Hosiery Mills of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, and a farm

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<sup>85</sup> *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 156-72; C. B. Baldwin interview with Richard K. Doud, 28-30.

<sup>86</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 262-63.

machinery manufacturing plant in Arthurdale.<sup>87</sup> Michigan Republican Paul Shafer called the project a “socialistic scheme for government-operated industry,” the purpose of which was to “Sovietize American industry in the same manner in that Secretary Wallace has been Sovietizing American agriculture.”<sup>88</sup>

Such efforts remained a sore spot even after the Comptroller General ruled against the construction of such mills.<sup>89</sup> After incorrectly asserting that the BJFTA provided funds for this and other rural rehabilitation programs (corrected by Georgia Senator Richard Russell), Pennsylvania Congressman Guy L. Moser attacked the FSA as an “octopus” reaching out to take \$3.5 million away from relief and to provide “an alleged loan” toward building hosiery mills for homesteaders. Moser said it was worth eliminating the FSA’s entire appropriation, including loans to tenant farmers and the land-utilization program, if it were “the only way to strike at the bureaucracy,” and further claimed that “the end justifies the means, because there are no means that they won’t resort to to accomplish their ends.”<sup>90</sup>

Baldwin pointed out the absurdity of this criticism. “Is it socializing agriculture,” he asked, “in cases where the government guarantees and subsidizes workers for the employer, also to guarantee the worker a leakproof roof, a safe source of drinking water,” and so on? He continued, “It is strange that this charge should be directed particularly against the Farm Security Administration whose every effort has been to strengthen the American system of family type

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<sup>87</sup> “New Deal Homestead Groups Chosen for Hosiery-Making,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 1, 1938; Milo Perkins, “Memorandum for the Secretary,” July 13, 1938, Folder “Farm Security 2 (Projects,)” Box 2783, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>88</sup> “Says New Deal Aim Is ‘Soviet Industry,’” *New York Times*, August 22, 1938.

<sup>89</sup> “FSA Factory Loans Declared Illegal,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1938; Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1940* (1939), 820-22.

<sup>90</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1940* (1939), 820-23. Given that these funds came from the Emergency Relief funds, not agricultural appropriations, and that construction of the mills had already been prohibited, one can only assume that Representative Moser was indulging in a bit of political grandstanding.

farms which is the very opposite of socialized agriculture.”<sup>91</sup> Such protestations, especially from Baldwin, appear not to have satisfied FSA critics.

A more humorous critique came from the *Monroe Morning Herald*, which noted that while Baldwin, a boyish, blue-eyed 40-year-old who combed his hair and wore blue suits, “looks like a bond salesman [...] you can’t trust these Communists and there’s no telling what tricks they’re up to.” The editorial went on to sarcastically claim that Baldwin’s communism was evident in his past as a Virginia Democrat who voted three times for Harry Byrd. Turning away from its satire of Baldwin’s critics, the paper also pointed in a more serious tone to the fact that the FSA was under attack by those opposed to its program in general, and “Baldwin just happens to be the man who is directing the program and so he has to catch all the brickbats thrown in that general direction.”<sup>92</sup>

The FSA came under intense criticism for its assaults on the southern status quo. There was an inchoate sense that the FSA or its allies treated the South unfairly, which came out most clearly during congressional hearings in the early 1940s over the continued funding and role of the FSA. For example, after listening to Robert Hudgens explain some of the problems faced by impoverished farmers in the South – specifically that some tenants were so poor that their children could not go to school for lack of sufficient clothing – Georgia’s Stephen Pace had had enough. “I am pretty well fed up with hearing Georgia and Alabama downed,” he said. “The people in those states are as good and as kind and as honest as people anywhere else.” If anyone

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<sup>91</sup> “Toward a Full Mobilization of Manpower: Speech for delivery by C. B. Baldwin, Administrator, Farm Security Administration, before the National Farmers Union Convention, Oklahoma City, Tuesday, November 17 [1942], at 8: pm” Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Edson, “In Washington,” *Monroe (La.) Morning Herald*, June 6, 1942, in Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.



in Laurens County knew about it, he said, they surely would have given the tenants “three times as many clothes as those children needed to supply them and send them to school.”<sup>93</sup>

Sometimes this sense of the FSA’s anti-southern sentiment resulted in rather fanciful charges. Georgia representative Malcolm C. Tarver claimed in 1943 that the FSA was using the war effort as a pretense to effect an idea which “originated long before the war,” to move tens of thousands of farm families out of the South to other areas of the country – “reshuffling of the agricultural population of this country and placing them where certain theorists want them” – and stated that C. B. Baldwin apparently agreed with such an idea.<sup>94</sup>

The most potentially explosive criticisms of the FSA, despite the agency’s care in avoiding any violation of southern protocols, involved race. Many of the FSA’s leaders (including Alexander, Baldwin, Hudgens, Mitchell, and Maddox) were southerners, and they knew they had to be careful. At no point did the federal farm security program make a serious effort to challenge segregation, although it did include African Americans in separate projects.<sup>95</sup> In many cases, African Americans were ignored or even pushed off of their land at the expense of white FSA clients. Anthropologist Jane Adams and journalist D. Gorton demonstrate how this was particularly a problem in the largely black Mississippi Delta, where all-white projects could not all be built on virgin land. Tenants were evicted from areas that would become RA/FSA projects either because they were the wrong race for a segregated community or because they did not qualify as an FSA client (due to poverty, generally, which tended to be black tenants). In

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<sup>93</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 192.

<sup>94</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1007.

<sup>95</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 279; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 200-02.

some cases, such as around Transylvania Plantation in Louisiana, the agency broke up long-established black communities and replaced them with white FSA clients.<sup>96</sup>

Many southerners who did support the FSA did so on the basis of their own racist, paternalistic beliefs. One South Carolina newspaper editor wrote to Robert Hudgens asking for a resettlement project for local black farmers forced out of their homes by the Santee-Cooper development. “Probably you are familiar with the Negroes of the Carolina coast,” James C. Derieux wrote. “They are a simple, friendly, illiterate people. If paid a few hundred dollars per family, and turned loose, the dealers in second hand automobiles will get the money, and the Negroes will have the cars for a short time. Then what?” Derieux recommended more intensive government aid through a resettlement project in a nearby neighborhood.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the care administrators took to avoid violating southern racial mores, white southerners still criticized the FSA. Any program that even brushed against the color line raised immediate concerns. Senator James Byrnes, for example, complained to Will Alexander about a proposal to create state Advisory Committees that would include at least one black member. Byrnes asserted that such a committee was unnecessary in the first place (even though he admitted, “I do not know exactly what duty will be performed by the Committee”) but, if they were essential, he insisted that Alexander reconsider including African Americans. After an ominous request to know the name of any “leader of the negro race in this State” that made “any demand” on the subject, Byrnes turned to sarcasm. He asked whether Catholics, Jews, Irish, Scots, and Baptists were fully represented. He asked “whether this is limited to a negro of full blood, of how much negro blood a man must have in order to qualify.” Finally, Byrnes warned

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<sup>96</sup> Adams and Gorton, “This Ain’t My Land,” 324-30. The evicted tenants were supposed to move to a new project, but mostly because of poor planning, the families scattered across the Mississippi Delta. See also Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, for more on FSA Region VI in general, and on race specifically 179-90.

<sup>97</sup> James C. Derieux to R. W. Hudgens, December 20, 1936, Folder “85-163-01 Articles & Press Releases, July, 1938 thru December, 1938,” Box 2, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

that while “the races in South Carolina, for instance, are living in peace,” any action that would “raise the race question” would “prove a serious handicap to the success of your work.”<sup>98</sup>

For all their care to avoid even a hint of racial subversion, FSA administrators (many of whom had experience with civil rights organizations) still took steps toward racial equality, some minor and a few major. Alexander, for example, requested in 1940 that black women working on FSA projects make the same amount of money as white women. Whites made between \$1,800 and \$2,000, while black women made between \$1,260 and \$1,440; he ordered this remedied. At the same conference, Baldwin recommended that State Committees include black committee members to select the black clients.<sup>99</sup> And on some policies, such as providing loans that could be used for the payment of the poll tax, the FSA refused to compromise.<sup>100</sup>

But far more important than any specific activity of the FSA was the fact that, as historian Donald Holley writes, “in much of what Resettlement and Farm Security did lay an implied rejection of Jim Crow.”<sup>101</sup> The FSA simply could not be careful enough to avoid raising criticism from the southern political establishment. The very creation of an agency outside their control, one dedicated to improving the lot of the impoverished and mostly disenfranchised in southern society, was inherently a threat.

The criticism of the FSA as a subversive organization undermining American norms was important, but more so as the foundation for a stronger and more common argument that skirted any ideological issues: wasteful government spending. Virginia Senator Harry Byrd was one of the earliest critics taking this line. In a letter to various newspapers in 1937, he claimed that

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<sup>98</sup> James F. Byrnes to Mr. W. W. Alexander, October 9, 1937, Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1937,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>99</sup> “Conference of FSA officials held at Capon Springs, W. Va., during the period May 31 1940 – June 3, 1940,” [no date], Folder “Dept. of Agriculture. Farm Security Administration. Conference at Capon Springs. 1940.” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>100</sup> C. P. Trussell, “FSA Is Accused of Tax Loan Plan,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1942.

<sup>101</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 180.

“when the true facts are known of the sinful and absurd waste in the Resettlement Administration homesteads projects [...] the conditions existing will approach a national scandal.”<sup>102</sup>

In a July 1937 radio address, Byrd attacked several aspects of the RA’s program. He criticized the use of federal grants, “something which we must pay back and pay back several fold on account of the red tape and duplicated effort with which the funds are administered.” He feared that relief labor created a natural constituency for more wasteful spending programs. And Byrd directly condemned the RA, claiming it spent \$1,400 a day for telephone and telegraph messages and \$11,300 a day in travel expenses. Byrd’s strongest criticism took aim at the homesteads program “conceived in the brain of Dr. Tugwell” and being built all over the country – Byrd claimed there were 232 such “costly experiments” under construction nationwide. “Extravagance and duplications exist on every hand,” Byrd asserted, “but of all the waste of present or past governments, nothing can parallel the homestead projects,” which took “the first prize in sinful waste.” Byrd attacked several projects by name – Shenandoah Park, “Tugwell Town” (referring to the greenbelt project near D.C.), the Newport News homesteads (“for the occupancy of colored people,”) and others. The RA and its supporters claimed the economic emergency as their rationale, but to Byrd, this only hid their belief “that they have divine authority to disregard of sensible mandate of economy and efficiency” to instead spend other peoples’ money as they saw fit. The only reasonable solution, he concluded, was to cut such spending and balance the federal budget while the taxpayers could still afford to do so.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Harry F. Byrd, “Note to Editors and Correspondents,” July 3, 1937, Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1937,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers; see also, “Byrd Attacks RA on ‘Sinful Waste,’” *New York Times*, July 5, 1937. Byrd still used the FSA when it furthered his constituents as individually necessary, writing to ensure the FSA considered their needs; see Grover B. Hill to Harry F. Byrd, Folder “Farm Security Loans or Grants, Aug. 1 to Nov. 1,” Box 292, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>103</sup> “Government Waste and Extravagance (Radio address by Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, over stations of the National Broadcasting Company, from Washington, D. C., Saturday, July 17, 1937.)” Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1937,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers. Byrd and Henry Wallace had conversed both in person and by letter regarding the Shenandoah homesteads and other such projects around

A related criticism was that the FSA encouraged “shiftlessness” in farmers – in effect, imparting what critics saw as the wasteful mindset of the program. Henry C. Taylor, for example, warned that a program helping tenants become owners would undercut “thrift” and make them dependent on relief.<sup>104</sup> This criticism came often enough that the FSA trained its employees to turn it around and argue that such a view was un-American. In a sample speech sent to FSA personnel for use at meetings with committees and County Councils, public gatherings, and other events, the speaker was to explain that the FSA “believes in the American people.” Those who attacked it for giving loans to “shiftless” people failed to recognize the capacity of American farmers to improve their lot in life, with a little credit and lots of technical assistance from FSA experts. To assume otherwise would mean “there would be no reason to hold out opportunity or hope to our people -- and no reason, for example to oppose Hitler and Stalin and all the other enemies of democracy.”<sup>105</sup>

The FSA faced the related criticism of being too centralized and bureaucratized. With a few important exceptions (primarily local committees responsible for things like debt adjustment or selecting tenant-purchase clients), the FSA was still administered almost entirely by employees of the federal government, not local farmers committees or local associations. The picture that its opponents developed, in the words of Minnesota Congressman August H.

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Virginia, but apparently Byrd was unsatisfied by Wallace’s response, as criticism of the homesteads would become one of the centerpieces of Byrd’s years-long attack on the FSA. Byrd’s frequent requests for information on the homesteads projects, creating work by the RA and FSA which he then used to attack them, did not improve relations, especially since Byrd put off appearances by the Secretary of Agriculture before the Committee to Investigate Executive Agencies of the Government in the summer of 1937, a move apparently designed simply to make things more difficult for the RA. RA administrators maintained an extensive “Byrd File” for dealing with the difficult politician. Robert Hudgens estimated that the Byrd committee alone cost the agency about 300 man-hours. *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 200.

<sup>104</sup> National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy*, 28.

<sup>105</sup> FSA, “To the FSA Personnel,” p. 4, Folder “85-161 Speeches, July thru Dec. 1940,” Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

Andresen, was a top-down, over-bureaucratized agency “where they have a lot of personnel drawing big salaries and riding around the country telling people how to live and what to do.”<sup>106</sup>

These sorts of criticisms did not pose existential threats to the FSA prior to World War II. However, political and ideological changes in the early 1940s put the FSA in a much more difficult situation. The New Deal and American liberalism as a whole underwent significant changes in the first half of the 1940s. The early New Deal, in particular up to 1937, had been reform-oriented, aimed at changing and improving the very structure of capitalism. Modern capitalism, liberals believed, had essentially failed in some significant areas; government, especially the federal government, would be responsible for building the infrastructure (both real and metaphorical) necessary for society to continue and beyond the capacity or willingness of modern industrial capitalism to build.

In the late 1930s, Roosevelt and his New Dealers had neither the political power nor, increasingly, the political will to institute and maintain such reforms. At the same time, the period of recovery from the 1937 recession and, in particular, the changes wrought by World War II led to a new kind of liberalism. The government would still play a significant part in the economy, but it would do so in order to expand and stabilize capitalism, not reform it. Liberalism went from being reform-oriented to being consumer-oriented, comfortable with the shape of modern capitalism, committed to expanding mass consumption, and more concerned with the protection of civil liberties and individual rights than with restructuring capitalism or directly acting in the economy.<sup>107</sup>

In this sense, the FSA was, even at the moment of its creation in 1937, almost a relic of an earlier time. As one rural sociologist wrote, “public rural rehabilitation programs achieved a

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<sup>106</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, 96.

<sup>107</sup> Significant studies of this change include Brinkley, *The End of Reform*; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*.

relative permanence as rural poverty came to be viewed as a widespread, deep-rooted, and long-standing problem to which the Federal Government should address itself.”<sup>108</sup> But this idea of rural poverty was not to last, and the political climate and ideas surrounding the creation of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads and the Rural Rehabilitation Division in 1933 were already beginning to wane when the FSA went to work in 1937.

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<sup>108</sup> Olaf F. Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 14.

### PART III

#### FIGHTING RURAL POVERTY: FARM SECURITY IN PRACTICE

It is necessary to understand the on-the-ground functioning of the Farm Security Administration in order to understand the effectiveness of federal anti-rural poverty efforts. Administrators and planners made policy, and the president, Congress, and various members of the United States Department of Agriculture influenced what the FSA could do. However, the same was true for the FSA's employees and clients. Rural rehabilitation in particular proved to be a local affair, as, increasingly, county and district supervisors and local advisory committees made important decisions about supervision and making loans. But for all of the programs, the success or failure of any given project depended as much on the men and women who lived and worked there as it did the particular policies put forward by faraway administrators.

Moreover, while the FSA played an influential role in an ideological and political struggle taking place at the highest levels of the federal government in the 1930s and early 1940s, that was not what was important about the agency for the people directly involved on a day-to-day basis. For most FSA employees, the agency's work was embodied in their activities with local or project clients. Similarly, for most clients who received credit, assistance, or homes from the FSA, the agency was not a massive bureaucracy maneuvering against other massive bureaucracies and political organizations. It was the local agent who showed a family how to use a pressure cooker, the county committees who helped decide whether a tenant-purchase client was well-suited for a particular farm, or the managers of the community in which they lived.



The FSA's effectiveness as an anti-poverty agency depended upon the success of its operating divisions (rural rehabilitation, tenant-purchase, and resettlement). For this reason, it is valuable to look more closely at the work of those programs. By far the most important was rural rehabilitation. It consumed most of the FSA's budget, and its system of supervised credit became the most important single tool for fighting rural poverty. It also heavily influenced how the resettlement and (particularly) the tenant-purchase programs were carried out. By the late 1930s, FSA administrators had settled on farm and home management plans, with their accompanying loans, as the best way to promote rural rehabilitation and thus to solve rural poverty. The FSA should be understood as a local agency, in terms of its county agents and local offices, and as a (supervised) credit agency, in terms of how it extended loans and grants to clients and how supervision operated.

A similar perspective is required for the resettlement program. It had great significance as an ideological ideal or as political football to be used against the FSA by its enemies. But it also had considerable influence on the lives of those who were resettled, both the ones who became successful in their new communities and the ones who failed or moved away. The homesteads around Birmingham, Alabama, eventually became settled and generally successful communities, but only after years of setbacks, false starts, and reduced expectations. Given the limited resources of the program's supporters and the hostility of its opponents, the homesteads could never match the utopian ideals of their early boosters, or even the reduced expectations of later FSA administrators. The Birmingham homesteads, like the resettlement projects around the country, were part of a political failure that still enriched the lives of its residents and communities.

## CHAPTER 7

### REGAINING A LOST SECURITY: THE RURAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

The Rural Rehabilitation Division was by far the most important of the Farm Security Administration's main programs, accounting for about 60% of the \$1.96 billion that the Resettlement Administration (RA) and FSA collectively spent on low-income rural and migratory families.<sup>1</sup> It offered assistance and funds to a larger number of low-income rural families, and in a wider variety of ways, than did the resettlement or tenant-purchase programs. Rural rehabilitation also had the broadest geographic reach of any FSA program. The Rural Rehabilitation Division originated in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and it included a set of related projects, the most important of which were supervised loans and emergency grants. Rural rehabilitation also included a voluntary debt adjustment program, tenure improvement activities, the promotion of cooperative programs, and a medical care/sanitation improvement program.

Being so broad, rural rehabilitation had a wide and sometimes contradictory set of goals. One goal, and a large part of the reason that the rural rehabilitation program took the shape it did, was to save money while improving the rural economy. Proponents promoted the loan program as more cost effective than direct relief and work programs. Similarly, if the commercial agricultural economy was to recover, something needed to be done to incorporate small farmers into it. If the economy did not return to prosperity, or if small farmers did not take part in that

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<sup>1</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 84-89.

prosperity, then they would have to go on relief and continue to cost the government money. Promoting farm security also prevented farmers from becoming migrant agricultural laborers, a national problem largely being handled at public expense.<sup>2</sup>

A related objective was to keep small farmers on the land. In part this goal smack of pessimism: if there was nowhere for impoverished farmers to get work in urban areas, then they were best kept on the land (a similar sentiment was attached to the Subsistence Homesteads Division, and later the tenant purchase program). On the other hand, a number of commentators and planners (including many people involved in the rural rehabilitation program) simply valued rural life, arguing it was better than city living and perhaps even necessary for national prosperity. One agricultural economist even warned of the possibility that continued migration from rural to urban areas would so lower the nation's birthrate that it would threaten the capacity of the United States to maintain its population. The only solution was to move factories into rural areas, to limit the migration of rural citizens to the cities.<sup>3</sup> M. L. Wilson, who put such views into action while administrator of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in the Department of the Interior, wrote in 1940 that he would "keep a much larger number of people on our farms than many agricultural economists would advise. There are values in rural life, even in a rural life without rich material returns, which in my estimation are superior to maximum commercial productiveness without these homely values."<sup>4</sup>

While by the 1930s, most pro-agrarian language had lost its moralistic streak in favor of emphasizing the economic importance of farmer purchasing power, the inherent virtue of an agrarian life remained a popular belief, underlying many of the material arguments in favor of aid to the rural poor. As historian Clifford B. Anderson puts it, as a result of the Depression and

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<sup>2</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 41-53.

<sup>3</sup> O. E. Baker, "Rural-Urban Migration and the National Welfare," *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.2 (February, 1935): 25.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, "Problem of Poverty in Agriculture," 28.

New Deal, “moral agrarianism was secularized into an economic creed.”<sup>5</sup> Groups as diverse as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Nashville Agrarians agreed that the root of American’s problems lay in the capitalist, industrialized economy, and that the solution depended on some sort of land reform.<sup>6</sup>

In the South in particular, this notion of the inherent value of rural life, and of the necessity of restoring farmers to their rightful economic place if the larger economy were to recover, held sway. Economic conditions were also worse in the South: Even in 1937, after four years of federal aid, the average southern income was \$314, compared to national average of \$604.<sup>7</sup> Southern farmers faced bleak futures: a 1938 report found that almost 60% of southern white non-owners and 63% of southern black non-owners rated their chance of becoming a farm owner in the next five years as “poor.”<sup>8</sup>

Federal Emergency Relief Administration, RA, and FSA administrators believed that a rural rehabilitation program would be the key to fixing these problems, or at least keeping them from getting worse, but what exactly rural rehabilitation meant remained up in the air. One set of FSA instructions defined it simply as “regaining a lost security.”<sup>9</sup> But generally, proponents of rural rehabilitation had in mind efforts that built on one another, a pyramid to ensure that a family would not again fall into poverty. The foundation was the relief of immediate suffering and misery, the most basic necessity. Permanent self-support and a healthy living standard would allow a family to avoid falling into poverty again. Stable land resources, improved tenure conditions, and a dependable monthly income made it possible for a family to have that self-

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford B. Anderson, “The Metamorphosis of American Agrarian Idealism in the 1920’s and 1930’s,” *Agricultural History* 35.4 (1961): 184.

<sup>6</sup> Jess Gilbert and Steve Brown, “Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union,” *Agricultural History* 55.4 (1981): 352-55.

<sup>7</sup> National Emergency Council. *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Schuler, *Social Status and Farm Tenure*, 10.

<sup>9</sup>FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 400.10, sheet 1-sheet 1 reverse (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1942).

support and health to avoid again being overwhelmed by poverty. Finally, participation in the community and democracy both created a reason for the family to work hard to avoid falling into poverty and provided additional resources (such as education and community aid) to help them avoid it. Additionally, during World War II many definitions of rural rehabilitation included full participation in the war effort.<sup>10</sup> This was both a practical goal, to ensure the continued existence of the rural rehabilitation program, and an ideological one, as the war effort was conceived as a defense of democracy and the American way of life.

That ultimately might be the best description of how proponents (at least, those in the FSA and its predecessors) understood rural rehabilitation: ensuring that the rural poor could participate in the American way of life. But determining the best ways to get clients to that point and to keep them there, much less figuring out what “the American way of life” meant, was a moving target. The Rural Rehabilitation Division thus simultaneously undertook to improve rural life using a variety of approaches in an effort to restore the sense of rural security that its leaders believed had been lost.

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The Rural Rehabilitation Division came to the RA mostly from FERA, but it expanded rapidly in the new agency. From the beginning it was the largest division in the RA, with not quite 3,100 employees, and, 3,000 of these were field agents.<sup>11</sup> It had five separate, but closely related, operations: a loan program built on farm and home management; an emergency grant program; feed and seed loans; a farm debt adjustment program (from the FCA); and a cooperative loan program. It was at first part of a Rural Resettlement Division handling both

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<sup>10</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 45-57.

<sup>11</sup> In the RA, the Land Utilization Division had the largest Washington staff of 200, with another 2,500 in the field. “Force of 6,090 Hired in Tugwell Program,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1935.

rural rehabilitation and resettlement, but in December 1935 the two functions were separated into separate administrations.<sup>12</sup>

The RA made available loans and grants for rural rehabilitation and relief to low-income farmers, farm tenants, and sharecroppers who could not secure credit elsewhere, either through private credit or other government agencies. Clients received loans for the purchase of feed, seed, fertilizer, animals, equipment, and tools. With these loans and grants came a supervised home and farm plan thus these were known as “farm plan” clients. A lien on the crop secured loans for non-recoverable goods. Grants were used for emergency cases (hence, recipients were known as “emergency” clients); sometimes loans and grants arrived together, and a family often received grants to get into shape to become borrowers. The loan and grant program was by far the largest aspect of the RA program: within the first year of its existence, about 780,000 farm families received aid.<sup>13</sup> At first, only those on relief were eligible for loans, but in August 1935, Tugwell expanded this to include anyone who was on the verge of relief, essentially those who could not get loans elsewhere. Farmers could obtain loans at 5% interest. Repayment was effectively seasonal, to be made after harvest or sale. Non-recoverable loans for things like minor repairs, food, rent, or clothing were generally made for a two-year repayment period. Larger loans for recoverable goods like breeding stock, large-scale repairs, or equipment usually had a five-year period.<sup>14</sup>

The RA loan program underwent some substantial changes from the way FERA had operated it. Instead of repayment in kind or by public work, repayment could only be made in cash. Most importantly, the RA instituted supervised farm and home plans, which improved the

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<sup>12</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 7-10; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 54-56; *Interim Report of the Resettlement Administration*, 8-13; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> “Tugwell Expands Loan Plan,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1935; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 9-10.

quality of work done by county supervisors, who now had to make a careful study of eligible applicants. However, being more careful meant that many low-income farmers with insufficient or poor land were no longer eligible for loans. Loan sizes increased and the emphasis moved away from subsistence farming and toward profitable agricultural operations.<sup>15</sup> The RA also improved on the way that clients understood their loans. One RA administrator found that, at least in some counties, early rural rehabilitation clients (and the public at large) understood their loans as essentially gifts that did not have to be repaid. After only five months of the RA's operation, however, most clients and local farmers recognized that the RA's loans required repayment.<sup>16</sup>

Observers like Henry Wallace saw the supervised loans as the most significant part of the RA's mandate. He commended the RA for its role in helping farmers in emergency situations, for example in drought conditions. But, he wrote, from "a long-time point of view the 300,000 [farmers who had received supervised loans up to that point] are more important," not only for the 5% loans (which replaced the enormous interest rates poor farmers had previously faced) but for the supervision and guidance, which promised a new direction for the government's relationship with poor farmers and a new hope for the children of impoverished tenants.<sup>17</sup>

Although conditions in the South were generally the worst in the country, on a per-farm basis the RA spent sometimes twice as much on northern and Midwestern farms as it did southern ones. This was particularly true of grants, which were usually made for emergency purposes: the national average was \$18.30 in grants per month per farm, but in some northern states the average was between \$25 and \$30. This had a number of causes. The harsh winters of

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<sup>15</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 156; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 202-03.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Lazar, "Rural Rehabilitation General Personnel Report," September 18, 1935, Folder "RR-101-03 L Reports," Box 6, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>17</sup> Henry A. Wallace, "In Quest of Farm Security," *Extension Service Review* 8.3 (March 1937): 34.

some states, especially in the northern plains, demanded that northern farmers receive more fuel and clothes than did southern ones. Southerners also could grow more of their own food – a family in Florida could eat from the garden almost the entire year, while in the farthest northern farms, farmers could not count on anything for more than half the year.<sup>18</sup> The South also had a considerably lower standard of living: difficulties there did not rise to the level of emergency, because they had been that bad for years or decades.

Loans and grants were the most important aspect of the rural rehabilitation work, but they were not all of it. The Rural Rehabilitation Division also, in close connection with the loan program, operated the Farm Debt Adjustment Program, which began in October 1933 under the Farm Credit Administration. This program was intended to bring debtors and creditors together to work out and reduce farm debt. It was transferred to the RA on September 1, 1935, becoming a part of the Rural Rehabilitation Division through its Farm Debt Adjustment Section. This cooperated with voluntary state and county debt adjustment programs and with district supervisors; it depended for its success on the actions of thousands (over 13,000 on state and county committees combined by the end of 1936) of these unpaid farm debt adjustment committees, coordinated by only 254 total RA employees.<sup>19</sup>

The rural rehabilitation program also included community and cooperative services. These started much more slowly than the loan, grant, and debt adjustment programs – only five loans to cooperatives closed in the first year of the RA's existence. The program's goal was to help low-income families in groups, similar to the individual loan program. Supplies, equipment, and services that could be profitable for a group but proved too expensive to own or operate individually could be purchased through the cooperative loan program. The loans went to the

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<sup>18</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1938* (1937), 419-21.

<sup>19</sup> *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 12-14.



usual sorts of agricultural cooperatives for producing, processing, and marketing farm products; often, the RA facilitated the creation of such organizations.<sup>20</sup>

While relatively popular, the rural rehabilitation program had its troubles. As would be the case with the resettlement program of the RA, the agency got bad press and criticism because of its predecessors. New York Senator Royal Copeland complained in May 1937 to Will Alexander that the RA had put a farmer on his land in Florida, but he had received neither rent nor payment for taxes. The problem was that the man had apparently received his loan from FERA over a year before the RA was created.<sup>21</sup>

The RA also had to deal with poorly planned projects inherited from its predecessors. The Coffee County, Alabama, project had, in the words of Assistant Administrator R. W. Hudgens, “no sound economic basis.”<sup>22</sup> The people there, as journalist Ernie Pyle noted when he visited the community, definitely needed help: they were in deep poverty and suffering from easily prevented diseases like pellagra and hookworm. But that was the problem: even after a great deal of work, the 600 county FSA clients still mostly lacked amenities like indoor toilets, and the problem still to be handled was even bigger. Pyle estimated it might take ten generations to fix such a problem, which he claimed was “a combination of the landlord and the supply merchant and poor land and low prices and sickness and ignorance – in other words, it was the whole system.”<sup>23</sup> The RA’s attempts to repair that system were complicated by the necessity of addressing their predecessor’s slap-dash early efforts.

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<sup>20</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 9-10; *Interim Report of the Resettlement Administration*, 11; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 11-12; *First Annual Report, Resettlement Administration*, 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1938* (1937), 414-16.

<sup>22</sup> R. W. Hudgens to R. G. Tugwell, November 3, 1936, Folder “AD-AL-17 (060) Coffee Farms,” Box 52, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>23</sup> Pyle, *Home Country*, 368.

Credit was the most important facet of the rural rehabilitation program (and the most important part of Farm Security Administration activities overall: by 1943, more than 950,000 loans had been made, although not all of these were for rehabilitation purposes). The loan program originated in the FERA, then went to the Resettlement Administration, then to the FSA. Funds for rural rehabilitation loans came from loans by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to the FSA, which then provided rural rehabilitation loans to struggling farmers, combining credit with technical assistance (most notably in the home and farm management plans). Known as the standard loans, these small sums (averaging about \$240 in 1937, \$600 in 1940) were more concerned with general welfare than with standard risk concerns, so higher-risk families who would not have been able to receive tenant purchase loans, much less traditional commercial loans, were eligible for rural rehabilitation loans. Despite having higher-risk clients, the program ended up collecting more than 80% of the total amount loaned; by 1945, about 374,000 of borrowers had paid up in full.<sup>24</sup>

If a family was unable to get financing from any other source, could get local recommendations as honest and hardworking, and either owned or rented a farm capable of providing a living, then that family was eligible for a rehabilitation loan.<sup>25</sup> These loans came with strings attached: borrowers had to agree to receive farm and home supervision from trained FSA agents. This program of “loans based on farm and home planning,” as the FSA described it to interested committeemen and advisers, was the heart the program of rehabilitation. Emphasizing loans and farm management was in part intended to ensure that rural rehabilitation was not treated as and did not behave like a relief agency. FERA planners imagined rural

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<sup>24</sup> W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume II*, no date, Box 3, FSA Historical Records, RG 96, NACP; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 200-201; T. Swann Harding, “Farmers Home Administration,” *Antioch Review* 6.4 (1946): 587.

<sup>25</sup> *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1939*, 2.

rehabilitation as an alternative to relief, a cheaper solution that would do a better job. RA and FSA administrators retained this idea of economic improvement but also imagined an even grander mandate to use scientific farm and home management to “help reestablish people on the land with a chance to succeed – to help people help themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition to loans, FERA and then the RA had both made emergency grants to farmers in response to natural disasters or simple need. The FSA continued this and in 1940-41 expanded the program to include grants made for the purpose of rehabilitation. In part this was a response to the increasing tendency of county agents only to approve the relatively most prosperous of low-income farmers. FSA administrators hoped that this new grant program would help to lower the eligibility standards for new clients, standards which they believed local agents had raised too high. For example, sometimes it simply was not possible for a family to produce enough income to both pay their expenses and repay a possible loan. A yearly, perhaps annually decreasing, grant could remedy that by taking care of some or all of the household expenses while the family made repayments.<sup>27</sup>

The FSA classified recipients as suitable either for the emergency or standard programs. In general, standard rural rehabilitation clients received loans, and emergency clients received grants. The FSA did expand the loan program to include occasional emergency loans; while most emergency programs were made up of grants that amounted to essentially direct relief for needy farm families, the FSA also provided loans for areas where drought or flood had temporarily eliminated small farmers’ operating funds. Many emergency loan recipients eventually became standard loan borrowers; on the other side, many standard rural rehabilitation clients added emergency loans in cases of unexpected difficulty. Of the \$1.15 billion dollars spent by the RA

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<sup>26</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 400.10, sheet 1 reverse.

<sup>27</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 162-64. The grant program faced negative public relations, widely seen as encouraging laziness. See Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 201-03.

and FSA rural rehabilitation program between 1935 and 1946, 87% went toward loans of some kind, while only 13% went to grants.<sup>28</sup>

The FSA's standard loan program was not quite as southern-oriented as the original FERA program had been, but southerners still made up a large number of borrowers. Forty-seven percent of standard loans went to the four southern FSA regions, which had 56% of the total number of borrowers – the loan amounts were relatively less than those given to non-southern recipients because the South was so much poorer and its standard of living much lower than in the rest of the country, and thus loans could be smaller. In the period between July 1, 1935, and June 30, 1944, Region IV (West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina) got 8.1% of loans, Regions V (Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida) and VI (Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi) each received 13.3% of the total loans, and Region VIII (most of Texas and Oklahoma) got 12.5%. Besides living in greater levels of poverty, part of the reason for the disparity in loan amounts is that southerners, particularly in Regions V and VI, were much more likely to require supplemental loans.<sup>29</sup>

The standard rural rehabilitation loan program of the RA/FSA was less obviously racially imbalanced than were other New Deal rural aid programs (including, within the FSA, the tenant-purchase program). Between 1936 and 1939, 13% of all borrowers were African American, compared to a 12% black population among the farm population as a whole. In the four southern FSA regions, black borrowers made up 22% of the total number of clients, while they were 23% of population of farm operators. These statistics overstate the fairness of the program, however, as black operators were a much larger percentage of poor farmers than were

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<sup>28</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 132-34.

<sup>29</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 161-66. Regions III (Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio) and VII (the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas) received a similar percentage (11% and 10.3% respectively) to the southern regions

whites. Besides overt racism, a variety of factors besides account for this. Black tenants and sharecroppers were even poorer than their white counterparts, and they often fell below the minimum standards of eligibility. African Americans also tended to be less likely to push for resources, based on their past experience with similar federal programs. The landlord-tenant relationship was also stronger between black renters or croppers and white landlords; blacks were thus less likely to apply, either because of pressure from their landlords who opposed any signs of independence or because the old furnish system remained in place.<sup>30</sup>

Black farmers who did get into the program often had troubles with racist or disinterested agents. The FSA, for its part, was willing to investigate criticisms of employees, but rarely did this have appreciable results. One 1938 case in South Carolina, for example, began with an anonymous letter from twelve black clients who feared retribution from their local agent or his allies. They accused their local agent, James Moss, of refusing to help with bad crops and boll weevil problems. Worse, he made sure that when their cotton was sold, the checks were written to him and to the landlords, not the sharecroppers. “The rich using the money them self,” the writers accused, “and make the poor pay back.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that such allegations had been rather common under that Agricultural Adjustment Administration (widespread enough, in fact, as to have been part of the justification for the creation of the rural rehabilitation and resettlement programs), FSA officials had little sympathy. Such complaints had “very little foundation,” in

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<sup>30</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 103-04. Jason Scott Smith points out how New Deal works programs reinforced gendered and racial boundaries. Basing their welfare state on construction and public works, the New Deal reinforced industries – construction and building – that were bastions of white male employment. See Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15, 260. In promoting the family farm, the tenant-purchase and rural rehabilitation programs similarly strengthened gender and familial norms in rural America. The FSA’s racial impact, particularly in terms of the rural rehabilitation program, had less to do encouraging white-dominated industry than it did with fitting into an already-existent racial hierarchy.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous letter to “The United States Department of Agriculture,” September 1 1939, Folder “85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

the words of the Assistant Regional Director, who still thought it “advisable [...] to make a preliminary investigation in this County and determine if there are any discriminations being made against the Negro clients.”<sup>32</sup> Unsurprisingly, with this kind of attitude, nothing came of the investigation.

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Along with loans and grants to individuals, the FSA also provided loans for cooperative purposes. Starting in 1937, the FSA made loans to client families on a group or collective basis to purchase stock, machinery, farm services, and other things too expensive or unnecessary for a single family to own. In addition, loans were made up until 1942 to cooperatives operating creameries, canning plants, and similar rural businesses. Over 10,000 such cooperatives received loans. The FSA in 1942 created the Cooperative Division to handle these loans until 1946, when the Farmers Home Administration Act required the liquidation all cooperative association loans, a process that was completed in 1954.<sup>33</sup>

Cooperative farming projects reflected FSA officials’ belief that small farmers were increasingly at a disadvantage against large, modern industrial farms. Farm security administration believed that the family-operated farm was a better social ideal than the large-scale farm owned by a business and worked by hired laborers while recognizing the inherent economic advantages of large-scale farming. They intended for small farmers to get the benefits of modern technology and organization through cooperative activity, while maintaining the virtues of family farmers. What was known as a “group-service” enterprise is a good example of such programs. Individual, low-income farmers could pool their resources to purchase expensive

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<sup>32</sup> E. S. Morgan to R. F. Kolb, October 21, 1938, Folder “85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>33</sup> Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 16; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 179-81. For an overview of the expansion of, and hope for, agricultural cooperatives during World War II, see also Eaton, *Exploring Tomorrow’s Agriculture*, 65-191.

equipment or services they could not otherwise afford and which would not be economical if owned individually. Joint ownership and use of heavy equipment was nothing new to American farmers; FSA administrators hoped to promote this activity in a more efficient manner. Generally, either a single farmer owned an item that was used by neighbors for a small rental fee (with agreements made beforehand regarding amount of use, fees, and similar issues), or a number of small farmers owned and shared a particular item or facility. While these were considered cooperatives, they were more like partnerships.<sup>34</sup>

The FSA did promote formal cooperatives, organizations which took responsibility for buying, selling, processing agricultural production, and providing farm services on behalf of their owner-members. In some cases, the FSA provided loans for local farmers to become members of already-existing cooperative associations, or provided loans for farmers already planning to create cooperatives but who lacked the capital; in these cases, direct FSA activity was limited. The FSA's role was largely restricted to strongly encouraging the creation of cooperatives where the situation demanded it and planning and creating the framework. Beyond that, administrators believed that it was up to the membership to make the program succeed. A related cooperative program was the promotion of small neighborhood groups. Similar to the extension services' group-study approach, FSA leaders encouraged groups of six to eight families to meet regularly in one another's home to talk and plan cooperative activities. The program also hoped to alleviate some of the isolation and loneliness that came with farm life and to encourage stronger community bonds.<sup>35</sup>

Because so many southern farms still operated as plantations, improvements for individual tenants was not always enough to promote rural rehabilitation. In the Mississippi

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<sup>34</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 261-64.

<sup>35</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 274-77; Eaton, *Exploring Tomorrow's Agriculture*, 87-88; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 194-200; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 207-08.

Delta and other cotton-heavy regions, a number of different activities all operated as part of a single economic unit, including the production of cotton and other products, a central cotton gin or commissary, pasture, land for feed-crop, and more. It was not feasible to accept a single tenant from such an operation as a rehabilitation client. The FSA instead organized land-leasing associations – cooperatives – owned by the tenants and sharecroppers living there, which leased part or all of a plantation from the owner and subleased individual farms to existing tenants. The association might operate a livestock system, cotton gin, mills, and farming equipment and machinery service. The cooperative effectively acted as the plantation overseer. The FSA handled negotiations for the lease and provided a loan for operating capital, a charter for the cooperative, and an overall farm plan. An FSA official would often act as manager or bookkeeper for the cooperative association.<sup>36</sup>

Most FSA activity involving cooperatives, then, was indirect and small-scale. The entities known as Cooperative Corporation Farms were different from most other group farming projects in that they were generally large farms incorporated as cooperative agencies, with one vote per member and distribution of profits based on the amount of labor contributed by each member. As of March 1942, the FSA had only established 27 Cooperative Corporation Farms with only 757 full-time members.<sup>37</sup>

Critics of the FSA decried the cooperative programs as a socialization of American agriculture, akin to Soviet farming practices, but they resulted in very little communal farming. For example, the FSA turned several large plantations into cooperative farms. The plantations shared pasture land, but individual families owned their milk cows and sows. Each family had its own garden. The livestock, farm equipment, seed, and farm supplies were purchased

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<sup>36</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 230-36; R. W. Hudgens, “The Plantation South Tries a New Way,” *Land Policy Review* 3.7 (1940): 26-29.

<sup>37</sup> Eaton, *Exploring Tomorrow's Agriculture*, 36, 67. Thirteen of these, or about half, were in the South.



cooperatively, but each family owned its livestock and farming supplies individually. They farmed the cooperatively held land in individual units. Assistant Administrator Robert Hudgens described the set-up as keeping the plantation system under new ownership, with families “working both as plantation operators and plantation tenants, and taking full advantage of all the good that the plantation economy has to offer.”<sup>38</sup>

Some FSA officials believed that the Community and Cooperative Service loans could be more fully utilized. T. Roy Reid, Director of FSA Region VI, wrote in 1939 that “the possibilities of such [cooperative] loans have not been fully realized and further opportunities for their profitable use are many.”<sup>39</sup> However, any expansion of the program was difficult. Cooperatives were one of most frequently criticized aspects of federal farm security efforts, both from without and within the agency. The move of the RA to the USDA and its evolution into the FSA encouraged shifts away from cooperative loans. Increasing regulations limited the way that cooperatives loans could be made, and by the summer of 1937, administrators could point out to hostile letter-writers that farming cooperatives were a small and shrinking part of the federal government’s farm security program.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to the resettlement projects, the cooperatives continued to be criticized even as their size and relative importance in the FSA decreased. Congress was strongly opposed to the cooperative farming program in general, and widespread political assault led to the prohibition of all new cooperative activity by the FSA after June 30, 1943, except for the medical, dental, and hospital groups associations. Before then, a large number of families took part in the various cooperative programs, despite the hostility. By the end of 1943, over 148,000 families had taken

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<sup>38</sup> R. W. Hudgens, “The Plantation South Tries a New Way,” 25 (quote); Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 243.

<sup>39</sup> Reid, “Public Assistance to Low-Income Farmers of the South,” 192.

<sup>40</sup> R. M. Evans to Howard. A. Cowden, June 25, 1937, Folder “Resettlement,” Box 2629, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

part in the local and state purchasing and marketing programs, 103,000 used cooperative processing facilities like grain elevators, cotton gins, or canneries, and 58,000 families purchased cooperative-based insurance. Thousands more used migratory health camps, land leasing programs, cooperative water facilities, and cooperative veterinary care.<sup>41</sup>

A less controversial cooperative enterprise involved medical and dental care.<sup>42</sup> Rural living and poverty combined to produce terrible health conditions.<sup>43</sup> For years, the Department of Agriculture operated a variety of different programs addressing rural health, some indirectly, dealing with animal diseases (which frequently spread to humans) and the elimination of disease-bearing pests. The USDA performed a great deal of work concerned with nutrition, while the Extension Service provided improved medical and sanitation education. However, these programs clearly showed more the potential for reform in rural sanitation and health care more than tangible results.<sup>44</sup>

To address the massive problem of rural health, the RA organized a Public Health Section in its Washington office, to provide better medical care and wider choice of physicians for client families. The program moved to the FSA, where it expanded to include hospital and dental care. It became an important part of the FSA program because administrators considered good physical health to be so important to rural rehabilitation and farming success. For farmers receiving rehabilitation and tenant purchase loans, the general approach was to provide funds for families to pool their resources to create medical associations that could enter into agreements

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<sup>41</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 209-30.

<sup>42</sup> Particularly valuable on subject of the FSA's medical care program: Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, Chapter 22, "Rural Health Activities of the Department of Agriculture," 389-431 (written by two doctors personally involved with the FSA medical program); and House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part IV, 1613-32. The best secondary source is Grey, *New Deal Medicine*.

<sup>43</sup> O. V. Wells, "Agriculture Today: An Appraisal of the Agricultural Problem," *Farmers in a Changing World*, 388; National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, 29-30; Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 192-96; Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 110-27.

<sup>44</sup> Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, 389-91; Grey, *New Deal Medicine*, 31-47.

with local doctors and hospitals. These medical associations could maintain better rates for care and a stronger assurance of service than could the families working individually. Moreover, it was the only realistic way to budget for medical care: individual rates and needs varied far too much for reliable planning.<sup>45</sup>

Membership in the medical care plans was voluntary. The FSA county or district created a medical insurance fund; members paid annual fees, based on the ability of the client to pay. Sometimes, rehabilitation loans or grants included such membership fees along with feed, fertilizer, and similar loans. The typical fee was \$18 for husband and wife and \$1 for each child. The doctor sent bills to the trustee, who divided the medical fee fund into twelve parts and paid the doctor bill monthly, in full if possible but prorated if not, out of the medical insurance fund.<sup>46</sup>

Physician membership was similarly voluntary and organized: local doctors and dentists often signed informal agreements, usually after FSA employees had come to an agreement with the local or state medical and dental associations. These negotiations with medical professionals did not always go smoothly, as professional associations generally discounted the severity of the rural health problem and, more importantly, greatly feared any moves that might increase the role of the federal government in health care. The FSA's decentralization and emphasis on local concerns proved crucial in gaining local support. Administrators recognized the importance of maintaining good relations with local and country medical societies and agencies if the program was going to work, and they were fairly successful at cultivating their support by pledging to only introduce plans that had the support of the local medical community.<sup>47</sup> They also cut some

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<sup>45</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 307; Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, 393-94.

<sup>46</sup> Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, 394; House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part IV, 1616; Grey, *New Deal Medicine*, 58-60; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 71-72. See also USDA, *Better Health for Rural America: Plans of Action for Farm Communities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1945), 10-14.

<sup>47</sup> Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, 395; Grey, *New Deal Medicine*, 53-57; A. M. Simon, "Medical Service Plans for the Farm Security Administration," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 120.16 (1942): 1315.

of the more controversial elements of the program when necessary: in one county, physician unhappiness with the pooled funds forced a change to a more traditional billing system.<sup>48</sup>

In one sense, the RA and FSA medical program was modest. The problem was simply so large that administrators could only provide a minimal amount of medical care locally to low-income farmers and migratory workers; they could establish a certain basic level of sanitary facilities (clean water, sanitary toilet facilities, and mosquito screens for home). Little was done to increase the number of medical professionals in rural America, and little was done to improve the number of chronic illnesses and physical handicaps among FSA clients.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, most of the solutions to the problems of health and sanitation were not particularly difficult or expensive to fix. Better education and standards of living were most important to improving rural sanitation. To the extent that the FSA and its predecessors contributed to those goals, they also contributed to improving rural sanitation.

While limited, the program did have results; if nothing else, it provided (for those able to join a medical cooperative) immediate, tangible improvements in their medical care. For example, starting in 1937, officials in FSA Region V began to make \$10-30 grants for client families to build sanitary facilities, eventually providing such grants to almost 25,000 families by the end of 1939. Other regions followed suit, and in September 1939 the national agency provided authority to all regions to initiate a sanitation grant program. By the middle of 1943, about 112,000 families in 1,053 counties spread over 45 states had received a total of \$3.4 million in grants. The program was focused on the South, especially Regions V and VI, where

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<sup>48</sup> R. C. Williams to C. B. Baldwin, April 10, 1941, Folder "AD-AL-17 (060) Coffee Farms," Box 52, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>49</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 306-07; House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part IV, 1613-16.

the problem was greatest; because of limited funds for the grant program, effort tended to be concentrated on areas where the situation was the worst.<sup>50</sup>

The physical improvement for clients was significant. Providing medical care to southerners who had never been to a doctor or dentist, for example, was both a moral and a practical concern. Farming was strenuous work. Poor farmers lost their farms for medical costs as minor problems became major problems and then life-threatening ones. Other farmers continued to work but ineffectively due to pellagra, hookworm, malaria, and other poverty-related conditions. Recognizing this, FSA local administrators and agents strongly favored the medical program. W. L. McArthur, the FSA county agent in Coffee County, Alabama, believed that the health program was foundational to rural rehabilitation. The first thing to do, he told journalist Ernie Pyle, was to get people healthy, and other improvements to the quality of rural life would follow. But, he recognized, the long-term problems could not be fixed overnight. McArthur said it might take generations to make sure that the poor lived well, because, as Pyle put it, “They’d been used to feeling rotten too long to change overnight.”<sup>51</sup>

The FSA also improved the situation from the physician’s end. Rural doctors frequently had to write off the bad debts of their patients, particularly during the Depression. By 1941, clients had actually paid only 61% of doctor’s bills, 81% of dental bills, and 74% of hospital bills, but this was quite an improvement from earlier repayment rates.<sup>52</sup> One observer found that for all the medical program’s shortcomings and failed experiments, it did reach out to an underserved class and provided “more or better or at least earlier medical care than they had received before the introduction of the plan,” with a similar feeling that rural physicians “as a whole

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<sup>50</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 253-56.

<sup>51</sup> Pyle, *Home Country*, 366.

<sup>52</sup> Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, 396; Grey, *New Deal Medical Care*, 65.

received more money under the Farm Security Administration plan than they had been able to collect from the same body of patients previously.”<sup>53</sup>

Dealing with families already in such poor condition, the FSA was often playing catch-up. In Geneva, Alabama, the FSA worked with the local health department to sponsor family visits by local doctors and nurses. The Home Management Supervisor and Public Health Nurse went to a client family and met with the family physician in response to the death of one of the family’s young girls. Malnutrition and heart disease had been the cause, and an eight-year-old boy in the family was on the same track because of hookworm. After treatment at the County Health Department, the boy lived, and the entire family received hookworm treatments. The county’s Home Management Supervisor provided a special demonstration on food preparation and balanced diets, and with FSA help the family obtained a milk cow and chickens. As a result, the county Home Management Supervisor could report, “the health of the entire family is much improved.”<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps the biggest problem with the FSA’s health plan program (aside from the obvious problems created by serving a poor, rural clientele with limited resources) was administrative. The medical program was part of the larger rural rehabilitation program, and so the final responsibility for its operation rested with the county supervisors. But these local FSA agents already had trouble keeping up with their standard rural rehabilitation cases. Supervisors tended to let the medical program move along with little guidance, while the member families lacked any understanding of how the plan worked, or what part they might play in it. Such apathy, neglect, and uncertainty lead to the selection of the quickest and easiest solution, not necessarily

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<sup>53</sup> Simons, “Medical Service Plans of the Farm Security Administration,” 1315. On physicians’ responses to the medical cooperatives, see Grey, *New Deal Medicine*, 65-71.

<sup>54</sup> Ruth B. Register to George C. Stoney, May 17, 1941, Folder “85-160 Public Relations, July thru December, 1940,” Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

the best one; for example, this often meant employing local generalists, not rare and expensive specialists. County doctors, furthermore, were brought into the program to gain local acceptance for the medical plans. Overall, while rural health coverage could generally be expanded by the FSA medical program, it was rarely improved. One example was in Coffee County, Alabama. Before the government project started, Coffee County had one nurse to serve the county's 35,000 people. By 1941 the county had three nurses but still lacked necessary specialists.<sup>55</sup>

The reduction in FSA funding in 1942 meant that the medical care program had to limp along with disappointing results. This is borne out in numbers enrolled: the peak membership was June 1942, when nationally 613,854 enrolled; that dropped to 528,094 a year later, 363,443 in 1944, 284,100 in 1945, and 236,780 by June, 1946. In many cases, such declines in membership made the plans untenable – by 1944, the average number of families enrolled per plan was only 92, not nearly enough to support a program funded by low-income farmers. Compounding the problem of declining membership and funds was a sense among clients that they had little direct responsibility for the program. Relatively few FSA clients took the lead in managing or creating the medical plans, leaving that work to FSA field agents. Only a third of the associations in 1940 had a meeting of the local board of directors, made up of members, at least once a year.<sup>56</sup> When funding began to dry up, and FSA agents could no longer provide leadership and organizational momentum, there were no local leaders to provide continuity.

The drop in membership resulted from external factors as well. Many rural physicians and dentists joined the armed forces during World War II; those who remained behind served such a large number of patients that they saw no reason to contract care for a particular group, particularly one made of poorer patients who might not be able to pay. At the same time,

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<sup>55</sup> USDA, *Better Health for Rural America*, 13-14; Farm Security Administration, "Farm Security in Coffee County, Alabama," June 17, 1941, Folder "AD-AL-17 (060) Coffee Farms," Box 53, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>56</sup> Mott and Roemer, *Rural Health and Medical Care*, 405, 411, 413.

increasing farm income meant that fewer rural families wanted or needed to use a low-income program. Finally, the mass reduction of the FSA budget meant that fewer families were a part of the FSA program (a drop during the war years from 500,000 to about 200,000); a smaller staff meant there were fewer people, with generally less experience, to organize and maintain such programs.<sup>57</sup>

The FSA also got caught up in a debate over nationalized health care. The agency publicly came out in favor of the 1943 Wagner-Murray Dingell bill, which proposed universal health insurance as a sort of extension of Social Security. The FSA's advocacy drew the ire of organized medicine, already nervous about the threat of government intervention in health care. Rural physicians, county medical associations, the American Medical Association, and numerous other medical organizations turned against the FSA in 1943, critically wounding the agency at the worst possible time.<sup>58</sup>

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In trying to improve clients' lives as part of rural rehabilitation, administrators had to consider their debts. The Farm Credit Act of 1933 created the Farm Credit Administration (FCA), which provided loans to farmers from the Federal Land Banks. But these and other sources of funds proved inadequate; selling prices were often well below appraised values, and farmers were often in debt to numerous lenders (any of whom might push the farmer into bankruptcy) and behind on taxes; as a result, a debtor might stop all repayments to save money for when one creditor might begin foreclosure proceedings. Because of numerous debts incurred before 1929, the general agricultural decline of the late 1920s, and the economic crash, something like one-sixth of all American farmers (about a million people) were on the edge of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>58</sup> The story of the FSA's role in the national health care debate in the 1930s and 1940s is in Grey, *New Deal Medicine*, 152-67.



bankruptcy when the FCA began operations in 1933. Unable to help pay for even a fraction of this, the FCA started a program to bring together debtors and creditors, in order to work out new terms and to avoid foreclosure and bankruptcy.

The program, which came to be known as Voluntary Farm Debt Adjustment, moved from the FCA to the RA and then to the FSA. The program was a practical necessity for the operation of a government loan program aimed at helping poor farmers. Otherwise, the receipt of government funds would simply be a signal for creditors to renew their push for payment, and the government would essentially be paying the debt-holders. By June 1940, the FSA had overseen more than 58,000 debt adjustment cases, and thousands more followed the example (which was often both quicker and less costly than legal proceedings). Despite the fact that part of the rationale for the program was to protect government investments, about a third of the families involved were not clients of the FSA.<sup>59</sup>

One unique aspect of the Voluntary Debt Readjustment Program was that it had essentially no legal standing; the volunteer adjustment committees worked only because of the personal reputation of the members, the goodwill they generated, and the difficult situation in which both creditors and debtors found themselves.<sup>60</sup> These committees, usually made up of five members, were generally chosen for their reputations as fair and unselfish men, crucial in encouraging a voluntary settlement from both sides. Often it was fairly straightforward to encourage creditors that the current state of affairs – the farm being profitably run by its current occupants – was the best. A carefully prepared agreement between a debtor and all creditors

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<sup>59</sup> H.C. M. Case, "Farm Debt Adjustment During the Early 1930s," *Agricultural History* 34.4 (1960): 174-82; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 209-11; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 142-44, 213-22. See also Ernest Feder, "Farm Debt Adjustment During the Depression – The Other Side of the Coin" *Agricultural History* 35.2 (1961): 78-81. For county supervisor policies for debt adjustment, see FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instructions 732.1 and 733.1, NAL.

<sup>60</sup> "3,661 Farm Debts Cut \$6,491,866, Or 31.7%," *New York Times*, February 3, 1936.

helped avoid court action, which would cost both sides enormous amounts of money. While they did not preclude foreclosure altogether, the county committees urged a friendly settlement whenever possible.

Aiding the county committees was the awareness that even the best farmers took on debts. Knowledge that a farmer could continue to profitably run a farm, along with the moral support of the committee, was often all it took to bring creditors together to work out an equitable settlement. In other cases, interest rates were dropped, perhaps from 5% to 2%, until prices recovered. Often simply bringing the creditor and debtor together solved all the problems. In one case, a creditor was unaware that his debtor was taking out a Federal Land Bank loan to partially pay off his debt; the debtor agreed to cancel the mortgage entirely for the value of the loan. On the other hand, committees were willing to see people lose their farms when necessary; the farm of one heavy-drinking debtor, the committee believed, would be better off in other hands. The committee recommended the creditor begin foreclosure proceedings. When the committees became better known, it often became unnecessary even to meet; recommendations from a single member might encourage debtors and creditors to meet together to work out a new settlement.<sup>61</sup>

The committees established a good record of debt adjustment. In one of the FSA's poorest regions, Region V, an FSA report noted that 9,618 cases came before the 334 voluntary Farm Debt Adjustment Committees between September 16, 1935, and March 31, 1937. In 6,044 of 7,218 decided cases, debts were adjusted, for a total debt reduction of \$1.8 million. The average debtor in settled cases entered the negotiations with \$1,541 in debt and came out with \$1,244, an average reduction per settled case of about \$297 (about a 19% reduction). These

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<sup>61</sup> Case, "Farm Debt Adjustment During the Early 1930s," 176-82; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 213-21.

adjustments also freed up a total of \$203,802 in taxes. As a report noted, the adjustments helped local government, as “approximately one dollar and seventy-five cents of delinquent taxes are paid into state and local taxing units for every dollar spent on farm debt adjustment activities.”<sup>62</sup>

By the end of 1943, the program had overseen over 187,000 cases. The average adjustment was about 22%, with a total debt reduction of over \$109 million. The average farmer’s indebtedness (which before the program totaled about \$2,700 per person) was reduced by about \$585 dollars; this probably understates the impact on those whose debts were reduced, however, because not all cases saw reduction (about two-thirds of cases adjusted between 1936 and 1939 were adjusted, but only about half of cases between June 1940 and June 1942, before shooting up to about three-fourths of cases in 1942-43, probably the result of the comparatively small number of cases). The largest single year for debt reduction was 1941, with over 35,000 cases; this number declined sharply with the improving economic condition and other changes caused by World War II, along with the decline of the FSA after 1942.<sup>63</sup>

With the FSA’s budget cuts, policy shifted; county supervisor picked up responsibility for debt adjustment instead of the agency organizing and overseeing the committees. While many debt adjustment cases in the past had involved non-FSA clients, as a practical matter this could not continue after about 1942. The FSA simply lacked the funds, and county supervisors – some of whom by then had over two hundred clients – did not have the time to help non-clients. The improving economic situation also meant such services were in less demand, and the

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<sup>62</sup> FSA, “Progress of Rural Rehabilitation Region V,” no date, Folder “Rehabilitation Region V AD-560 Reports,” Box 60, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>63</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 256; House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 165-67.

remaining debt-adjustment committees added tenure-improvement programs as their debt-adjustment load declined.<sup>64</sup>

Closely related to debt adjustment was the tenure improvement effort. FSA officials hoped to replace vague one-year oral agreements with written contracts for a three-to-five year period and/or an automatically renewing lease. Tenure specialists, along with farm management and debt adjustment experts, trained county and district supervisors in the importance of having standard, written, easily-enforced contracts.<sup>65</sup>

Some landlords willingly went along with the new leases. If they believed that farm and home management plans would improve their rental incomes by increasing agricultural outputs, landlords would cooperate with the FSA program because the loans only went to applicants in good tenure situations (a policy that became official in 1938). In particular, landlords who had made little or nothing on a particular plot of land, or those who were not full-time farmers and had other interests or sources of income, were glad to do anything that might improve the value of their property. In other cases, FSA agents often found it necessary to put in a bit of effort to get landlords to go along. They held meetings with local landowners to explain the FSA program and how they believed it benefited both parties to have more stable tenure arrangements. Sometimes it was necessary to sweeten the pot; a rehabilitation borrower might also receive a sanitation grant to repair or improve the landlord's home and sanitary facilities if the landlord went along with the new lease.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 160-62.

<sup>65</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 224-26; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 263-67. Like many farm security programs, the tenure improvement project went through a variety of bureaucratic shifts. It started out in the RA's Rural Rehabilitation Division, which moved to the FSA in September 1937. In July 1939, the section was eliminated and its work put into the general effort toward farm management. In the summer of 1941, a Farm Debt Adjustment and Tenure Improvement Section was established; since the number of cases involving debt adjustment were declining, and the two programs were closely linked, FSA officials concentrated their experienced agents in one place.

<sup>66</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 226-228.

As with debt adjustment, tenure improvement was among the practical changes in tenant lifestyle that FSA leaders believed were necessary for the rehabilitation loan program to succeed. Prior to 1937, federal officials had not done much to remedy tenure conditions, although many people recognized the problem. There were simply other things to do. FERA officials had been busy focusing on subsistence farming. RA officials had been too occupied with the resettlement and rehabilitation projects, and then on passing tenancy legislation, to take steps toward fixing tenure problems.<sup>67</sup>

The FSA tenure improvement program had mixed results. Written leases and provisions for a garden and pastures came easily. Long-term leases, automatic renewal, and other provisions proved more difficult to obtain. However even the relatively limited change of written leases created a dramatically different relationship between landlord and tenant in the South, where oral leases had been the rule for decades; for the first time, negotiation of rates and obligations became the rule, not the exception.<sup>68</sup>

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The trend among county agents toward making loans to better-off clients encouraged some FSA administrators to try other approaches. At Administrator Will Alexander's urging, the FSA began to develop new plans for experiments to reach the poorest farmers, which became the only FSA program designed for such clients. Late in 1938, the FSA established special staffs in 11 counties across the country to assist groups of needy families not able to qualify for the regular FSA program. Intensive supervision and experimentation were encouraged for the specially selected personnel. The farm and home specialists were to visit every needy farm family in the area to work out a supervised program for that family or refer them to an

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<sup>67</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 223; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 262-64.

<sup>68</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 266-67.

appropriate agency that could take care of their case.<sup>69</sup> Eventually, about five hundred families were chosen. They received in the first year about \$225,000 in loans and another \$100,000 in grants. These kinds of families generally suffered under a variety of problems – from economic difficulties like poor farm management or inadequate services to physical problems like acute illness.<sup>70</sup>

The experimental effort for these families reflects the general rural rehabilitation approach, especially in the South. For example, the biggest emphasis was on increasing production of items consumed in the home, particularly food. Laurens County, Georgia, was one of the communities selected. Only twelve of the families in the group had cows in 1939 when the program started; by 1940, all fifty did. Starting so low, the increases could appear astounding: In Georgia, Laurens County increased its dried bean storage by 900%, and Oglethorpe County stored five times as much homemade syrup.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The story of this experiment is told throughout Conrad Taeuber and Rachel Rowe, *Five Hundred Families Rehabilitate Themselves* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Farm Security Administration, Cooperating, 1941); Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *They Too Produce for Victory* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Farm Security Administration, Cooperating, 1942); Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *Solving Problems Through Cooperation* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Farm Security Administration, Cooperating, 1942); Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *Ill Fed, Ill Clothed, Ill Housed – Five Hundred Farm Families in Need of Help* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Farm Security Administration, Cooperating, 1942); Rachel Rowe Swiger and Olaf F. Larson, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Five Hundred Low-Income Farm Families in Wartime* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Farm Security Administration, Cooperating, 1943); and Rachel Rowe Swiger and Olaf F. Larson, *Climbing Toward Security* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1944).

Before taking these fairly successful examples as emblematic of the whole program, it may be valuable to compare the experience of these communities with the administrative reports on nine resettlement communities described by Marion Clawson in “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Resettlement Projects.” Clawson, an agricultural economist working for the FSA, discovered an utter failure in resettlement, a project that the FSA began with high hopes but dropped in embarrassment in the early 1940s. Clawson recovered as much information as possible and wrote up a report. But with WWII and the concentrated Congressional attack on the FSA getting underway, Clawson felt it would be better to keep the report strictly internal; it was not published until 1978 and apparently was not seen by any but the top of the FSA administration before then.

<sup>70</sup> Taeuber and Rowe, *Five Hundred Families Rehabilitate Themselves*, 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Along with the emphasis on home production, FSA agents emphasized proper home and farm management. Supervisors found that their new clients did not understand even “simple farm tasks that are ordinarily taken for granted by farm people who are better educated and equipped.”<sup>72</sup> This experimental group needed much more intensive supervision than the overworked staff of the standard rural rehabilitation program could normally provide. For these clients, each farm management supervisor was assigned a caseload of fifty families, compared to 100-300 or more for the standard loan program. Furthermore, the experimental families were concentrated in a much smaller geographical area.<sup>73</sup>

The FSA promoted mutual cooperation, bigger and better homes and outbuildings, better health and sanitation, and other programs similar to the larger rehabilitation program.<sup>74</sup> Most telling, however, were the social and educational activities developed for these clients. FSA administrators believed that the physical side of the equation was not enough; in listing the problems faced by the five hundred families, for example, Sociologists Conrad Taeuber and Rachel Rowe included “Social Difficulties – Lack of satisfactory social and educational services” and “Emotional Difficulties – Engendered feeling of inferiority and distrust in humanity.”<sup>75</sup> Like the rest of the rural rehabilitation program, FSA leaders believed they were doing their part to bring these families back into full membership in American society.

FSA supervisors were particularly proud of changing attitudes. Things like “improved facial expressions, strengthened faith and a friendlier and more cooperative spirit toward neighbors and supervisors” counted as much as how many more cans of tomatoes a family stored in a given year. Supervisors even imagined themselves marriage counselors. “Constant bickering

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<sup>72</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Swiger and Taeuber, *Solving Problems through Cooperation*, 1-11.

<sup>75</sup> Taeuber and Rowe, *Five Hundred Families Rehabilitate Themselves*, 3.

and strained relationships between husbands and wives, caused to a great extent by the effort involved to obtain a bare existence,” Taeuber and Rowe summarized from supervisor reports, “have been alleviated, by frank discussions of problems and differences and by improved living conditions.”<sup>76</sup>

With the outbreak of World War II, the needy families experiment shifted toward war production. “Production is the keynote in agriculture in wartime,” one description of the program read, yet “many farm families do not now have [...] skills, equipment, capital, and productive land” necessary for production. Even health services took on a martial tone: “temporary illness can sabotage production efficiency and seriously hinder the cause of victory.” Rural rehabilitation was championed as the key to making even poor families a part of wartime production. Further, the experimental program was linked to the ideals for which the war was allegedly being fought, along the lines put forward in Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech. “Freedom from want is based on production,” but neglect due to poverty and ignorance had made it impossible for much of America’s now-worn out soil to produce the necessary agricultural output (and thus impossible for it to allow freedom from want).<sup>77</sup> The rural rehabilitation program made it possible for even the poorest families, then, to be a part of both the practical war effort and the fight for American freedom. While the start of World War II may have given new urgency to the project, it also ultimately ended it: wartime changes forced the FSA to merge this experiment more and more with their regular rehabilitation program.<sup>78</sup>

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From its origins in FERA in 1933 to the end of World War II, rural rehabilitation was the center of the anti-rural poverty effort in the federal government. Rural rehabilitation accounted

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 18, 18-19.

<sup>77</sup> Swiger and Taeuber, *They Too Produce for Victory*, 1, 22, 3 (quotes).

<sup>78</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, iv.



for more of the money spent than the FSA's other major programs, resettlement and tenant-purchase, combined. Several tools of rural rehabilitation, particularly the farm and home management plans, influenced how the rest of the FSA operated. As the passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act in 1937 indicates, Americans increasingly recognized the need for such measures aimed at rural poverty. Rural rehabilitation, however, was a mass approach ideally intended for any poor rural citizen willing and able to take advantage of it. The BJFTA, among other proposals for curing the ills of rural America, operated primarily for the benefit of a smaller group of the rural poor. Americans had come to recognize the problems caused by farm tenancy and given the FSA responsibility for fixing it. The result, the FSA's tenant-purchase program, was sort of a more intensified version of rural rehabilitation: large government loans for the purchase, improvement, and operation of a family-size farm combined with more intensive farm and home management. The cost of such a narrowed focus was that the tenant-purchase program could only aid a relatively small number of farmers, particularly as compared to the general rural rehabilitation program. But administrators hoped that success could rehabilitate tenants entirely, freeing up resources for the rest of the rural poor while providing a politically popular underpinning for the FSA as a whole.

## CHAPTER 8

### CREATING FAMILY FARMS: THE TENANT PURCHASE PROGRAM

The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act (BJFTA) provided, for the first time, some direct legislative support for the activities of the Farm Security Administration, which had found funding (as its predecessors had) through a variety of executive authorizations, emergency and agricultural appropriations, and Reconstruction Finance Corporation Loans. The BJFTA provided specific authority, in Title I and sections of Title IV, to make loans to farm tenants, laborers, sharecroppers, and other destitute rural people in order to purchase, construct, or repair farms and farm buildings. The Tenant Purchase Division was created in 1937 (renamed the Farm Ownership Division in July 1942) to manage and operate this program. Tenant Purchase Sections (late Farm Ownership Sections) established in the regional offices supervised the program in the field. Created to promote that most American ideal of rural life, the family farm, the TP Division's operation reflected traditional agricultural ideas, but the program also showed the influence of the FSA's ideological and organizational background. The program was placed into the existing national-regional-state organization that characterized the rest of the FSA (as opposed, say, to a state-by-state program that would have better suited traditional agriculturalists).<sup>1</sup>

Technically, the BJFTA called for the establishment of a Farmers Home Corporation, but it did not specify how it was to operate. Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace created it, as

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<sup>1</sup> Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 24.

the law required, but treated it as solely an advisory body. Its members were already busy with FSA work – the initial Board of Directors, for example, included Paul V. Maris and Will Alexander. It met to discuss pertinent information and its members took field trips to determine the local situation, but as an institution it had little influence. There was a bit of confusion at the time over why Wallace did not utilize the Farmers Home Corporation more, but, given that the administrative structure for the FSA had already been developed, there was little reason for him to do so. The FSA had a system in place, Wallace found it adequate, and that was it.<sup>2</sup>

These organizational departures from the wishes of Congress may have appeared to indicate a willingness among TP administrators to operate the program as they wished, without consideration of what Congress expected or desired. But the tenant purchase program reflected the influence of its first head, Paul V. Maris, more than any other division in the FSA. Maris was cognizant of Congress' special interest in the TP program, and he kept the program firmly within the bounds of traditionalist views of farming. The tenant purchase program operated under the idea that farm ownership was a step up from farm tenancy. The living and building standards for clients were intended to rise with their entry into the program. For this reason, the standards for acceptance were higher, the loans were larger, and the supervision more intense, than previously in government loans.

Being, then, an intensified version of the FSA program, the tenant purchase program provides perhaps the best picture of how New Dealers, by the late 1930s, imagined post-Depression rural America. The FSA self-consciously concerned itself with the long-term future of rural America, looking ahead not just to the end of the Depression, or even the lives of its clients, but to generations to come. Much like resettlement projects, TP did this in the most direct way, but because it interacted with clients individually, it remained much more popular with

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<sup>2</sup> Maris, "*the land is mine*", 27-30; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 189.

politicians and the public. The FSA shows how the New Deal patched together old fashioned ideas about the small family farm and rural communities and a newer idea of a vigorous, beneficial national government. This notion informed most aspects of the FSA's work, but it was particularly evident in the tenant purchase program, where candidates received the most scrutiny and faced the highest standards.

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Paul Maris had worked on rural rehabilitation projects under the FERA and the RA. He believed strongly in the agricultural ladder aspect of the program, the idea that the primary function of the program should be to accelerate the move of the most capable tenants into the ranks of farm owners, and for good reason. Congressional intent in the drafting of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act and potential congressional hostility necessitated, to him, a cautious course. To make loans to unprepared or incapable applicants, loans that would never be repaid, would only waste money and risk political fallout.<sup>3</sup> "The law under which we operate contemplates making loans for the purchase of farm on which industrious families can make a living and repay their debts," Maris said in a speech at an FSA conference in 1940. "There is no other intention than that the debts shall be repaid. No other measuring stick is likely to have so much to do with continued congressional support as the collection record."<sup>4</sup>

Maris' primary objective was to have successful clients, defined as those who repaid their loans and became farm owners. He was motivated by a combination of a desire to see his program succeed and a heavy dose of political pragmatism. Maris, like the rest of the FSA administration, realized that Congress considered the tenant purchase program to be the most

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<sup>3</sup> Paul V. Maris, "From Tenant to Owner: The First Year Shows Progress Under the Bankhead-Jones Tenant Act," *Extension Service Review* 9.10 (October 1938): 154; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 195-96.

<sup>4</sup> Paul V. Maris, "Significant Administrative Problems Related to the Tenant Purchase Program," p. 3, September 1940, Folder "85-161 Speeches, July thru Dec. 1940," Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

justifiable part of the FSA; indeed, for many critics, it was the agency's only legitimate function. To liberalize lending and lower return rates would risk support for the part of the FSA that had the strongest public relations advantage. And in that regard, Maris was mostly successful – he could point to a 98.4% return rate of loans that had fallen due by June 30, 1943. This trend continued, and by 1949, when not quite \$82 million was mature, \$162 million in principal payments had been repaid – almost twice what was due, plus another \$40 million in interest payments.<sup>5</sup>

Maris wanted the program to get off to a careful start, but also a quick one: had it failed to use the entire \$10 million allocated for the first year, the administrators or even the program itself might look like a failure. There was much to be done: forms to create, staff to hire, methodology to be worked out. But the staff had examples to work from. The resettlement and rural rehabilitation program had experience with farm and home planning, appropriate farm sizes and budgets, rural housing, and small-farm record-keeping that had been developed over the course of several years. The FSA learned from its mistakes – the public relations debacles surrounding the resettlement program and certain cooperatives contributed to the TP program's insistence on working only with individual families.<sup>6</sup>

Concerned about the program's success rate and political viability, program staff took great care selecting tenants, delaying the actual loans despite the considerable demand. Although the BJFTA passed on July 22, 1937, the first loan was not made until over a month into 1938. The agency was busy selecting state and county committees, appointing field representative, training said committee members and representatives, developing procedure, advertising the

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<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 197-99; Maris, "*the land is mine*", 319-20.

<sup>6</sup> Maris, "*the land is mine*", 17-22. Such criticisms would only intensify even as rural rehabilitation and tenant purchase became a more important part of the FSA's operations, and resettlement relatively less so; they played a crucial role in the ultimate political defeat of the FSA during World War II.

program's availability, and looking over applications. The FSA made its first tenant purchase loan on February 12, 1938, to Wiley J. Langley, of Jasper, Alabama, almost seven months after the legislation passed. Not coincidentally, this was the hometown of John H. Bankhead.<sup>7</sup>

In its first year of operation, the Tenant Purchase Division provided 1,879 loans, although it received slightly more than 38,000 applications. Even this number underestimates the demand for the program – the first applications came from the 325 counties eligible for tenant purchase loans, and the call for applications came relatively late in the season, when many tenants were already settled.<sup>8</sup> By the end of January 1938, when more than half the regions had ended the closing date for their first group of applicants, the FSA received about 24,500 applications for the 1,932 loans available in those regions.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to the demand for them, the program made very few loans, even after it was up and running. Between 1937 and 1940, the TP program approved 12,234 loans in 1,633 counties (including, as amused Alabama newspapers enjoyed pointing out, a Pickens County tenant farmer named Bankhead Jones, who received a loan in late 1939 of \$3,106 toward the purchase of an 80-acre farm).<sup>10</sup> These averaged \$5,721 per loan, and the numbers approved each year rose rapidly (1,829 in 1937-38, 4,233 in 1938-39, and 6,172 in 1939-40). These approved clients came from over 280,000 applicants, or about 23 applicants per loan selected.<sup>11</sup> In 1938, the FSA

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<sup>7</sup> Will W. Alexander to Paul V. Maris, "Report of Progress for the Period January 1 to January 31, 1938, inclusive," p. 2, February 1, 1938, and Will W. Alexander to Paul V. Maris, "Report of Progress for the Period February 1 to February 28, 1938, inclusive," p. 1, March 1, 1938, both in Folder "Tenant Purchase Division AD-183-06," Box 40, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>8</sup> Paul V. Maris, "From Tenant to Owner: The First Year Shows Progress Under the Bankhead-Jones Tenant Act," *Extension Service Review* 9.10 (October, 1938): 154.

<sup>9</sup> Will W. Alexander to Paul V. Maris, "Report of Progress for the Period January 1 to January 31, 1938, inclusive," p. 2, February 1, 1938, Folder "Tenant Purchase Division AD-183-06," Box 40, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>10</sup> "Bankhead-Jones Act Break for This Man," *Birmingham News*, February 17, 1940; "Bankhead Jones Invokes Bankhead-Jones Statute," *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 18, 1940.

<sup>11</sup> Paul V. Maris, "Significant Administrative Problems Related to the Tenant Purchase Program," pp. 2-3, September 1940, Folder "85-161 Speeches, July thru Dec. 1940," Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE

only made an average of seven loans in each of the 333 counties then designated for loans (the basis for the number of loans per county, and counties per state, were determined by the number of farms and the prevalence of tenancy in the area, the source of much congressional complaint that a particular representative's state or district was not receiving many loans).<sup>12</sup> Even with rapid growth throughout the war years, in 1945 the TP program made only 38,000 tenant purchase loans.<sup>13</sup>

The TP administration and its ideas about proper clients or political goals were not entirely responsible for the slowness in making loans or the small number of clients. Congress played a large part, both indirectly (in, for example, influencing how Maris thought the program should proceed to maintain congressional approval) and directly. The relatively small appropriations limited the number of tenants to whom the FSA could make loans. Other limitations hindered how the FSA could use those funds.

Most notable among these was the Tarver amendment, which sometimes made it impossible to use the entirety of apportioned funds in every state. In 1940, Georgia representative Malcolm Tarver introduced limitations to the appropriations bill on the purchase of farms; tenant-purchase farms could not have a greater value than the average farming unit above 30 acres in the locality in which the farm was purchased. Tarver was a proponent of the TP program, but he was suspicious that the lower class of farmers could not handle a large farm and that benefits might not go to the most deserving applicants (usually, in his mind, those of his home state of Georgia). "We are dealing here with the very poorest class of agricultural people," he said. "I do not see the point in buying one of these men a farm worth \$7,500, when you could buy four farms, for four tenants, at one-quarter of the price, which would buy a fairly good farm

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<sup>12</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1940* (1939), 625.

<sup>13</sup> Harding, "Farmers Home Administration," 587. These loans actually repaid 57% more than was due as of March 31, 1945.

in my district for a tenant.”<sup>14</sup> Tarver was also suspicious of the FSA, particularly C. B. Baldwin, whom he criticized as operating, as it were, a stealth relocation program. The limit on the size of farms the FSA could purchase made it more difficult to break up large plantations and sell them piecemeal to farmers from another county or state, a procedure Tarver saw as part of a larger plot by Baldwin to move strange farmers into new areas and break up the influence of the planter class.<sup>15</sup>

Despite this increasingly narrow range of acceptable applicants, FSA officials could point out the popularity of the tenant purchase program among farmers. TP borrowers mostly approved of the the program in general, their individual farms, and the fact that the program moved people from the ranks of renters to owners. Even farmers who were already owners, or who applied but could not get loans due to the shortage of funds, favored the program. In following the traditional pattern of individual farms, it met the approval of virtually all classes of farmers, particularly in the South.<sup>16</sup> The *Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife* found in early 1942 that 75% of respondents approved and 25% disapproved of the job the FSA was doing. Even those who disagreed with the results or impact of the FSA usually approved of its goals, but found fault with how the program was carried out.<sup>17</sup> Will Alexander estimated that the newspaper response in the first year was about 85% positive and that most of the criticism focused on the program's small size.<sup>18</sup> It also met the approval of politicians – Paul Appleby, then the Executive Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, reported in 1939 that “a number of Congressmen and Senators” had

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<sup>14</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1941* (1940), 954 (quote); House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 87-89.

<sup>15</sup> Banfield, “Ten Years of the Farm Tenant Purchase Program,” 474-76; House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1646.

<sup>16</sup> Maris, “*the land is mine*”, 299; Reid, “Public Assistant to Low-Income Farmers of the South,” 193. Oklahoma Congressman Phil Ferguson claimed to have not found a single farmer against the program. Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1941* (1940), 667.

<sup>17</sup> Farm Security Administration, “The FSA—Pro and Con”, January 28, 1942, NAL.

<sup>18</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1939* (1938), 567.



informally met with USDA administrators to discuss how the popular program might be expanded.<sup>19</sup> The biggest complaint from Congress may have been the limitations its members imposed – politicians wanted more loans in their own states and districts but were unwilling to appropriate the funds necessary to make such loans.

Part of the program's popularity and success resulted from the fact that it was put into operation much more carefully than the standard rural rehabilitation loan, allowing tenant purchase administrators to build on lessons learned during rehabilitation. In fact, approved tenant purchase families often had experience in the rural rehabilitation program, so agents were dealing (as it were) with known quantities. But the most important reason for its popularity was that the tenant purchase program was the closest in line with what most Americans thought the government should be promoting: home and farm ownership. As Georgia Senator Richard Russell noted, the "publicity given the program" was "all out of proportion to the money" spent.<sup>20</sup> It was sort of an anti-resettlement program, in terms of public and political perception: a relatively modest government program using relatively modest innovations to help a small slice of the rural poor, only in this case receiving general approval from both the public and the politicians.

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The various FSA Divisions had different approaches to selecting families. The most stringent requirements were in the Tenant Purchase Division. For example, TP regulations listed 25 distinct steps in making tenant purchase loans.<sup>21</sup> An applicant's existing capital and assets received little attention, though most borrowers were share renters or cash renters – the highest

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<sup>19</sup> Paul H. Appleby, "Memorandum for Dr. Howard R. Tolley," February 16, 1939, Folder "Farm Security 4 Loans," Box 3020, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>20</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1941* (1940), 429.

<sup>21</sup> FSA, "Administrative Instruction 137," pp. 30-31, January 22, 1938, Folder "Farm Security (Adm. Orders Etc)," Box 2782, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

level, in other words, below owners on the agricultural ladder. Applicants who received tenant purchase loans were low-income, but they were by no means the poorest farmers. The Tenant Purchase Division instead focused on the most effective and industrious tenant farmers, judged less in terms of their wealth than by their farming skill and capacity, willingness and ability to cooperate, history of good character, and reputation in their community.<sup>22</sup>

The number of loans in each state was determined by the BJFTA, using a formula devised by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. The FSA created a state committee of farmers, businessmen, and agricultural leaders to select the counties. This committee used census figures to determine which counties had the highest percentage of tenancy, which they usually selected to introduce the program.<sup>23</sup> As soon as a county was designated one in which loans were to be made, local FSA officials created as much publicity as possible, using both newspapers and public notices at trading centers and other public places, for three or four weeks. County supervisors did not list what land was for sale locally, as the goal was to give applicants the widest possible latitude in selecting their own farms. The county supervisor passed applicants onto the county committees, usually with rankings or recommendations based on eligibility and desirability.<sup>24</sup>

Applicants to the tenant purchase program had to meet a number of requirements. They had to be American citizens who were farm tenants, croppers, laborers, or recent owners who had been involved in farming as the principle means of providing family income. Applicants had to be willing to cooperate with FSA supervisors to develop a home and farm plan and keep up with their records. Applicants had to also have a good standing in their community: a potential

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<sup>22</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 428-29.

<sup>23</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1940* (1939), 638.

<sup>24</sup> FSA, "Administrative Instruction 137," p. 4, January 22, 1938, Folder "Farm Security (Adm. Orders Etc)," Box 2782, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

client was required, in the words of FSA instructions to its employees, to “have a reputation for paying his debts and meeting obligations,” as well as having shown stability, resourcefulness, and managerial and farming ability. Clients and their families had to be physically able to farm and free of any incurable debilitating illnesses. Finally, an applicant had to be unable to secure a loan through other private or government sources. Preference was to be given to married applicants or those with dependents and to those clients who could make a down payment on a farm or already owned the livestock and farm implements necessary to operate a farm successfully. Families with young children were to get the tiebreaker, as it were, all other things being equal. A farmer could be too successful – those able to pay 25% down payment could get credit through other means and thus were ineligible. Rural rehabilitation clients were to receive consideration equally with qualified applicants who had not been a part of the rural rehabilitation program (though in practice, those coming from the rural rehabilitation program often had an advantage because they were already known to local supervisors and committees). Regional directors had to personally approve applicants trying to buy a farm from a close relative, to prevent abuses and to keep from buying a farm for a client who would be in line to inherit it anyway. Loans could not be made to refinance current debts or to applicants with an outstanding judgment against them.<sup>25</sup>

Essentially any tenant who could not obtain a loan from a bank, but who possessed the capacity and desire to operate a family-sized farm, was eligible to receive a tenant purchase loan. This did not quite limit the options as much as it may sound; for a bank loan in most of the country at the time, farmers were expected to have 25% of the farm purchase price as well as

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<sup>25</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 611.1.

stock, equipment, and operating capital.<sup>26</sup> The purpose, more than in matching any given set of numerical standards, was to find tenants who were qualified to own and operate their own farms but who could not afford to do so. It was not always possible to stick to this ideal, as some clients found income in other ways, and farms even fell back into the old landlord system – for example, Lee Clark, who had purchased a farm with BJFTA funds, found a buyer in Birmingham who planned to operate his farm as a landlord, renting it out.<sup>27</sup>

Whether they were buying the farms they already worked or picking a new one, borrowers went through several steps to obtain loans. Tenant purchase clients and farms provisionally approved by the local committee went back to the county supervisors for further study. Local farm and home supervisors created a narrative form for the family's history, a list of qualifications of the family, and a description of the applicant's capacity for farm and home management. Provisionally approved applicants also received physicals. After a farm had been appraised and a family provisionally approved, local supervisors put together a loan docket. This included the county committee's certification, detailed farm and home management plans, and other documents. In total, each tenant purchase docket required twelve different documents before consideration by the regional office.<sup>28</sup>

The Chief of the Tenant Purchase Section in each Regional Office received these dockets for inspection and approval. The majority of such dockets was approved or required only minimal changes by the time they reached the regional level; any contributions by state or regional personnel usually came earlier in the process, during the creation of the docket (often at

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<sup>26</sup> Edward C. Banfield, "Ten Years of the Farm Tenant Purchase Program," *Journal of Farm Economics* 31.3 (1949): 472.

<sup>27</sup> "Tenant Purchase Family Progress Report No. 1," Folder "Clarke, Lee," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>28</sup> FSA, "Administrative Instruction 137," pp. 6-7, 14-16, January 22, 1938, Folder "Farm Security (Adm. Orders Etc)," Box 2782, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

the request of the local agent), not in its final inspection.<sup>29</sup> The client then began purchasing, repairing, and building as necessary.

County committees, including at least two local farmers on each three-person committee, played a large role in determining who would receive a tenant purchase loan. After receiving training from local supervisors, the committees selected applicants, with preference given to those families with sufficient cash on hand to make a down payment on a farm or enough livestock and equipment to begin farming operations, in addition to those with initiative and managerial skill (as determined by the committees and local county supervisors). The county committees also determined whether the price of the farm was appropriate and if a farmer could use it to both support a family and meet a repayment schedule. Veterans received priority when loans were allocated.<sup>30</sup> The letter appointing a committee member described their responsibilities as “certification of applicants for tenant purchase loans and certification of farms which approved applicants desire to purchase with the proceeds of the loans,” with compensation of \$3.00 a day for up to five days a month.<sup>31</sup>

County committees were a mixed blessing for Tenant Purchase Division administrators. To some degree, one of the purposes of these local committees was to ensure support from local authorities, who could use them to approve or reject candidates they found unsuitable for whatever reason (including race).<sup>32</sup> When making decisions on tenant purchase clients, committee members often violated law and policy in their selection of applicants. They approved

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<sup>29</sup> FSA, “Administrative Instruction 137,” pp. 17-20, January 22, 1938, Folder “Farm Security (Adm. Orders Etc),” Box 2782, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>30</sup> FSA, “Administrative Instruction 137,” p. 5, January 22, 1938, Folder “Farm Security (Adm. Orders Etc),” Box 2782, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP; Paul V. Maris, “From Tenant to Owner: The First Year Shows Progress Under the Bankhead-Jones Tenant Act,” *Extension Service Review* 9.10 (October 1938): 154.

<sup>31</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 403.1; numerous letters in Folder “Tenancy 2.1 (County Committees),” Box 2663, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>32</sup> John H. Bankhead to J. L. Edwards, [early December 1936?], Folder 1, Box 5, Bankhead Papers.

families with outside industrial employment or farmers who already possessed considerable capital and land. County committee members sometimes took the view that their tenant purchase recommendations were final; they even threatened to resign if the regional office did not follow their recommendations.<sup>33</sup> Generally, however, relations between the committees and the local, state, or national FSA offices were fairly good, and the willingness of county committee members to provide their time and reputation was crucial to the tenant purchase program's operation.

The political cover provided by using locals also made things easier for FSA administrators. Will Alexander recalled one case in which Senator Ellison "Cotton Ed" Smith criticized the FSA for selling a farm in a plantation area to a black farmer in his home state of South Carolina, bringing a complaint directly to Alexander (at that time FSA administrator). Alexander then contacted the committee, which was able to give a full, detailed explanation for why it had selected that farmer and that farm: it turned out that the black farmer had been working that land as a tenant for more than ten years, and he was considered a fine candidate for a loan. Alexander simply forwarded the report to Smith, who could not criticize the decision made by local white farmers from his own state.<sup>34</sup> Using the committees as political cover did not always work: Malcolm Tarver refused to believe that it was the county committees who determined the average value of loans made in his state, claiming that "they have been acting under directions from [FSA Administrator Will Alexander's] office," before Tarver set a limit on

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<sup>33</sup> [Paul V. Maris?], "To the Members of the County FSA Committees Assembled in 1940, Tenant Purchase Schools of Instruction," pp. 2-4, 9-10, Folder "Farm Security," Box 76, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>34</sup> *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 603-05.

the value of TP loans.<sup>35</sup> In most cases, however, the local decision-making was one of the most widely supported parts of the program.

Within the boundaries set by legislation, the FSA had some leeway in who it selected. Practically every borrower was the head of a family, usually a large one. Among the most important factors in choosing families was health – farming was hard work, so few major illnesses or disabilities afflicted adult tenant purchase borrowers. Client families rarely had any health problems more severe than the occasional husband blind in one eye or wife with goiter. Children with illnesses were less of a strike against an applicant, as county supervisors often thought of those borrowers as working for a better future for their children, and therefore were more likely to be hard workers. Generally borrowers were youngish, rarely older than their mid-40s for husbands and usually in their late 20s and 30s, with wives slightly younger. A large, healthy family could make up for old age – one 67-year-old farmer was recommended for acceptance because his doctor noted after the physical examination that the family was perhaps the healthiest he had ever examined, and because (as the local supervisor noted) even if the borrower became unable to work, his four sons could take over the operation of the farm.<sup>36</sup>

Another big advantage for applicants was to be well-thought of in one's community. County committees (which were, after all, composed of local farmers) liked this, as did home and farm supervisors. Along with good health and a family, local reputation as a good farmer and member of the community was one near-absolute in supervisor and county committee decision-making. One particularly positive family narrative described black farmers as being respected by both black and white farmers and being “leaders among their race” because of their “integrity,

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<sup>35</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1941* (1940), 955.

<sup>36</sup> William J. Roberts and Dorothy D. Fashee, “Family Narrative Robert Hixson,” in Folder “Hixson, Robert” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE. On the ideal ages for farmers in government rehabilitation and resettlement programs, see Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, 7-10.

industry, and cooperativeness.”<sup>37</sup> Another supervisor strongly recommended an applicant because “Mr. Parham’s neighbors say of him that if anybody will pay for a farm, June Parham will!”<sup>38</sup> Local reputation was just as important for wives. One home supervisor wrote in recommending a family, “Mrs. Harris seems to be the main cog in the wheel of the Rose Hill Community.”<sup>39</sup> Even the reputation of an applicant’s family could help – the families of both Joe and Mildred Farr “have made a record of ambition and good management” that reflected well on the Farr’s character and thus their chances to become successful tenant purchase clients.<sup>40</sup> Not being terribly involved in community affairs could be overlooked – a county supervisor noted that eventually-approved applicant Otto Moss was not sufficiently involved in community affairs but still had a good reputation among those who knew him.<sup>41</sup> A bad reputation, however, could not be overcome.

Having some formal education was less important in the view of county supervisors and committees. Supervisors in every FSA program, including the Tenant Purchase Division, worried that too much education might draw a farmer away from farm life. On the other hand, not enough education left him unable to handle farm problems in a practical, capable way.<sup>42</sup> In the tenant purchase program specifically, numerous clients with a fourth-grade or below education were accepted, and frequently supervisors described clients as having the disadvantage of little education but still recommending approval. More important from the FSA supervisor’s perspective was a willingness to do the work necessary to make a farm successful and the

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<sup>37</sup> James R. White and Tee H. Owings, “Narrative Statement Regarding Family of J. B. Kelly, T. P. Applicant,” Folder Kelley, J. B.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>38</sup> Ev M. Flannigan, “Narrative for Family Information Schedule – Form TP 2,” Folder “Parham, June,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>39</sup> Patty E. Kroell, and Wike C. Ikey, “Narrative of the Jack L. Harris Family,” December 20, 1938, Folder “Harris, Jack L.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>40</sup> Marjorie L. Andrews, “Narrative,” Folder “Farr, Joe C.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>41</sup> Otto Mills, County RR Supervisor, “W. B. Moss and Beulah Satterfield Moss” [no date], Folder “Moss, W. B.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>42</sup> Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, 6-7.



clients' innate intelligence. A lack of education could be overlooked if that innate intelligence was evident – one supervisor described applicant Willie Ferguson (who was strongly recommended) as having only a 7<sup>th</sup> grade education on paper, but in conversation sounding like he had a high school degree.<sup>43</sup>

Ferguson's narrative report points to what supervisors considered to be far more important than previous formal education: a willingness to listen to, and put into practice, the advice of home and farm supervisors. Looking at Ferguson, for example, the home supervisors believed he and his family would succeed because they "will welcome supervision and appreciate everything that is being done to help to own a home and farm and live better than they have ever lived before."<sup>44</sup> Supervisors frequently used the word "progressive" to describe qualified, desirable applicants – those who had proven that they would take advantage of professional agricultural expertise. Rather than just being someone with an education or formal instruction in farming, good applicants were "hustlers" who liked working hard and working on a farm and who would be willing to take the advice of their farm and home supervisors. Capable supervision and hard work could overcome much, FSA agents thought, if a client was willing to take it to heart: the Page family, described as "a hard working ignorant family of negroes," was recommended by a county supervisor who believed that the family could succeed so long as they had supervision and encouragement.<sup>45</sup>

Closely related to a family's willingness to take supervision, at least in the minds of supervisors making recommendations, was a family's desire to own a home and their gratefulness for the opportunity to do so. One supervisor wrote in of an applicant family, "The

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<sup>43</sup> Carolyn A. Warnell, "Home Narrative," Folder "Ferguson, Willie F.," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Sallie U. Patrick, "Narrative of Home Supervisor to Accompany Josh Page's Papers," Folder "Page, Josh," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

Carlos Moores seem to be an ideal family for the tenant purchase program. They are both young and healthy and genuinely interested in owning a home.”<sup>46</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Billie Moring were approved in part because “both understand the supervisory program and welcome any help they get from this source.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, another applicant couple, the Hardens, worked hard and maintained a standard of living above that of the average tenant family; they were just never able financially to make the jump to ownership before. The supervisor wrote that “I do not believe I have ever seen a couple more appreciative of a chance to own their home,” indicating that the Hardens would be willing to cooperate with their local farm and home management agents.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, appearing cooperative and eager to work with the county home and farm supervisors could help the chances of a farmer who might otherwise not be considered for a tenant purchase loan; supervisors hoping to remake tenants into property-owning family farmers tended to favor those applicants who seemed particularly receptive to their efforts. One borrower, Josh Dowdell, was behind with over \$2,000 in rural rehabilitation loans, but he was still accepted into the tenant purchase program. His county supervisor noted that Dowdell was cooperative and “always willing to accept any new ideas.” Despite having a history of poor farming techniques, the supervisors’ report showed a sense of optimism, the idea that any client who would work hard could succeed with the help of the FSA: “This family will need plenty of good close supervision.”<sup>49</sup> In this particular case that approach almost proved disastrous, as it was impossible for the over-worked county supervisor to give the necessary supervision, if that even would have been enough to make Dowdell a successful farmer. Five years after his

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<sup>46</sup> John C. Holmes and Eileen P. Cole, “Narrative of the Carlos A. Moore Family.” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE

<sup>47</sup> Mildred A. Row, and William M. DuBose, “Narrative – Billie Moring,” April 5 1940, Folder “Moring, Billie T.P. 1-45,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE

<sup>48</sup> William R. Mallard and Maxie H. Adkins, “Narrative, Ansel E. Harden, Lyons, RFD # 3,” Folder “Harden, Ansel E.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>49</sup> T. C. Hubbard, “Narrative Statement – Josh Dowdell,” and “Remarks,” Folder “Dowdell, Josh,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

application, the FSA was on the verge of foreclosing on Dowdell, who was getting too old to work the farm alone, and his two children were getting old enough to move. The regional director wrote Dowdell directly, putting him on an informal probation, and he narrowly avoided foreclosure.<sup>50</sup>

Along with a willingness to work hard, there were other intangible characteristics which could carry, or help carry, a family into the program, especially for the mother. The desire and ability to create the right kind of home, particularly for one's children, counted highly. One home supervisor, in recommending an applicant, described the wife's being "reared in a home of good moral atmosphere," noting that her father was a minister for 27 years. Similarly, a lack of education was covered by a desire to have had one: this applicant couple had not finished high school, falling a year short, but both "regret very much" not finishing, and they made sure their two young sons made good grades in school.<sup>51</sup>

Although they generally recognized a deficiency in schooling as an unavoidable problem for many poor farmers and thus did not hold a lack of formal education against applicants, county home and farm supervisors brought other notions of class and proper behavior for a farmer to how they described and selected clients. For example, one applicant was noted as spending a higher than usual amount of money on clothing because he always wore boots and breeches – in contrast, apparently, to the usually (and appropriately) barefoot poor southerner.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, middle-class ideas about personal appearance and behavior were evident in how supervisors thought of their clients. One applicant's wife was described as "probably too stout"

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<sup>50</sup> C. H. Bedgfield to Joe G. Woodruff, [no date], and E. S. Morgan to Josh Dowdell, March 20, 1942, both in Folder "Dowdell, Josh," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE. Dowdell did in the end manage to pay off his loan.

<sup>51</sup> Patty E. Kroell and Wike C. Ikey, "Narrative of the Jack L. Harris Family," December 20, 1938, Folder "Harris, Jack L.," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>52</sup> Ted M. Phelps, "Tenant Purchase Narrative, to Accompany Home Plan," Folder Owens, George H., Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

and “plump,”<sup>53</sup> reflecting the home supervisor’s conceptions of what a healthy farm wife should look like. Another family was recommended because neither of the parents used tobacco.<sup>54</sup>

This invocation of class ideals was especially common when judging African-American applicants. According to FSA instructions, there was officially to be “no discrimination on nationality, race, creed or political affiliation” in making loans, but black tenants had a worse experience in the program than did white ones, starting with the application process.<sup>55</sup> Black applicants endured indignities common to African Americans in the rest of the South, like being referred by their first names by county supervisors while white applicants and borrowers were generally “Mr. and Mrs. Applicant.” The mostly white local supervisors thought of and described their clients in casually racial terms. Eugene Orr, according to his rural rehabilitation supervisor, obviously demonstrated “some of the slave traits as he invariably removes his cap when approaching and is very gracious for being chosen on the Tenant Purchase Program.” The home management supervisor described Orr’s wife, Josephine, almost like a child, saying that she was “quite fat” but still presentable with her “very neat red and white print dress” and “large sparkling eyes.”<sup>56</sup>

African-American farmers were also less likely to receive loans. This was not necessarily due to overt racial discrimination, although that was a factor; African Americans’ generally impoverished condition meant that fewer met the standards for a loan. A combination of landlord hostility and apathy made it more difficult to make loans even to those black tenants who were

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<sup>53</sup> Jerome B. McMichael and Lois D. McCants, “Narrative Report B. M. Tyler,” Folder “Tyler, B. M.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE. On the similarities between the FSA’s supervision and the efforts by social workers in other programs to inculcate middle-class norms of sanitation and hygiene on poor, rural southerners, see Taylor, “The Farm Security Administration and Rural Families in the South,” 30-43.

<sup>54</sup> Buena F. Klinhart, “German Moats and Family,” Folder “Moats, German 10-81,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>55</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 611.1.

<sup>56</sup> Robert E. Perry, “Narrative Report of Eugene and Josephine Orr,” May 2, 1939, and M. Elizabeth Miss, “Narrative Report, Eugene Orr and Josephine Orr,” May 2, 1939, both in Folder “Orr, Eugene,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

eligible. The problem was particularly acute in the early years of the program; in the first year of operation, for example, Region V (in which 44% of tenants were African American) provided 124 of its 505 total loans to black tenants (25%). Region VI, where 56% of tenants were black, gave out 385 loans, only 67 of which went to black tenants (17%).<sup>57</sup> The situation did improve slightly over the years. In the eight southern states with the largest black populations, in 1938 20% of borrowers were African Americans; by 1945 it was 23%. But considering that African Americans made up an average of 51% of tenants in those eight states, the improvement was only marginal, and the FSA never came close to providing loans equally to black and white tenants.<sup>58</sup>

Even the best black borrowers, when they managed to obtain a loan, often ended up with lower-quality farms. Wallace Burton and his wife Wide, described as an “outstanding Negro woman” whose “yard, orchard, chickens, garden, and general surroundings impressed [the local supervisor] as being far above the average for negroes as we know them in Alabama,” purchased a farm which had “been very poorly handled and looks ragged since it has been leased for years to negroes with no supervision.” Supervisors, looking at the situation optimistically as usual, described the farm as “a real demonstration of the exact conditions as we find them now” which “offers all of us an opportunity to see what we can do about it,” but such confidence could not hide the fact that the Burtons had purchased a subpar farm.<sup>59</sup>

Examples of applicants most strongly recommended by home and farm specialists illuminate what a ground-level FSA employee considered to be a good tenant farmer and a good

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<sup>57</sup> Paul V. Maris, “Report of Progress for the Tenant Purchase Division for the Period July 1 to 30, 1938, inclusive,” p. 10, September 17, 1938, Folder “Tenant Purchase Division AD-183-06,” Box 40, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>58</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 196-7.

<sup>59</sup> M. H. Pearson to Joe G. Woodruff, May 28, 1938, Folder “Burton, Wallace,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

candidate for farm ownership. Dean Hardy, of Cobb County, Georgia, was a white 35-year-old tenant farmer, married with one son. The farm he had selected was, in the view of the farm supervisor, perhaps the best in the county: highly cultivated, little erosion, and with no need for further terracing. Moreover, the new owner was a good match. As a tenant, Hardy was careful about maintaining soil quality, and he made it clear that he planned to continue this practice on the new farm. The good farm plan, mixing cash and subsistence crops, was entirely his plan. Mrs. Hardy gardened extensively and canned an average of 500 quarts of food a year, having won prizes in the past despite lacking good equipment. She planned to buy a pressure cooker, curtains, and other furnishings for their new home, and she had been saving money for the chance. In addition to these practical concerns, Mrs. Hardy also told her home supervisor about plans for improving the appearance of the house inside and out, should the family become borrowers. Both Hardys were the children of farmers and had lived on farms their entire lives. They were not very well-educated (he with a 7<sup>th</sup> grade education, she with 8<sup>th</sup>). But, their home supervisor wrote, “They are both very progressive and through associations and reading they have progressed beyond this level.” Both were active in community and church organizations, mostly healthy, and had never been more than a few dollars in debt.<sup>60</sup>

Forty-year-old Alabama tenant farmer William Moody and his family similarly received only praise from their local supervisors. He was born and raised in the community in which he wanted to buy a farm, already owned his own stock and tools, and had no debt. He had been a successful tenant farmer, the county farm supervisor wrote, because “Moody is industrious, intelligent, honest, progressive and ambitious.” Moody adopted the live-at-home, diversification goals that FSA supervisors urged: he planned to get out of cotton in order to raise more cattle,

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Boyd and Nellie D. Roberts, “Narrative to accompany FSA-RR-14 Farm and Home Plan, Dean Hardy, RFD # 2, Power Springs, Georgia,” January 24, 1940, Folder “Hardy, Dean,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

hogs, and feed. His three sons and two daughters were expected to help produce large crops on the quality farm he had chosen. Mrs. Moody, an energetic, “bright eyed woman,” was highly esteemed by locals, according to the home supervisor, who commended her clean home and how she kept her bright, popular children in school (which reflected the better life that the Moodys wanted for their children). In sum, the Moodys were “a progressive, wide-awake family, ambitious to own and operate a farm.”<sup>61</sup>

Families like the Moodys and the Hardys decided, with help from local supervisors, on which farm they would purchase. The FSA, through the county committees, employed an unusual appraisal method. Rather than using the purchase price of the farm, Tenant Purchase Division agents emphasized a farm’s annual earning capacity. This was in part a result of the fact that in so many cases, a large part of the loan went toward improving land and farm buildings. Simply considering the purchase price of a plot would not include these factors and thus put the new owner at a capital disadvantage. Furthermore, FSA administrators expected the farm to support a family and produce enough income to repay their loans; this was more important than the selling value of the farm.<sup>62</sup> The program also operated under the assumption that it was creating long-term farmers; since regulations forbid the sale of the farm without special permission for a number of years, the selling value of a farm was not considered very important in comparison to its potential productivity.

In providing clients with funds to improve their farms and homes, in many cases the first time clients had such an opportunity, the tenant purchase program revealed an enormous shortage of decent housing in rural America. In its first three years, about 97% of borrowers in

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<sup>61</sup>James E. Bains and Leeta C. Lowery, “William E. Moody,” May 10, 1938, Folder “Moody, William E.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>62</sup>Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 438-40; FSA, “Administrative Instruction 137,” pp. 8-13, January 22, 1938, Folder “Farm Security (Adm. Orders Etc),” Box 2782, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

the program used their loans to make considerable repairs to their homes or to purchase new ones.<sup>63</sup> TP engineers in the field supervised this construction. The Division provided sample plans, but local committees could modify them as necessary; the Tenant Purchase Division's only requirement was that the construction be solid.<sup>64</sup> Often a borrower helped with labor or repairs himself, but in most cases professional contractors did the majority of the skilled labor. In this way the FSA created a wave of improvement in the physical structures of the rural South as TP loans went toward some kind of structural improvement in the farm, be it a painted barn, repaired roof, or a new building altogether.

TP administrators considered improvements to clients' homes and farms to be important for more than purely physical or economic reasons. Better material conditions were obviously very important, but more than that, administrators and local agents looked at what such improvements meant for clients as members of their communities and as American citizens. One of the benefits of one client family's improved home, for example, was in what it meant for the social life of the family, particularly the younger members. This was the case for the Martin family; "The children are now at the age to appreciate a home in which to entertain their friends," farm and home supervisors reported, and their living conditions needed improvement for them to do able to have friends over without embarrassment. The FSA would make it possible for the Martins to have the kind of social life necessary for any happy citizen: "Mrs. Martin is anxious for some living room furniture, but does not feel able to purchase any at present. We discussed making a couch out of bed springs. This may be done quite easily."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, having an attractive, pleasant home was almost as important as having a productive

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<sup>63</sup> FSA, "Rural Housing by the Farm Security Administration," May 5, 1941, NAL, 8. Specifically, 41.4% needed new homes altogether, and 55.5% repaired their existing homes.

<sup>64</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1940* (1939), 640-41.

<sup>65</sup> Isaac E. Davis and Elizabeth May Byrd, "Narrative on Hallie P. Martin," April 29-30, 1941, Folder "Martin, Hallie P.," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.



farm. One home management supervisor even planned to have experts from the local agricultural college help a Mrs. Moats landscape her yard.<sup>66</sup>

Another reflection of TP administrators' expectations is evident in the efforts to subdivide large holdings, especially in the South. Administrators agreed with what, they argued, was the consistent finding of any study on American agriculture, that "small farms provide the basis for a richer community life and a greater sum of those values for which America stands, than do industrialized farms of the usual type."<sup>67</sup> Their entire program showed that administrators and planners believed there was no reason to think that a properly-run family farm could not compete economically with large-scale agriculture. Further, in parts of the plantation South it was necessary to break up large holdings if any considerable number of tenants and sharecroppers were to become owners. So, to meet both the practical goal of turning tenants into landholders and to eventually reach the long-term goal of shaping agriculture into a future built on family-type farms, breaking up already-established big farms was necessary. As Maris, head of the tenant purchase section, wrote, "Nothing within the realm of practical achievement that is likely to happen would do more to advance the economic, social, and political welfare of a great region of our country than would such a transition."<sup>68</sup>

There were plenty of candidates for subdivision. In counties qualifying as the "plantation South," which included most of the Deep South plus counties in the border and peripheral states, there were about 140,000 multiple-unit farms with over 550,000 subunits (more than ¾ of which were occupied by sharecroppers) in 1945. A gradual move from the plantation system to a system of efficient family-sized farms was the goal. However, the scarcity of funds (and

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<sup>66</sup> Buena F. Klinhart, "German Moats and Family," Folder "Moats, German 10-81," Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>67</sup> Maris, "*the land is mine*", 70.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 147 (quote).

eventually limitations placed on the FSA by the Tarver amendment) meant that the tenant purchase program could only make a limited dent in the plantation system. The difficulty of concentrating sufficient funds in a single county proved to be a hurdle in purchasing large tracts for subdivision, but by 1948, the FSA and its successor, the Farmers Home Administration, had subdivided 1,231 large farms among 6,285 borrowers, an average of 5.1 farms to each subdivision. Not surprisingly, Mississippi (at 8.5 borrowers per subdivision) and Louisiana (6.4) had the largest plantations for subdivision. Mississippi also had by far the largest number of subdivisions purchased (227), with Georgia (192) and Alabama (151) following.<sup>69</sup>

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The tenant purchase program as conceived in 1935 envisioned a much larger fund than the one that was eventually created in 1937. It is possible that while working on a larger scale, it would have been less effective on an individual basis, because the program would have lacked the supervisory elements that the FERA, the RA, and then the FSA developed between the initial proposal in 1935 and its eventual creation in 1937. Critics in 1935 pointed out that just loans were not enough. J. M. Maclachlen wrote in *Opportunity* that ownership was not the only key and that the program needed to address income and spending. “If we merely wave an official wand over any number of tenants, and change their class-name,” he argued, “we shall not accomplish a powerful magic. If we leave the basic inability to buy education, good housing, good clothing, proper medical attention and satisfactory recreation, we shall have left tenant families as unfortunate as they were before.”<sup>70</sup> Observers inside and outside of the program believed that more was necessary than just providing borrowers with sufficient funds to purchase farms.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 141-47, 151.

<sup>70</sup> J. M. Maclachlen, “Salvation for the Tenant Farmer,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro life* 13.4 (1935): 104-05.

The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 required that borrowers carry out “proper farming practices,” as described in “covenants.” This portion of the law essentially allowed FSA supervisors to import their farm and home plans directly into the tenant purchase program. Thus FSA instructions noted, “Even more important the law itself, however, is the fact that borrowers who plan their operations wisely in advance may expect, in general, to be more successful than those who do not do so.”<sup>71</sup> FSA administrators strongly believed in the success of supervision in the rural rehabilitation program, and they brought that to the tenant purchase program.

In fact, even some of the people came directly from rural rehabilitation – many of the applicants selected for the tenant purchase plan came from the more successful rural rehabilitation clients. As one observer described it, “certain selected farmers ‘graduate’ to the tenant purchase plan.”<sup>72</sup> Being in the rural rehabilitation program often helped a tenants’ chances of being accepted into the tenant purchase program – if a county farm or home management supervisor knew a family as rural rehabilitation borrowers and found them satisfactory, that increased the chances of getting a good recommendation and being accepted.

Tenant purchase borrowers filled out farm and home plans, similar to but more detailed than those filled out by rural rehabilitation borrowers.<sup>73</sup> They covered what, where, and how crops were to be farmed, how much food would be produced and stored, the kind of garden and/or orchard the family would operate along with its production, what kind of household goods would be purchased, improvements to the home and farm buildings, financial planning including paying off the TP loan, and so on. With their loans received and their plans created, then, clients went to work repaying their loans.

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<sup>71</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 623.10.

<sup>72</sup> Charles R. Walker, “Homesteaders-New Style,” *Survey Graphic* 28.6 (June, 1939): 378.

<sup>73</sup> One published example of such a family and their plan can be found in Maris, “*the land is mine*”, 211-27.

The tenant purchase program was fairly innovative in its form of repayments. Given the fluctuations in yearly income, tenant purchase borrowers could choose a Variable Payment Plan, which eventually about half of borrowers used. This allowed clients to use net cash income to determine how much to pay (which required careful record keeping) in comparison to the amount that a client would have been paying under the standard fixed rate of 4.326%. A client behind in payments agreed to put all net cash income toward debt repayment, while clients ahead could meet with local FSA agents to decide what to do with extra cash, perhaps to expand production or make extra payments. This plan depended on evident hard work and progress by the borrowers; if the regional director determined that a client was not making satisfactory progress, that client could be moved to a fixed payment plan.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, tenant purchase borrowers could, when necessary, defer their first two years of repayment altogether if approved by the regional director. This was generally reserved for cases when a client had some short-term problem that limited income, for example in building up livestock or for a farm that needed a great deal of clearing or drainage before it could begin operation.<sup>75</sup>

Many clients paid off all or part of their loans early. Sometimes economic success was the reason – timber sales, for example, frequently made it possible for a client to make an early payment. World War II also had an impact. Clients went to work in defense industries or joined the military and paid their loans off early or transferred them to another borrower. Frequently, one or more sons joining the military meant enough pay was sent home to pay off a loan early. Having a child in the military could also close out a loan in more tragic ways: I. B. Nations' son was among those killed at Pearl Harbor, and the insurance money from his death allowed the family to pay the loan off early. Even this case required special permission, as the FSA forbid

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<sup>74</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 658.10, NAL; Maris, “*the land is mine*”, 251-76.

<sup>75</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 658.11, NAL.

selling a farm to a family in less than five years, to ensure it met the BJFTA goals of creating a family farm.<sup>76</sup>

Not every borrower left the program as a successful new farm owner. Clients quit for a variety of reasons, frequently because they felt they could not make a good living on a particular farm. One borrower, considered by the farm and home management supervisors as “an ideal family for the tenant purchase program,” complained that his new farm was “cold-natured” and conveyed the farm back to the government to pay his debt.<sup>77</sup> Another made sure to tell his county supervisor he was, in the supervisor’s words, “not sore in the least at the FSA Supervisor of the program. He simply became dissatisfied with place due to location.”<sup>78</sup>

Some borrowers expressed their displeasure with the aid, or lack of it, they felt they were getting from the FSA by closing their loans. This particularly became a problem in World War II, when shortages and building restrictions meant a slow-down in constructing homes and barns. On April 9, 1942, the War Production Board’s Order L-41 limited construction work to a \$500 yearly limit on construction of or repairs to a dwelling, with an aggregate limit of \$1,000 for all farm construction. This \$500 ceiling was soon reduced to \$200, though not before the FSA made extensive plans for constructing temporary \$500 residences that could be upgraded or altered at a later date. The result was that tenant purchase loans had to be limited almost entirely to those farms with existing buildings that could be cheaply improved.<sup>79</sup> As a result, many borrowers came to believe that not only had the FSA failed to help them make progress, but even that it was

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<sup>76</sup> Otis A. O’Dell to Joe G. Woodruff, April 24, 1942, Folder “Nations, I. B.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>77</sup> John C. Holmes and Eileen P. Cole, “Narrative of the Carlos A. Moore Family,” and Julian Brown to Samuel T. Windham, January 18, 1945, both in Folder “Moore, Carlos,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>78</sup> Garza D. Roberts to Julian Brown, May 3, 1945, Folder “Morris, Floyd W., Entry 94,” Record Group 96, NARASE. Of course, Roberts had good reason to say that, being the supervisor in question.

<sup>79</sup> C. B. Baldwin, “Rural Housing in 1942: The Work of the Farm Security Administration,” *Housing Yearbook 1943*, eds. Hugh R. Pomeroy and Edmond H. Hoben (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1943): 76.

holding them back. For example, Waymon Blankenship wrote in 1944 that he had “not got a house to live in and every time I say anything about it they say they can’t fix it so that is why I am giving it up.” With two sons in the military and a good crop growing, he had enough to cover his existing rural rehabilitation loan. Blankenship sold the farm to another buyer, paid the FSA off from his 1945 crop sales, and ended his relationship with the agency.<sup>80</sup>

World War II changed the economic situation for many farmers in other ways. William Gowan started out happy with his farm when he got it in 1940, but in 1945, after making what an FSA supervisor called “big money” in the defense industry, a small truck farm no longer met his expectations. He sold the farm to an outside buyer, using the proceeds to pay off his rural rehabilitation and farm ownership loans.<sup>81</sup> Another borrower secured a job as a painter doing defense work. In this and many other cases, when a borrower prematurely left the program for reasons having nothing to do with the farm, another tenant purchase borrower could be found, and the farm could be transferred.<sup>82</sup>

Whether it resulted from Paul Maris’s desire for care in selecting TP candidates, the effects of farm and home supervision, the program’s small size, or the generally improving economic conditions, the tenant purchase program experienced a relatively low rate of failure. By June 30, 1949, the federal government had made about 62,000 TP loans. 9,372 (about 15%) of those had been foreclosed, sold, transferred, or repossessed by the government. Of these, 2,183 resulted from accidents, death, illness, or old age making it impossible to continue farming. The second-highest cause was a switch in occupation by the borrower, causing 1,680

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<sup>80</sup> “Administrative Letter 286, Exhibit C” (quote), C. B. Edwards to Julian Brown, August 14, 1944, and Julian Brown to C. B. Edwards, November 6, 1945, all in Folder “Blankenship, Waymon,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>81</sup> William E. Elsberry to E. S. Morgan, January 10, 1945, Folder “Gowan, William W.,” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>82</sup> Elizie E. Wilson to Joe G. Woodruff, May 7, 1942, Folder “Crowe, John T.” Farm Ownership Files, RG 96, NARASE.

liquidations. Third was poor management by the operator which supervisors felt could not be remedied by supervision, resulting in 1,302 liquidations. Unhappiness by the borrower, either with the location or the community (872 liquidations) or the farm (626) was another significant reason. It required the special permission to sell one's farm within five years of entering the program, but selling the farm for a profit led to 598 liquidations. A change in the family due to marital problems (385) or children leaving the farm (286), dissatisfaction with supervision (255), and various other causes rounded out the rest.<sup>83</sup>

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The farm ownership program was the most successful on the balance sheets and most politically popular of the FSA's programs; it was also the most cautious and conservative. Its record as a New Deal ideal for rural life is mixed. Borrowers, generally speaking, succeeded, and they frequently attributed their success at least in part to their farm and home plans and supervision. Similarly, FSA supervisors believed the programs were effective and found the supervision and plans beneficial for their clients.<sup>84</sup> Congress charged the FSA with the task of turning tenants into homeowners, a responsibility the FSA eagerly accepted, and it successfully carried out its duties.

But the compromises, both legislative and ideological, necessary for the tenant purchase program's creation were evident in its results. John H. Bankhead's initial goal for a billion-dollar government program buying land to resell to large numbers of tenants, sharecroppers, and farm laborers became a government-backed loan program for a small fraction of successful (and, relative to most of the rural poor, less needy) tenant farmers in a handful of carefully-chosen

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<sup>83</sup> Maris, *"the land is mine"*, 330-35.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-05. Very few borrowers actively disliked supervision or believed it to be harmful to their farming practices.

counties.<sup>85</sup> The tenant purchase program's success suggests how relatively modest federal anti-poverty goals had become, even after the FSA had discarded the most ambitious elements of the community-building efforts of the early New Deal, much less to the back-to-the-land utopian dreams of the early subsistence homesteads program

The tenant purchase program was a successful New Deal program, in other words, but that success only indicates how low New Deal liberalism had set its sights in its fight against rural poverty. But this does not mean that the FSA in general or the tenant purchase program in particular lacked any liberal impulses or large-scale reform goals. Most notably in the elements of the program imported from rural rehabilitation, like supervision and farm management plans, the TP program demonstrates the continuing vitality of a reform-oriented mindset even in the limiting surroundings of the farm ownership program. In fact, the tenant purchase program carried over many elements of its more ambitious predecessors. In its actual operations, the tenant purchase program was a sort of intensified version of the Resettlement Administration's scattered farms program. That project had moved deserving rural families onto new farms throughout a community. The tenant purchase program did not emphasize the community elements of the scattered farms, dealing with each borrower on an individual basis. It did, however, incorporate many elements of the RA and FSA's resettlement and rehabilitation programs. Most important among these was the practice of supervised credit. To an extent FSA supervisors saw their entire agency as a way to bring scientific farming practices to its clients. It was farm and home supervisors who brought the tenant purchase program to the FSA's clients, just as they brought it to rehabilitation and resettlement clients, and most of this interaction came

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<sup>85</sup> For a much greater emphasis on the conservative aspects of the farm ownership program, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 195-99.



through individual or group supervision. In this way, even the relatively cautious farm ownership program adhered to both the methodology and ideology of New Deal anti-rural poverty efforts.

## CHAPTER 9

### RURAL REHABILITATION IN ACTION: COUNTY AGENTS, CREDIT, AND SUPERVISION

In the history of any federal bureaucracy – particularly mass anti-poverty programs – it is easy to overlook the interaction between government agencies and their clients in chronicling the big picture. Whether the recipients of government interest, aid, or resources find such programs helpful or harmful gets lost in the story of legislative fights, ideological aims, and bureaucratic organizations. Similarly, the policies put forth by Congress or the president can overshadow how federal employees and agents shape and implement those policies. Understanding the impact and effectiveness of government initiatives and agencies requires expanding one's scope beyond the political successes or failures to include the government employees actually putting such programs into action and the clients they intend to help.

This is no less true for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and its predecessors than for any other government program or agency. Throughout the New Deal, as the FSA created, combined, divided, or lost responsibility for operational divisions and programs, the one constant of the federal effort to eliminate rural poverty was its essentially local nature. The FSA was a national organization, with a large bureaucracy and complex hierarchy, but in operation it was a local program. Whatever the political situation in Washington, for its rural poor clientele the FSA was embodied by local agents, especially farm and home supervisors, centered in the county office (for rural rehabilitation and tenant-purchase clients) or the local project office (for resettlement clients). Similarly, much policy was decided at the state or even local level -- in the

case of approving loan applications, for example, regional directors at first had official responsibility, but in most cases practical authority rested at the county and district level from the beginning.

FSA administrators recognized this fact, and their understanding of how the local FSA-client relationship would function, how it would operate and toward what purpose, reflects how late New Deal liberalism would solve the problem of rural poverty. By 1937, after Rexford Tugwell had left and the Resettlement Administration (RA, which was soon to become the FSA) moved into the United States Department of Agriculture, programs like land use reform and mass resettlement or community building fell out of favor with liberal reformers concerned with rural poverty. This was partly the result of politics, as resettlement and land use reform were never popular with the FSA's loudest critics, but it was also because FSA administrators increasingly emphasized a more personal solution to rural poverty. Rural rehabilitation of individual farm families was an important part of the federal anti-rural poverty program from its beginning; by 1937, the foundation of the FSA's approach to solving rural poverty was targeted farm and home management, accompanied by rehabilitation or farm ownership loans, and overseen by local FSA agents working out of a county office.

Administrators had a very particular idea of what county-level operations would look like. Local offices would be staffed by farm and home management specialists skilled in agricultural techniques and with a deep understanding of the causes and nature of rural poverty. These agents would bring a new kind of scientific farm management, not to mention infusions of cash, to the rural poor. In some cases FSA supervisors might help plan group projects or help tenants on the road to farm ownership, but for all of the clients, FSA leaders imagined local agents creating a new kind of rural citizen. Or, more accurately, restoring rural citizenship:

looking back to a (perhaps imaginary) time when the small farmer could operate on an equal basis with the largest farmers, when small farmers were valued and participating members of their communities and country, farm security leaders looked toward renewing those elements of rural citizenship by empowering small farmers. As mechanization and factory farming became more important parts of American agriculture, the FSA (like its predecessors) operated on the idea that the small farmer, with the aid of the government, could continue in that idealized agrarian position.

It is not surprising, then, that the largest part of this effort should have had the name “rural rehabilitation.” The rural poor were trapped in a sick, injured system; with the proper aid and care, they could be restored to their original vitality. Or so FSA administrators hoped. Crucial to this, then, were the men and women doing the rehabilitating and the clients they chose for rehabilitation. If the FSA was going to work, if it were to restore security to small farmers and ready them for an uncertain future, it would have to work at the county level.

Generally, FSA leadership managed to properly train local agents and employees and to inculcate them with the agency’s view of rural poverty, and they generally succeeded in creating the kind of local office that could serve as the foundation for an effort to eliminate rural poverty. The successful creation of a functioning hierarchy, from the local and project offices at the bottom to the regional offices and national office at the top, took some time to develop, just as the evolution of farm security thinking took time to shift from the varied approaches of land use reform, resettlement, and more to a focus on targeted credit and supervision as the foundation of the program. But, as with the philosophical framework underlying rural rehabilitation, FSA administrators only had a short time to make the institutional framework that they had created (particularly the county office) flourish. A lack of resources, the enormity of the problems of

rural poverty, and their own shortcomings made it impossible for the FSA to fully implement the kind of program that administrators had in mind.

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The actual work of rural rehabilitation was carried out by trained farm and home management supervisors. By 1941, the FSA operated 2,270 county offices, with 4,178 rural rehabilitation supervisors and 2,586 home management supervisors. They dealt with approximately 800,000 rural rehabilitation client families. Reflecting the program's southern roots and the great deal of need in the South, 14 southern states accounted for 51% of the county offices, 61% of the rural rehabilitation supervisors, and 66% of the home management supervisors.<sup>1</sup>

County rural rehabilitation officers filled a wide variety of roles. Generally men, they handled the farm management aspect of rural rehabilitation. Home management was handled by home economists. One of the unique features of FSA field activity was its reliance on trained home economists, many of whom were women. This represented a significant shift in USDA emphasis. Prior to this, the Department had concentrated on the farm, meaning things like the soil, crop prices, livestock, machinery, and similar issues that were presumably the concern of men. The FSA expanded the focus from the farms to include the farmer, his family, and their home. Extension services had occasionally used home economists, but, like the male agricultural demonstration specialists, they generally focused on large-scale planters. They wanted to work with big-time farmers who could more easily find success, not those on relief or marginal land. For the first time, on a large scale, professionally trained specialists were assisting lower-class farmers with their crops and livestock, as well as their homes, budgets, and families. No other

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 250. For a breakdown by region, state, and county, see the *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part II*, 370-404.

major USDA program had ever put so much emphasis on home management or production for home use, nor had one ever used professionally trained women to such an extent to do so.<sup>2</sup>

In the South, assistant farm or home supervisors were sometimes African American. C. B. Baldwin, in an interview, reported that one of his disappointments was the difficulty in persuading regional and state directors to appoint more African Americans. While the FSA had a reputation as being more willing to push boundaries than were other USDA agencies, the racial make-up of its personnel did not differ much from the rest of the USDA: most agents were white, and the few black agents almost exclusively served black clients.<sup>3</sup>

Although the FSA's alleged big-spending ways were the source of criticism, FSA field employees did not actually make much money, at least compared to people working similar jobs. In the FSA's prewar years, for example, in every state but California, Rural Rehabilitation Supervisors made between \$1,620 and \$2,000 a year. The incomes of Home Management Supervisors varied a bit more among the different regions of the country, but \$1,800 was the highest salary in any state. Assistants made even less, between \$1,080 and \$1,440 depending on the region for both rural rehabilitation and home management assistants. For comparison, people working in the most similar occupation, as county extension agents, were much better paid. There was much greater variance among states (the Extension Service being essentially state organizations), but nationally, extension agents made between \$2,011.62 and \$3,678.42 in salary. The low salary for an Alabama State Extension Agent, \$1,920, was only \$80 below the high salary for his counterpart in the FSA, and it was \$120 more than a home management specialist made. No state extension agent started at a lower income than an assistant rural rehabilitation

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 249-50; Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, April 7, 1934, *One Third of a Nation*, 211-12; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 101-02.

<sup>3</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 250.

specialist, and no state had a highest-paid county agent who made less than the highest-paid FSA county agent.<sup>4</sup>

County officials may have made less money, but they had help from technical experts with specialized knowledge. The FSA's Rehabilitation Division in Washington, for example, had sections for farm management, home management, farm debt adjustment, tenure improvement, and cooperative services, each staffed by specialists in that area. Most regional offices had a similar collection of technical experts, and most state offices had a specialist in home economics, farm debt adjustment, and farm management. These experts did not have direct responsibility for any program or activity; instead, they advised administrators at all levels and helped with training, in particular the district and county supervisors who would be making and approving the actual farm and home management plans.<sup>5</sup>

The FSA also ensured that its employees had help from locals. FSA administrators frequently used committees for this. In every state and every county in which the FSA operated, there was at least one corresponding state or county committee. These committees brought local farmers, farm organization leaders, extension service employees, and landlords into a formal relationship, at least in an advisory role, with the FSA. The actual structure of these committees changed over the years: FERA started the practice of having an advisory committee for local county agents, recommending new rural rehabilitation clients and aiding the flow of information between clients (potential or actual) and county agents. These continued without much change in their capacity until the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act created new committees in each county designated for the tenant purchase program. In 1941, yet another committee was

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<sup>4</sup> "Salary Ranges for County Agents in the Extension Service" and "Salary Schedule – Farm and Home Management Supervisors," [1937], both in Folder "Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration – Personnel, 1933-1945," Box 31, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 100-101.

introduced, an eight-to-ten member FSA Advisory Council. This new committee provided a forum for representatives of FSA clients, public welfare and similar agencies, the extension service, and other interested parties. Its creation recognized the fact that, in many counties (in some regions, a majority of the counties), a single committee did the jobs of both the rehabilitation and the farm ownership committees. In late 1943, the four often-overlapping committees (including the debt-adjustment committees) merged into one large county committee to handle the entirety of FSA county committee functions. Members of most of these committees served three years, with some compensation for travel and other expenses.<sup>6</sup>

The state committees (limited to only six days of compensated work) were relatively unimportant in the function of the FSA, but the county committees played a crucial role in the agency's work. In each county in which the FSA operated, it created a county farm security advisory council, county rural rehabilitation committee, a county farm-debt adjustment committee, and a county tenant-purchase committee (in tenant purchase counties). The farm security advisory council included five to seven members who also served on one or more of the other committees, along with three "members-at-large" who only served on a single committee. These county members-at-large were chosen carefully: "sympathy with FSA objectives," one set of instructions explained, "is the primary qualification for service on FSA councils and committees." The TP committee had to include "three bona-fide farmers" from the county, including at least one tenant with experience operating a family-type farm (a requirement that held when the county committees merged in 1943). In some cases, FSA clients elected one or more of the members-at-large. County committee members were to both advise and help local FSA personnel and to interpret the FSA to the local community, explaining its methods and

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<sup>6</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 403.1; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 75-78; FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 400.10; Maris, "the land is mine", 53-57.



objectives to local residents, lending institutions and businesses, and others in the community. TP committees additionally had to certify tenant-purchase applicants.<sup>7</sup> In addition to these specific roles, the county councils in part played a general role as an outside viewpoint. The overworked county agents, administrators felt, sometimes lacked the time or ability to consider their overall work. County committeemen could provide an outside perspective on the local situation. These advisers also played a role in selecting clients, recommending to local supervisors a family that had for whatever reason been overlooked. For example, the councils could, when a family was under consideration, help supervisors get more accurate information about the potential client.<sup>8</sup>

The FSA's county agent system was similar, at least on the surface, to the system used by the Extension Service. County extension agents spent a good deal of time visiting farmers at their home or farm. A "highly important method of extension contact from the standpoint of both influence and time consumed," as the Extension Service's official magazine put it in 1930, extension service agents used personal visits to build personal relationships with farmers, learn about local farming conditions, and teach new practices to farmers and their wives.<sup>9</sup> The Maine Assistant Director of Extension Services wrote, "Probably no other extension method, if gone about rightly, can do more to help an individual than a farm or home visit."<sup>10</sup> Extension agents, however, dealt with a relatively stable and well-off group of farmers; thus, their focus was almost entirely agricultural.

Dealing with similar, if poorer, rural clients, the FSA wanted to hire people with agricultural and rural expertise, but more particularly with the right kind of training, background,

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<sup>7</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 403.1. See also FSA, *A Handbook for County FSA Committeemen* (August, 1945), NAL.

<sup>8</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 400.10, sheet 2 reverse.

<sup>9</sup> "The Extension Visit," *Extension Service Review* 1.6 (October, 1930): 88.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur L. Deering, "Farm and Home Visits," *Extension Service Review* 1.8 (November, 1930): 116.

and mindset. Although rural sociology and agricultural economics were rapidly expanding fields of interest even before the Great Depression gave them new urgency, land grant colleges and universities were understaffed in terms of both quantity and quality of rural experts in the 1930s and 1940s. A considerable part of this shortage resulted from the federal government's growing demand for trained personnel, as it too found itself short of trained employees. Particularly in those rural regions hardest hit by the Depression – the South and the Great Plains – agricultural colleges and experiment stations simply could not keep up with the demand for trained workers. In these regions (especially the South) there was the greatest demand for people trained in agricultural economics and rural sociology because of the deep-seated social and economic problems of those rural areas, which also meant that these regions had the least ability to improve their research, teaching, and agricultural extension services. That deans and administrators were largely unsympathetic at least to certain aspects of rural sociology and agricultural economics only exacerbated the problem.<sup>11</sup>

The FSA was a part of the enormous increase in the number of federal government employees trained in agriculture and rural studies, but in responding to the shortage of trained workers and because of its different view of farming and rural poverty, FSA employees had a somewhat different background than did employees of other agricultural agencies, giving them a different perspective on the proper solutions to agricultural and rural problems. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and Farm Credit Administration together had 2,064 employees as of December 1938. The vast majority of these came from professional agriculture or scientific backgrounds; no more than 300 were non-specialists in such fields. On the other hand, the FSA's 6,188 employees were largely non-

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<sup>11</sup> Theodore W. Schultz, *Training and Recruiting of Personnel in the Rural Social Studies* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1941), 1-8, 10, 27.

scientists and non-professionals. FSA field agents in particular came from the rural social sciences, in some states absorbing the majority of college graduates in those fields in a given year.<sup>12</sup>

County supervisors were nominated by state directors and appointed by regional directors. As much as possible, FSA leaders tried to ensure that agents would have strong qualifications, just as someone hiring, say, a county extension agent would. But while the FSA wanted educated employees, it also desired those who shared its general approach to rural poverty. Field agents were selected based on three primary qualifications. First, as a 1938 agency manual put it, was a “broad social viewpoint and a sympathetic attitude toward low-income farmers.” Potential hires also had to have relevant training: a college degree in agriculture or a closely related field for farm supervisors and assistants, and a degree in home economics or related and useful field for home management supervisors and assistants. Third, supervisors had to have some demonstrated experience in their area, with a general rural background for assistants.<sup>13</sup>

This emphasis on social views was necessary because both the methods and goals of the federal farm security effort, as envisioned by its leaders, were outside the experience of most traditional agricultural county agents. Especially in the South, field agents came largely from state land-grant colleges and the Extension Services. These institutions did not, for example, emphasize a farm management approach, the idea of an individual farm as a business that should be concerned with how much money it spent, made, and saved; they instead focused on efficiency and increased production. Thus just-hired field agents had, in the words of one RA

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 185-87.

<sup>13</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instruction 705.1, NAL. This idea was in the air among FSA planners, as the exact same phrase can be found in “Report of the Committee on Standard Qualifications for Rehabilitation Field Supervisory Positions,” *Report of Regional Personnel Advisers’ Conference, 1938*, NAL, 3. On qualifications, see also Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 250-51.

Farm Management Specialist, a “comparative unfamiliarity” with the farm management approach.<sup>14</sup> Part of this was related to a larger problem: there was a distinct tendency among federal agencies dealing with rural issues to promote and hire from within the federal government or even from different divisions within the same agency. This encouraged the hiring of employees without formal agricultural training or the experience of working outside the federal government (in, say, graduate positions in land-grant colleges), and it discouraged the introduction of outside ideas.<sup>15</sup> For the FSA, which already operated outside the mindset of traditional agriculturalists, hiring practices and training were intended similarly to create a shared outlook, but one different from (in some cases, in opposition to) the orthodox view of rural life found in the extension services and land grant colleges.

An appropriate viewpoint and a college education did not, FSA administrators believed, sufficiently prepare employees for the field; the FSA put a great deal of emphasis on personnel training, reflecting both its practical needs and ideological background. Agency leaders believed that, as one guide put it, not even a “technical or administrative employee can possibly perform his or her duties adequately without understanding the main problem with which this agency is coping, and how it is attempting to solve this problem.”<sup>16</sup> Training, then, was crucial from this perspective: Most new hires did not understand the issues they would be confronting; because the vast majority of FSA employees were in the field, where the program would be implemented, the agency had to train its employees well, or else the job would not get done. Furthermore, agents handled situations that simply could not be addressed by rote memorization of bureaucratic processes. Independent judgment was an absolute necessity for county agents, and

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard D. Joy to J. R. Allgyer, April 7, 1935, Folder “RR 101-03 I-J Reports,” Box 6, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>15</sup> Schultz, *Training and Recruiting of Personnel in the Rural Social Studies*, 13-15.

<sup>16</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, xi.

administrators wanted to be sure that such judgments would be made according to the proper principles. Finally, one of the biggest problems FSA leaders believed the agency faced was the lack of understanding of its goals and purposes by its clients. To succeed, the FSA would have to get its message to clients, other agencies, and indeed everyone with whom the FSA dealt. To teach them, local agents also had to understand the agency's objectives.<sup>17</sup>

Increasingly, FSA administrators came to believe that the agricultural and economic expertise of their supervisors was secondary. Especially in dealing with poorer clients, the supervisors who had the most success were those with certain personal characteristics: interpretative ability, humility, patience, and confidence in the ability of clients to rehabilitate. The FSA did not take an absolutist view of poverty, as one might take of starvation; instead administrators viewed it in relative terms. Those who lacked the security and material possessions of the majority were impoverished.<sup>18</sup> Getting such clients rehabilitated took something more than mastery of agricultural techniques, many of which did not apply to the relatively small-scale operations run by FSA clients. In this sense, agents were much closer to social workers than they were to extension agents.

The FSA dealt, in the opinion of its administrators, with those who were as socially isolated as they were economically disadvantaged, particularly in the South and Plains States. Some FSA leaders hoped that county supervisors might help eliminate rural isolation and alienation by connecting clients to the community, a skill that required more personal warmth and tact than agricultural knowledge. Supervisors consulted with local leaders and representatives of the extension services, the 4-H Club, officials of other government agencies, and leaders of local schools and government to better connect their clients with these groups.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., xii-xiv.

<sup>18</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 5, 18-19; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 3.

Socialization and community-building was, after all, an important part of the FSA's mandate. The risk in such cases was that clients were often (with good reason) hostile to local institutions and leaders. The relationship between county supervisors and clients could be weakened or destroyed if the FSA agents were seen as being too close to, or identical with, the interests of these other groups. Navigating this kind of situation had little to do with the latest farming techniques.<sup>19</sup>

The FSA was constantly reevaluating its approach, its national leaders questioning their own program and encouraging employees to have a similarly inquiring attitude. The 1940 conference in Washington, for example, saw group discussions around questions like "Have we been able to help all racial groups uniformly relative to their need? What do we mean by 'need'?", "What do we mean by realistic planning and supervision?", and "What is the relation between the understanding with the client at the time of his acceptance and the subsequent relations with him?"<sup>20</sup> Results from conferences at Washington tended to filter down into regional or district conferences, and then to local employees.<sup>21</sup>

The training that new FSA employees went through reflects the perceived need for practical farming skills, a proper understanding of rural poverty, and a willingness to consider larger social questions. In 1941, employees went through a two-week training course. Each day of training began with a forty-five-minute lecture on the background of various FSA programs or projects – the FSA's legislative and administrative history, the causes and characteristics of rural poverty, the objectives of various programs, and other such topics. A second lecture handled more practical elements, like learning about the county committees or what the FSA was doing for rural housing. The third period of the training day went to explaining the most important FSA

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<sup>19</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 253.

<sup>20</sup> FSA, "FSA Washington Conference, August 6-14, 1940," NAL.

<sup>21</sup> FSA, "Proposed Program for the District Meetings of RR and HM Supervisors," 1940, NAL.

instructions and particular aspects of the program they worked with. But the training did not consist solely of trainees passively listening to lecturers – it also included group discussions on what it meant to run a family farm, whether or not self-sufficiency was possible and desirable, what constituted a satisfactory level of rural living, and similar questions about the nature of the FSA’s work. Trainees then tried it themselves in what the FSA called Laboratory Exercises. They set up a model county office, spoke with clients, made home visits, ran a group meeting, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

It appears that FSA leaders were successful in instilling their beliefs about rural poverty and life in the agency’s local employees. At least some FSA agents and supervisors genuinely and intensely believed that it was only because of a previous lack of opportunity that clients had failed to find any success. More cynical observers referred to the FSA as the “Order of the Bleeding Heart.”<sup>23</sup> FSA administrators also generally succeeded in making sure that their agents had the necessary technical and agricultural background, at least as much as possible. One 1938 report found that about two-thirds of the regions of the FSA were successful in maintaining high standards in hiring qualified local personnel; the problem in the one-third of regions failing to meet standards was that the local educational and training facilities simply made it impossible to hire trained personnel.<sup>24</sup>

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For most client families, the FSA was the county office – that was where they first met the local FSA agents, learned about farm security programs, applied for loans or grants, and

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<sup>22</sup> FSA, *Induction Training Course* (October, 1941), pp. 1-12, NAL.

<sup>23</sup> Clawson, “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Resettlement Projects,” 17. This had the negative impact, as Clawson notes, of encouraging a certain mentality that rejected any outside criticism, which might be dismissed as ideologically based and simply ignored

<sup>24</sup> “Report of the Committee on Standard Qualifications for Rehabilitation Field Supervisory Positions,” *Report of Regional Personnel Advisers’ Conference, 1938*, p. 3, NAL.

frequently went for meetings and evaluations. For this reason, FSA officials tried to make sure that the county office would create a positive impression. The county office, ideally, was a place that was welcoming and useful. Administrators encouraged all employees to be aware of this. This started with the office's appearance. Planners intended the reception space, for example, to demonstrate concern for applicants and clients and to reduce the strain of coming to an agency for assistance. FSA manuals urged that walls not be bare unless required by local rules or ordinances (as in the case, say, that an FSA office was at a Post Office). Posters and charts were advisable if they were both educational and improved appearance. Administrators also recommended a publication rack with FSA pamphlets and USDA bulletins. Home supervisors used wall space to demonstrate home improvement techniques like curtaining or making clothes. To give the office a more personal flavor, training materials suggested that when the county supervisor had a camera, the office should put up pictures of successful local families for encouragement.<sup>25</sup>

Before World War II and budget cuts forced reductions, a typical county office had a county supervisor, home supervisor, at least one assistant rural rehabilitation supervisor, and two clerk-typists. The very smallest county offices always had at least a county supervisor, a home management supervisor (who might split time with another county), and a clerk or typist. Even the clerk-typist was expected to understand rural poverty and the FSA programs. This was a practical necessity; clerks needed to understand all the transactions going on in the office and the relevant government regulations. FSA officials also urged county agents to encourage their clerks, typists, or other office staff to make suggestions about the best use of home visits and meetings. Given the large number of applicants and clients, the thinking went, it was important to have as much help as possible. Offices also had to be well-organized and easy to use: FSA

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<sup>25</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 93-94.



leaders asserted that each county office should have a file containing information on things like county topography, agriculture, farm population, income, sources of farm income, size and number of farms, prices and yields, taxes, mortgaged farms, tenants, county maps, and similar information, including numbers for both black and white tenants.<sup>26</sup>

FSA officials considered the first meeting between applicants and agents the most important, and they put a great deal of stress on creating a good impression. The initial interview provided a first, best chance to learn more about the potential client. While filling out the application, local agents learned about the family, its health, and its relationship with the community. From the answers, the interviewer could learn about the chances for that applicant family's rehabilitation. While in the process of an interview, the county agent established (often without realizing it) prejudices for or against an applicant, while the interviewee similarly established attitudes about the agency. An interviewer's reactions and behavior influenced this more than the questions asked. The applicant, administrators believed, subconsciously made up his mind in a way that might help or hinder farm supervision. At this moment the interviewer represented the FSA of which the applicant was asking for help, and farm security officials urged agents to present themselves as employees of a federal government gravely concerned about the well-being of that particular family.<sup>27</sup>

Getting to know clients proved difficult at times. In part this was a natural reticence of rural folks toward outsiders who lacked their farming experience. In other cases, distrust resulted from a history of being mistreated by economic and political superiors. Sometimes the problem was simply one of personality. County agents took a variety of paths to try to resolve these kinds of problems. One supervisor recalled that he had never been able to make a connection with a

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<sup>26</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 71-72; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 95-97.

<sup>27</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 97-98.

certain client. He tried a variety of ways to win cooperation, but seemed to fail every time. Finally, noticing that the client had a bad reputation among locals for being lazy and preferring to go hunting with his beloved dog rather than farm, the supervisor started lavishly complimenting the client's dog and asked about his hunting success. These conversations turned to discussions about how the man was doing economically and eventually to questions about how he might improve his farming practices. In the end, the supervisor proudly related, that client had started with less but done more than any other case.<sup>28</sup>

While FSA officials wanted to make a good impression on applicants at the first meeting, they also wanted to dispel incorrect assumptions about the agency's work. Most applicants thought exclusively in terms of loans or grants, but administrators wanted agents to make clear the idea that supervision and better farm management, specifically through the farm and home management plans, were the most valuable products a client could receive. From experience with families that did not recognize the importance of this supervision, officials wanted to ensure that applicants had a clear understanding of the importance of planning. Given how much emphasis FSA leaders put on supervision, this is not surprising; they believed that any weaknesses in the plan or resistance to it by clients might permanently derail the rehabilitation effort.<sup>29</sup> Doubtlessly many long-time employees also remembered their experiences when the rural rehabilitation program began under FERA, when one problem had been a failure to clearly impart to clients that loans would have to be repaid.

The first step in getting a rural rehabilitation loan was the preliminary investigation. In the first few meetings, a farmer seeking a rural rehabilitation loan or grant had to go over his situation with a county supervisor. They had to discuss the size of the farm, its fertility, what the

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<sup>28</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 98.

farmer already owned in the way of equipment or cattle, what his debt was, and similar issues. The county supervisor was to double-check all of this with a visit to the farm, ideally more than one time (although budget and time constraints increasingly made multiple visits a rarely-indulged-in luxury). The farmer's wife went through a similar process with the home management supervisor. With this in mind, the supervisor then had to determine if the family's income could be increased with FSA help to become self-supporting. County rural rehabilitation and home management supervisors made the initial decision on applications for a rehabilitation loan. They usually consulted with the advisory committee made up of local farmers. County supervisors generally followed a committee's recommendation of rejection. Families that did not qualify for rural rehabilitation loans might still find use in other FSA activities. Farmers with too much debt, for example, could be pointed toward the voluntary debt adjustment committees, to help get debts adjusted down.<sup>30</sup>

Rehabilitation supervisors had to make decisions about how to find the clients most likely to succeed. If a resettlement project or farm ownership loan was going to be successful, it seemed evident that a certain kind of family would be more successful than others. But what kind? Administrators struggled with how to rank various qualifications, including farm experience, starting capital, and more nebulous qualities like good character, idealism, or ambition. The ideal size-sex-age ratio for a family depended on factors like the size of the family's prospective farm, how they might expand it, and what sort of agriculture they would be pursuing. When the work was narrowly seasonal, for example, children might cost more than hired help. On the other hand, children brought a family together and improve its connection to the community. Sex distribution depended on custom. Women helped in a variety of roles on

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<sup>30</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instruction 731.1, NAL; *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1939*, 2-4; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 251-52; Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture*, 152.

cotton farms in the South, for example, but were not considered profitable in the northern crop and dairy farms.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the tenant purchase program, the Rural Rehabilitation Division (like the Resettlement Division) had much lighter and more varied restrictions on family selection. If a family was unable to get financing from any other source, could get local recommendations as an honest and hardworking unit, and either owned or rented a farm capable of making a living, then that family was eligible for a rehabilitation loan. In their earlier years, the rural rehabilitation and resettlement programs tended to select the poorest, with plenty of variation by local project – in fact, on some projects lower income was the chief basis for selection. As the projects went on, this emphasis on lower income declined in importance, and selections came to emphasize more traditional notions of farmer experience, family health, and apparent capacity for economic advance.<sup>32</sup> Despite all this effort to approve only the most capable candidates, even successful applicants were often a long way from running their own farms. In the words of one administrator, many early rural rehabilitation clients “lack[ed] the qualities of character and intelligence to successfully carry out a farming enterprise on their own.”<sup>33</sup>

When the Resettlement Administration took over the rural rehabilitation program, loan applications and home and farm management plans started out in the office of the County Supervisor, who passed them to the State Farm Management expert for checking. If rejected, they went back to the County Supervisor; if approved, they went to the State Loan Officer, who also checked the loan and plan, either returning them to the County Office or passing them on the

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<sup>31</sup> Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1939*, 2; Clawson, “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Resettlement Projects,” 16. See also Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, 14-16.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard D. Joy to J. R. Allgyer, April 7, 1935, Folder “RR 101-03 I-J Reports,” Box 6, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

State Finance Officer. This official for a third time either approved the loan and plan or returned them down to the County Supervisor. In most cases, after the State Farm Manager approved a plan and loan, other state officials approved it as well. One RA official went so far as to say that the general system, with so many redundancies and prior approvals, made the Loan Officer's function one of "glorified checking."<sup>34</sup> This soon proved to be true for most of the RA's bureaucracy above the state level.

The Rural Rehabilitation Division moved to the FSA at the time of the agency's creation in 1937. Until 1940, the authority to select rural rehabilitation loans was officially assigned to the regional FSA offices. It was an extremely complex 13-step process (with many of those having sub-steps) to apply for a standard rehabilitation loan: applications went through the county office, the regional files section, the client file unit, the mechanical examining sub-unit, the general services unit, the general services unit, the collection and securities unit, the comptometer operator, the regional loan approval adviser and, if approved, on to the repair and action clerk, back through the district rural rehabilitation supervisor's office, to the voucher and review section, the accounting section, the treasury accounts and disbursing offices, and back to the district and county offices. Loan renewal submissions and grant applications were a bit simpler, with only nine steps. A standard rural rehabilitation loan for \$4,500 had to meet the approval of at least six different officials in the regional office alone. FSA instructions provided flowcharts to simplify this process by creating a visual reference, but for the more complicated applications these charts took on an astrological or alchemical appearance, with numerous,

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<sup>34</sup> George S. Mitchell to C. B. Baldwin, "Proposal for eliminating in part the work of Loan Officers," May 11, 1936, Folder "Organization, Administration, General AD-101," Box 15, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

sometimes mysteriously-named orbs floating around one another while connected by a series of minutely labeled, overlapping arrows.<sup>35</sup>

After an applicant received approval from the district supervisor, the docket went to the regional loan advisors, where the farm and home management plan was reviewed, along with a look by finance and control units in the regional office. After regional approval, a voucher went to the U. S. Treasury for payment. A rejected loan docket went back to the county office for revision or filing as rejected. From the beginning, actual authority to approve loans fell to the district and county supervisors. The FSA received an enormous number of applications, and many of these were fairly straightforward: the same client requesting a follow-up loan as recommended by the county agent, for example. Most of that work was completed at the local level, then sent up for official approval up the chain of bureaucracy. As a result, informally regional directors delegated approval to district and even county supervisors, both because of the administrative backlog and because agency leaders believed that local agents, being closer to ground level, had a better view of the situation.

The proportion of cases actually rejected by regional or district officials were fairly low, even before county supervisors could officially grant approval. County supervisors and their local advisory committees made the most important decisions, and if the farm and home management plans appeared to be reasonable and the loan amounts sound, then higher-ups generally accepted the local decision to approve or reject.<sup>36</sup> FSA administrators preferred for reasons of efficiency that loans be approved by the District Supervisor; in any case, by 1940 the

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<sup>35</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instruction 702.1, NAL.

<sup>36</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 161.

regional office's role was essentially "mechanical checking."<sup>37</sup> In that year the district supervisor's role in approving loans became official, despite intense concern among the FSA leadership that local agents tended to pick only the best of the low-income farm population for loans (ignoring the poorest farmers that administrators saw as the agency's natural clientele).<sup>38</sup> It became, in fact, their prime concern; in 1941 FSA documents described "the main function of the district supervisor" as being "to pass upon loan applications that are recommended by the county office."<sup>39</sup>

Some, like James Maddox, wanted to go even further down, to have the District Supervisor working with the county supervisor to approve rural rehabilitation loans in the county office.<sup>40</sup> The process of decentralization continued, and by May 1943, Baldwin estimated that 85% of rural rehabilitation loans were officially approved by the county supervisors, these being loans less than \$200. For loans between \$200 and \$500, the State Director's approval was needed. This mirrored, incidentally, a similar shift toward local control in other matters. In 1937, every FSA appointment had to be approved in Washington; by 1941 regional directors hired practically every FSA field employee, many of those having been recommended by even lower-level administrators.<sup>41</sup>

Local supervisors handled almost every element of the client's relationship with the FSA. County agents received applications for loans, grants, and services, and in turn they investigated

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<sup>37</sup> "Conference of FSA officials held at Capon Springs, W. Va., during the period May 31 1940 – June 3, 1940," Folder "Dept. of Agriculture. Farm Security Administration. Conference at Capon Springs. 1940." Box 30, Baldwin Papers, 4. This was very similar to how local RA employees had described the situation four years earlier.

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 217-220; "Conference of FSA officials held at Capon Springs, W. Va., during the period May 31 1940 – June 3, 1940," [no date], Folder "Dept. of Agriculture. Farm Security Administration. Conference at Capon Springs. 1940." Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>39</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 400.10, sheet 2.

<sup>40</sup> "Conference of FSA officials held at Capon Springs, W. Va., during the period May 31 1940 – June 3, 1940," Folder "Dept. of Agriculture. Farm Security Administration. Conference at Capon Springs. 1940." Box 30, Baldwin Papers, 4.

<sup>41</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 125, 118.

applicants, consulting with the advisory board or committee and others in the community. They helped with debt and tenure adjustment agreements, either directly or (more commonly) aiding and overseeing local committees. Local supervisors helped families create home and farm management plans and stick to the plans or adjust them as necessary after implementation. They oversaw grants and loans. They encouraged leadership and community among client families. County supervisors made visits to client families. They collected loan repayments. They also recommended, when necessary, action on defaults and foreclosures. As one FSA pamphlet for new employees described it, “As far as the community is concerned, the County Farm and Home Supervisors *are* the Farm Security Administration.”<sup>42</sup>

FSA officials worried because the agents, as the face of the FSA to clients, could reflect poorly on the entire effort and because so much could go wrong in the supervisor-client relationship. Good supervisors could keep a family involved even through tough times. But families who resented the type of supervision they received could not be expected to stay with the program for long. If the local supervisor identified too much with the elite or upper class in a locality, that could discourage potential clients who had found themselves on the wrong end of that elite. It was worst for a supervisor to adopt a condescending or overbearing posture, and experience taught that clients could have long memories. The Regional Chief of Home Economics in Region V found, for example, that the insistent “dictation” of the earlier Social Division made it difficult for Home Supervisors to be anything more than “tolerated” by their current clients.<sup>43</sup>

Most of the interaction between the client family and FSA county agents involved loans or grants and, more specifically, the supervision that came with such loans. The agency stressed

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<sup>42</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 117. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>43</sup> F. E. Patch to Paul V. Maris, April 22, 1936, Folder “RR-101-03 P Reports,” Box 6, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.



to its employees that it was not a general lending agency. Instead, Farm Security loans were designed for a specific group of rural people who could not get credit elsewhere but who would ideally be able to pay them back once they become self-sustaining on the land. Most importantly, they were not just monetary credits; accepting the loan meant acceptance of supervision and guidance. The FSA also made grants, but (as agents went to pains to point out) only for rehabilitation and farm security purposes, not as relief.

Direct loans and grants reinforced the agency's ability to influence and supervise clients. In Coffee County, Alabama, for example, observers noted that among rural rehabilitation clients who continued to use the old supply merchants in the area, the FSA had less influence than it did over families who used government credit.<sup>44</sup> Thus credit, and the supervision it made possible, was necessary for changing the system of rural credit and clients' relationship with the rest of the community. More pragmatically, agency leaders recognized that supervision was necessary for collecting repayment: clients needed training in managing their financial affairs, saving money and time by home production, and superior farming techniques if they were going to be able to make payments.<sup>45</sup>

The typical applicant for a rehabilitation loan was an unsuccessful farmer. In the words of Robert Hudgens, this farmer "must have obtained the major part of his income from farming in the recent past. He might have had an inadequate unit, or he might have been pushed off a unit."<sup>46</sup> For these kinds of clients, the FSA offered a ten-year rehabilitation loan. These standard loans could help a client renting land to change types of agriculture, for example shifting from

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<sup>44</sup> F. H. Robinson to P. F. Aylesworth, "Report on Visit to Coffee County Farms, RR-AL-17," p. 1, October 29, 1937, folder "Coffee County RF-AL-17," Box 67, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>45</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 146.

<sup>46</sup> House, *Hearings to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration, Part I*, 78th cong., 1st sess., 176. Unlike earlier efforts, such as subsistence homesteads (which were intended for underemployed industrial workers), the rural rehabilitation and tenant purchase programs were aimed exclusively at farmers.

cash crop farming to a diversified livestock and grazing farm. These loans could be used for a client to purchase purebred and high grade livestock. Or they could be used for improving agricultural land. This might be the case when a farmer moved from submarginal land or the government resettled the client, when a rural rehabilitation client was trying to get a farm up to full production and did not have sufficient income, or when a client was purchasing a farm and getting farm operations started. For smaller needs, the FSA made five-year loans, for example for the purchase of work stock or subsistence livestock, the purchase of farm machinery or household equipment, the purchase of fertilizer, construction, and refinancing certain kinds of debt. Even smaller two-year loans were available for seasonal items, tools, and similar small purchases.<sup>47</sup>

The standard loan program, like the tenant-purchase program, was aimed at families. FSA leaders believed, in the words of one social scientist, that a “man without a wife is not likely to be considered a good prospect for rehabilitation because having a homemaker is vital from the standpoint of the success of the farm enterprise.” For approved borrowers before World War II, one-person households made up less than 2% of selected families; families with eight or more members, by contrast, made up 13% of standard loan borrowers.<sup>48</sup> Administrators, like most Americans, imagined the nuclear family as the traditional American household and the only approach with any chance for success, particularly in an agricultural setting.

They also tended to favor younger families with relatively young children; 70% of families approved before 1939 had a child under the age of 16, and in 43% of families, all the children were 16 or younger. Farm families approved for standard loans had fertility rates 29% higher than the total farm population in 1940 (which, in turn, was higher than the fertility rate for

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<sup>47</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instruction 731.1, NAL; FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 731.10.

<sup>48</sup> Larson *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 97-98.

the population as a whole). Families in the South generally were a little larger than approved families in other regions. Over 90% of applicants to the standard loan program had been full-time farmers in the year before they were approved, and a large portion of those who considered themselves non-farmers had significant experience in agricultural work.<sup>49</sup>

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One issue that FSA leaders and agents wrestled with and never satisfactorily solved was the question of who, exactly, represented the ideal client. From the beginning, farm security officials found that there were far more applicants for loans than there were available funds, and only a fraction of potentially eligible farmers applied for loans, jobs, and relief. This was less of an issue for the tenant purchase program, which was a more narrowly focused program. Tenant Purchase Division head Paul V. Maris emphasized selecting successful clients who were good credit risks (for both ideological and political reasons), and the number of applicants was so much larger than the number of loans available that the division could focus on a very thin slice at the top of its potential clientele. But for the rural rehabilitation program in particular, the answer remained unclear.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of legislative directive made the situation muddier. Before Congress took a more active and intrusive role in FSA activity in 1942 and 1943, the only clear rules were that rural rehabilitation loans would go toward families who could not obtain adequate credit otherwise. What exactly “adequate credit” meant was unclear. As a result, so long as FSA loans did not directly compete with private banks or similar lenders (who generally made loans to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 98-100, 104-07.

<sup>50</sup> See Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 217-21.

relatively well-off farmers quite above the FSA's consideration), eligibility requirements were up to FSA administrators.<sup>51</sup>

As FSA leaders recognized, the agency existed to help low-income farm families. More specifically, FSA was for poor rural people who had no credit and needed help. Thinking about it this way, the best way to establish eligibility standards would have been to give top priority to the poorest farmers. Loans would have been small, often replaced with grants, and with them would have come intensive supervision.

However, the natural tendency, especially among local agents, was to help those among the low-income farm families who were in the best position to help themselves, because economic success could be most easily attained with those sorts of clients. This made sense for reasons beyond the county agents' sense of personal satisfaction. FSA officials did not see their program as intended for the helpless and the hopeless, and they did not conceive of it as a relief program. Nor did they have the time and money to provide such funds and supervision to a large number of clients.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the FSA still retained something of the early pessimism evident in the beginnings of the rural rehabilitation program, when S. B. Cleland wrote in FERA's official journal for rural rehabilitation that it would be wiser to start out most clients as farm laborers, rather than farm owners, as it would be "a poor favor to rehabilitation clients if we place them under too heavy a debt." Cleland argued that it would be pointless to extend aid and loans to those who would never be able to repay, "the capital expended upon [the client being] a loss to the public treasury, as well as to the client."<sup>53</sup> Some supervisors still feared that FSA loans might prove to be only another burden on the rural poor.

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<sup>51</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 149.

<sup>52</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 64-68; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 147-48.

<sup>53</sup> S. B. Cleland, "More Jobs for Farm Labor," *Rural Rehabilitation* 1.2 (February, 1935): 7.

This mindset meant that the organization could have gone in a different direction, emphasizing aid to those clients with the best experience, existing capital, and land. These clients needed aid not to survive or rise above subsistence levels, but rather to operate their existing farms more efficiently. Tens of thousands of farmers in the United States found themselves operating more or less successful farms but were still mired in old debts and in short-term distress because natural or economic disaster had eroded their lands, ruined their crops, or made it impossible to replace or improve machinery. If the FSA had chosen these sorts of clients, then the loans would have necessarily been very large, because the agricultural operations were large, but the repayment level would have been correspondingly rather high. Supervision would have been relatively unimportant, mostly related to spreading recent agricultural innovations and machinery. But this approach seemed to go against the very purpose of the FSA; those best able to help themselves were not necessarily the ones most in need of aid. Further, these sorts of programs were already in place for some potential clients through the Farm Credit Administration and the extension services.<sup>54</sup>

The struggle came down to two related questions. How heavily should the agency emphasize the capacity of clients to repay their loans? And should the agency focus intensely on a few clients, or spread its efforts among the larger population of the rural impoverished?<sup>55</sup> These questions had administrative, ideological, and political implications. A good collection record, for example, had obvious political advantages. It helped FSA leaders demonstrate that their program was not merely a relief program and helped them parry criticisms of socialism or waste. But excessive emphasis on repayment would make rehabilitation more difficult for farm families (who did, after all, have to make a living in addition to making repayments). It also might mean

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<sup>54</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 68; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 148.

<sup>55</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 217.

that the FSA ignored those who might not be good traditional credit risks but who had some chance of making repayments on much-needed loans. It would, in other words, fly directly in the face of the purposes of rural rehabilitation and the FSA.

The solution landed in a wide range somewhere in-between aid to the neediest or the best-off, and it worked out in two ways. Starting in 1940, FSA leaders were confident enough in the training of their field personnel that they were willing to delegate increasing responsibility to district supervisors (and even county supervisors) to make loan decisions. Local FSA agents still tended to select clients more likely to repay their loans rather than those most in need, but FSA leaders believed there was little they could do about that without both dividing the agency internally and risking political attacks from the outside. By 1941-42, then, then FSA had fallen somewhere in between those two extremes. In particular in the early years, when many clients came from FERA and either came directly from relief rolls or to avoid them, policy tended toward the relief direction. But by the time that the FSA had begun to delegate authority in 1940, operating procedures leaned toward relatively better off farmers. At any rate, from the earliest rehabilitation programs, the federal government provided loans and supervision to a wide number of families of various incomes, quality of land, and management ability. By the time that the RA came into being as a national organization, because of the wide variety of potential clients, regional variation, and agent choice, federal farm security efforts did not focus on a single kind of applicant until 1942, when goals changed drastically.<sup>56</sup>

Second, with the outbreak of World War II, the FSA changed its focus to those applicants who could most rapidly expand food and fiber production. This meant more emphasis on the relatively larger growers (at least, among the low-income class). During the war, the changing

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<sup>56</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 149-50; "Conference of FSA officials held at Capon Springs, W. Va., during the period May 31 1940 – June 3, 1940," [no date], Folder "Dept. of Agriculture. Farm Security Administration. Conference at Capon Springs. 1940." Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

political climate forced FSA administrators, starting in 1943, to put a definite time limit on rehabilitation. Families that did not show definite signs of progress faced the threat of being dropped from the lists of active borrowers. Administrators began to use a five-year limit as the amount of time a client would have to completely repay their loan or be clearly well on the way to doing so. The result was that supervisors had to go up the economic scale to select eligible farmers who were best able to repay their loans within that five year window.<sup>57</sup>

*Table 1: Rural Rehabilitation Average Loan Size, Fiscal Year Ending June 30*<sup>58</sup>

| Year | Original loan amount | Supplemental loan |
|------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1936 | \$240                | \$67              |
| 1937 | \$487                | \$166             |
| 1938 | \$592                | \$216             |
| 1939 | \$629                | \$246             |
| 1940 | \$612                | \$218             |
| 1941 | \$658                | \$194             |
| 1942 | \$631                | \$232             |
| 1943 | \$704                | \$285             |
| 1944 | \$1,007              | \$316             |

One bit of evidence of this shift is the changing size of the average standard rural rehabilitation loan (table 1). Between 1936 and 1944, average original loans sizes increased in all but two years, and those showed only a slight decrease. The improving economic situation in World War II, meaning bigger farms and thus bigger loans, doubtless also played a role in such a

<sup>57</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 333; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 254; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 153.

<sup>58</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 168.

large increase in 1944, but political pressure also influenced the shift. Before that, the tendency between 1938 and 1942 (after the earlier, more relief-oriented approach had ended but before orienting toward war production) was to make loans between \$592 and \$658, with supplemental loans in the range of \$194-246. It was in this period that the rural rehabilitation program operated closest to what its administrators wanted, and when the process of supervised credit was most important.

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Rural rehabilitation was the foundation of the FSA's approach to alleviating rural poverty, despite the press generated by the more popular tenant-purchase program and the more controversial resettlement program. Farm and home management plans and their accompanying loans were, in turn, the center of rural rehabilitation. FSA administrators operated as if the entire purpose of the FSA was, at least to a degree, farm and home supervision. As FSA instructions told employees, the "purpose of extending credit is to make possible the carrying out of approved practices developed in the Farm and Home Management Plans."<sup>59</sup>

Grants and loans were, in the eyes of administrators, only a means for the real end: retraining farm families in improved farm and home management. RA field instructions in 1936 described the investment in the farm and homestead, the income-producing farm plan, and the money-using home plan of rural rehabilitation clients as three equally important aspects of client success, each balanced with the other.<sup>60</sup> The assistance and supervision that the FSA supplied via

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<sup>59</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instruction 731.1, NAL. See also *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1938*, 1-4; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 84-89.

<sup>60</sup> Resettlement Administration, "Field Instruction RS 11," p. 1, August 3, 1936, Folder "Organization, Administration, General AD-101," Box 15, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.



home and farm management plans was, administrators noted, “by far the most important part of its aid to rural needy farm families.”<sup>61</sup>

FSA administrators also believed that supervision had measurable results. Will Alexander estimated that supervision of tenant purchase clients improved their farm operations by somewhere between a quarter and a third.<sup>62</sup> C. B. Baldwin asserted that the FSA’s successes in rehabilitation and farm ownership were “due to the supervision to a larger extent than to anything else [...] many of these families need close supervision, and we have tried to give it to them.” Despite criticisms of the agency for its high administrative costs, Baldwin recommended more. “I don’t believe,” he said, “that supervision has ever been as close as it should have been.”<sup>63</sup> In its first year the RA spent something over 10% of its budget on administration and overhead, and RA officials believed that this was a very low figure, given the nature of their work.<sup>64</sup> R. W. Hudgens estimated that if the FSA did its job of educating and supervising the rural poor correctly, eventually 90% of its budget would go toward administrative costs and overhead and only 10% for actual loans.<sup>65</sup>

The farm and home management plans were, ideally, more than just a written up budget or set of goals. They encouraged the right kind of mindset: in the words of one administrator, a farm and home plan indicated a “set of intentions” and a “a process of thinking,” a bit of tangible proof that the client family had evaluated its current conditions, thought about what that situation should be, and determined with the help of the county agents what needed to be done to reach their new goals.<sup>66</sup> Even for non-client farmers who did not receive supervision, the simple

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<sup>61</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 59-62.

<sup>62</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1940* (1939), 643-44.

<sup>63</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 299-300.

<sup>64</sup> House, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Resettlement Projects*, 6-7.

<sup>65</sup> R. W. Hudgens to Paul V. Maris, July 26, 1937, Folder “Rehabilitation Region V AD-560 Reports,” Box 60, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>66</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 183-84.

presence of a supervised family could improve operations, providing not only an example of practical farming, but the example of a farmer who was now going about it with the right attitude. The plans also provided the foundation for the relationship between clients, the FSA, and their supervisors. Many clients apparently agreed about supervision's value: One family even kept a small debt, around \$50, intentionally; the farmer was afraid that if he paid off his debt entirely, the supervisor would quit visiting.<sup>67</sup>

County agents made most of the decisions about supervision. Different borrowers received different degrees of supervision based on how each agent classified a family's need, even among similar groups (such as among all rural rehabilitation clients). As might be expected, standards for categorizing families varied considerably from county to county as local agents had their own understandings of how to classify farm families, despite the efforts to create a national standard. In 1941, the FSA tried to resolve any confusion and introduced a plan for the proper use of agent time, grouping each client family into classes by letter – for each time an A family received one visit, a B family needed two, a C borrower needed three, and a special group of D borrowers needed particular advisory attention. Local supervisors were to divide their family case loads into these classifications at least yearly, based on the family's farm and home planning capacity, management skills, attitude, integrity, and similar criteria, keeping in consideration any new projects or responsibilities on the family's part that might require FSA support.<sup>68</sup>

To succeed, such farm and home planning and supervision had to be sound and workable for the family. FSA leaders insisted that county agents take the ideas and desires of the family involved in making the plan: "No plan should ever be prepared for any family," an FSA

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<sup>67</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 532-33.

<sup>68</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 133-35. See also Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 266-67.

handbook explained, “it should always be prepared with the family.”<sup>69</sup> This touches on the significance of the plan as a means of solidifying the agent-client relationship; FSA administrators recognized its importance in this role, but sometimes they lost sight of that relationship. The farm and home plans received a great deal of emphasis from agents, and doubtless they were valuable to many clients. However, more important in terms of how borrowers changed their farming was the assistance of local supervisors. Supervisors put more emphasis on the home and farm plans than did the borrowers, who appreciated the personal touch of individual supervision.<sup>70</sup> Ideally, FSA agents saw the farm and home plans as providing a foundational aspect in a larger effort to improve farming and rural life with expert help and credit, and as only a start in the relationship between the client and agent. The amount of time required to build such a relationship, however, decreased as agents’ case loads expanded.

For what FSA leaders considered a sound home and farm plan, expenditures were planned ahead of time based on expected income and food production. Farm supervisors and home economists studied and helped the family create their plans. Planning involved analyzing the farm and family situation: health, labor resources, managerial ability, cooperative attitude, industry and ambition, family capability and resources, training and experience, and the maximum productive use of time. Despite this careful analysis, the FSA wanted agents to present the plan as a guide which might require revisions, not as a rigid set of rules.<sup>71</sup>

Most plans emphasized general farming requirements, but the FSA had a broad vision of rural rehabilitation. One example of a successful operation was in southeastern Arkansas, where a Mr. Armstrong utilized both loans and a local cooperative. Armstrong took oak trees on land he was already working to the local sawmill cooperative to improve his housing. In exchange for

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<sup>69</sup> Gaer, *Toward Home Security*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 449.

<sup>71</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 99-100.

one-third of the lumber produced and his own labor, he received the lumber necessary (along with the recovery from his old, beat-up home) for building a new four-room house. The RA provided him with a \$250 loan for concrete, nails, flooring, and other requirements, and for that small sum a client received a new, livable home.<sup>72</sup> For Mr. Amstrong and many other clients, rural rehabilitation considered a number of elements in a client's life beyond just expanded agricultural production.

In preparing a home management plan, the Home Supervisor set forward the needs of the family for food, clothing, consumer and household goods, shelter, education, health, and so on. The home supervisors, ideally, would set standards for how much food a family needed to produce and preserve for a year-round healthy diet, teach the family how to conserve, preserve, and prepare food, and guide them toward better facilities for serving food. She also was to inculcate in mothers the methods for encouraging the rest of the family to adopt proper habits. Like farm supervisors, home management supervisors took a variety of different approaches in reaching families. They met individually with families to prepare plans, check up with them, and so on. Home supervisors, like farm supervisors, employed group techniques, particularly when teaching particular skills or procedures.<sup>73</sup>

Home supervisors also addressed the types of household furnishings, clothes, and other possessions a family had, touching on intangible questions like whether a barely furnished, unattractive house was a family problem. Home supervisors taught families their ideals of convenience, sanitation, and beauty. One home economist summed it up: "It is not enough to arouse within a family a desire for a better and more satisfying home life. The home economist

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<sup>72</sup> Milo Perkins to Will W. Alexander, August 22, 1937, Folder "U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1937," Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>73</sup> Erna E. Proctor, "Home Economics in a Rural Rehabilitation Program," *Journal of Home Economics* 27.8 (1935): 503-05.

must go further. She must teach such a family how to attain a better standard, and this means constant supervision, guidance, patience, understanding.”<sup>74</sup>

Home management supervisors thus had a more difficult job than did farm management supervisors, at least in terms of determining the best candidates for FSA aid and defining the success of those families. A farm supervisor, in making decisions about which family to select for a resettlement project or which applicants to provide loans for, had objective, if sometimes difficult to measure or obtain, standards: he could look at the soil, the local market, and so on to determine whether or not a project or client had a good chance of success. Home management supervisors, on the other hand, had only the vague idea of what the ideal family looked like. The FSA provided some criteria, with regards to health and so on, but in many cases home management supervisors were on their own.<sup>75</sup>

This broad notion of rural rehabilitation, encompassing both the home and the community, sometimes created trouble for the FSA. Perhaps the most notable example of this is the scandal that broke out in early 1942 over FSA loans made for the payment of poll taxes. The controversy apparently began in Hale County, Alabama, when Probate Judge R. K. Greene discovered (a man he believed to be) an FSA administrator checking county records to determine which clients were delinquent.<sup>76</sup> The FSA only made such a determination for white clients, but critics feared that they might soon extend it to black clients, threatening the political balance-of-power in many rural counties.<sup>77</sup>

Technically, the FSA did not pay the poll tax for its clients; under the laws of most states with such taxes, that would have been illegal. But it did, in budgeting for clients’ expenses,

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<sup>74</sup> Proctor, “Home Economics in a Rural Rehabilitation Program,” 504.

<sup>75</sup> Banfield, *Government Project*, 57-58.

<sup>76</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 323.

<sup>77</sup> C. P. Trussell, “FSA Is Accused of Tax Loan Plan,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1942; “FSA Defends ‘Payment’ Of Farmers’ Poll Taxes,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 23, 1942.

consider the amounts needed to pay the poll tax, and when clients withdrew money for paying poll taxes from the joint bank account, supervisors generally approved it as a reasonable expense.<sup>78</sup> But more than any concern over keeping to the letter of the law, the agency stuck by this policy as a matter of principle. As Region V Director E. S. Morgan put it, FSA administrators believed that “you can never rehabilitate a family that is qualified to vote until that person pays his poll tax and exercises his rights of citizenship.”<sup>79</sup> FSA administrators argued that voting made people a part of the community, and that was not something that they were willing to sacrifice.

Rural rehabilitation farm and home agents were exceptionally thorough in creating farm and home plans, at least ideally. Supervisors inventoried everything from how much food a family was expected to grow to the money necessary for toiletries and underwear. In this meticulousness, preparing home and farm management plans required a great deal of information. Farm management specialists had to map the farmland with acreage, soil types, drainage, and other pertinent information. They also had to help the client family create a farming budget, considering the amount of funds available and determining the probable cash income from farm production against operating expenses, taxes, and other outlays. Home management specialists had to plan a home budget, describing how much food a family could expect to get from their farm and how much would have to be purchased, how much fuel, clothing, and similar such expenses would be, and plan a cash budget based on those amounts. A variety of agency-provided forms (like “Budget for Food and Fuel Furnished by Farm,” “Farm Family Living Budget,” or “Seasonal Distribution of Fresh and Stored Farm-Produced Foods”)

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<sup>78</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 304; “Attacks FSA Stand on Poll Tax Loans,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1942.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in FSA, “Region V Bulletin,” February 7, 1942, Folder “85-160 Public Relations, July thru December, 1940,” Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

helped county agents in this task, but they could not eliminate the burden of gathering all that information.<sup>80</sup>

The necessary skills required to create these plans demonstrate just how important the capacity of a county or home agent was in the success of the farm security project. Between the two of them, the farm and home specialists had to be able to determine (for example) how much money and time would be needed to improve soil drainage, how to budget for depreciation on farm machinery, how much food a family could expect to can and save for the winter, how many hens would be needed for the family egg supply, and the best or at least cheapest local supply for food or other necessities that could not be produced on the family farm. They were responsible, in other words, for preparing the plans that (as agency leaders saw it) would make or break a successful home and farming operation.

While the home and farm plans were considered together, they had different methods and purposes. The farm plan was more about income production, while the home plan considered income use. Thus to make a plan, the agents and client family had to know their requirements for food, fuel, and cash for family needs, as well as what the farm can provide. Farm plans included diversification to spread the source of income, proper use of family labor and land, and marketing.<sup>81</sup> Food production and consumption was where the home and farm plans overlapped the most, and they were generally planned with great care, since FSA officials emphasized how a bad diet affected health, morale, and efficiency. Food decisions depended on what was available at what cost and on what the farm can produce, factors that depended on climate, region, and the like.

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<sup>80</sup> Resettlement Administration, "Field Instruction RS 11," p. 2-16, August 3, 1936, Folder "Organization, Administration, General AD-101," Box 15, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>81</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 100.

As much as possible, FSA officials urged that food should be produced at home, but they also recognized that amount would be determined by factors like tenure and labor relations, diet plan, individual initiative, comparative advantages in production, and so on.<sup>82</sup> This meant a shift away from producing cash crops. As Paul Johnstone wrote in 1939, “cotton farmers who cannot read nor write, who cannot be considered even simple students of economics,” recognized the harms that resulted from the overproduction of cotton. While in other parts of the country, such an explanation about cash crops required argument and convincing, in “the cotton areas the consciousness of this fact is present in those who do not understand rationally why it is so.”<sup>83</sup>

In particular, FSA agents emphasized home production and consumption for the lowest income families. A dollar of food produced at home, they asserted, usually went farther than a dollar bought at the store. The general assumption was that for the first year, at least half a family’s food should be produced at home. Under good conditions, agents believed that a family should be eventually able to produce 75% of a household’s annual food needs. FSA officials recognized the cost attached to producing food at home (it required land, capital, effort, planning, and risk), but they believed that careful planning could meet dietary needs at a low cost. The FSA estimated that bought at retail, an adequate diet for a family of three or four would annually cost \$300-350 at 1940 prices. Between half and 90% of that could be produced at home for the cost of \$40-50 for staples that could not be produced at all. Producing \$200-400 worth of food annually, then, was a major part of the farm enterprise.<sup>84</sup> FSA administrators took this

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>83</sup> Paul H. Johnstone, “Memorandum for Mr. M. L. Wilson,” p. 2, March 8, 1939, Folder “Farm Security 2 (Projects),” Box 3019, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>84</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 101-04.



requirement very seriously, to the point that (for example) they sometimes dropped rural rehabilitation clients who refused to plant subsistence crops as well as cash crops.<sup>85</sup>

The farm security program appears to have been successful in increasing food production. Families active in the program in 1941 increased their production of fruits and vegetables preserved for family use by 114%, or 158 quarts per family, and almost doubled their production of meat and poultry for home use.<sup>86</sup> Arthur Raper pointed out the importance of gardens and home production in Greene County, Georgia. There, each FSA family was required to have a garden. Practically all were fenced in, and most were a half-acre or larger. Between gardens and truck patches, Greene County FSA families averaged three acres each. Each family was asked to plant at least one new kind of vegetable each year, with meetings to demonstrate and share recipes. In this way, clients came to develop a taste for white potatoes, carrots, beets, and other vegetables. Canning food was a crucial part of the program. Turnip greens, green peas, and sweet potatoes were particularly popular for canning; farm women seemed to think these did the best job of giving strength to working men. Canning in great quantities was made possible by FSA loans for purchasing family-sized pressure cookers, commonly called “precious cookers.” FSA supervisors demonstrated that almost everything could be canned: squash, okra, sweet corn, soups, even veal and beef. The FSA also provided loans for cows and chickens, to improve the amount of milk, eggs, and meat families produced at home.<sup>87</sup>

As with food, FSA officials wanted clients to produce clothes at home. The FSA guide recommended only that “Provision should be made in the plan to cover customary expenditures for tobacco, barber, and toilet supplies, such as toilet soap, toothbrushes, combs, and razor

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<sup>85</sup> E. S. Morgan to Pat Cannon, October 27, 1939, Folder “85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>86</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 10.

<sup>87</sup> Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 233-42.

blades,” in addition to medical costs and expenditures for fuel, lighting, and other household items, about \$20-30 per year.<sup>88</sup> Furniture, too, should be homemade: FSA guides pointed out that infant beds could be constructed from salvage materials at almost no cost and that adolescents should be encouraged to build furniture for both themselves and the family rooms. Even tools, if possible, should be handmade – an FSA report proudly pointed to clients in Laurens County, Georgia, making hoe handles out of hickory saplings and building wagons using out-of-date anvil forges and scavenged materials.<sup>89</sup>

The family record book was an essential tool to manage farm and home plans. It allowed a family to see its strong and weak points. But if they were going to follow through with recordkeeping, a family had to believe in the purposes of the record book, which supervisors often had some difficulty in getting across. Many if not most low-income farmers had only the vaguest idea what their income and expenditures were, and they had little experience keeping track of such things.<sup>90</sup> One client reportedly brought out, when asked to show his records, a hanging wire basket full of partially-read letters, contracts, and other mailings sent from the federal government (separated from the other mail by the fact that they had been sent without stamps).<sup>91</sup> For these barely-educated farmers, any change could cause problems – some supervisors found that if they managed to successfully get their clients to use record books, even altering the placement of items on the page or using a different color book for the next season required convincing the family of the usefulness and necessity of the record book.<sup>92</sup> In many cases, the wife or an older child (often an older daughter) had to keep the records. One visitor to

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<sup>88</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 314.

<sup>89</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 107; Swiger and Larson, *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 111.

<sup>91</sup> Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 280.

<sup>92</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 20.

the Coffee County project in Alabama found that every account book inspected was kept by the wife or one of the older girls in the family.<sup>93</sup>

Thus a large part of the FSA's client supervision effort was simply explaining basic budgeting and recordkeeping to lower-income farmers. In developing a farm and home management plan, for perhaps the first time a family had to plan its income and expenses for the year or years ahead. Families had to determine their expenses: food, clothing, medical care, machinery, livestock, and similar costs. They had to determine their income, either from farming or extra income from side jobs.

To ease the transition to keeping good records, the FSA provided farm family record books. It recommended families start with a list everything they owned – their current real estate and machinery, food on hand, crops and livestock, and so forth. Then the family could list its debts and so determine its net worth (helpfully defined as “what you own” and “what you owe”). As the year progressed, the family was enjoined to keep a record of all receipts from farm product sales, other income, and loans, as well as a record of all money spent for farm and family operations. Families were also encouraged to keep farming records of how much, and what kinds, of crop and livestock had been produced. Once a year, the family was to write a summary of its progress. To aid in all this, the family record book included forms for keeping a record of open accounts, monthly cash balances, stored food summaries, maps of the farm, and more. The record book also contained information that administrators believed would be useful in daily farm recordkeeping or in encouraging the right kinds of behavior by client families – lists of how

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<sup>93</sup> F. H. Robinson to P. F. Aylesworth, October 29, 1937, Folder “Coffee County, RF-AL-17,” Box 67, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

many quarts of fruit could be canned per bushel, for example, or standard weights per bushel of farm product.<sup>94</sup>

For the first time, farming became a business venture for many of these clients. Some even went so far as to build their own business center for their record books and other important documents. These were made from easily-obtained materials. Orange crates were common – they were built into shelves and partitions and then painted. A plywood cover, or for poorer families a dyed salt or flour sack, acted as a door. Some even built doors and locks and then hung their new cabinet on the wall.<sup>95</sup>

FSA administrators wanted poor farmers to produce far more for home consumption because most families, prior to receiving supervision, produced so little. The farm of the average family approved in 1937, for example, had produced (in the year before approval) about 27 gallons of milk per person, compared to the FSA goal of 90 gallons; 35 pounds of meat per person, compared to the FSA goal of 100 to 125 pounds; 14 dozen eggs per person, with the FSA goal of 20 to 25 dozen, and canned 22 quarts of fruit and vegetables, against the FSA's goal of 80 quarts per person. As in most cases, southern farmers were well below other regions in their production.<sup>96</sup> Even worse, the families that needed to preserve the most food tended to do so less often, either by choice or necessity. In Gorgas, Alabama, in the mid 1930s, one study found that the average large landowners' family canned 770 quarts of fruits, vegetables, and meat, along with drying and storing another 25 gallons; the sharecropper family, in contrast, canned 218 quarts and dried another 7 gallons.<sup>97</sup> It was obvious, at least to FSA planners, that most applicants were missing an enormous opportunity to save money by producing more at home.

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<sup>94</sup> FSA, *Farm Family Record Book*, [1939?], NAL.

<sup>95</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 19.

<sup>96</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 110.

<sup>97</sup> Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 63.

For all the FSA's successes in raising home production among clients, this kind of approach to consumption was difficult to impart to many families because it went so strongly against the prevailing trends of farm life. Small farmers had already begun the process of joining the commercial agricultural economy, and whenever farmers could afford it, they discarded the live-at-home mindset. Even some small producers by the 1930s did not take their own grain to the local mill for grinding; they sold it and bought bags of flour from the local store. Few had orchards, which were difficult to maintain and whose crops (especially frost-vulnerable plants like peaches) were easily destroyed. Instead, they bought truck-shipped fruit from other parts of the country. Few still made their own vinegar. Most farmers kept chickens but rarely hatched their own, and most of their flock would be sold as fryers in town, not consumed on the farm. The crops most likely to be produced at home were those easiest to grow and impossible to obtain before the widespread introduction of electricity and refrigeration. Other sources of food were rare; hunting, for example, was more a hobby than a reliable food source, especially considering that by the 1930s most large game had been hunted out of existence (with wild populations of animals like deer rebounding only well into the second half of the twentieth century).<sup>98</sup>

The home-production message was also muddled by the FSA, which was not consistent about the value of the live-at-home mindset because farm and especially home agents carried a certain middle-class perspective that valued store-bought consumer goods. This mindset is apparent in the Resettlement Division's furniture catalogs, evidently created for use in the local supervisors' office, where orders would be made. For living rooms, clients could apply for easy chairs, coffee tables, and day beds in "Amber Maple" or "Brown Oak" that promised to match "any other model of living-room furniture shown," easing the transition for new home-owners by

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<sup>98</sup> Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 39-42.

helping choose their decor for them. For the dining room, clients could choose from a variety of wooden dining chairs, armchairs, dining tables, and sideboards (noted, in the sales-speak intended for possibly uncertain new home owners, to be “attractive when used with hung mirror”) with the same wood selections and five options for the color of the leather seats. White oak rockers and wicker side chairs were available to fill out the spacious porches intended for the resettlement projects. Single and double-sized beds, chests, and dressers were available for the bedroom, again helpfully labeled to match other bedroom furniture available.<sup>99</sup>

So while the FSA emphasized the importance of home production, administrators also recognized that it was neither possible nor desirable to adhere to an entirely live-at-home program. County agents were instructed, for example, to plan for education costs. Children in school needed books, paper, pencils, and supplies. Agents also needed to encourage less formal education: every farm family should subscribe or have access at least one newspaper and one farm magazine. Supervisors also had to keep in mind recreation and socialization. Church and charitable contributions had to be planned. And while the first and most effective way to rehabilitate families may have been to show them how to increase home production of food and how to improve their housing, clothing, health, and sanitation, it was clear that a cash income was still necessary. More generally, FSA leaders saw social isolation as one of the greatest dangers of rural poverty, and an entirely live-at-home program would make it difficult for farmers to be part of their community. Agents, then, were to emphasize home planning and production, but “be very careful to recognize its limitations.”<sup>100</sup>

To ensure that home and farm plans were being understood and followed, county and home agents took (ideally) at least monthly trips to visit their client families. FSA guides warned

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<sup>99</sup> FSA, *Household Furniture and Domestic Equipment* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), n.p.

<sup>100</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 108-11.

that many families resented such visits, even if they acted friendly, and urged supervisors to be careful not to impinge on client rights. While the most frequent and important visits were designed to develop and stick to home and farm management plans, other visits investigated for loans, grants, medical needs, and releases; others planned for cooperatives, farm debt adjustment, or medical group services. Agents had to prepare ahead of time no matter what the purpose, and the FSA manuals recommended that farm and home specialists, along with the office clerk-typist, confer ahead of time to ensure an efficient and productive visit.<sup>101</sup> Maintaining a good relationship meant a steady level of contact; county agents found that clients who, as one county agent put it, had “not had benefit of as close supervision as they should have had” were much more likely to complain about their treatment by the FSA.<sup>102</sup>

The planners’ view of its clients, county agents, and conception of what their relationship should be like is evident in an FSA handbook’s “Simple Rules for the Farm and Home Visit.”. The handbook discouraged arriving with a briefcase and a handful of documents, making orders, and doing anything else that could be intimidating, insulting, or off-putting. Instead the agent was to offer advice that clients should accept, but without condescension and with the conviction that the agents’ suggestions are for the client family’s benefit. Working on the assumption of where each family member’s protective instinct lay, the guide recommended that the agent win the respect of the children to get the mother’s respect, and the mother’s respect to get the father’s. Recognizing the limited education of many tenants and their adherence to agricultural tradition, agents were discouraged from introducing too many new ideas or methods at once and prompted to make sure the family understood both the advice and the benefits of it. Finally (and a bit obviously), agents could gauge the success of the last visit by how welcome they were the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 111-12.

<sup>102</sup> John E. Hydrick to Homer D. Lee, March 12, 1940, Folder “85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

next time, and the ideal was to have client families stopping by to find out when the next visit was.<sup>103</sup>

On visits, county agents were supposed to both praise clients for the work that they had done and encourage them to do better. Agents and clients filled out a Farm Visit Report listing the client's responsibilities (keep records up to date, maintain family health, and so on), what the client had done well, and what the client needed to do better. One typical example noted that the client had done a good job of preserving food for the family and pointing to earlier successes to encourage better practices in the future, describing "54 jars filled." The client needed, the agent said, to give more attention to the "fall garden" and to "save seed and all the feed you can."<sup>104</sup> These reports emphasized both the farm and family: one client had met the agent's recommendations to keep a "home and yard clean and attractive."<sup>105</sup>

Given the demands on their time, it was not always possible for agents to meet with families as often as they wanted. Monthly group meetings had a number of virtues. They saved time, but they also helped skeptical farmers accept new things by showing that others were also doing something new. Supervisors would remind clients of particular needs for the month – make sure to fix fences in January, plant spring gardens in March, and so on – and give a demonstration of skills like preparing and canning meat, making peanut butter at home, or how to properly balance a nutritious meal. Group participation also, administrators believed, encouraged community feelings, perhaps even encouraging a family to join a cooperative group

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<sup>103</sup> Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 112-13.

<sup>104</sup> "Farm Visit Report," August 27, 1940, Folder "Dickerson, Gus," Records of Region 6, Records Rural Rehabilitation Loan Case Files, 1934-1944 (Entry 133), Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia.

<sup>105</sup> "Farm Visit Report," [July 22, 1940?], Folder "Williams, Callie," Records of Region 6, Records Rural Rehabilitation Loan Case Files, 1934-1944 (Entry 133), Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia.



enterprise. This group sentiment, planners hoped, meant that farmers would share such skills, experiences, and recommendations among themselves.<sup>106</sup>

Another method of supervision was the supervised or joint bank account, used more often in the South. Under this arrangement, the client's loan was deposited in a local bank, and withdrawals and checks had to be countersigned by an authorized FSA official. Sometimes, income was deposited into this same account, putting the entirety of the client's income and expenses under FSA supervision. On the one hand, this process helped teach financial management to tenants who had never had much influence over their own finances. A former tenant who had depended on monthly advances or furnishes did not have the habits of careful money use. But this also risked putting client families too much at the mercy of their local county agents, who might use it to force a particular plan of spending on an unwilling family, or who might forbid certain purchases. It also created a relationship ripe for resentment as farm families felt their rights were being impeded.<sup>107</sup>

At the end of the year, tenant-purchase clients got a special visit known as "the annual check-out." This supervisory visit after the end of the crop year involved a final look over the family record book, with the results summarized and loan repayments calculated. After all of the clients in the county had their final supervisor visit, usually the county had a meeting of all the TP clients, with a general discussion of how the year had gone and how the next year might be improved.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1939*, 3-5; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 114-15; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 145; Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 257-58.

<sup>107</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instruction 731.1, NAL; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 195-96.

<sup>108</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 446-47.

From the start, the supervised credit program had problems. Its emphasis on a more scientific approach to farming conflicted with clients' traditional knowledge of farming. The FSA's conception of rural relationships differed from that of its clients; FSA administrators thought mostly in terms of individual families while tenants, for their part, relied on a social, economic, and kin network that government supervision could not replace. The FSA wanted clients to diversify and plant food crops when they (and their landlords) wanted or needed to plant cotton.<sup>109</sup>

These sort of big-picture issues were a problem in terms of planning or creating a system of supervised credit, but a bigger headache for administrators was implementing the program and making sure that FSA employees carried it out. There were some problems with the farm and home plans from the administrators' perspective, for example, but these had more to do with the difficulty of making sure that local employees implemented and oversaw them properly more than with the plans themselves. Both supervisors and borrowers, Will Alexander noted in 1940, failed in some degree to understand the meaning and purpose of the farm and home plans. Administrators even toyed with more rudimentary forms of teaching and rewards. Baldwin thought that the FSA might provide a narrative story to each client as an example of what was to be done – the local agent interpreting the home plan to the client by, say, describing the number of hogs that needed to be vaccinated or the amount of corn to be planted. All administrators agreed that it was necessary to move the farm and home plans beyond being seen simply as

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<sup>109</sup> Adams and Gorton, "This Ain't My Land," 341-42; Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 38-39; Gaer, *Toward Farm Security*, 16-17; Schuler, *Social Status and Farm Tenure*, 34-36.

another “document” by the clients, and instead understood as a better way of farm management and rural production.<sup>110</sup>

Simply getting a family to fill out such plans was a difficult and time-consuming task (one version had 78 separate lines of information to be entered in the plan summary alone), not to mention the struggles of imparting to clients the ideal that the plan was more than just a budget.<sup>111</sup> Applicants and clients often had little education, and agents sometimes found it easier to simply tell them what to do. Farm security leaders had trouble throughout the course of federal rural poverty efforts in getting local administrators to recognize the larger purposes of the plan, and then in getting them to undertake the difficult task of imparting those purposes to clients. Increased and improved training could overcome some of those problems, but it could not remedy a shortage of agents. Because of the caseload, it was not even always possible to create a plan each year for rural rehabilitation clients, although these families still received supervision from some form of in-person contact with county agents.<sup>112</sup>

Many supervisors saw the creation of farm and home plans as an irritant or an obstacle to their larger goals of rehabilitation. If a supervisor believed a loan to be sound and necessary, the apparent need to prove it with a farm and home plan felt like just another bit of red tape to deal with. It was no surprise, then, that some clients did not appreciate the value of the plans; being told that the plans were simply a requirement of the national office hardly impressed most clients.<sup>113</sup> The results were rarely ideal. Robert Hudgens, for example, visited one failed farmer who had been dropped as an RA client. Hudgens went to see the county supervisor who had

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<sup>110</sup> “Conference of FSA officials held at Capon Springs, W. Va., during the period May 31 1940 – June 3, 1940,” [no date], Folder “Dept. of Agriculture. Farm Security Administration. Conference at Capon Springs. 1940.” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>111</sup> “Farm and Home Plan Summary,” February 5, 1942, Folder “Anderson, Rannie,” Records of Region 6, Records Rural Rehabilitation Loan Case Files, 1934-1944 (Entry 133), Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia.

<sup>112</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 184-86.

<sup>113</sup> Clawson, “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Resettlement Projects,” 68-69.

made a farm budget. This supervisor had worked out a budget and realized the farmer was short \$50 for the year. The agent had simply included a line of income for selling “sorghum syrup” to make up the difference. The client had thus been short of money, sold a bale of cotton to buy food even though the crop had a government mortgage, and was dropped for not repaying his loan. In this case, at least, it provided something of a learning experience – Hudgens reported that the supervisor came to understand the relationship between a grant and a loan, and between success and the farm management plans.<sup>114</sup>

For these and other reasons, many families failed to even create a complete farm and home plan. This was often the case for rural rehabilitation borrowers, who got relatively less supervision than did resettlement or tenant-purchase clients. For all the FSA leadership’s emphasis on supervision, in July 1941, only slightly more than half rural rehabilitation borrowers had a complete farm and home plan, although this does not include partial plans, and the number rose through the early 1940s.<sup>115</sup> Even for the tenant-purchase program, which had much more intensive supervision, a 1945 study found that 46% of mid-westerners and a mere 14% of southerners had an “adequate knowledge of details” of the farm and home plans; only 57% of mid-westerners and 56% of southerners found the plans helpful, and 23% and 12%, respectively, said the plan was a bother. Almost a quarter of southerners either did not have or never had a plan at all.<sup>116</sup>

Part of the problem was that plans and clients just did not match up, and FSA administrators constantly urged supervisors to tailor their farm and home plans to fit their clients. One farmer, for instance, disliked farming and instead wanted to make a living by some kind of itinerant trading and selling. His supervisor found success by developing a farm plan that

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<sup>114</sup> *Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*, 185-87.

<sup>115</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 140.

<sup>116</sup> Maris, “*the land is mine*”, 300-02.

emphasized the production of garden truck vegetables and similar crops, along with money to convert the family car into a truck. The farmer and supervisor then worked out a plan to sell crops from other local FSA clients in a nearby town with a good market; the plan appeared to benefit all sides.<sup>117</sup> This was the ideal, but such creativity and willingness to work with clients was not always in ample supply. When supervisors ignored family wishes and interests, plans failed. One supervisor developed a plan that completely ignored a client family's dedication to raising chickens (they kept their small chicken flock in the house because they lacked of a henhouse). With the family left out of its creation, the farm plan failed. The family tried to use their loans for chicken production anyway and refused to initiate any contact with their supervisor. It took years for a new plan to develop that improved their chicken operation and renewed the client-supervisor relationship.<sup>118</sup> And this example was, in a sense, a success – untold other clients never returned.

Sometimes, borrowers had problems even while finding relative success in farming. One Texan fell afoul of the law by selling hay that had an RA lien and by paying his landlord out of an improper account. The client, as the USDA general counsel noted, “enjoys a good reputation, but that he is very ignorant and is unable to read or write, with the exception of signing his name.” The rural rehabilitation supervisor considered him “a good and conscientious farmer” who simply did not know what he was allowed to do.<sup>119</sup> The client's case ended up reported to the USDA's Solicitor's Office essentially because of his supervisor's failure to properly explain what the farmer could and could not do with the loan or mortgaged crops.

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<sup>117</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 11-12.

<sup>118</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 12-13.

<sup>119</sup> Monroe Oppenheimer to W. F. Farrell, November 19, 1936, Folder “Carter, Tom,” Box 12, Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP.

On the other hand, the problem was not always too little supervision; many of the more paternalistic elements of supervision created tensions. Borrowers were expected to stick to their plans in a way that did not always seem fair. This was especially true for tenant purchase borrowers, who could not, for example, “buy a tractor, a radio, a refrigerator, incur a new debt, or pay off an old debt” unless it was included in the farm and home plan.<sup>120</sup> The requirement for the joint signatures on checks for those clients with a shared bank account, one observer found, “was extremely irritating to many settlers.”<sup>121</sup> This was a hassle in just a practical sense, as making sure to have the opportunity to get approval for each purchase with the county agent was difficult and time consuming, but more than that, it was demeaning. The requirement implied that a client could not be trusted to use funds properly.

Critics attacked the stringent requirements of the FSA rural rehabilitation program, such as the insistence on planting crops for home consumption and the requirement to keep a budget book. In particular they criticized the coercive element, the idea that the FSA was telling farmers what to do, when the farmers did not want or need such help. FSA employees believed this was unfair; as one anonymous project manager pointed out, “Farmers don’t have to come into the project unless they want to. Our requirements are an elementary protection of the government’s investment, pointing the way to the purchaser’s economic independence and security. The landlord and time-merchant not only bound their tenants hand and foot, but often in the end dropped them on the state’s relief rolls.”<sup>122</sup> This was not necessarily true: apparently the majority of client families in Greene County, Georgia, signed up for rehabilitation loans at the insistence of their

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<sup>120</sup> FSA, *The Work of the Farm Security Administration*, FSA Instruction 623.10.

<sup>121</sup> Clawson, “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Resettlement Projects,” 64.

<sup>122</sup> Charles R. Walker, “Homesteaders-New Style,” *Survey Graphic* 28.6 (June, 1939): 380.

landlords, who were themselves going through hard times and hoped that improvements like terracing and replacing old farm buildings would be good investments.<sup>123</sup>

The FSA's warnings for what a supervisor should not do provides a window into the sorts of problems that FSA leadership had run into with local supervisors. The agency discouraged any sort of coercion or threat to force a family to take action. Leaders opposed any insistence on the client family showing gratitude for supervision, which might emphasize to the family that they had lost some measure of control over their situation. Supervisors were enjoined to be careful about over-emphasizing one particular aspect of supervision, such as focusing on just farm production at the expense of other needs. FSA leaders worried about supervisors who could not adjust their procedures to handle relatively worse-off families less capable of making the sorts of lifestyle or economic changes they recommended.<sup>124</sup>

The FSA had trouble when its ideals ran into what clients saw as reality. The Casa Grande project in Arizona had trouble with unrest and factionalism among the settlers. Myer Cohen, a regional staff member described by political scientist Edward Banfield as "an intelligent young liberal of an urban background" who "was expected to bring the techniques as a social scientist," traveled to the project to help. At the introductory meeting Cohen spoke grandly of democracy and how important it was for community-building. The speech did not go over well: one man claimed that management made all the decisions in the community, not the settlers; an argument began over who had begun the drinking that had led to ending the Saturday night dances. Finally Harry Olivier, a settler known for his unhappiness with how the government ran the project, stood up and said that they would be glad to cooperate with the FSA "after we get our bellies full. How can you expect us to talk to you tonight when our bellies

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<sup>123</sup> Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 259-60.

<sup>124</sup> Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 20; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 152-53.

aren't full? Do you think that a family can be happy on about \$45 a month? We are discouraged on that account."<sup>125</sup>

Problems with county agents also resulted from personal greed or malice rather than mere incompetence. As administrators feared, local farmers often recognized that misdeeds by local agents resulted from the agents' connections with the local elite. One anonymous complaint from Roberts, Georgia, came on behalf of farmers "who have been so unfortunate as to have made farm and crop loans through 'Rehab' Agent Padrick," "a thorough rascal and a grafter" who required borrowers to purchase things at high prices from his friends. The writer remained anonymous for fear of becoming "the victim of any revenge from this carpet-bagger Padrick." The complainant may also have been illiterate, as the note was written by a friend living in Atlanta. The letter requested that FBI agents come to investigate and jail the supervisor, as the local office only ignored complaints.<sup>126</sup>

Because of problems on the part of the FSA or the clients, or because of economic factors beyond either's control, sometimes clients could not make their loan payments. Official policy was that a client would make a good faith effort both to repay loans on schedule and protect the value of any property held as security. Despite this, rural rehabilitation officials recognized from the beginning that not all loans would be repaid. As it turned out, the repayment rate of the rural rehabilitation program was fairly good. In April, 1938, the FSA had collected not quite half of all loans that had come to maturity – about \$48.7 million out of \$97.6 million loaned. But this included areas receiving a great deal of emergency loans due to drought, where the repayment

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<sup>125</sup> Banfield, *Government Project*, 160, 162.

<sup>126</sup> "Crawford County, Georgia Farmers" to "U. S. Department of Agricultural, Farm Security Administration, Rural Farm Rehabilitation", August 9 1939, Folder "85-160-02 Criticisms and Complaints, July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939," Box 1, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE. A considerable number of complaints were anonymous, as the fear of retribution against poor farmers by the targets of their complaints (not only in matters involving the FSA, but throughout the rural South in general), who were usually connected with the local elite, was common.



average was only about 14%. The average was much higher in non-emergency areas; outside of these states the average repayment was 60%. In three states (Indiana, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin) the repayment level of mature loans was over 100%.<sup>127</sup>

Collecting on loans depended on a variety of factors. Most fundamentally, county agents had to do the actual collection, so the amount of collections depended on the leniency or strictness of individual agents and their immediate superiors. Overall the FSA was rather loose with repayments. Variable repayment installments eased the pressure on clients by making it possible to make larger repayments in later years, when presumably they would be better able to do so. Clients behind in payment for good reason might find their loan renewed and extended or see the agency issue a forbearance declaring its intention to take no actions on collection for a limited time while the debtor family got back on its feet. Renewals were also frequently made in states in which local law required a shorter repayment schedule for loans than the FSA considered reasonable and in situations in which a borrower received one or more supplemental loans and, for convenience sake, it would be easier to combine all notes into a single debt.<sup>128</sup> Just an apparent willingness to try harder was often enough for local agents. For example, Octave Fongemie, a rural rehabilitation borrower, went bankrupt, threatening the FSA's security. The agency decided not to pursue a foreclosure, however, after Fongemie signed a "Waiver and New Promise to Pay." The value of such a document signed by a bankrupt small farmer might have been rather low in legal terms, but for FSA administrators, it indicated the right kind of attitude on the part of the borrower, and so they were willing to give him another chance.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1939* (1938), 568-69. Those drought-afflicted states were Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

<sup>128</sup> FSA, *Procedure Manual*, FSA Instructions 765.1 and 765.2, NAL; Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 175-79.

<sup>129</sup> "Waiver and New Promise to Pay," Folder "Fongemie, Octave (Clients)," Box 23, Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP.

Borrowers who could not or would not receive supervision or financing but who had not yet completely repaid their loans were classified either as collection-only, if it appeared possible to collect, or dropped if there was no chance of collecting. Defaulting borrowers might find the county supervisor recommending liquidation, which might be voluntary. If not, legal efforts to recover property or liquidate had to be approved by the regional director and undertaken by federal attorneys rather than the rehabilitation agency. This last resort was rarely used.<sup>130</sup>

One reason that county supervisors tended to shy away from taking legal action was that, frequently, nothing much happened. Local officials complained about delays in taking legal action. Often, what county officials believed constituted a good reason for moving against a client did not match what upper level officials believed. Even when state or regional or national officials agreed, there was further considerable delay before the case was forwarded to the USDA Solicitor's office (although by the end of 1943, the FSA was mostly organized enough to eliminate that sort of problem). Once the case reached the Solicitor, that office very often lacked the ability to take immediate action, though that was less a problem as the years wore on. Once the case got out of the USDA, the District Attorney took weeks, sometimes months, before taking action. This was one situation where the FSA's instinct toward local control did not pan out – county supervisors and committees requested that local attorneys handle the cases in county courts, rather than at the federal level, but this was not possible for a national agency like the FSA.<sup>131</sup>

Another practical problem, of course, was that the FSA was dealing with some of the poorest people in the country, particularly its rural rehabilitation clients – if they failed or went bankrupt, there was usually not much that could be done. Generally speaking, the FSA did not

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<sup>130</sup> Larson, *Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 178-79.

<sup>131</sup> P. G. Beck to Frank Hancock, January 22, 1944, Folder "3D-Gen Jan-April 1944," Box 1, General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP.

treat clients as if they were trying to defraud the government. They had simply proven unable to succeed as farmers or as borrowers, due to inability, personal or natural catastrophe, or economic circumstances. Usually, that meant the client was left with practically nothing. In some cases, the FSA could recover a sizable bit of its loan, but most of the time there was little to be gained.

In the case of one client from Goggins, Georgia, who owed \$439.66 plus interest, the FSA (through the Attorney General's office) managed to force the sale of a horse, various equipment, and fertilizer for \$35.75 (minus court costs). The U.S. Attorney's office saw no point in further action. An Assistant U.S. Attorney wrote to the Attorney General's office on the matter: "this defendant [...] is a negro who owns no property and who is insolvent. A judgment against him for the deficiency would be absolutely worthless."<sup>132</sup> The FSA ended up receiving a check for \$0.75.

Another example involved a client in Texas who owed the FSA \$660.99, plus interest, as a result of taking out four separate loans. The FSA turned the case over the USDA attorneys, who then referred it the District Attorney's office. After the client allowed the sale of what property could be recovered, the FSA received \$66.65, and the matter effectively ended as any deficiency judgment against the client would be uncollectable.<sup>133</sup> Or, as Monroe Oppenheimer, the USDA's Solicitor, wrote about another case, it should be closed because "the possibility of collection was too remote to justify instituting legal action;" that could almost be the slogan for FSA debt recovery efforts.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> John P. Cowart to the Attorney General, January 5, 1940, Folder "Barkley, Pierce," Box 4, Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>133</sup> Folder "(Campbell, W. C.) Clients," Box 12, Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP. See especially "Report on F.S.A. Litigation."

<sup>134</sup> Monroe Oppenheimer, "Memorandum for Dr. W. W. Alexander," February 17, 1940, Folder "Caplis, William L.," Box 12, Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP.

One borrower from Wedowee, Alabama, summed up the problems of delay on the government's side and poverty on the borrower's. He owed the FSA \$147.51 (having taken loans from both the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation in 1935 and the RA in 1936, which became overdue to the FSA). On October 13, 1937, the matter was referred to Thomas D. Samford, a US District Attorney in Alabama. He recommended (in light of the small sums involved) that the FSA try to obtain the money voluntarily, as any cost of repossessing mortgaged property would almost certainly exceed the value of the property. The only recoverable chattel was a steer worth \$66, which was finally sold on October 7, 1939, just short of two years after the case was sent to the District Attorney. After expenses relating to the sale, the FSA recovered \$41.20.<sup>135</sup>

The desire to ease repayments for the purposes of enhancing rehabilitation and clients' farming success led to some difficulties with other government departments and sometimes compromised the FSA's lending role. FSA Instruction 758.2 was changed in 1941 to explicitly allow FSA clients to deposit money earned from the sale of crops or other farm operations into their supervised bank accounts regardless of the clients' debt status, to the amount necessary for farm operations in the upcoming year. FSA supervisors could, in other words, allow clients to save money for the next farming year without consideration of repaying their debts. This was in line with, if not an integral part of, the FSA's general attitude toward debt, farming and rural poverty – a family had to be able to feed itself and operate a farm successfully in order to make rehabilitation possible. But as W. R. Fuchs, the USDA's Assistant Director of Finance, wrote, this approach to debt was “somewhat difficult to reconcile [...] with our concept of the obligations of a collecting officer of the Government and of the purposes of a chattel mortgage.” Fuchs was not, he went on to claim, against the government remitting debts for “for humane

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<sup>135</sup> Folder “Ball, S. A.,” Box 4, Office of the Solicitor, Rural Rehabilitation, RG 16, NACP.

reasons” in certain cases, but he wanted these to be “the exception rather than the rule.”<sup>136</sup> Otherwise, the FSA was forfeiting any claim to be a lending agency.

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It was easy to identify the failed clients – they were unable to pay back their loans – but recognizing or even defining the successful ones proved a little bit harder. The FSA never specifically answered the question of what exactly a rehabilitated family meant. For tenant-purchase clients, it generally meant the point at which they could be safely trusted to make payments without needing supervision. For a barely literate or illiterate tenant with almost no experience in money management, even the best supervision and the right amount of loan money would not, in the short-term, produce an independent farmer.

Even the question of how long the process should take was unclear. The proposed amount of time necessary to rehabilitate a client varied from only a few years to generations, depending on who was talking. Perhaps being optimistic in a public address, or at least responding to public concern about how long it took, Will Alexander said in 1940 that experience had shown that a family could be rehabilitated in five years.<sup>137</sup> Another RA employee in 1935 had estimated that new farm plans and annual loans might be necessary for more than ten years for some rural rehabilitation clients.<sup>138</sup> Robert W. Hudgens went even further, writing that there were “very few families in our Region [V] who will be carried from 100 percent supervision down to no supervision, but rather all of them should be carried down from 100 to 75 percent, to 50, to 25 percent and then lower. I doubt if there are any families in our program who

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<sup>136</sup> W. R. Fuchs to Martin G. White, September 8, 1941, Folder “Farm Security Loans or Grants Aug. 1 to Nov. 1,” Box 292, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 333.

<sup>138</sup> Bernard D. Joy to J. R. Allgyer, April 7, 1935, Folder “RR 101-03 I-J Reports,” Box 6, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

should, at any time within the next two generations, be left without at least enough advice to cover the making of a farm plan.”<sup>139</sup>

For Hudgens, who probably had as much influence on how local agents thought about the rehabilitation process as anyone, talking in terms of years and dates was beside the point. He argued before Congress that most of the proposed time limits for rehabilitation, particularly relatively short times like five years, were “not sufficient time in anybody’s language to remove the imprints of several generations of rural poverty.”<sup>140</sup> More important, in his view, was reaching a set of standards for a rehabilitated family, not reaching a certain number of years in the program. FSA personnel generally believed that a family should receive assistance until its standard of living had reached a point where healthy living (which could mean a variety of things) was a certainty. It was also important to continue supervision in order to ensure that any FSA loans were fully repaid, especially if other sources of credit became available. Finally, FSA personnel wanted their clients to reach the managerial potential (again, a nebulously defined concept) in order to maintain their farms without need for more assistance or relief.<sup>141</sup>

It is difficult to estimate exactly how many families the federal farm security programs assisted, much less how many it rehabilitated. One problem, for example, involves the duplication of clients. Between the State Rural Rehabilitation Corporations, the RA, and the FSA, the federal government provided something like 912,500 standard rural rehabilitation loans. However, the same family may have received loans from three different sources and still been recorded as “original” loans: emergency funds from the emergency relief appropriations acts, funds for the various State Rural Rehabilitation Corporations, and funds appropriated for

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<sup>139</sup> R. W. Hudgens to Paul V. Maris, July 26, 1937, Folder “Rehabilitation Region V AD-560 Reports,” Box 60, General Correspondence, Washington Office, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>140</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 190.

<sup>141</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 141-43.

the Pope-Jones Water Facilities Act. Some families might have repaid the entirety of one group of original and supplemental loans but later been forced to take out more. Families moving between different regions may have been recorded multiple times. Further, a family might have received both rural rehabilitation loans and tenant purchase loans. According to one estimate, something like 875,000 families received loans from the RA and FSA based on the standard home and farm plan supervised model. 40-50,000 of these were probably long-term borrowers in the resettlement or tenant purchase program.<sup>142</sup>

However many families it helped, rehabilitation and supervised credit showed results. Farm security efforts in the South did go some of the way toward solving that region's enormous lack of capital, which held so many small operators back. One Tenant Purchase Engineer pointed out the case of a farmer named Compton in Hale County, Alabama, who took a loan of about \$9,000, part of which was \$1,800 toward a new hay barn with a capacity of two hundred tons. Clients could plant and sell surplus hay, making a possible yearly profit on hay alone of over \$900 – well over double his annual loan repayment of \$390.<sup>143</sup> The low starting point of the South can be seen in how even a considerable increase in income could still leave southern FSA clients behind other parts of the country. For example, total cash receipts in FSA Region V almost doubled between 1941 and 1943, yet that region was still the poorest in America. Average annual income to operators in Region V in 1943 was only \$604, making it one of only

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<sup>142</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 170-72.

<sup>143</sup> Murff Hawkins, "Talk Made by Murff Hawkins, TP Engineer at Tenant Purchase School, Linden, Ala. July 31, 1941," p. 2, Folder "85-161 Speeches, July thru Dec. 1940," Box 14, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE. Hawkins also claimed that the Tenant Purchase Division could build homes in rural east Alabama for less expense than any other agency or individual, so he may have been exaggerating for the sake of pride in his agency.

three regions (along with Region VI at \$611 and Region IV at \$889, also both southern regions) with average incomes below \$1,000 a year.<sup>144</sup>

While the FSA did much to improve rural standards of living, it could only do so much. This caused some resentment. FSA clients in Greene County Georgia, mostly saw improvements to their homes, but a large number – over a quarter – still lived in below standard homes. These clients, lacking screened-in porches, easy access to clean water, or sanitary toilets, unsurprisingly felt some bitterness. They had done everything the FSA had asked of them, yet they still lived in the same bad housing they had lived in before, while neighbors saw large-scale improvements.<sup>145</sup>

The FSA also faced entrenched opinion among clients that made some aspects of the program difficult to implement. For example, many clients in Coffee County, Alabama, continued to use the old merchant system to purchase their seed, fertilizer, and machinery, and to market their cotton, peanuts, and hogs. These clients believed that while the government program would eventually end, the local merchant would always be there. Thus local farmers feared that turning away from their traditional sources of credit would mean losing credit when the government was out of the area.<sup>146</sup>

One social scientist summed up the changes and similarities for tenants in the rural rehabilitation program. The future outlook of tenants and landlords was not that different: tenants were still on year-long arrangements. Clients got subsistence advances of about the same amount as they had gotten from landlords and similar short term credit for fertilizer, seed, feed, and similar needs, plus cash or a share of the crop was paid to the owner or Rural Rehabilitation

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<sup>144</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 317-18. The states in each of these regions were: Region IV, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina; Region V, South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida; Region VI, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

<sup>145</sup> Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 247-48.

<sup>146</sup> P. F. Aylesworth to F. H. Robinson, "Report on Visit to Coffee County Farms, RR-AL-17," p. 1, October 29, 1937, folder "Coffee County RF-AL-17," Box 67, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.



Corporation. But the differences were significant. Clients faced no high interest rates, and work stock and equipment were sold to clients with 3-5 years repayment. Unlike the emphasis on cotton by most landlords, under the rural rehabilitation programs, diversification was obligatory.<sup>147</sup> James G. Maddox, who spent eight years in New Deal farm security agencies and wrote a doctoral dissertation on the subject, claimed that the FSA generally made good progress in raising the standards of living of individual client families.<sup>148</sup>

In the largest economic sense, the FSA did not have much of an impact, except perhaps in its World War II functions when it focused on production at the expense of social change. Its preoccupation with marginal, subsistence agriculture meant that the FSA's real significance came from the impact it had on the thousands of client families and the thousands of communities it influenced.<sup>149</sup> For the tenant-purchase program specifically, the number of loans was simply too small to significantly impact the South or the nation's overall tenancy rates. Instead, the program was most significant in the satisfaction that farm families could take in a varied and reliable diet, in children clothed and schooled, in better health, and in new ambitions and hopes.<sup>150</sup>

Equally important to many observers were the improvements in morale and outlook the FSA created. Raper and Reid noted, "the Farm Security Administration has also generally worked out its benefits on an equitable racial basis," even if "in some communities—particularly where there are big plantations—the national policy is not too obvious." But the "democratic philosophy of the FSA with its rural-rehabilitation program, land-purchase service, and farm

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<sup>147</sup> Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, 174-75.

<sup>148</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," iv, 391-92. Maddox believed that the FSA was only effective as a Depression-era undertaking, and in a period of economic growth and full employment a better strategy would be moving low-income farmers out of chronically impoverished rural areas and into non-agricultural occupations.

<sup>149</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 263.

<sup>150</sup> Reid, "Public Assistance to Low-Income Farmers of the South," 193-94.

communities” is overcoming the old plantation background. They went on: “By demonstrating that the South’s landless people will respond to sympathetic assistance and scientific guidance, and that the money used in such programs is a public investment rather than a public expenditure, the FSA is doing much to free the South of its greatest handicap—lack of faith in its own people.”<sup>151</sup> From the other direction, farm security agents noted time and again the benefits that rural southerners got from knowing that there was a government agency trying to help them through their most difficult financial problems.<sup>152</sup>

Farm security efforts also improved the social life of many rural southerners. One study of seven resettlement projects found that families on the projects were more likely to exchange work and borrow items from other families, which improved their lives materially, but also socially. The report noted that families visiting with one another were also more likely to borrow or exchange work, and vice versa, “thus combining social and economic activities to a greater extent at the time of the study than was the case in the communities of previous residence.”<sup>153</sup> A great deal of social problems resulted from the fact that tenants were so mobile. In the South in particular, some tenant families moved almost yearly in the search for the best line of credit. By getting southern tenants away from soil-depleting crops and by providing either more consistent tenure agreements or the possibility to own land, the farm security efforts tried to encourage a sense of permanence and connection to a particular community.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers All*, 262, 263.

<sup>152</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 392-94.

<sup>153</sup> Charles P. Loomis, *Social Relationships and Institutions in Seven New Rural Communities*, Social Research Report no. 18 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, the Farm Security Administration, and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Cooperating, 1940), 23, 48.

<sup>154</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 188-89.

## CHAPTER 10

### THE RESETTLEMENT COMMUNITIES AROUND BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Georgia Senator Richard H. Russell, speaking in 1941, called the resettlement program a “black eye” for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) while questioning then-administrator Will Alexander about the FSA’s progress in getting rid of the projects as quickly as possible.<sup>1</sup> Years later, one resident of the Palmerdale community near Birmingham, Alabama, Jean Walker, said (in an interview about how she felt about the New Deal project) that “it was good, very good, and I think that everybody that came out here [Palmerdale] really profited by doing so.”<sup>2</sup> These two quotes reflect opposing conclusions about the resettlement program. In one sense, most individual projects and the program as a whole were utter failures. Poorly conceived, most of the early resettlement communities managed to be planned in too great a hurry while at the same time constructed extremely slowly, all at higher costs than expected. Even in the earliest stages, planners, administrators, observers, and residents had different ideas about the goals of the communities and the make-up of their residents. Such problems only exacerbated the controversy surrounding the projects. Consequently, the resettlement program, even though it was only a minor part of the Farm Security Administration’s efforts, was a major part of the reason that the FSA came under attack during World War II. For the administrators of the FSA and its predecessors, resettlement was a financial and political disaster. In Birmingham

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<sup>1</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1941* (1940), 430.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. (Jean) Walker, “G. T. (Jean) Walker, Memoir,” interviewed by Joe Lilly, Oral History Research Office, University of Alabama in Birmingham (April 25, 1981), Mervyn H. Sterne Library, Birmingham, Alabama, 8.

specifically, the projects never lived up to the subsistence farming ideal, and a variety of efforts to improve the lives of residents (like cooperative services) turned out poorly.

At the same time, most residents who stuck through the early difficult years (made difficult in part because of that poor planning and political instability) strongly approved of the program. Homesteaders saw improvements in their housing, diets, and financial situation. Even if they were not successful as subsistence farmers, residents were proud of their communities (pride that still exists in many of the communities to this day) and glad to get a chance for new, better lives for their families. Overall, it is fair to say that, for most resettlement residents (particularly for the Birmingham projects), the communities eventually turned out well, after a few years of instability, uncertainty, and false starts. But by the time that the resettlement programs had overcome those difficult early years, their apparent failures and expenses had irreparably harmed the reputation and political position of the Farm Security Administration as a whole.

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In the 1920s, in contrast with the sagging agriculture in the rest of the state, Birmingham was experiencing unprecedented levels of economic success. Its iron and steel industry were earning the city the title “Pittsburgh of the South,” and even in 1930, U.S. Steel responded to the steadily growing demand for steel, iron, and coke production by investing \$25 million in its subsidiary, Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, which operated in Birmingham.<sup>3</sup> But the city’s economy was fundamentally weak, and the Great Depression showed exactly how much. And,

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas L. Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 12.

like most major cities in the South, Birmingham faced significant urban problems magnified by the city's recent rapid growth.<sup>4</sup>

Birmingham was hit harder by the depression than any major city in the South. Relying so heavily on a single industry, steel, meant that the city's industrial employment was vulnerable to large-scale shocks. Steel production in 1932 dropped to a quarter of its 1929 high. Coal production (heavily dependent on the steel industry) dropped to about a third of the highs of the mid-1920s.<sup>5</sup> In Walker County (just northwest of Jefferson County), which depended heavily on coal mining, employment in 1934 was only 60% of the pre-depression level.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the depression, Birmingham's leadership possessed a traditional perspective on solving social ills: economic growth would be the solution. Jefferson County had legal responsibility for caring for the poor, but its activities before the depression mostly consisted of maintaining an almshouse that a 1928 grand jury had considered unfit for human habitation and running a punitive poor farm. Thus when the depression hit, city leaders had little inclination to play a greater role in public spending and relief, and by the time they were willing to, around 1932, they lacked the funds to do so because of the financial crisis.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, large numbers of Birmingham residents moved out of the city, and more and more people tried their hand at farming – a shift that in part inspired the development of subsistence homesteads. The number of farms in Jefferson County increased from 3,349 in 1930

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<sup>4</sup> Blaine A. Brownell, "Birmingham: New South City in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History* 38.1 (1972): 25, 30-36.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South*, 17-20.

<sup>6</sup> Rutledge, "The Development of the Bankhead Farmsteads Community," 5.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Shannon LaMonte, *Politics and Welfare in Birmingham 1900-1975* (Tuscaloosa; University of Alabama Press, 1995), 69-70, 92-93; James H. Tuten, "Regulating the Poor in Alabama: The Jefferson County Poor Farm, 1885-1945," in *Before the New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 40-60. Unique among major cities in the South, Birmingham had been spending less and less on social needs: between 1921 and 1928, the city's outlay for hospitals, charities, and other social institutions actually declined from 25 cents per person to 20 cents per person, going from a small 1.9% of the city budget to below 1%. On most scales regarding healthcare, education, and similar spending, Birmingham paid little and got less in public services than most other major American cities. See LaMonte, *Politics and Welfare in Birmingham*, 70-72.

to 6,491 in 1935 as families streamed out the city.<sup>8</sup> Nationwide, the number of farmers had risen by half a million, and Birmingham was one of the places where the greatest farm increases took place.<sup>9</sup> As one RA official later explained, “Far from embarking on a new and untried venture, the Resettlement Administration is simply reinforcing, organizing and channeling a spontaneous, unplanned movement of the local population which was already under way.”<sup>10</sup>

Subsistence homesteads planners believed that workers had fallen on tough times as a direct result of the depression but also because of larger changes like mechanization. While in previous years industrial work had been constant, in the early 1930s, it was intermittent and things appeared to be getting worse. If such conditions could befall steel, “one of the great basic industries,” as the project book for the Palmerdale homesteads explained, it could happen anywhere and last for many years. The expected periods of “idleness and leisure” resulting from a lack of industrial employment could be filled, homesteader supporters claimed, by farming. Further, home ownership, which was “sadly lacking” among industrial and even white-collar workers in the region, would promote stability, education, culture, and a whole host of other improvements to the lives of the homesteaders. And while Birmingham was currently in bad economic shape, planners emphasized that the steel industry would continue to be important and

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<sup>8</sup> Kollmorgen, “The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham,” *A Place on Earth*, 65-66; Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> John Beecher, “Suburban Resettlement in the Birmingham Industrial District,” Folder “85-060 Projects (General Information Only) July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 2, Records of the Resettlement Division, Correspondence Relating to Proposed Projects, 1934-1941 (Entry 95), Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia. This increase represented an 8% increase in the number of American farmers between 1930 and 1935.

<sup>10</sup> John Beecher, “Suburban Resettlement in the Birmingham Industrial District,” Folder “85-060 Projects (General Information Only) July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939,” Box 2, Records of the Resettlement Division, Correspondence Relating to Proposed Projects, 1934-1941 (Entry 95), Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia.

provide at least some income for many workers; the government would not simply be throwing money away on a hopeless situation.<sup>11</sup>

Birmingham and the city of Jasper obtained approval for five projects, likely reflecting Senator John Bankhead's influence.<sup>12</sup> The first application, for the Jefferson County homesteads, was approved and a local corporation was organized in December 1933. Erskine Ramsay, a Birmingham industrialist and philanthropist, was elected its president, and the corporation received a loan \$750,000 dollars.<sup>13</sup> J. K. Liles, a Jefferson County extension agent, acted as manager of the company.<sup>14</sup> Soil surveys began soon after, and the tracts around Birmingham were tentatively selected in late December 1933, out of more than seventy considered by the committee and reviewed by FERA surveyors. Planners hoped to begin developing the project in January and perhaps get occupants in early spring.<sup>15</sup> Under the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, the emphasis was (at least at first) on decentralization. To encourage local control for the Birmingham area communities, two corporations were formed, one in Jefferson County and one in Walker County, to direct the projects. Sites were selected by committees of local citizens from Jefferson and Walker Counties. These committees were selected by M. L. Wilson, head of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, and many became members of the first local

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<sup>11</sup> "Economic and Social Merits of Proposed Project," pp. 2-3, 5, 22, in "200 – Plans – Project Book AL-3," Box 10, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>12</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 111; Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 15-16. Bankhead was not only the only notable supporter, as other influential people in and around Birmingham appreciated the difficult local conditions and the need for some sort of aid program for the city's residents. Other sponsors included Victor Henry Hanson, president of the Birmingham News Publishing Company; Robert Jemison, Jr., president of Jemison and Co., Inc.; and Hugh Morrow, president of Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron. "Biographical Sketch of Sponsors of Birmingham Homesteads Project," in "Subsistence Garden Homestead Project in Birmingham, Alabama," Folder "Alabama No. 3 Birmingham 310," Box 22, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>13</sup> E. Richardson, "Birmingham Homesteads Project #1 Summary of Studies and Reports Jefferson County, Alabama," n.p., June 28, 1935, Folder "Alabama No. 3 Birmingham 310," Box 22, Project Records, RG 96, NACP; "Homestead Body Organized Here," *Birmingham News*, January 1, 1934.

<sup>14</sup> Mildred Moore McCrimmon Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood: The History of a Subsistence Homesteads Project and Its People* (Montevallo, Alabama: Times Printing Company[, 1990]), 8.

<sup>15</sup> "Homestead Soil Surveys Begun," *Birmingham News*, December 21, 1933; "Four Tracts Picked by Homestead Body," *Birmingham News*, December 24, 1933.

corporations.<sup>16</sup> On January 9, 1934, FERA regional director Oscar Dugger (the owner and publisher of the *Andalusia Star*) announced that the Birmingham Homesteads, Inc., was officially organized and in operation.<sup>17</sup> A few days later, J. L. Miles, the manager for the corporation, announced that family selection would soon begin and that application blanks would be distributed soon, following approval from Washington.<sup>18</sup> The five Birmingham-area projects were named Palmerdale, Mount Olive (also known as the Gardendale Project), Greenwood, Cahaba, and Bankhead Farms.

Observers believed that Palmerdale Homesteads, located 19 miles northeast of Birmingham, had the best chance for farming success. The rolling, loamy soil had been used primarily for dairy farming, truck crops, and poultry farms in recent years and was considered perhaps the best agricultural land of the Birmingham-area projects.<sup>19</sup> But it took a bit of time to get what had been known as the “Kent-Cannon” tract prepared because Cannon Dairy, the previous owner, was slow to move. This delayed everything; for example, the Homesteads Corporation intended to use existing fencing material for development work and to use the existing residence as a storage house and a field office in order to save money. But at the end of July 1934, those fences still enclosed the Cannon pastures, and Mr. Cannon still lived in the house.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, the project came to include 102 units in two parts: Palmer, having 60 units, and Palmerdale, with 42, together on 689 acres.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 18. Photographs of the communities can be found in Birmingham Historical Society, *Digging out of the Great Depression*, 50-65.

<sup>17</sup> “Homestead Body Organized Here,” *Birmingham News*, January 10, 1934.

<sup>18</sup> “Homesteads to Be Chosen,” *Birmingham Post*, January 19, 1934.

<sup>19</sup> “Procedure Manual,” [1936?], Box 19, Project Records, RG 96, NACP; Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> F. G. Morris to Mr. Dugger and Mr. Liles, July 30, 1934, Folder “OS-ERA-SH-AL-2 (210) Title,” Box 1, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>21</sup> Will W. Alexander, “Memorandum for the Secretary,” October 2, 1939, Folder “Farm Security 2 Projects,” Box 3019, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.



Bankhead Farms, located five miles north of Jasper and 40 miles northwest of Birmingham, eventually covered 2,096 acres and consisted of 100 homesteads, along with apartment buildings, a park, and a community building/school. Each homestead was wired for electricity and had a frame barn and an individual well. Applicants came from those employed in local lumber mills, coal mines, and textile mills. The project began on January 13, 1934, when \$92,000 was allotted for the project, but construction did not commence until the end of January 1935.<sup>22</sup>

Greenwood Homesteads was composed of 83 units about five miles southwest of Bessemer, Alabama.<sup>23</sup> It was originally the Martin Farm, a plantation-type operation employing about twenty black families who lived in houses on site and received their pay in scrip for use at the Martin Commissary (and who, like other black Birmingham residents, would not be eligible to live in the new homestead community). The depression hit the Martin family hard, and they sold their land in May 1934 to the Birmingham Subsistence Homesteads Corporation.<sup>24</sup> Greenwood's 402 acres appeared to be a good deal at the relatively low price of \$20,000 (or \$50 an acre), but much of the land was useless for farming. The soil that was suitable for cultivation was badly eroded, and the homestead corporation had to drain, terrace, and improve much of the land. Even then, the first homesteaders had to invest in intensive soil improvement before good yields were possible. Much of the land was never good enough to be used for anything but pasture.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Project History Jasper Homesteads MH-AL-12 Walker County, Alabama," pp. 1-4, Folder "Jasper Homesteads (MH-AL-12) Walker County, Alabama," Box 31, Project Records, RG 96, NACP; Milo Perkins, "Memorandum for the Secretary," July 16, 1938, Folder "Farm Security 2 (Projects)," Box 2783, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>23</sup> Resettlement Administration Construction Division, "Greenwood, Jefferson County, Alabama, SH-AL-5 Region V," Box 26, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>24</sup> Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 1-4.

<sup>25</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 20.

About ten miles away from the center of Birmingham, Mount Olive in Gardendale was intended as a workers' subsistence garden. It was perhaps the least promising of the projects around Birmingham. Not only was it relatively far from Birmingham, but the hilly land made it difficult to farm. The soil on its 512 acres was sandy and easily worked, but it was prone to leaching nutrients, and heavy fertilization proved necessary. Residents complained that their farms missed summer showers, as its valley location made the site a relatively dry pocket north of Birmingham.<sup>26</sup> Despite its apparent shortcomings, once actually underway, the Mount Olive project went well. Managers began accepting applicants on April 16, 1936, and quickly received far more applicants than houses available; only delays in construction and processing applications, and problems with the houses, slowed occupation. By August 1, 1937, every available house had been assigned.<sup>27</sup>

The Cahaba Project, near city of Trussville, was about 16 miles east of Birmingham. It sat on 810 acres formerly known as "Slagheap Village," which had old mill houses and slag heaps that had to be removed before construction began.<sup>28</sup> It cost about \$109,000, or \$135 per acre, a fairly high price considering that the land was entirely unsuited to subsistence-style farming.<sup>29</sup> From the beginning, Cahaba (unlike the other four projects) was a residential suburb for the fairly well off: almost half of its houses, for example, were either brick or brick and frame construction. A majority of the houses had five rooms, and all had baths, porches, and a garage.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

<sup>27</sup> Resettlement Administration Management Division, "Semi-Monthly Report on Progress of Family Selection," April 1, 1937, through September 1, 1937, Folder SH-AL-4," Box 23, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>28</sup> Farm Security Administration, "Official Name: Cahaba" (untitled report), no date, Folder "85-163-01 Articles & Press Releases, Jan. 1939 thru April, 1939," Box 2, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>29</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Farm Security Administration, "Official Name: Cahaba" (untitled report), no date, Folder "85-163-01 Articles & Press Releases, Jan. 1939 thru April, 1939," Box 2, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE; Marion W. Ormond, "Marion W. Ormond Memoir," interviewed by Bob Haynes, Oral History Research

Looking at these projects, sponsors were optimistic about the possibilities for immediate results – in the summer of 1934, for example, John H. Bankhead wrote the director of the Subsistence Homesteads Division with plans to start producing tomatoes for the fall.<sup>31</sup> Planners hoped that the land would need very little clearing, as most of it had been at some point cultivated in the previous few years. Given the existing trend in subsistence homesteading and community gardening in Birmingham, optimistic supporters believed that the government would only be building on what industrial leaders in Jefferson County already encouraged.<sup>32</sup> Most supporters and planners were completely unprepared for the variety of obstacles the projects would have to overcome.

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In June 1934, the Secretary of the Interior called for the dissolution of the local subsistence homesteads corporations, and administration of the projects became centralized in Washington. Distant control meant additional delays and confusion.<sup>33</sup> Regional Supervisor Oscar M. Dugger became most directly responsible for the Birmingham homesteads. Between July and November of 1934, the Subsistence Homesteads Corporation carried out additional surveys of the soil, topography, layout, and others necessities.<sup>34</sup> Between approval of the purchase and finalizing the sale, the projects were federalized. Completing the purchase was a struggle – with

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Office, University of Alabama in Birmingham (April 17, 1981), Mervyn H. Sterne Library, Birmingham, Alabama, 2.

<sup>31</sup> John H. Bankhead, Jr., to Charles E. Pynchon, July 26, 1934, Folder 5, Box 4, Bankhead Papers.

<sup>32</sup> “Subsistence Garden Homestead Project in Birmingham, Alabama,” Folder “Alabama No. 3 Birmingham 310,” Box 22, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>33</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 130-32.

<sup>34</sup> E. Richardson, “Birmingham Homesteads Project #1 Summary of Studies and Reports Jefferson County, Alabama,” June 28, 1935, Folder “Alabama No. 3 Birmingham 310,” Box 22, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

administrative changes and unclear ownership, attorney Philip M. Glick noted, “more than 100 different instruments needed to be secured in order to clear up the title.”<sup>35</sup>

The Birmingham Homesteads did not get off to a quick or impressive start. For example, Palmerdale, Mount Olive, and Greenwood required substantial terracing due to their hilly topography. The Jefferson County Soil Conservation Association helped terrace approximately 600 acres, requiring the construction of 70 miles of terrace lines and 6,000 feet of outlet ditches, plus 3,000 square feet of Bermuda sod to control terrace drop outlets and ditches.<sup>36</sup> As a result of these kinds of delays, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads completed only 84 houses in the Birmingham-Jasper projects, 24 at Bankhead and 60 at Palmerdale. These houses were built at about \$2,000 each, initially considered a good deal. It turned out, however, that they were too cheaply constructed: the floors proved cold, pipes froze, and improper weathering allowed rain to seep into the side walls and ruin the inside finish of the homes. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads did not survive long enough to see even this modest success come to fruition; the RA officially opened the homes at Bankhead on September 1, 1935, and at Palmerdale on November 1, more than two years after Roosevelt authorized the Secretary of the Interior to begin the projects.<sup>37</sup>

When Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration in 1935, it took responsibility for most of the federal government’s community-building efforts. The RA’s Resettlement Division took over more than thirty subsistence homestead projects from Department of Interior, including the Birmingham-area homesteads, and roughly equal number from FERA. These

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<sup>35</sup> Philip M. Glick, “Memorandum for Mr. Jenkins,” September 1, 1934, Folder “OS-ERA-SH-AL-2 (210) Title,” Box 1, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>36</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 27-28. See also Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 29; FDR, Executive Order 6209, 1933.

included projects encompassing entire communities as well as individual families settled into already established communities (the “infiltration” or “scattered farmsteads” projects).<sup>38</sup>

The move to the RA, the second step in centralizing the subsistence homesteads (after the federalization of the projects under FERA) had confusing results. Most notably, the line of command was unclear. The Birmingham area projects, for example, were subject to the Management Division, the Construction Division, and the regional office in Montgomery, meaning that at least three lines of authority existed around the creation of the projects after the RA took over.<sup>39</sup> The RA also faced the problem of the necessity of using relief work. A former Land Use Planning Section Chief for Region V, which contained the Birmingham homesteads, described the process at its worst: development work went to the Work Division of the FERA, which then procured the relief labor necessary. The assumption was that the allocated money for land and improvements would pay the cost of labor. But in many cases, money ran out before improvements were finished, and work ran over well into planting season. When the money ran out, the workers moved on to a new job with new funds. The client moved into a half-finished house or a farm with no outbuildings already several weeks or months behind in preparations for the crop year.<sup>40</sup>

As the difficulties with relief work indicates, many of the problems with resettlement could not be entirely laid at the feet of the RA or its leadership. The reputation for confusion, delay, and bureaucracy that the RA developed resulted in large part from requirements from other parts of government. Subsistence homesteads, “already under such fierce attack that its organizers were frankly seeking cover” (as Tugwell described it), was another agency’s mess

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<sup>38</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 4; R. G. Tugwell, “What About Resettlement?: Sweep of Task Ahead and How Extension Can Help,” *Extension Service Review* 7.3 (March 1936): 35-36.

<sup>39</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Clarence A. Wiley, “Settlement and Unsettlement in the Resettlement Administration Program,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 466-67.

that the RA had to clean up.<sup>41</sup> The worst offenders, like Arthurdale in West Virginia, had not been started under the RA, but the agency nevertheless received criticism for Arthurdale's failures and alleged "evasion of the law" in its funding.<sup>42</sup>

When the Resettlement Administration took over the homesteads around Birmingham on May 15, 1935, planning was well along, except at Cahaba. However, little in the way of actual construction had been done – the first units begun at Palmerdale and Bankhead were not even completed. The RA's Construction and Management Division took over completing projects already in process, including the Birmingham homesteads. The Construction Division did the building, generally with better results than that done under the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. But it did so at higher costs, requiring additional money. The Management Division of the RA was responsible for continued supervision for the project, including assigning applicants to their homes and providing agricultural assistance. In addition to the houses, the RA built roads, a store, and a combined school and community center for each community. At Greenwood, planners constructed a central water system. Houses ended up averaging about \$6,500 each in Greenwood, Mount Olive, and Palmerdale. The Bankhead Farms homes were the most expensive, about \$7,200 each, as they were generally slightly larger than houses at the other Birmingham homesteads.<sup>43</sup>

In doing most of the construction of the projects, the Resettlement Administration also selected most of the families who would live in them. RA Community Managers oversaw or worked with family selection specialists who helped select client families and then moved on. It was to a degree a decentralized process: local administrators and experts on the ground, RA leaders believed, would do a better job of understanding the issues on a particular project than

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<sup>41</sup> Tugwell, "The Resettlement Idea," 162.

<sup>42</sup> "In Defiance of Law," *Washington Post*, September 22, 1935.

<sup>43</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 32-34, 132-35.

the Washington office could.<sup>44</sup> The national office did set some standards regarding training; family selection personnel usually had to have graduated from an approved college or its equivalent plus possess a certain amount of training in social service, and experience in relief, rehabilitation, or similar social agencies, along with a solid knowledge of farm life and its problems.<sup>45</sup>

Although the selection process was local, the national office set the tone for the kind of family that would be selected. Applications for the subsistence homesteads were generally only accepted from families making less than \$1,600 a year. Each family was considered according to its prospects of economic stability, health, age, number of children in family, and similar concerns.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, applications were very detailed – Cahaba residents joked about having to count out how many pillowcases the family had before getting approved.<sup>47</sup> RA administrators wanted to approve the most capable of the poor. Since applicants from this group often lacked anything like the traditional notion of “credit history,” RA administrators instead focused on “credit character,” the personality and integrity of a family in, say, paying bills when due. These were the kind of families that would do whatever necessary to make payment.<sup>48</sup> The ideal applicant family had that personal integrity and some (but not too much) income to ensure a good start. As one resident remembered when her family was chosen for the initial 60 homes at Palmerdale, Alabama, in 1935, “Our main credentials were character, being a family, being

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<sup>44</sup> Dr. Wendell Lund, “Family Selection in the Management Division,” pp. 9-11, December 12, 1935, Folder 161-Speeches,” Box 11, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>45</sup> Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, 44-45.

<sup>46</sup> Senate, *Resettlement Administration Program*, 22-23.

<sup>47</sup> “Ormond Memoir,” 4.

<sup>48</sup> Dr. Wendell Lund, “Family Selection in the Management Division,” pp. 4-6, December 12, 1935, Folder 161-Speeches,” Box 11, Rural Rehabilitation General Correspondence, RG 96, NACP.

employed because they did want someone out here who could start making payments on the homes back to the government.”<sup>49</sup>

When the RA moved to the USDA in early 1937 and then became the FSA in the fall of that year, the real concern about the resettlement communities was management. Much construction remained to be done – when the resettlement program was transferred in the fall of 1937, only 38 projects had completed construction.<sup>50</sup> But FSA administrators were mainly preoccupied with two issues: managing the homesteads already completed and selling them to residents.

The biggest problem in managing the homesteads was residential turnover, as approved applicants sometimes decided they did not like the management, farming, or some other element of life on a subsistence homestead. The Birmingham homesteads solved this problem in part by ignoring it. The regional FSA office in Montgomery appears to have paid little attention to the Birmingham project; instead the community managers made policy. The result was a less fiscally-sound operation as homeowners who fell behind on rent, for example, were not evicted, but were given a new schedule of payments. This meant, however, that once the process of self-selection was finished – that is, once the considerable number of residents who decided not to live in the communities for their own reasons had moved away (amounting to perhaps a bit over half the total number of families in any particular project) – the communities achieved a measure of stability.<sup>51</sup>

The FSA also oversaw the sale of the homesteads to residents, which it accomplished via homestead boards. It was clear from the beginning that the Birmingham homesteads would not

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<sup>49</sup> “Walker Memoir,” 2.

<sup>50</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 214-16.

<sup>51</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 136-40; Harding, “The Record of the Subsistence Homesteads,” 500; Jack House, “547 Homesteaders in District Now Enjoy More Abundant Life.” *Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, May 9, 1943.



pay for themselves, nor even come close. Except for Cahaba, which could be operated profitably as a rental project, the Birmingham projects would “have a substantial write-off in their capital cost in order to meet the income group for which they are built,” the Director of the FSA’s Resettlement Division, J. O. Walker, told Will Alexander in 1938.<sup>52</sup> Delays only increased the costs and homesteader unhappiness (the first people who moved to the projects did so under the impression that they would get the selling price within the year and then have the chance to buy their lots, but it actually took four and a half years for the first selling price and sales contracts to be announced). The process of selling the Birmingham homesteads to residents began in 1938, when the local homestead board purchased Bankhead Farms and most of the occupants signed purchasing contracts for their homesteads. Palmerdale, Mount Olive, and Greenwood followed in 1940. Most administrative problems were resolved by these boards, which were made up of local homesteaders; they and occupants were collectively responsible for total rent and purchase payments of all the units.<sup>53</sup>

FSA leadership wanted to influence the homesteads after the purchase, though their efforts to do so did not last. One idea was to allow the homestead associations to purchase the projects with the understanding that they would only have to make payments and accrue interest when the associations had received sufficient rental payments to do so. Officially, the RA would

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<sup>52</sup> J. O. Walker, “Memorandum for Dr. W. W. Alexander,” May 31, 1938, Folder “A,” Box 2, Farmers Home Administration, General Correspondence, 1935-42, Record Group 96, NACP.

<sup>53</sup> Kollmorgen, “The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham,” *A Place on Earth*, 78; Clarence I. Blau, “Memorandum for Mr. C. B. Baldwin,” March 17, 1941, Folder “Farm Security 3 Projects,” Box 292, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP; Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 140-41; “Government Offers County Homestead Projects for Sale,” *Birmingham News*, January 30, 1940; Finance Division, FSA, “Report on Examination, SH-AL 4, Mount Olive, Jefferson County, Alabama, Rental Accounts for the Period May 15, 1935 to April 30, 1940,” Folder OS-ERA-SH-AL-4 (460) Mount Olive Homesteads,” Box 2, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP; Finance Division, FSA, “Report on Examination, Greenwood Homesteads, SH-AL 5, Bessemer, Jefferson County, Alabama, Rental and Utility Accounts for the Period May 15, 1935 to April 30, 1940,” Folder OS-ERA-SH-AL-5 (460) Greenwood Homesteads Audit,” Box 2, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP; Finance Division, FSA, “Report on Examination, Bankhead Farms, SH-AL 13, Jasper, Walker County, Alabama, Rental Accounts for the Period May 15, 1935 to September 30, 1938,” Folder “OS-ERA-SH-AL-13 (460) Bankhead Farms,” Box 3, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

make such allowances to protect the homestead associations from a shortage of money due to vacancy, unemployment, or illness. But it would also draw out the repayment schedule and make the homestead associations more dependent on the FSA. The USDA's Solicitor's Office nixed this idea as legally impermissible, given that it effectively relieved the association of the requirement to make payments.<sup>54</sup>

Another policy, one quite unpopular with residents, allowed additional monthly payments but withheld full title to the units until after twenty years of occupancy. The policy had its purposes; it preserved the strength of the homestead associations and secured many of the benefits of zoning and regular subdivision restriction. Administrators feared that full ownership without adoption of special regulations might result in new construction like unsightly barns or hog shelters, commercial poultry houses, or cheap quarters for black workers (several of whom lived in barns and structures without sanitary facilities in Palmerdale when the sales contracts were announced). The boards also wanted to avoid speculation, which would be probable and be heavily criticized because the sale prices were not based solely on construction costs. This proved to be a controversial decision, however, condemned both by residents and members of Congress. Homesteaders, naturally, wanted full title to the land they occupied and had paid off in its entirety. Congressional critics saw a transparent ploy by the FSA to keep homesteaders dependent on the agency (which was true, to an extent) and to maintain government control of the farms as part of a scheme to further the socialization of American agriculture (which was not quite as valid a criticism).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> J. O. Walker, "Memorandum for the Solicitor," June 20, 1938, Folder "S-ERA-SH-AL-13 (922-05) Transfer of Assets," Box 3, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP; Mastin G. White, "Memorandum for Dr. Will W. Alexander," June 29, 1938, Folder "S-ERA-SH-AL-13 (922-05) Transfer of Assets," Box 3, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>55</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 80; House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1616-30, 1653-57, 1691-93.

As the FSA slowly conveyed the homesteads to new owners, the United States' entry into World War II reduced the need for subsistence farming and the homestead communities. By the summer of 1944, most Birmingham homesteaders were working full-time and even overtime. Some young men joined the military. In many cases, women also found jobs; Palmerdale residents, for example, went to work as nurses, truck drivers, and industrial workers, among other things.<sup>56</sup> Local farmers who had acted as hired labor for the homesteaders found themselves with more work than they could handle. There was less available farm labor in and around Birmingham than there had been in years, if not decades. In addition to a shortage of labor, war industry created a shortage of equipment. Cooperative farm service equipment went to the military, war industries, or other agricultural pursuits where the need was greater.<sup>57</sup> World War II demands did encourage some families to start gardening, but that could not overcome the other factors working against full use of the land for subsistence farming.<sup>58</sup> As a result, only about 20% of homesteaders had all of their land in intensive use in 1944; about 17% had their land in no agriculture use, and another 15% had only a garden.<sup>59</sup> Cooperatives faced similar problems; the Palmerdale cooperative's mules, for example, became too expensive to keep soon after World War II began, because so few residents could farm or garden with any regularity, and they had to be sold.<sup>60</sup> War also undermined the projects as communities, as residents were drafted or left for defense-industry jobs.<sup>61</sup>

The homesteads also lost administrative support after a presidential order moved them to the Federal Public Housing Authority (FHPA) on October 1, 1942. The Birmingham office

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<sup>56</sup> June Gilliland Andrews, *A Palmerdale Tale* [Palmerdale, Alabama: Self-Published, 1995], 116.

<sup>57</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 93.

<sup>58</sup> "Ormond Memoir," 11-12.

<sup>59</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 97.

<sup>60</sup> "Walker Memoir," 10.

<sup>61</sup> "Ormond Memoir," 10.

stayed the same, with the same community manager being renamed the area adviser.<sup>62</sup> But the FPHA was not a rural or farming-oriented organization; it was concerned with housing and the sale of the projects to the homestead associations. Its policy was to keep prices down and get the projects ready for self-management. The FSA continued to supervise the cooperative associations on the transferred projects until June 30, 1943. Farm and home management assistance also continued for some clients. But generally, the projects began to move away from influence or control by the federal government; after the Birmingham area office closed on August 20, 1944, the homesteads had no direct connection with Washington. The FPHA instead functioned primarily to audit the homesteads, insuring that they were more or less paid up and that the houses were well maintained by their tenants.<sup>63</sup>

This transition did not go terribly smoothly, and the FPHA does not appear to have been a successful or conscientious auditor. By the time its successor, the Public Housing Administration (PHA), went about figuring out exactly what it had responsibility for after World War II, the cooperatives had effectively come to an end. Francis Brill, of the PHA's Finance and Accounts Division, tried to determine the exact conditions of the industrial and subsistence cooperatives. He found the records barely usable and "in a deplorable condition. Some of the records located there are not even in cabinets. It appears that they were placed at random on the tops of boxes and cabinets [...] it would take one person weeks to completely inventory the records, check the subsidiaries, and general certify whether or not the books are posted to date." Brill found that some records from the FSA, by then the Farmers Home Administration, had never even been sent to the PHA (including the records of the Bankhead, Cahaba, and Palmerdale cooperatives). The records that were in the PHA's possession (like those from Mount

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<sup>62</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 142.

<sup>63</sup> "Annual Report of the Administrator, Farm Security Administration, 1941-42," 18; Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 143-46.

Olive) had simply lay in storage. Only those that had been kept by residents or local employees, like those at Greenwood, were mostly kept up.<sup>64</sup>

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Resettlement was plagued a variety of problems, the most obvious of which was political. Resettlement was the most controversial aspect of farm security. One congressional report described the FSA, “beginning with the administration of Rexford G. Tugwell and continuing throughout the administration of C. B. Baldwin” (conveniently skipping the more popular Will Alexander) as “financing communistic resettlement projects, where the families could never own homes or be paid for all that they made or for all the time that they worked.”<sup>65</sup> W. T. Frazier wrote that “the Resettlement projects have provoked more criticisms of the FSA than any other” program; this was despite the fact that resettlement was not the largest part of the FSA’s efforts, and that resettlement families were fewer than 2% of those served by the agency.<sup>66</sup> The resettlement program even pushed away some FSA supporters – Bankhead, for example, became a less vocal supporter of the FSA for a number of reasons during World War II, but his disappointment with the subsistence homesteads around Birmingham could not have strengthened his commitment.

The resettlement program was a political disaster despite the care taken by FSA administrators. The cautious approach by the FSA and its predecessors to the issue of race is a good example. Many employees, perhaps most notably Will Alexander, worked hard to ensure that FSA benefits, as much as possible, benefited black and white equally. But the FSA never

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<sup>64</sup> Francis E. Brill to Kurt M. Loewy, Subject “Status of Accounting Records for Industrial Co-operative Associations,” January 16, 1948, Folder “Subsistence Homesteads,” Box 1, Records Relating to Subsistence Homesteads and the PHA’s Rural Housing Programs (NC-196-80-01) (Entry 54), in Records of the Public Housing Administration (Record Group 196), National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

<sup>65</sup> House, *Activities of the FSA*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> W. T. Frazier, *Farm Security Administration, Volume I*, no date; Box 3, FSA Historical Record, RG 96, NACP.

directly confronted the Jim Crow South. In some cases, including during the construction of the Cahaba community, black families were forced to move off of land and out of homes which were often destroyed so that homes for white residents could be constructed.<sup>67</sup> The resettled communities were segregated, either officially or in practice. At Palmerdale, for example, the procedure book announced officially that selection of applicants did not discriminate based on “race, nationality, or creed,” however, planners did say that “consideration will be given to the homogeneity within the group.”<sup>68</sup> The result was an all-white community.

There was some discussion that one of the sites around Birmingham to be used for a homestead project for African Americans, but such a plan never got off the ground; the fear was, as Oscar Dugger put it, that such an effort would “invite antagonism” and threaten the other projects.<sup>69</sup> As all of the sites were located in white areas anyway, switching them to a black clientele was not politically realistic. The Board of Directors of the Birmingham Homesteads instead adopted a fairly meaningless resolution for the Division of Subsistence Homesteads to authorize a black homestead project around Birmingham “at the earliest possible convenience.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, around the country a number of proposed black communities were canceled due to the protests of local white residents.<sup>71</sup>

Administrators also left much to be desired in their individual relationships with both black and white resettlement clients who had been approved. James L. McCamy, Assistant to the Secretary of the USDA, remembered noticing on the part of local supervisors “an unconscious

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<sup>67</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 201-02. See also Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 112-113, 183-86. This New Deal tendency was not limited to FERA and its successors – see Michael J. McDonald and John Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area* (Knoxville; University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> “Procedure Manual,” [1936?], Box 19, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>69</sup> Oscar M. Dugger to M. L. Wilson, March 12, 1934, Folder “030 Birmingham – General,” Box 17, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>70</sup> “Excerpt from Minutes of Meeting of Birmingham Homesteads, Inc., March 8, 1934, Folder “030 Birmingham – General,” Box 17, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>71</sup> Holley, “The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program,” 179-93; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 279-86.

but obvious lack of regard for the dignity of the farmers who had gotten loans from FSA” when he toured resettlement communities in Mississippi and Arkansas in 1939.<sup>72</sup> Some of this was a racist tendency to dismiss African Americans, but much more was simply thoughtlessness. On one instance McCamy, Regional Director Roy Reid, and Henry Wallace visited the home of a borrower. They were followed by “seven shining black cars [...] each filled with a complement of officials.”<sup>73</sup> The very uncomfortable farmer being visited was then peppered with questions on how the program was going. In another case, a Mississippi project manager and six other men tramped mud across a freshly washed porch and into an unprepared woman’s home; the local manager later responded to complaints by insisting that “the more you gave these clients the more they fussed and the harder it was to get them to cooperate.”<sup>74</sup>

Race- and class-based prejudices and poor administration created problems for the resettlement program in general, but the different resettlement projects ran into trouble for several reasons. None of the five Birmingham-area projects, for example, met their original objectives. One issue involved the size of the homesteads; decisions about who would be residents had particular importance for deciding on acreage allotments for each community, which depended on the type of homesteader on each project. Administrators faced questions of how many acres low-income industrial workers could really operate, how much part-time could be devoted to farming, and how to accommodate full-time but low-income workers. Decisions had to be made before answers could be found, and the result was a poor allocation of land. Initial expectations, generally, had been that less than half of the occupants in the four projects

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<sup>72</sup> James L. McCamy, “We Need More Personalized Administration,” *Public Administration Readings and Documents*, ed. Felix A. Nigro (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1951): 467.

<sup>73</sup> McCamy, “We Need More Personalized Administration,” 467.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

around Birmingham would be white-collar workers, and that these would be low-salary and part-time employees, but this did not turn out to be the case.<sup>75</sup>

Bankhead Farms, for example, was planned for irregularly employed miners, so its occupants were expected to have a rounded subsistence farming program with units of 9-25 acres, the average being 20 acres. Coal miners found the location bad and the rent high, so instead middle-income families moved in. While some had good gardens, only a few used all of their land profitably. Those residents who did have a full, effective farm did so by hiring labor or occasionally a son or grandson, and the homesteader did little work beyond the garden. Bankhead Farms fell between two stools, too large to be effectively used for intensive, part-time cultivation but too small for commercial agriculture with hired labor.<sup>76</sup>

The other industrial-subsistence projects at Palmerdale, Greenwood, and Mount Olive had similar problems. At first, most occupants appeared to be the underemployed working-class who might follow through with subsistence farming out of necessity; about two-thirds of the first sixty families selected for Palmerdale, for example, were industrial or manual laborers.<sup>77</sup> But this apparent need to farm did not translate into the ability to do so successfully. Residents at Greenwood, largely unemployed or underemployed TCI workers, had little knowledge of agriculture, despite the fact that a rural background was supposed to be a requirement for all applicants. Allegedly one farmer destroyed his entire corn crop and instead cultivated Johnson

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<sup>75</sup> "Homestead Plans Near Completion," *Birmingham News*, January 18, 1934; Bob Kinsey, "Palmer Station Project to Offer Opportunity to Obtain Homes," *Birmingham News*, August 12, 1934

<sup>76</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 67-70.

<sup>77</sup> John Beecher, "Suburban Resettlement in the Birmingham Industrial District," Folder "85-060 Projects (General Information Only) July, 1938 thru Dec., 1939," Box 2, Records of the Resettlement Division, Correspondence Relating to Proposed Projects, 1934-1941 (Entry 95), Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia.



grass, a common weed that resembles young corn stalks.<sup>78</sup> A Cahaba resident knew so little about farming that he failed to weed his first garden.<sup>79</sup>

The suburban Cahaba project strayed far from the subsistence ideal. Its plots had much smaller acreages for gardens or orchards on a fraction of an acre. Planners expected that the owners would have subsistence gardens and orchards, but few did, since the typical resident was a white-collar worker with an average yearly income high enough (\$1,800-\$2,000) to practically eliminate any need for gardening. Those who did keep good gardens considered it a leisure activity or a hobby, not a foundation for economic well-being.<sup>80</sup> Most of the residents by 1940 were middle class, working in Birmingham; they could have lived comfortably in Birmingham, but at Cahaba the rent was about half of what it would be in the city.<sup>81</sup> Marion Ormond, for example, was an office worker employed by the federal government; she worked in downtown Birmingham in the accounting department.<sup>82</sup>

The Birmingham-area homesteads were inconvenient for working-class residents. To save money, the homesteads board wanted to buy land cheaply (at less than \$100 per acre) and in large (400 or more acres) tracts, which eliminated many sites close to the city. This also meant, as Table 2 indicates, that many of the projects ended up quite far away from Birmingham's major industrial centers. Many mining operations were spread out across the area, and job opportunities outside of the industrial centers were scattered. As a result, most people could not carpool to work. Public transportation hardly solved the problem. Palmerdale, for example, had bus service, but irregularly so; one resident remembered the "Blue Goose," the privately owned bus that first served the community, being unable to navigate the community's bad roads during

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<sup>78</sup> Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> "Ormond Memoir," 11.

<sup>80</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 71.

<sup>81</sup> George Nagel, "Cahaba Village – a Dwelling for Neither the Rich nor Poor," *Birmingham News*, March 29, 1940.

<sup>82</sup> "Ormond Memoir," 1-2.

heavy rain, with the result that the bus driver had to get out and walk to pick up passengers and bring them back to the bus.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Greenwood faced a delay in getting paved roads, and the dirt roads were frequently in such bad shape (particularly in the rainy first year) that no car or bus, including the school bus, could get there.<sup>84</sup> Residents who owned automobiles discovered that the new dirt driveways were prone to trapping cars.<sup>85</sup> Three out of five families who had left the project by May 1944 cited financial problems or living costs, employment, and the location or transportation costs of the homesteads as their reasons for leaving.<sup>86</sup>

*Table 2: Distance in Miles to Industrial Centers from Birmingham Homesteads*<sup>87</sup>

|             | Cahaba | Palmerdale | Mt. Olive | Greenwood |
|-------------|--------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Birmingham  | 15     | 21         | 14        | 18        |
| North B'ham | 16     | 19         | 10        | 22        |
| Tarrant     | 14     | 15         | 12        | 23        |
| Fairfield   | 18     | 27         | 18        | 11        |
| Hueytown    | 32     | 37         | 31        | 6         |
| Woodward    | 29     | 34         | 28        | 8         |
| Brighton    | 27     | 32         | 26        | 10        |
| Bessemer    | 32     | 40         | 30        | 5         |
| Ensley      | 20     | 25         | 14        | 13        |

The homesteaders, then, had good reasons for not living up to the early objectives of the program. They needed cash income, for example, because of transportation costs and other

<sup>83</sup> Andrews, *A Palmerdale Tale*, 41.

<sup>84</sup> Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> "Walker Memoir," 5.

<sup>86</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 61.

<sup>87</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 68.

expenses, so they could never devote sufficient time to subsistence farming. But then too, homesteaders never really understood the goals or nature of subsistence farming. They never shook their old habits, in particular the ideal of hiring help and the idea that the field is particularly the place for African Americans. Farmers who could afford to (and many who could not) shifted as much as possible to black labor. Families with monthly incomes over \$100 considered a black servant and aides indispensable. Since most occupants had incomes in the \$100-200 per month range, they were accustomed to black help in and out of the house.<sup>88</sup>

Sponsors and planners initially believed that local's farming experience would increase the effectiveness of subsistence farming. One Subsistence Homesteads planner wrote, in 1934, that what made Birmingham different from similarly sized industrial centers was that "a very large percentage of its citizenry came from farms [...] there is a great urge on the part of a great many people in Birmingham to get back to the soil, where they believe they will have greater security."<sup>89</sup> However, the experience of most unemployed industrial workers, as with most of the rest of the South, was with one-crop and cash-crop growing, usually meaning corn, cotton, and an undiversified garden. The projects had four agricultural experts and two home-demonstration experts to provide an agricultural education, but that accomplished little because hired laborers did most of the work.<sup>90</sup>

Thus most families did not make good use of their land, even during World War II when war-time conditions raised the economic value of home production. Those who could most benefit from the subsistence homesteads were men engaged in manual labor. They were used to doing physical work, and so gardening or farming did not strike them as recreational or

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<sup>88</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 72.

<sup>89</sup> J. L. Liles to Oscar M. Dugger, February 22, 1934, Folder "Oscar M. Dugger 181.18," Box 17, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>90</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 72.

enjoyable. It was just more work.<sup>91</sup> Further, the rhythms of farming and the schedules of industrial employment did not mesh well together. A farm requires time, energy, and the possession of certain tools and equipment. Rarely did the three always come together just right for men with full or mostly full-time industrial employment.

In 1943, the homesteads in Birmingham were apparently full and fruitful, but even success stories pointed to unsustainability. Palmerdale resident Tobe Missildine worked at the *Birmingham Age-Herald* from 9 pm until the early morning. After work, he drove home and plowed, planted, hoed, or raked until 11 am, then went to sleep. Meanwhile, his wife kept the house and raised four children. The Missildine family had erased their debt and stored away canned goods, but it required a great deal of work. About half the families at Palmerdale remained there seven years after construction, but getting there was tough. As one observer described it, “All of these families had to go through hell and high water in those experimental months from 1935 to 1937. But now, in 1943, Palmerdale is one big, happy family, thriving on its own prosperity.”<sup>92</sup> Residents could thrive, then, but effectively working two full-time jobs year-round (as Missildine and others did) did not promise to be a blueprint for success that everyone could follow.

The struggles of the cooperative services at the Birmingham-area homesteads embody the problems of the subsistence homesteads and resettlement programs as a whole. In Birmingham and around the country, homesteaders liked the idea of a cooperative service, but they failed to overcome a combination of poor planning, poor management, and bad luck. In every community but Cahaba, residents organized cooperative farms services, and in every community but

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<sup>91</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 79, 91; “Walker Memoir,” 9.

<sup>92</sup> Jack House, “547 Homesteaders in District Now Enjoy More Abundant Life.” *Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, May 9, 1943.

Bankhead, they operated cooperative stores. None of them lasted long beyond the end of World War II.

Cooperative farm services matched almost everyone's ideal about what living on a homestead community should be like. Except in Cahaba, community barns were built and the necessary farm machinery and animals were purchased. Prices were set at seemingly reasonable levels. However, with the necessary hired labor, the cost of field operations was too high for the homesteaders. Scheduling was a problem. Homesteaders often had to hire help at least seasonally but the numbers of cooperative mules and implements were limited. Further, everyone wanted them at the same times, such as on the weekends, since many worked during the week. The farm service therefore failed to meet expenses, including amortization charges. It took in enough to operate during the heavy work periods, but the mules and implements were idle much of the year. As a result, the farm services often had to be sold to individuals on or near the projects with the requirement that the tools and mules be available to homesteaders at a modest charge.<sup>93</sup>

The Bankhead Cooperative Association, formed in June 1937, stuck to farm services, and it seemed to have the best chance of success of the four homestead farming cooperatives. Its residents had the biggest tracts of land of any of the Birmingham homesteads, and mining schedules potentially fit much better with part-time farming. The Association put a \$20,000 government loan toward mules, horses, a tractor, and related equipment. Even this limited effort in cooperative business failed. Despite the fact that it paid only a dollar a year to lease the property from the United States government, the cooperative could not operate at a profit. Between June 12, 1937, and October 15, 1938, the Association earned about \$1,350 in farm services, but spent almost \$3,300, losing nearly \$1,950. In-season, residents found the service

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<sup>93</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 73-74; Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 18.

unsatisfactory; they demanded prompt service and grew impatient with the delays that a sharing program necessarily created. And off-season overhead cost more than in-season profits. The Association voluntarily liquidated on March 21, 1940, with close to the original loan amount still owed to the federal government.<sup>94</sup>

Administrators also planned cooperative stores and filling stations in mind for the homestead projects. There were already some stores located close to the projects, but they generally had a limited stock of goods, and planners believed that homesteaders coming from Birmingham would be used to a high standard of service and facilities. When the first homesteaders arrived in Palmerdale, Mount Olive, and Greenwood, they were asked about establishing them; administrators encouraged the plan, and FSA representatives gave meetings to talk about how many opportunities a cooperative project had. These talks did not go well; homesteaders got the impression that they could buy for less from the cooperatives than from other stores while at the same time earning enough dividends to buy the enterprises.<sup>95</sup>

The Palmerdale Cooperative Association received its charter in September, 1936. It used a loan of about \$20,000 from the federal government to create a store and filling station and a cooperative farm service. The association constructed a barn, purchasing work stock and farm implements, and opened for business March 9, 1938.<sup>96</sup> Like the other cooperatives, the Palmerdale store got the use of its buildings at extremely low cost. The store building at Palmerdale cost \$30,000 to build, but the contract with the local association gave a value of \$5,615.75, and the building and site were made available at an annual charge of \$12 the first 3

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<sup>94</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 115-16; Audit Division, "Audit Report, Bankhead Cooperative Association, Jasper, Walker County, Alabama, for the Period June 12, 1937 to October 15, 1938," pp. 3-5, 13, 17, Folder "OS-ERA-SH-AL-13 (460) Bankhead Coop. Assn. Audit," Box 3, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP; Rutledge, "The Development of the Bankhead Farmsteads Community," 32.

<sup>95</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 74.

<sup>96</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 108.

years and \$175 the next two, with the option of buying at the listed book value with a 40 year payment period at 3% interest. Similar arrangements were made in the other cooperative associations. The cooperatives stores, then, paid almost no rent and had the opportunity to purchase their buildings at a greatly reduced price.<sup>97</sup>

Despite these advantages, the business did not go well. At Palmerdale, like at other cooperatives, in-store management was a problem. Some managers were not trained or qualified, hired at low salaries on the assumption that anybody could run a store successfully. This predictably created problems like maintaining stock, messy and disorganized stores, and improperly kept accounts and inventory. Even those experienced managers who did take over the stores failed to get out of the red.<sup>98</sup> Palmerdale had perhaps the worst management, and its store was not run according to good accounting standards – money was withheld from daily receipts and used for petty-cash expenditures, employees were reimbursed and checks cashed in excess of the petty-cash fund of \$100, and the Palmerdale Credit Union’s funds mixed freely with the Association’s moneys. The bookkeeper frequently backdated checks so that the expense would be recorded in the same month as the unpaid purchases had been made; the result was that it was difficult to accurately determine both available cash and unpaid liabilities.<sup>99</sup> At the end of 1939, the Association had assets (including cash, savings, inventory, and fixed assets) totaling \$12,360.02, debts of \$17,593 (including accounts payable, rent, and mortgage), and ran a net deficit of \$4,178.58.<sup>100</sup> After the store closed in February 1943, the Association sold its inventory to the Greenwood Cooperative Association but still owed almost \$16,000 on its loan.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Kollmorgen, “The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham,” *A Place on Earth*, 74.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>99</sup> Audit Division, FSA, “Audit Report, Palmerdale Cooperative Association, Palmerdale, Jefferson County, Alabama, for the Period September 1, 1938 to December 31, 1939,” pp.7-8, Folder “OS-ERA-SH-AL-3 Audit (460) Palmerdale Coop. Assn.,” Box 1, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>100</sup> Audit Division, FSA, “Audit Report, Palmerdale Cooperative Association, Palmerdale, Jefferson County, Alabama, for the Period September 1, 1938 to December 31, 1939,” pp. 6, 19, Folder “OS-ERA-SH-AL-3 Audit

Similar mismanagement plagued the Greenwood Cooperative Association. It was in an even more advantageous position than Palmyra – in addition to operating nearly rent-free, the Greenwood Cooperative Association was far from potential competitors. The Association formed in June, 1937, took out a loan of about \$18,500, and opened its store in March, 1938.<sup>102</sup> With such a large amount of money, the Association made the mistake of buying a large inventory, hiring a big staff, and otherwise accumulating heavy overhead costs. The farm service never showed a profit, and had to be sold to a private operator after ending the service on October 1, 1940.<sup>103</sup> At the end of 1939, the Greenwood Cooperative Association had a debt of about \$2,400, though it did at least show a profit of \$20.20 for the year of 1939, after losses in 1938 of \$2,532.59. Like the other Associations, Greenwood's store was burglarized several times in the spring and summer of 1939.<sup>104</sup>

The Mount Olive Cooperative Association had even worse luck. It organized in June, 1937, and received about \$18,000 in loans from the federal government.<sup>105</sup> The store opened in March, 1938, and burned down on October 19, 1938. Despite monthly increases in sales, the rebuilt store still failed to meet expenses. It was also robbed repeatedly. Burglars broke into the store in four times in 1938 and 1939, including a failed attempt to dynamite the safe, stealing \$609.66 worth of goods (including \$66.66 belonging to the Cooperative Baseball Team),

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(460) Palmyra Coop. Assn.," Box 1, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP. That deficit, however, was largely (\$3,249.19) accrued in the first few months of operation; the year of 1939 saw a much smaller operating loss of \$983.89.

<sup>101</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 109-111.

<sup>102</sup> "Memorandum for Major Walker," June 22, 1937, Folder "OS-ERA-SH-AL-5 (922-01) (Greenwood Coop. Assn.) Loan Application," Box 2, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>103</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 116-18; Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> Finance Division, FSA, "Audit Report, Greenwood Cooperative Association, Bessemer, Jefferson County, Alabama, for the Period September 1, 1938 to December 31, 1939," Folder OS-ERA-SH-AL-5 (460) Greenwood Coop. Assn. Audit," Box 2, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP, 6, 18, 21.

<sup>105</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 112.



although theft insurance meant that the Association (and the baseball team) suffered no losses.<sup>106</sup> By the end of 1939, the Association owed \$17,041.60 (including a \$16,494.13 mortgage) with total assets of \$12,964.<sup>107</sup>

Befitting its more suburban nature, the Cahaba Cooperative Association was organized in 1938 to operate a general store, filling station, and similar enterprises, managed by a five-person Board of Directors.<sup>108</sup> Despite high hopes, the Cahaba Association had trouble even maintaining local interest in its operations. In the summer of 1937, the Resettlement Division could not find any residents to become members of a proposed Cahaba Mutual Association, so that idea was dropped.<sup>109</sup> In 1939, the Association had to amend its voting rules, changing from requiring a majority vote to allowing one-third of the members as a sufficient quorum to conduct business at its poorly-attended meetings.<sup>110</sup> The community manager threatened to close the store in February 1944 to force more residents to shop there.<sup>111</sup>

The Cahaba Association did not plan the store well at all. On the expectation that the homesteaders would buy almost everything from the store, projected sales were wildly optimistic. But only a minority of occupants proved to be constant patrons of the stores, and sales to non-occupants were limited. Unlike the more distant cooperatives, many residents of Cahaba could easily patronize the A&P in Birmingham, often buying a large amount of groceries at one

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<sup>106</sup> Audit Division, FSA, "Audit Report, Mount Olive (Formerly Gardendale) Cooperative Association, Mount Olive, Jefferson County, Alabama, for the Period October 20, 1938 to December 31, 1939," Folder OS-ERA-SH-AL-4 (460) Garden Coop. Assn. Audit," Box 2, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP, 15-16.

<sup>107</sup> Audit Division, FSA, "Audit Report, Mount Olive (Formerly Gardendale) Cooperative Association, Mount Olive, Jefferson County, Alabama, for the Period October 20, 1938 to December 31, 1939," Folder OS-ERA-SH-AL-4 (460) Garden Coop. Assn. Audit," Box 2, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP, 6.

<sup>108</sup> "By-Laws of Cahaba Cooperative Association," Folder "OS-ERA-SH-AL-1 (921) Organization (Cahaba Coop. Ass'n)," Box 1, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>109</sup> Lewis B. Woodson to Mastin G. White, June 19, 1937, Folder "OS-ERA-SH-AL-1 (921) Organization (Cahaba Mutual Assn.)," Box 1, Office of the Solicitor, Resettlement Cases, RG 16, NACP

<sup>110</sup> J. O. Walker, "Memorandum for Mr. Mastin G. White," August 10, 1939, and Donald B. MacGuineas, "Memorandum for Dr. W. W. Alexander," August 18, 1939, both in Folder "OS-ERA-SH-AL-1 (921) Organization (Cahaba Coop. Ass'n)," Box 1, Entry 113, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>111</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 120.

time on a monthly trip to save money.<sup>112</sup> Numerous experiments were made to save the stores: rallies and campaigns to popularize them, repeated changes in management, and changes in purchases and sales methods, but the stores continue to fail. Various enterprises were tried: milk delivery and coal delivery were introduced to make use of a truck purchased for grocery deliveries, but neither was successful and the truck eventually had to be sold, resulting in a drop in grocery sales by 30%. As result, even though the Association rented a building from the federal government for only \$80 a month, it consistently failed to pay; rent was reduced to \$50, which it still failed to consistently pay.<sup>113</sup> Overall, only the filling stations produced a modest profit.<sup>114</sup>

After World War II, the various cooperative associations came to an end, at considerable cost to the federal government. By the end of 1947, The Mount Olive Cooperative Association and the Cahaba Cooperative Association were officially liquidated.<sup>115</sup> However, the Mount Olive Cooperative was essentially defunct by September 1945, when the Public Housing Authority's Field Accounts Section closed its books (as much as was possible), leaving an unpaid debt to the federal government of almost \$16,000.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, the Palmerdale Cooperative Association, after paying off its creditors, wrote a check for the remainder of its bank account (\$389.95) to the federal government on September 25, 1945, leaving a debt of about \$19,000.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 75; "Ormond Memoir," 8.

<sup>113</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 119-20.

<sup>114</sup> Kollmorgen, "The Subsistence Homesteads Near Birmingham," *A Place on Earth*, 74-75.

<sup>115</sup> Irving N. Goodman to Kurt M. Loewy, Subject "Cahaba Cooperative Association, Trussville, Alabama," June 3, 1948; Irving N. Goodman to Kurt M. Loewy, Subject "Mt. Olive Cooperative Association, Mt. Olive, Alabama," June 9, 1948; both in Folder "Subsistence Homesteads," Box 1, Records Relating to Subsistence Homesteads and the PHA's Rural Housing Programs (NC-196-80-01) (Entry 54), in Records of the Public Housing Administration (Record Group 196), National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

<sup>116</sup> Roy M. Little to H. L. Wooten, Subject "Mount Olive Cooperative Association, Gardendale, Alabama," April 1, 1948, Folder "Subsistence Homesteads," Box 1, Records Relating to Subsistence Homesteads and the PHA's Rural Housing Programs (NC-196-80-01) (Entry 54), in Records of the Public Housing Administration (Record Group 196), National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

<sup>117</sup> Roy M. Little to H. L. Wooten, Subject "Cahaba Cooperative Association, Trussville, Alabama," April 1, 1948, Folder "Subsistence Homesteads," Box 1, Records Relating to Subsistence Homesteads and the PHA's Rural

While the Birmingham-area subsistence homesteads failed to meet most of their original goals, residents approved of the projects almost from the beginning. The *Birmingham News* noted in June 1936 that while there was much controversy surrounding the Resettlement Administration, “there is one place in Jefferson County where the resettlement agency has no opposition. That is Palmerdale, first of four resettlement projects in Jefferson County to be occupied.”<sup>118</sup> For one thing, the program promoted a general improvement in living standards. The biggest change for most families was in diet. Almost all had reliable, year-round access to milk and eggs, as well as to fresh vegetables. Unsurprisingly, the overall health of residents improved dramatically when they moved to their new homesteads.<sup>119</sup> The communities also provided instruction in cooking (along with sewing, quilting, budgeting, and other skills that administrators believed wives could use) to improve both the quality and flavor of meals.<sup>120</sup>

Clients found their financial situation much improved. While later arrivals were economically better off than the first ones or the ideal ones, they were still far from wealthy, and even small economic improvements could provide a much better life. Once the program got settled around 1941, almost all applicants found steady jobs and decent pay. Many who were in debt or barely above water developed a net worth over a thousand dollars. Those who came early and stayed had equity in their homes by the end of World War II, and some had paid off almost their entire debt.<sup>121</sup> While not all or even most residents took advantage of subsistence farming opportunity, those who did had a fairly good record (as even hostile congressional committees

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Housing Programs (NC-196-80-01) (Entry 54), in Records of the Public Housing Administration (Record Group 196), National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

<sup>118</sup> “First Project in Jefferson Busy,” *Birmingham News*, June 7, 1936.

<sup>119</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 70-71.

<sup>120</sup> Andrews, *A Palmerdale Tale*, 123.

<sup>121</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 68.

recognized).<sup>122</sup> For example, Otis Ledbetter, a machine shop foreman, succeeded at part-time farming in Mount Olive. He devoted his afternoons to it, and he managed to produce almost all of the meat and vegetables his family consumed, selling surplus to others on the project or to men with whom he worked. His rent was about half of what a similar home in Birmingham would be, not including the 3.5 acres of farm.<sup>123</sup>

Just as important as the physical improvement was a psychological one. There was a strong sense of pride in the homesteader communities: residents liked the way they looked, believed in the quality of the people living there, and were proud of the community they had built. Of the 171 women from the four industrial communities interviewed around the end of World War II, 167 responded that they liked their neighborhood.<sup>124</sup> Of course, not everything went ideally. The slow start hindered community feeling – Greenwood, for example, did not have a local school until after the Christmas break at the end of 1937.<sup>125</sup> Nor were community relationships maintained through formal or institutional bonds; of the 171 women interviewed, 75 said they belong to no club of any kind. But interviewers still frequently found that residents mentioned the neighborliness that prevailed in the communities.<sup>126</sup> Residents prided themselves on their ability to work together. In 1943, one reporter noted that despite a shortage of pressure cookers, residents of Greenwood had canned 30,000 quarts of food the previous year and expected to break that record by sharing the cookers. “That’s the way these homesteaders do,” a newspaper article described in 1943. “They share their troubles and their successes alike. If a

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<sup>122</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part III, 1030-33. A list of the FSA’s resettlement projects in 1943, with description and financial situation, can be found on pages 1034-1117; transfers, costs, and liquidation information is on pages 1118-37.

<sup>123</sup> George Nagel, “City Dwellers Turn Farmer on Resettlement Projects,” *Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, March 31, 1940.

<sup>124</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 81-83.

<sup>125</sup> Crain, *Welcome to Greenwood*, 27-30.

<sup>126</sup> Wager, *One Foot on the Soil*, 76.

person living in the community needs hospitalization, all the neighbors chip in and see that he gets it, if need be.”<sup>127</sup>

Once the projects settled down, after the initial period of uncertainty and delay, turnover greatly declined and the projects filled to capacity. For example, at the end of 1939, all 100 sites in the Bankhead project were occupied, with tenants owning the tracts via the operating company, with several civic organizations and a large community school. Residents enjoyed the level of control they had – while the government provided a community manager, the homesteaders’ Bankhead Homesteads Company could, for example, reject any applicant for any potentially open spot. Even the local economy looked to be improving – a hosiery mill opened on November 8, 1939, employing 60 residents on a two-shift basis.<sup>128</sup>

Residents also believed themselves to be part of a successful social experiment that, if nothing else, played a part in overcoming the depression. Critics argued that the resettlement communities were unrealistic, but to homesteaders, they seemed to be just the opposite. A *Birmingham Age-Herald* editorial in May of 1936 pointed out, “To some the sight and the whole idea may be somewhat suggestive of regimentation and standardization. But doubtless to the many families already living in Palmerdale, it is a great escape into what is at least a great freedom compared to the regimentation that adversity had forced upon them.”<sup>129</sup> One Palmerdale resident recalled of Roosevelt, “I think he had some very practical ideas for domestic policy and he got the country back on its feet. In that way, he had some ideas of putting the men to work and using the raw materials that were already in our nation.”<sup>130</sup> When asked if the communities

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<sup>127</sup> Jack House, “547 Homesteaders in District Now Enjoy More Abundant Life.” *Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, May 9, 1943.

<sup>128</sup> “Bankhead Farmsteads Near Jasper Are Proving Successful Project,” *Birmingham News*, December 13, 1939; Rutledge, “The Development of the Bankhead Farmsteads Community,” 24.

<sup>129</sup> “Palmerdale,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, May 6, 1936.

<sup>130</sup> “Walker Memoir,” 22.

in general and Cahaba specifically were successful, resident Marion Ormond said, “Definitely, because of the circumstances during which this was built, after the stock market crash in 1929.”<sup>131</sup>

Residents also believed that their successes held enduring lessons for the country. After World War II, one resident recalled that the Cahaba project had dramatically changed the Trussville area. “You should have seen that site before the project was begun,” he said. “It was largely a wasteland. And you should see it now—and all the good people who have come to the Trussville community and made good neighbors and helped things along. I tell you I’m for that sort of thing. The spirit is right when the government tries to help people along—not spoil them, but so that they can help themselves.”<sup>132</sup>

The most successful residents combined the material gains of subsistence farming with the psychological ones of living in a proud community. Nolan McRee, who grew up near Central Park, New York City, and who knew practically nothing of farming in 1937, succeeded in his homesteading efforts. In October of 1937, McRee moved into 3.98 acres at Greenwood. He planted 65 fruit trees and a small vineyard, raised hogs cows and chickens, and grew corn with the help of USDA publications. An electrician for the U. S. Pipe Company in Bessemer, McRee managed all this in his spare time. His wife canned 400 jars of fruit, vegetable, and meat the previous summer; she won first prize at the Alabama State Fair for her canned bread and butter pickles and for a jar of chili sauce and second prize for butter beans and for peach pickles. The McRees patronized the local cooperative store, sent their children to the community school, and enjoyed the neighborhood community life: basketball games and dances at the auditorium, taking

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<sup>131</sup> “Ormond Memoir,” 17.

<sup>132</sup> “The Spirit of Right,” *Birmingham News*, March 2, 1946.

their children to the playground, and neighborhood gatherings. Mrs. McRee told reporters, “We’re not afraid of the future now, either for ourselves or our little boy.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Jerry Thrailkill, “All He Knew about Farming in 1937 Was the Gentle Art of How to Milk a Cow,” *Birmingham News*, January 8, 1939.

## PART IV

### THE END OF THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

With the outbreak of World War II, Farm Security Administration leadership faced considerable changes in both the type of work they did and the political atmosphere in which they operated. The FSA successfully navigated the first change, becoming an effective part of the American war effort, but it failed to survive a concerted political attack in a suddenly hostile environment. During World War II, anti-New Dealers and established agricultural interests, notably the American Farm Bureau Federation and its congressional allies, turned their full force against the FSA. The attack was more focused than previous such efforts had been, and the FSA was almost without allies. The Roosevelt Administration typified the change – Roosevelt simply had no time for agencies he had previously championed, such as the FSA, as he concentrated on the war. In 1942 and 1943, the FSA's opponents successfully reduced its appropriations such that the agency was powerless to enact any kind of reform. The FSA dragged on until 1946, when it was replaced by the Farmers Home Administration, effectively a rural credit agency intended mostly for veterans.



## CHAPTER 11

### THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION AND WORLD WAR II

Although the Farm Security Administration's upper leadership was unprepared for an attack threatening the agency's survival, they understood that World War II would dramatically alter the political climate. They took steps to strengthen their position within the United States Department of Agriculture and the federal government, while the FSA's foes worked through a series of congressional hearings and appropriations bills to weaken and eliminate the FSA. War-time changes gave new impetus to budget-cutters and created, within the Department of Agriculture, an atmosphere of survival-of-the-fittest competition among the various agencies.

In making their case for the agency's importance during World War II, FSA administrators argued that programs such as rural rehabilitation were crucial to the war effort. To win the war, the United States would need healthy farms that could produce the necessary soldiers, manpower, and food and fibers – farms that were, in other words, rehabilitated. A vast rural peasantry on the edge of starvation and unrest could not win the war, but with a little help from the FSA the rural poor could be transformed into a powerful asset. Such arguments came naturally to FSA administrators who had put such emphasis on rural rehabilitation and supervised credit. By 1940, when war loomed on the horizon, FSA administrators had come to focus on the rehabilitation of individual farm families using targeted loans and expert farm and home management as the key to ending rural poverty. It seemed only natural that the FSA should help the war effort by doing the same thing.

The FSA generally succeeded here, but it failed politically, for two reasons. First, its opponents made similarly compelling arguments about how to best harness rural production. Proponents of the agricultural lobbies hitched the traditional belief that only higher prices could improve farm production to the argument that only large operators had the means to expand production in time to help the war effort. From this perspective, the FSA's activity was irrelevant at best and probably harmful, wasting money and reducing the supply of cheap agricultural labor necessary for big, efficient farms.

Additionally, the FSA met political defeat because, in wartime, the rules of politics changed. Franklin Roosevelt explained that "Dr. New Deal" had been replaced with "Dr. Win-the-War" when the work of reform had been done and a new patient showed up. But well before the war began, no later than early 1938, the New Deal had ground to a halt, and surviving agencies like the FSA worked in an increasingly hostile political atmosphere. Opponents of the New Deal managed to slow any new reform efforts; with the Roosevelt Administration more and more occupied with foreign affairs after 1939, anti-New Dealers could take the offensive. Some New Deal reforms, like the Social Security Administration or agricultural price supporters, had become too entrenched or too popular. But others, like the FSA, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the National Youth Administration, found themselves without political cover and at the mercy of long-time political foes operating under the pretext of making necessary wartime sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> Critics of the FSA (and other New Deal agencies) found themselves with powerful new rhetorical and political weapons just as the FSA's allies became less willing or able to defend it. Ultimately, World War II provided the opportunity for the FSA's political and ideological foes to gut it almost entirely. Though it survived until 1946, the agency was effectively defeated by 1943.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 782-88.

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 initially meant little for the agencies of the USDA. Given the continued surpluses of so many commodities, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace recommended that American farmers avoid changes to their production plans. With America's recent history of overproduction and the New Deal emphasis on reduction, conservation, and raising prices, most USDA leaders agreed. This policy stuck until the first of several reorganizations came in 1941, when Claude Wickard (Wallace's replacement as Secretary of Agriculture after Wallace became Vice President in 1940) created the Office of Agricultural Defense Relations, to coordinate food production. This USDA effort to expand food production was built around the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA).<sup>2</sup>

Shifts in administrative structure and especially preparations for war prompted significant changes in FSA policy beginning in 1940. Land purchases for resettlement projects increased in order to make farms available to rural families displaced by or moving to military bases and defense industries. Especially as war approached, eligibility standards for rural rehabilitation loans began to favor those who could most rapidly expand production (despite concerns of big producers about overproduction). The FSA had worked for both increased food production and improved living conditions for its rural clients; the war meant that emphasis shifted more toward the production aspects of farm family rehabilitation.<sup>3</sup>

The biggest initial changes for the FSA occurred in the Resettlement Division. With the growing threat of war, the problem of an overabundance of labor turned into a problem of labor

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 326-28; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*. The FSA also had to move many of its offices from Washington, D.C., to make room for expanding defense work. Several hundred employees ended up moving to Cincinnati, Ohio. On wartime agricultural production and planning, see Bela Gold, *Wartime Economic Planning in Agriculture: A Study in the Allocation of Resources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Administrator of the Farm Security Administration, 1941*, 1-12; "Annual Report of the Administrator, Farm Security Administration, 1941-42," 2-9; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 105-07.

shortages. The Division had operated migratory labor camps since 1935; these were diverted to defense and wartime use.<sup>4</sup> The FSA built more temporary and permanent camps and shelters, with sanitary care and medical facilities. By the end of 1942, the FSA had built 95 camps capable of holding about 75,000 people. It was also responsible for a program that brought almost 13,000 Mexican workers into the United States by May 1943. Another 8,000 domestic farm laborers moved between September 1942 and May 1943, mostly from submarginal farming areas in the Southeast and the Appalachians to areas with labor shortages.<sup>5</sup> The FSA also cooperated with the U.S. Employment Service to make sure that laborers knew where the camps were located and where labor was most needed, and it had supervisors contact borrowers to see if some labor could be spared on larger nearby farms at peak harvest.<sup>6</sup>

The Rehabilitation Division shifted to a wartime footing. Food planning took on new emphasis, and the Division reorganized into six branches: food planning, agricultural rehabilitation, health and sanitation, consumer goods and services, shipping and storage forecasting, and rehabilitation research. Reorganization demanded new personnel and the shifting of existing employees, which took up valuable time.<sup>7</sup>

The outbreak of war raised bigger issues beyond just those of administrative shuffling. FSA leaders faced a decision on strategy. They needed to consider the actual problems that the war would create for the rural poor; dislocations could undo much of the work of the previous years. Equally important, they had to win a political fight by providing a strong rationale for their agency during wartime. There were a number of approaches, based on the war-time

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<sup>4</sup> Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, especially 72-74, 85-86, 113-18. See also Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 221-25; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 106-08.

<sup>6</sup> "Annual Report of the Administrator, Farm Security Administration, 1941-42," 20-25.

<sup>7</sup> E. R. Stettinius, Jr., and John A. Vieg, "Progress Report on the Rehabilitation Division," December 3, 1942, Folder "U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942," Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

responsibilities the FSA could claim. Administrators argued that the FSA could strengthen America's rural citizens for the war effort and pointed to the agency's experience with moving and re-housing Americans over the previous decade. Primarily, administrators settled on the issue of improving small farm production as their argument for the FSA's role in the war effort.<sup>8</sup>

Opening the struggle for a bigger place in America's wartime production, FSA administrators tied rural rehabilitation to national security. FSA public relations emphasized that the agency could be the difference in whether rural Americans proved helpful, a useless, or even a dangerous during the war. Administrator C. B. Baldwin echoed the earlier debate over the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act in noting that the FSA dealt with "the most under-privileged, poverty-stricken part of the farm population. This group might provide fertile soil for those agitators and sympathizers with foreign philosophies who are trying to plant seeds of discontent and doubt about our American system." The way to stop such a danger was to improve the situation of such needy farmers.<sup>9</sup>

More positively, Baldwin argued that America needed "manpower," but the only way to get that was to have healthy citizens. The FSA helped by improving the diet, medical care, and living standards of the rural poor. The FSA took farmers off relief and turned them into "self-supporting, tax-paying citizens – changing them from national liabilities into national assets."<sup>10</sup> One FSA speaker noted in 1941 that "an alarming number of young men are being rejected for military service because of physical defects or ill health. These rejections signify the importance of health to our front-line defense." Because "farms are the reservoirs of this country's defensive

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<sup>8</sup> On the FSA's re-orientation to wartime footing, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 326-332.

<sup>9</sup> C. B. Baldwin, correspondence to "Dear Fellow-workers," July 22, 1940, Folder "85-153-01 Articles & Press Releases (Oct-Dec, 1940)," Box 15, Office of the Director, General Correspondence, RG 96, NARASE.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

forces,” it was crucial to ensure their health.<sup>11</sup> The FSA was the best positioned agency to do this, the argument went, by improving nutrition, fixing sanitary facilities, and providing medical care.

FSA administrators also claimed that the agency had a more direct role to play in the war effort, particularly in relocation and housing. The FSA was involved in defense housing even before war broke out – the all-steel prefabricated houses it had developed, for example, became commonplace for building defense housing.<sup>12</sup> By the fall of 1941, over 14,500 farm families had already been displaced by the purchase of four million acres of land for defense purposes. These people needed housing, as did thousands of temporary defense employees. The FSA could claim to be the ideal agency to handle these sorts of problems – after all, it had already built or repaired more than 37,700 houses, and it was prepared to do more.<sup>13</sup> The agency was also already active in the South, where military projects moved families in every state. One of the first big moves involved 800 families near Hinesville, Georgia, who lived on 350,000 acres used by the Army. The FSA organized the Hinesville Relocation Corporation to move the families into temporary housing during the construction of permanent homes.<sup>14</sup>

This was part of a concerted effort by FSA leaders to find a politically useful purpose in war production, which administrators were careful to publicize.<sup>15</sup> In January 1942, for example, an FSA regional office claimed that its female migratory farm workers were doing more “in the

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<sup>11</sup> “Physical Status of Farm Security Borrowers as Indicated by Preliminary Studies of Examinations Conducted in Typical Counties,” p. 1, May 17, 1941, NAL.

<sup>12</sup> FSA, “Relocation of Farm Families Displaced by the Defense Program,” April 9, 1941, NAL; FSA, “Rural Housing by the Farm Security Administration,” May 5, 1941, NAL; “FSA Seeks Housing For Defense Help,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 22, 1941; “Uncle Sam ‘Whips Up Houses’ For Families Moved En Masse From Defense Areas,” *Washington Post*, July 6, 1941; “FSA To Help Farmers Find New Locations,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 29, 1941; “Prefabricated Steel Houses Made for Occupancy by Defense Workers,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 29, 1941.

<sup>13</sup> FSA, “Rural Housing by the Farm Security Administration,” pp. 1-2, May 5, 1941, NAL.

<sup>14</sup> FSA, “Rural Housing by the Farm Security Administration,” pp. 2-3, May 5, 1941, NAL; FSA, “Relocation of Farm Families Displaced by the Defense Program,” April 9, 1941, NAL.

<sup>15</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 106-08.

way of war production” than any other group of American women, as “nearly every one of them works in the fields some time during the year, and helps produce an essential war product – food for the people and armies of the United States and the Allies.”<sup>16</sup> Recognizing the value of such activity, in February 1942 Roosevelt allocated the FSA \$13 million to begin building over 12,000 temporary units in 24 different areas.<sup>17</sup>

The FSA also played a role in removing farmers during the evacuation of the Japanese from the West Coast in early 1942. The FSA handled primarily the agricultural phases of the evacuation, involving about half the evacuated Japanese on close to 6,700 farms. Japanese farms tended to be small but intensive, in 1940 producing about \$32 million in crops in California, where the large majority lived. On the eve of evacuation, Japanese farmers dominated California’s production of strawberries and grew a majority of the state’s snap beans, celery, and cauliflower. California’s complex system of tenancy, a result of the laws against Japanese ownership of land, meant that 70% of Japanese farmers on the Pacific coast were technically tenants; a significant number of the remaining 30% owned their property through third parties. The FSA tried to ensure that the Japanese evacuees got fair arrangements with their creditors and those who operated their farms, but protecting Japanese property and equipment, much less maintaining the farms at full production, proved impossible.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lawrence E. Davies, “Women ‘Okies’ Win California Niche,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1942.

<sup>17</sup> “FSA Allocated \$13 Million for War Industry Housing,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 1942.

<sup>18</sup> Laurence I. Hewes, Jr., “Final Report of the Participation of the Farm Security Administration in the Evacuation Program of the Wartime Civil Control Administration, Civil Affairs Division, Western Defense Command and Fourth Army,” June 5, 1942, Box 1, Final Report of the Farm Security Administration for the Period March 15, 1942-May 31, 1942 (Entry 21), in Records of the Farmers Home Administration (Record Group 96), National Archives at College Park, Maryland; U. S. Army, Western Defense Command and Fourth Army, *Final Report, Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast, 1942* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1943), 136-43. Valuable recent secondary work includes Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York: Columbia University, 2009). On social workers and the evacuation, see Yoosun Park, “Facilitating Injustice: Tracing the Role of Social Workers in the World War II Internment of the Japanese,” *The Social Service Review* 82.3 (2008): 447-83; on Japanese farms and the evacuations, see also Page Smith, *Democracy on Trial: The Japanese American Evacuation and Relocation in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 163-69.

While the FSA had an important role to play in housing, labor, and strengthening rural citizens for the war effort, Baldwin and the FSA chose to emphasize the importance of small farms and food production. This made political sense; USDA administrators increasingly worried about possible food shortages. Wickard feared a shortage created of farm labor (matched by worries that a federal solution to the problem might lay outside his own USDA).<sup>19</sup> Administrators in other departments, like Howard Tolley at the AAA, agreed that the biggest threat to war effort was a food shortage.<sup>20</sup> Most everyone agreed that wartime manpower demands threatened the farm labor supply. Baldwin and other administrators argued that the FSA was the key to solving that problem.

The thinking behind this push was that while large commercial farms found themselves suddenly short of labor, small or marginal farms, with FSA assistance, could rapidly expand production while at the same time improving the lives of the rural poor; without the FSA, they would stream into the cities, worsening the shortage of agricultural production. As Baldwin pointed out in April 1942, rural rehabilitation clients increased their food production, considering food consumed and home and produced for sale, by around \$300 per family. On a national scale, that represented the possibility of an enormous increase in food production.<sup>21</sup>

In a series of talks at St. John's University in 1942, Baldwin asserted that if America was to win the war, it "must mobilize the energy that is going to waste in 1,200,000 of our farm families."<sup>22</sup> In a November speech in Oklahoma City, Baldwin pointed out how the role of FSA borrowers had changed. "Yesterday, these people [poor farm families] were important," he said, "because they needed help. Today they are important because their help is needed." He went on

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<sup>19</sup> Albertson, *Roosevelt's Farmer*, 310-313.

<sup>20</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 493.

<sup>21</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 285.

<sup>22</sup> "FSA Head Gives Three Talks at Thursday Rallies," *St. Cloud (Minnesota) Times*, August 7, 1942, in Folder "U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942," Box 29, Baldwin Papers.



to emphasize the role of the FSA, especially rural rehabilitation, in improving the conditions of thousands of small farmers (“a great reservoir of unused manpower”). It would be absurd, he said, to create a 7.5 million-man army but only train and equip half of them, yet that was how Americans expected food and fiber needs to be met.<sup>23</sup> Baldwin claimed the FSA was ideally organized to run such a program; unlike the decentralized war boards or committees established along the lines of the Farm Credit Administration, the FSA possessed the capacity for rapid, single-minded activity. Wartime food production, Baldwin wrote, was “no job for debating societies.”<sup>24</sup> FSA supporters, including religious, farm, and labor leaders, contacted the president and Congress urging them to support the FSA in order to maintain the nation’s food supply.<sup>25</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, “Our great hope is to increase the production on small farms. The Farm Security Administration, working with the lowest income farmers, has proved that this can be done through wise advice in management, small loans and assistance in marketing produce.”<sup>26</sup>

FSA administrators down the line pointed to the importance of small farms for the war effort. One project manager wrote to his clients, in April 1941, that “today men are dying for liberty. They are fighting the enemies of liberty, who are the enemies of the United States.” These unnamed allies needed guns, ships, airplanes, but most importantly “FOOD,” and for ultimate victory “it comes down to the fact that we in America must raise more FOOD, not only for ourselves, but for our friends whose fight is our fight.” He believed that “every Farm Security

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<sup>23</sup> “Toward a Full Mobilization of Manpower: Speech for delivery by C. B. Baldwin, Administrator, Farm Security Administration, before the National Farmers Union Convention, Oklahoma City, Tuesday, November 17 [1942], at 8: pm,” Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>24</sup> C. B. Baldwin, “Memorandum for Mr. H. W. Parisius,” January 6, 1943, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1943. II,” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>25</sup> “Farm, Labor, Religious Leaders Ask President to Take to the People Issue of Adequate FSA Appropriations, Sale of Grain for Livestock Feed,” June 21; James G. Patton, Murray Lincoln, William Green, Philip Murray, J. G. Luhrsen, L. G. Ligutti, and Benson Y. Landis to Franklin D. Roosevelt, June 20, 1942; both in Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt “My Day: Definite Service for Every One,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 11, 1942.

family in Coffee County will want to do its part.”<sup>27</sup> Region V staff members met in Atlanta in October, 1941 to discuss how to improve food production among small farmers by 50-100%, and local supervisors urged clients to produce as much wheat, potatoes, oats, and other foodstuffs as possible.<sup>28</sup>

While this program would fail as a political argument, it was fairly successful as part of the war effort. Both as a percentage and in absolute numbers, FSA borrowers, especially dairy farmers, increased their food production dramatically during World War II.<sup>29</sup> Between 1941 and 1942, 38% of the total increase in American milk production resulted from FSA borrowers. Other gains were less impressive, but still considerable – of the total increase in American production of dry beans, beef, and peanuts, for example, FSA farmers were responsible for 17%, 11%, and 10%, respectively.<sup>30</sup> Beyond supervision, the FSA succeeded in raising production by aiding clients in acquiring labor-saving machinery such as tractors and combines. American farmers and agricultural policymakers generally failed to make proper use of farm machinery during World War II, with the significant exception of the FSA – at least, until Congress began to reduce and then prohibit funding for the cooperatives that made such results possible.<sup>31</sup>

While the FSA made its case for an expanded role in the nation’s war effort, critics and political foes launched increasingly effective attacks on the agency. The FSA’s opponents criticized it for various and sometimes contradictory reasons, but their arguments generally fell into three groups. The most vocal were representatives of agricultural interests who had long resented the FSA’s position in the USDA and used World War II as cover to eliminate a political

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<sup>27</sup> W. L. McArthur, April 18, 1941, attached to letter from Will Alexander to Henry B. Steagall, June 17, 1941, Folder “AD-AL-17 Coffee Farms (060),” Box 53, Project Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>28</sup> “Little Farmers’ Aid to Defense To Be Studied,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 26, 1941; “Little Farmers Must Aid U.S., FSA Head Says,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 30, 1941.

<sup>29</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 617-22.

<sup>30</sup> *The Annual Report of the Farm Security Administration, 1942-43*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Gold, *Wartime Economic Planning in Agriculture*, 224-40.

rival. A second group was made up of those who saw the FSA as an un-American or unconstitutional exercise of power, including many anti-New Dealers emboldened by the war and the declining political strength of New Deal liberals. A final, disparate group of critics were those politicians who disapproved of how the FSA operated, either in its alleged snubbing of congressional dictates or because they wanted to turn the FSA into an agency of their own design. Critics in these three groups at times overlapped, but many found common ground only in their opposition to the FSA. Despite this, these varied attacks worked together to reinforce one another to make something that had seemed rather unlikely in 1940 – the elimination of the FSA – an accomplishment in all but name by 1943.

The most important anti-FSA faction was organized agricultural interests, most notably represented by the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) and their congressional allies. Prior to 1940 or so, the AFBF had been hostile toward the FSA but had taken few concrete steps against it. AFBF leadership began to worry, however, about the Bureau's relationship with the USDA, particularly with Secretary Wallace.<sup>32</sup> As World War II got underway, the war effort provided the opportunity to eliminate a troublesome political rival.

Responding to FSA administrators' argument for an expanded wartime role, the AFBF countered that the FSA had the situation backwards. AFBF President Ed O'Neal asserted that while the FSA claimed its rural rehabilitation program was essential for meeting food goals, nobody else seemed to expect low-income farmers to produce much: the USDA called for the biggest wartime increases in states with high agriculture incomes, and those areas with the lowest agricultural incomes were expected to contribute very little to the national agricultural increase.<sup>33</sup> Before the war, half the farmers had been producing 89% of the country's commercial

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<sup>32</sup> McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 100.

<sup>33</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 751-52.

farm products. Instead of increasing production by FSA clients, critics like O'Neal argued, it would be better to increase the production of large farms and encourage small-scale farmers to take on new roles as agricultural laborers or work in the expanding defense industry.<sup>34</sup> AFBF leaders also stuck to their traditional belief that price increases for farmers would do the most to raise output, while the FSA argued that the best solution would be to maintain the supply of fertilizer, equipment, and other assistance to small-time farmers.<sup>35</sup>

One good example of the big producer mindset comes from Oscar Johnston, president of the National Cotton Council. He criticized the fact “that the F. S. A. has purchased many thousands of acres of alluvial land in the valley of the Mississippi River. [...] When I say the F. S. A. has purchased them, I mean that F. S. A. has provided the funds with which to consummate the purchase, holds a mortgage on them, and directs the operation of them.” Further, he asserted, “in this very fertile area,” farms working under FSA direction “have produced less than they were producing under individual private ownership.”<sup>36</sup> It is probably true that farms under FSA supervision produced less cotton for sale, because the FSA specifically instructed its clients not to grow cotton. But big producers did not see it that way: production of food for home consumption was tantamount to no production at all. Tenant ownership via government credit did not count as ownership, while tenants renting via landlord or merchant credit did. And what Johnston rightly called very fertile land was only fertile in so much as it produced for a glutted world cotton market, not for the farmers living there.

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<sup>34</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 331. Ed O'Neal was not above stretching the truth, misconstruing (for example) the president of the CIO's claim that corporate farming could not solve the nation's emergency food needs as an attack on the FSA. Philip Murray to John H., McCormack, March 7, 1942, Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 108.

<sup>36</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 957. On Johnston and the FSA, see Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton's Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 211-226. Johnston's allegations about the FSA's resettlement program and the alleged mistreatment of clients, and Baldwin's reply, can be found in House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1616-30, 1653-57, 1691-93.

Large producers approved of the FSA when it helped them, of course. This was particularly the case with migrant labor. The Yuma Producers Cooperative Association and the Imperial Valley Farmers Association praised the FSA in late 1942 for its role in supplying Mexican agricultural laborers, which raised their output and lowered their labor costs. The Palo Verde Cotton Growers Association was glad to have 230 cotton pickers in southeast Missouri, which they estimated saved them half a million dollars.<sup>37</sup>

But when the FSA threatened their supply of cheap labor, big producers changed their tune. This had been the case since the RA had begun sponsoring camps for migrants, which critics claimed promoted “radical agitation” and raised labor costs beyond growers’ ability to pay.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes the FSA faced praise from one group of growers and criticism from another: Cotton producers in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia complained that the FSA made it easier for their laborers to move to Florida for part-time work, while citrus growers in Florida protested that the agency was moving too slowly and not providing sufficient labor.<sup>39</sup> And growers balked at having to meet any standard on how to treat imported laborers. One Congressman received complaints about requirements to feed Mexican laborers meat six days a week.<sup>40</sup>

The testimony of L. L. Chandler, representing South Florida vegetable growers before a House committee on the farm labor problem, sums up how many large producers perceived the FSA’s labor program. The migrant laborers provided to him by the FSA, Chandler said, came

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<sup>37</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, 23-24. On the FSA’s role in moving laborers and its relationship to changing American immigration policy, see Cindy Hahamovitch, “In America Life is Given Away,” in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State*, eds. Catherine McNicol Stock and Roberts D. Johnston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001): 134-60.

<sup>38</sup> George P. West, “Growers Condemn Tugwell’s Camps,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1936.

<sup>39</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, 40-42.

<sup>40</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, 46, 105-13. This turned out to not even be a requirement of the FSA, but of a commissary company and fruit company which had a great deal of trouble with missed work by laborers due to food-related illness. The FSA was often the target of criticisms for activities beyond its control. Later in the same hearing, Chairman Cannon brought up complaints that the FSA was requiring owners to sign contracts to meet certain requirements for housing, minimum pay, and so on with regards to immigrant laborers – standards set by the State Department in agreement with the Mexican government (49-53).

from “the riffraff of the human family.” The FSA forced him to sign a contract wherein the workers were “guaranteed minimum wages, maximum hours, fancy housing and sanitation, transportation and feeding.” The result was that the worker became a “petted and pampered individual” because the “Government feeds and sleeps him and then spends days chasing around to see what kind of sleeping and cooking facilities and toilets are provided.” As a result, workers refused to work. Instead, Chandler said, especially the black ones. He claimed that he saw “time and again the Negroes make up their money in a pot and send in to town for a case of I. W. Harper whisky.” Then “the loose women of that outfit follow right on out into the field and pick up their men, and it is just a grand orgy, if you please.” In the end, Chandler claimed, he lost 25-35% of his winter crop because of the poor quality of laborers the FSA provided him.<sup>41</sup>

Operating with this kind of perspective, it is not surprising that many producers, represented by the AFBF and similar lobbying organizations, wanted the FSA eliminated. The earliest clear statement of their purposes came in 1941 budget hearings before the House Agricultural Appropriations subcommittee. In February, AFBF president Ed O’Neal appeared before the committee to insist that parity was the key to agricultural (and thus American) prosperity. Part of the problem, he argued, was the “duplication of effort and overlapping and even conflict that has developed among the various agencies” in the USDA.<sup>42</sup> To solve that problem, O’Neal recommended that everything be streamlined with the Extension Service taking

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<sup>41</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, 118-21.

<sup>42</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 407. Such a perspective was not limited to agricultural groups. For example, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, which was generally hostile to the existence of the FSA, pointed to “improvements which have taken place in economic conditions in rural areas,” the “temporary and emergency character of the Farm Security Administration,” and “the tendency for the activities of the Farm Security Administration to overlap the work of other agencies already authorized” to suggest that it be sharply reduced or eliminated. Chamber of Commerce of the United States, *Rural Relief and Rehabilitation under the Farm Security Administration* (Washington, D.C.: May, 1942), p. 4, in Folder “U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942,” Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

the lead, including taking over the FSA's supervision program. The FSA's credit activities would move to the Farm Credit Administration.<sup>43</sup>

The AFBF and its allies jumped in at any opportunity to attack the FSA – O'Neal gave Virginia Senator Harry Byrd's Congressional Economy Committee a list of nine charges regarding the FSA's "insidious and indefensible" behaviors in Alabama, including soliciting for clients, "collective farming projects, which make you think you are in Russia," politicking, and more.<sup>44</sup> But the main argument was practical: the credit and educational elements of the FSA should be divided for the benefit of both. For example, Georgia Congressman Malcolm C. Tarver asked O. O. Wolf (of the Kansas Farm Bureau Federation) if the FCA would continue the supervision of borrowers should it take over the FSA's loan program, to ensure the protection of the loan. "That is strictly a credit proposition," Wolf said, "[Home and farm management] is primarily educational and not regulatory or administrative. To that extent it is simply just the education features [and] we feel there can be a lot of consolidation made."<sup>45</sup>

There was not much evidence for this claim, and the rest of the AFBF's charges against the FSA – mostly a collection of unverifiable personal reports and unsupportable allegations – amounted to a weak case. Tarver, hardly an FSA ally, pointed out what the AFBF was really calling for: "[I]f you are going to continue the work and merely shift the personnel from one agency to another, then you have to have as many people [...] I do not think it makes any difference whether John Jones works for the Soil Conservation Service at \$3,000 a year or whether he works for the Extension Service at \$3,000 a year, so far as the Government is

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<sup>43</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 409-413.

<sup>44</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 743-46; "Attacks FSA Stand on Poll Tax Loans," *New York Times*, February 7, 1942.

<sup>45</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 517-18.

concerned.”<sup>46</sup> The AFBF, even FSA critics noted, was transparently demanding more power for itself and its Extension Service allies. But, as FSA administrators recognized, the atmosphere was such that even weak arguments could be dangerous.

A good example of how even the most transparently thin attack could prove harmful came during testimony by the AFBF general counsel Donald Kirkpatrick regarding the Bureau’s investigation of the FSA. His description, taken from brief looks at states in the Southeast, the Midwest, and the Northwest, was not terribly damning or convincing. Most telling was the study for the South: William C. Carr of Chicago was tasked with looking at Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Kirkpatrick admitted that Carr only had a limited time, less than three weeks, to study the situation and prepare a report. He was specifically told to look at FSA cooperatives, farming projects, solicitation of clients, excessive or duplicated efforts, and other misdeeds. Carr spent eight days in Alabama, looking at a one of several “socialized farming projects” in Hale County. Carr claimed that the FSA was soliciting clients for these projects, but confused the issue by presenting as evidence an advertisement for the farm-tenant purchase program. Carr used a few allegedly representative farm plans as proof that the FSA was overburdening clients. He spent even less time on the other states, only a day in Louisiana, but he drew a similar picture of mismanagement and abuse.<sup>47</sup>

Baldwin testified immediately after Kirkpatrick and pointed out that the AFBF was openly hostile to the FSA and that it would have been much more useful for such allegations to have been sent to the FSA, rather than sprung at a hearing.<sup>48</sup> Refuting Carr’s attack, Baldwin

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>47</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 792-838; the southern discussion is 801-12, 818-38; quotes on 802-03. During Kirkpatrick’s testimony, he recounted telling his investigators to “get the best you can. Let us get a true picture to the committee” (815), which resulted in open laughter from FSA employees viewing the proceedings. Eventually Byrd ordered all FSA employees to stand, counting five for the record. Later, McKellar made Baldwin’s wife stand, as part of an effort to show the leanings of the apparently hostile audience.

<sup>48</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 839-846.



said, was practically impossible: it was based on a very small subsection of the entire program, on interviews with unnamed and unknown sources, and from sources that could not in any meaningful sense be objectively assessed. Kirkpatrick himself was obviously biased, with only the most tenuous grasp of what the FSA was actually doing. But Baldwin's efforts to counter such criticisms were fruitless, since the actual merits of what the FSA was doing was not the point, as demonstrated by the discussion of how the FSA's work related to Rexford Tugwell and his sympathies toward the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> As he "vainly tried to answer every criticism," historian Donald Tolley writes, "Baldwin was merely blowing in the wind."<sup>50</sup> Smearing the FSA to worsen an already hostile climate was the goal, not the pursuit of fact.

The AFBF's criticisms of the FSA did not change considerably over the next few years; rather, they intensified. Tellingly, by 1942 the AFBF argued that Congress should actually reduce agricultural spending as a whole. The demand for budget cuts took precedence even over the demands for parity pricing: when O'Neal appeared before the House Agricultural Appropriations subcommittee in 1942, his first recommendation was for the coordination of agricultural programs under the Extension Service; his second was to reduce all other expenses, mostly by abolishing or transferring programs. He favored abolishing the FSA generally and the farm-tenant program specifically (along with several other agencies, including the Soil Conservation Service, the National Youth Administration, and the Civilian Conservation Corps), citing the need for wartime reductions in expenditures. Maintaining control of agricultural policy had become more important for AFBF leadership than even raising farm incomes.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 855-58, 873-75. Despite this, Baldwin introduced a lengthy response to many of the specific charges, conceding in a few cases that local FSA employees had shown bad judgment or been overzealous in their work but mostly showing that the AFBF's specific allegations were mostly misleading at best and false at worst. *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 893-902.

<sup>50</sup> Tolley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 246.

<sup>51</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 607-13.

In addition to the political machinations of the agricultural lobby, a second group of FSA critics argued that the FSA was an illegal, unconstitutional, or even un-American agency. Other groups of political foes made a similar argument for tactical reasons – AFBF president O’Neal attacked the FSA not only for its wasteful spending but also for alleged illegal practices and for possessing objectives that were “inconsistent with the spirit and genius of the American way of life.”<sup>52</sup> But some critics were primarily motivated by belief that the FSA’s activities were illegal and wasteful, not because it overlapped with someone’s political turf.

The most prominent such critic was Virginia Senator Harry Byrd, a long-time foe of the FSA and, indeed, of any federal intervention in agriculture. He chaired the Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures (better known as the Byrd Committee). Although Byrd and his committee had a much different conception of what the federal government should be doing in agriculture than did the AFBF, they shared the belief that the FSA was a wasteful duplication of other government programs. Byrd asked Baldwin during the hearings, for example, if the FSA was not doing exactly what the WPA was supposed to be doing, in providing help for rural families in catastrophic or disaster situations. North Carolina Representative Robert Doughton followed up by asking if state and local responsibility for the destitute had been ignored and if local authorities had been let off the hook by the new federal willingness to provide relief.<sup>53</sup> Some of the criticism of the FSA’s wastefulness targeted individual administrators: before a Senate subcommittee in 1942, Assistant Administrator Robert W. Hudgens defended a trip he took to New England in part to look at Canada’s extension

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 734.

<sup>53</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part II*, 368-70.

service. His having taken the trip in the summer, critics argued, indicated that Hudgens was just looking for a way to escape the Washington heat at taxpayer expense.<sup>54</sup>

A number of congressmen supported Byrd because the FSA seemed so expensive and therefore wasteful. Part of the problem, as Georgia Senator Richard Russell (an FSA supporter) pointed out, was that many in Congress did not know how it worked. The program looked “like a tremendously expensive program to a man who has never been out in the field to see how it operates,” Russell said, and “you would be astonished at the ignorance of some Members of Congress on the actual workings of this program and the need for the administrative expense that has been incurred.”<sup>55</sup>

While Byrd opposed on principle a great many federal agencies and activities, other critics opposed FSA because they believed it to be un-American and perhaps even communist-inspired. There was a sense that the projects were anti-individualistic, socialistic, and therefore illegitimate. During Baldwin’s testimony before a congressional subcommittee in 1942, Tarver asked about the Lake Dick Farm cooperative in Arkansas, “In what respect does that enterprise differ from the system of agriculture practiced in Soviet Russia?” Later he asked about a North Carolina project, pointedly avoiding the word “cooperative” in favor of a more radical-sounding term: “When did you start this collective project?” and “To what do you attribute the brilliant success of your experiment in collectivism in Arkansas over that in North Carolina?” To some extent, just the idea of what the FSA was doing seemed ridiculous to congressional critics. Tarver said, “I do think this whole fantastic idea of trying to furnish everyone in this country

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<sup>54</sup> Critics argued this despite the fact that he paid for about half of the trip as a personal vacation because he did not consider it to be specific FSA business. Senator Russell called what Hudgens, a bona fide war hero wounded 19 times in WWI, endured a “grave injustice” (1059). Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 1049-59. See also *The Reminiscences of Robert W. Hudgens*.

<sup>55</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 355.

with low-income decent quarters in which to live at a reasonable price at Government expense ought to be abandoned.”<sup>56</sup>

Baldwin, long seen as a radical in the vein of Rexford Tugwell, came under fire. Tennessee Senator Kenneth McKellar said in the Senate in May 1942, “I think Mr. Baldwin is a communist. I do not think he is really in favor of our American institutions.” Other senators came to Baldwin’s defense. Claude Pepper asked for evidence of Baldwin’s radicalism, to which McKellar vaguely responded that FSA wasted money sending people around the country. John H. Bankhead defended Baldwin: “I have at all times found him to be a gentleman, a Virginia gentleman, and if any criticism could be made of him it is because of his generosity, possibly, his tender heart toward relieving the sufferings of the poor farmers.”<sup>57</sup> Such defenses did not stop the accusations, and the FSA even got caught up in anti-communist hysteria and the House Un-American Activities Committee during an attack on C. B. Baldwin in 1944.<sup>58</sup>

Charges that the FSA was not only acting illegally but was also anti-southern followed news that the FSA allegedly paid southern farmers’ poll taxes. In February 1942, Robert K. Greene, a Hale County, Alabama, probate judge, told the Byrd Committee that on December 29, 1941, he found an FSA employee, Curdin McGill, looked through the poll-tax records of Hale County. McGill allegedly told Greene that he was looking for white clients who might need the FSA to help pay their poll taxes. Upon further investigation, Greene found that in at least two other Alabama counties (Macon and Coffee), FSA employees carried out the same procedure.

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<sup>56</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 248-49, 252, 237. See also Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 354

<sup>57</sup> *Congressional Record* 88 (1942), 4283, 4286.

<sup>58</sup> Westbrook Pegler, “Phone Records,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 21, 1944. Pegler claimed rather fancifully that Baldwin was “on leave serving with the political leader of the New York Communist faction of the union movement,” the CIO’s Sidney Hillman. See also “Reds Control PAC, Dies Aide Charges,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1944. Pegler described a vast and powerful FSA working closely with communist efforts to get Roosevelt reelected, with Baldwin simply “on loan” to the CIO and able to return to his old post as soon as the election was over. Critics were slightly correct: it later turned out that Nathan Gregory Silvermaster, who worked with the FSA and the Board of Economic Warfare, was a communist spy.

Greene contacted E. S. Morgan, director of Region V (which included Alabama), who defended the loans for the poll tax as similar to loans for any other tax.<sup>59</sup>

Advancing money for the payment of the poll tax was not technically illegal in Alabama unless it was done with the purpose of influencing that person's vote. To prove this was the case, Greene provided affidavits from people who claimed that the FSA had made efforts to force them to vote, that E. S. Morgan pressured local supervisors to make sure their clients had paid the poll tax in case their votes were needed, and that the FSA was taking on as many cases as possible in order to have a larger constituency. Baldwin responded by pointing out that the USDA Solicitor, Mastin G. White, had approved making such loans in Alabama. Except for an obviously irritated Senator Robert La Follette, this did not satisfy any members of the Committee, who tried to maneuver Baldwin into admitting that the FSA was forcing clients to vote a certain way in an effort to build up a political organization.<sup>60</sup> Much of the criticism was openly racial, despite the fact that black clients (as Morgan noted) could not vote whether they paid their taxes or not, so they were not eligible for such loans. Virginia Senator Carter Glass, the Appropriations Committee chair, told Baldwin that he doubted the connection between voting and rehabilitation, saying, "Our Appropriations Committee room is small and I hope you bring before us all your rehabilitated Negroes from Alabama so I can have a look at them."<sup>61</sup>

FSA administrators did not back down, arguing that rehabilitation included both paying taxes and ensuring that its clients were full, "self-respecting members of their community".<sup>62</sup> The distant but still sympathetic Roosevelt hesitated before openly supporting the agency. Asserting his lifelong opposition to the poll tax, FDR accused those who criticized such loans as believing

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<sup>59</sup> *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 699-704.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 706-09, 711-42.

<sup>61</sup> "Attacks FSA Stand on Poll Tax Loans," *New York Times*, February 7, 1942; *Byrd Committee Hearings, Part III*, 742.

<sup>62</sup> C. P. Trussell, "FSA Is Accused of Tax Loan Plan," *New York Times*, January 24, 1942.

that the poor should not vote. FDR also noted charges that the Farm Bureau collected dues involuntarily out of Agricultural Adjustment Administration benefits. The Southern Tenant Farmer Union's H. L. Mitchell and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics' Howard Tolley joined Baldwin before the Byrd committee in criticizing the AFBF as politically motivated and for failing to help or represent small farmers.<sup>63</sup> Eventually the issue blew over, but not before further wounding the FSA.

A third group of critics was the broadest and least rigidly anti-FSA: congressmen who resented the FSA's refusal, in their view, to adhere to congressional dictates or sufficiently respect congressional intent. The most important element of this criticism involved the apparent FSA foot-dragging over the liquidation of the resettlement projects. The delay, Tarver told Baldwin, constituted a "policy of defiance" that would "be exceedingly harmful to the Farm Security Administration."<sup>64</sup> Congress wanted the FSA to liquidate the resettlement program as quickly as possible, but it was going slowly. That alone would have been enough to create tension. But as war preparations began, the FSA appeared to be creating more resettlement communities for families forced to move by defense activities. To those congressmen most opposed to resettlement, it looked like the FSA was sneaking additional projects into a wartime effort.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Tarver asserted that the FSA was using its migratory labor program to stealthily and against congressional intent "bring about the migration by persuasion and by paying money to them also, paying expenses, of farm families of the South who are satisfied with their surroundings [...] to other sections of the country."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Robert De Vore, "Roosevelt Rebukes FSA for Paying Poll Tax; Also Hits at Farm Bureau Dues Deductions," *Washington Post*, February 11, 1942; C. P. Trussell, "Roosevelt Scores Levying Poll Tax," *New York Times*, February 14, 1942; Roosevelt, *PPA*, 11:95-96.

<sup>64</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1036.

<sup>65</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 491-93.

<sup>66</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 1006.

This criticism of the FSA's tardiness and underhanded behavior in liquidating the resettlement projects indicates the difference in viewpoint between the FSA and its critics. Congressional foes attacked the FSA for what they saw as intentional delay. But for FSA employees, things appeared to be going at breakneck speed. James Heizer, then Acting Director of the FSA's Management Division, told employees at a conference in 1943 that they had to keep in mind, in the haste of liquidating the communities, "the important phase of doing an orderly, intelligent, and constructive job of withdrawing Federal supervision from these communities."<sup>67</sup> Congress demanded speed and worried only about the transition of ownership from one party to another, but for the FSA, ending ownership did not mean ending responsibility. Administrators expected community managers to stay in the communities as the FSA's field representative, continuing supervision and making sure that the opportunities provided by the community-type set-up would not be lost in the change in agency or owner.<sup>68</sup>

Touchy congressmen even attacked the FSA for things it did not do. Virginia's John W. Flannagan criticized the FSA for using yearly appropriations to do rehabilitation work, when Title II of the BJFTA provided no money for such activity. He characterized this as ignoring or circumventing the will of Congress, taking the omission of any funding from the act as forbidding any further rehabilitation funding at all. The Bureau of the Budget told the FSA to go through the appropriations process to get money for rural rehabilitation, and Congress had passed such appropriations, but this did not suit Flannagan. Told that the Appropriations Committee had

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<sup>67</sup> "Statement Made by James S. Heizer, Acting Director, Management Division, before French Lick Conference – July 15, 1943," p. 1, Folder "F2," Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

provided such funds, Flannagan responded, “I did not, and I am protesting now [...] That is a direct violation of the clear provisions of this act.”<sup>69</sup>

At times, however, such policing of congressional rights and responsibilities could work for the FSA. The fight in the House among the Rules, Appropriations, and Agriculture Committees was particularly fierce and saved the FSA from destruction during the 1943 appropriations debate. The House Appropriations Committee drastically cut funding for the USDA, including abolishing the FSA and moving its lending operations to the Farm Credit Administration; at the same time, a House-Senate committee agreed in principle to a “Land Army” bill that would forbid farm workers from migrating from their home counties without written permission by county Extension agents. But the Appropriations Committee went too far, even for the FSA’s opponents, who feared its power to step on their own toes.<sup>70</sup> South Carolina congressman Hampton Fulmer asked, “Why should the Secretary of Agriculture of any of these groups come to my committee [Agriculture] if they are able to bypass my committee by going through the Appropriations Committee?”<sup>71</sup>

North Carolina representative Harold Cooley, a harsh FSA critic, also criticized the move, saying it was action that the Agricultural Committee or legislation should have covered. His committee, he said, “does resent the fact that the Committee on Appropriations has apparently constituted itself into a super-committee.” Particularly bothersome was that the Appropriations Committee took upon itself the power to create and destroy at will: “they now seek to destroy the agency completely – the good as well as the bad parts of it.”<sup>72</sup> The impasse

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<sup>69</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 177-81, 179 (quote). This was part of a turf war between the Appropriations and Agriculture Committees.

<sup>70</sup> C. P. Trussell, “House Group Cuts Wickard’s Funds,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1943; Christine Sadler, “Agriculture Bill Arouses Congress,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 1943; “FSA Fight Looms on Floor of House,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1943.

<sup>71</sup> *Congressional Record* 89 (1943), 3416.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 3411.



was only temporary, as a compromise was reached letting the Appropriations Committee make the cuts, with vague threats that next year the Rules and Agriculture Committees would not allow such behavior.<sup>73</sup> However, the House made a slight misstep in what became known as “Tarver’s knob”: Tarver added a small sum for the purpose of liquidating the FSA’s resettlement projects, which allowed the Senate to restore FSA funds; if there had been no appropriations at all, the Senate would have been unable to make any additions.<sup>74</sup>

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The most serious attacks on the FSA began in early 1941, in hearings for the House Agricultural Appropriations (although there were earlier skirmishes in 1940 when Tarver introduced several budget amendments to restrict FSA operations and eliminate some of its programs).<sup>75</sup> Many members, particularly Missouri Representative Clarence Cannon, used their time to criticize the FSA and in particular the tenant-purchase program. Cannon also went out of his way to force Baldwin to admit that raising prices was the real key to solving the problems of American farmers.<sup>76</sup>

At the corresponding Senate agricultural appropriations hearing for the fiscal year 1942, taking place in March 1941, AFBF President O’Neal continued his case against the FSA when he recommended that the USDA be reorganized both philosophically and administratively. The argument was not very strong, but the support from his congressional allies was, and if nothing else the AFBF was prepared to add a heavy dose of repetition. The Senate agricultural appropriations hearings for 1941, however, were still generally friendly to the FSA – when Baldwin appeared, he mostly received questions from two of the FSA’s biggest supporters,

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<sup>73</sup> “House Farm Battle Ends in Rules Second,” *Washington Post*, April 16, 1943.

<sup>74</sup> “FSA Fund Raised by Senate Group,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1943.

<sup>75</sup> Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 127; House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 87-89.

<sup>76</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 99-107.

Senators Russell and Bankhead. Most of the discussion involved the shortage of funds, requests for specific information, and similar questions. The Senate, for the time being, remained supportive.<sup>77</sup> With strong support from FDR, the Senate restored funds to the FSA which had been cut by the House and eliminated most other proposed limitations.

The Hearings on the Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures, held by a bipartisan committee chaired by Virginia Senator Harry Byrd, represented another line of attack.<sup>78</sup> Agricultural interests and their congressional supporters like Cannon strongly opposed any cuts to parity or soil conservation payments; Byrd and his committee generally agreed. Since this made up 57% of the agricultural appropriation for the fiscal year 1942, the rest of the USDA would be forced to make all of the Byrd Committee's contemplated cuts, including the elimination of entire agencies like the FSA and the Rural Electrification Administration.<sup>79</sup> These hearings raised some of the most prominent criticisms of the FSA: that it illegally paid poll taxes, was communist-inspired, and was generally an unnecessary and wasteful program. The committee also made the case for immediately eliminating the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration, as well as for the reduction and eventual elimination of the PWA, the WPA, and federal spending on roads, flood control, public works, and more.

The House hearings on agricultural appropriations for 1943, taking place in 1942, went almost as poorly as they could have for the FSA. Very little new came from these hearings – again, the AFBF and its allies launched an attack on the FSA and similar programs as at best a distraction from the real need for parity pricing, at worst a socialist plot for land reform. Some FSA programs, like tenant-purchase, had general support. But the tenor was decidedly hostile,

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<sup>77</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1942* (1941), 456-77.

<sup>78</sup> On the Byrd Committee, see Richard N. Chapman, *Contours of Public Policy, 1939-1945* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981), 129-142, 152-66.

<sup>79</sup> Chapman, *Contours of Public Policy, 1939-1945*, 139.

particularly regarding the resettlement projects, the subsistence homesteads, and cooperative farms. Much of it involved general criticisms that the projects cost too much, or were poorly run, or petty criticism of Baldwin personally – Tarver upbraided him, for example, for failing to bring the right kind of documents every day to the hearings.<sup>80</sup>

Edward O’Neal again appeared before the committee to represent the AFBF, accompanied by several state presidents. There was little new in the AFBF’s arguments. Some specific criticisms of the FSA already felt like a word-for-word recitation of earlier attacks. “We have had so many complaints of waste, extravagance, and abuses in the administration of the Farm Security Administration programs,” O’Neal said, including quotas for the number of clients “to maintain personnel employed by the agency,” client solicitation, excessive loans, “impractical collective farming projects,” wasteful grants, “attempts to build up pressure groups to maintain congressional appropriations,” and more.<sup>81</sup> In March, the House came within 23 votes of repealing the farm tenancy program entirely. Reflecting the AFBF line, Illinois Representative Everett Dirksen specifically noted that he wanted to eliminate the more than 5,000 FSA farm and home supervisors working for the FSA, who received some \$18.5 million dollars, because there were “already 7,000 on the Extension Service payrolls now throughout the country, capable, ready and eager to advise, and Triple A committees in every county of the nation.”<sup>82</sup>

The tide was strongly against the FSA, but other issues helped drag out the USDA budget fight through the summer. The USDA even became technically fundless on July 1, 1942, though it had a temporary operating fund set against the next year’s appropriation. The House and the

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<sup>80</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 300-03. The specific document in question was the loan proposal for Lord Scully Estate in Bates County, Missouri. Tarver criticized the FSA’s actions in organizing an association made largely of FSA employees to purchase the land and then convey it to future settlers.

<sup>81</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 607-13, 618 (quote).

<sup>82</sup> C. P. Trussell, “Farm Tenant Aid Slashed By House,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1942.

Senate split on spending for the FSA, but far more difficult was the issue of parity prices. The House insisted that the government pay full parity prices to dispose of the huge potential surplus. Senators feared that such a move would raise food prices and lead to inflation. FDR thought both options were far from what was necessary to ensure sufficient food for the war, but he sided with the Senate's relatively generous FSA funding and eagerness to keep food prices low. Behind the scenes, some believed the whole thing was a smokescreen for the AFBF (which released a statement affirming its support of the House bill and opposing what it considered extravagant spending on programs like the FSA) to get what it wanted.<sup>83</sup> Finally, after Roosevelt publicly criticized Congress for harming the war effort and subtly threatened a veto if he did not have sufficient freedom to take care of farm surpluses, Congress worked out a compromise.<sup>84</sup>

The FSA survived, but with a slashed budget. One measure of the FSA's decline was simply its size: from a peak in June 1942 of employing over 20,000 people, the agency's total employment declined by more than half, to below 10,000, by 1944.<sup>85</sup> Between budget reductions, congressional interference, and decreasing cooperation with other agricultural agencies, the spring and summer of 1942 was a despairing time for FSA administrators. One regional director even recommended to Baldwin that he demand the FSA be withdrawn from the USDA entirely.<sup>86</sup>

USDA reorganization hurt the FSA further, though indirectly. On December 5, 1942, Executive Order 9280 grouped the Farm Security Administration with several other agencies as

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<sup>83</sup> Robert C. Albright, "Agriculture Dept. Fundless as New Fiscal Years Starts," *Washington Post*, July 1, 1942; C. P. Trussell, "Deadlock Holds on Wickard Funds," *New York Times*, July 2, 1942; "Text of President's Letter on Farm Problem," *Washington Post*, July 4, 1942; "House Lines Hold Against Any Move in Farm Deadlock," *New York Times*, July 7, 1942.

<sup>84</sup> "Congress Tying Up War Food Supplies, President Asserts," *New York Times*, July 10, 1942; "Senate, House Conferees Compromise on Farm Bill; Vote May Come Today," *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 1942; "Agreement on Appropriation," *New York Times*, July 15, 1942; "House Yields to Senate in Parity Issue," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 1942; "Grain Sales Votes at Below Parity as House Yields," *New York Times*, July 16, 1942; "Signs Sub-Parity Bill," *New York Times*, July 24, 1942.

<sup>85</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 80.

<sup>86</sup> Laurence I. Hewes, Jr., telegram to Mr. C. B. Baldwin, April 22, 1942, Folder "U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1942," Box 29, Baldwin Papers.

the Food Production Administration (FPA), within the Department of Agriculture.<sup>87</sup> In a surprise choice for the powerful position, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard selected Herbert W. Parisius as the Director of Food Production. Parisius was an ardent New Dealer with no loyalty to any USDA faction, looking on both the liberals and conservatives as entirely too narrow-viewed and rigid; thus he was an ideal choice from the perspective of the threatened agencies like the FSA.<sup>88</sup>

Parisius turned out to be a disaster. He turned to FSA leaders to develop a plan for increasing food production. Parisius thought in terms of food production, so within the USDA, it was natural to turn to the FSA, as opposed to an agency like AAA, which was founded on the idea of reducing production and raising prices.<sup>89</sup> He selected Baldwin as his Deputy Director. Wickard, however, rejected the nomination; he respected Baldwin as an administrator and as an influential member of the liberal wing of the USDA but also recognized that he was unacceptable to conservative legislators.<sup>90</sup> In the resulting fight among various USDA officials, Parisius' plan was shelved. He resigned in mid-January 1943, part of a round of firings and reshufflings widely seen as a defeat for the FSA.<sup>91</sup>

This round of USDA reorganization went poorly, and Claude Wickard took most of the blame. Wickard had apparently been chosen by Roosevelt solely on the recommendation of Wallace; Wickard once recalled that at his first cabinet meeting, it was obvious that Roosevelt

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<sup>87</sup> John MacCormac, "Wickard Named Food Administrator," *New York Times*, December 7, 1942; Brown and Baugh, *Preliminary Inventory*, 4.

<sup>88</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 367-69; Albertson, *Roosevelt's Farmer*, 276, 327-28.

<sup>89</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 575.

<sup>90</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 370-71; Albertson, *Roosevelt's Farmer*, 337-44. Wickard's biographer, Albertson, paints Baldwin as rather scheming (342-43), using Parisius to strengthen the position of the FSA by making it entirely connected with wartime food production and thus beyond the knives of budget-cutting legislators. At times he even refers to the "Baldwin-Parisius plan." This is almost certainly overstating the reality of the FSA's influence.

<sup>91</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 372-74; "FSA Left Out of New Farm Loan Setup," *Washington Post*, January 24, 1943. Along with Parisius' departure, the resignation of Donald Montgomery, USDA consumers counsel and the firing of Gardner Jackson as special assistant to Undersecretary Paul Appleby provided a bad sign for the FSA: all three were known as part of the USDA circle trying to preserve or expand the FSA. "Wickard Ousts Jackson, FSA Proponent," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1943.

did not know who he was.<sup>92</sup> He started off at a disadvantage, and things only got worse. Wickard proved unable to arbitrate among the many competing factions or to enforce his decisions.<sup>93</sup> He faced criticism from both sides – the FSA and its allies worried that he had no sympathy for them, as his rejection of Baldwin showed. Others saw him as a pie-the-sky reformer.

Congressman J. William Ditter of Pennsylvania, for example, criticized Wickard's "fancy phrasing," "highfalootin language," "star gazing," and "socialized philosophizing" in response to his questions about dairy farm labor during the farm labor program hearings.<sup>94</sup>

Roosevelt lost confidence in Wickard after the Parisius affair. He therefore ordered, on March 26, 1943, that the War Food Administration (WFA) take over the FPA's administrative functions. Like the Food Production Administration, the WFA was within the USDA, but its head Chester Davis, one-time Agricultural Adjustment Administrator and friend of the AFBF, answered directly to the president. Although Davis too would be gone within months (citing his own lack of authority and disagreement with Administration plans to control inflation), the entire affair indicated that the FSA had little support within the USDA, particularly as the much more politically weakened Secretary had little desire or ability to defend it.<sup>95</sup>

The FSA's remaining claim to war-effort relevance was the labor program. Across the eastern United States, the FSA built migrant labor camps to remedy local shortages of labor, and it had been housing migrants in the West (increasingly including Mexican laborers) for years.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 487.

<sup>93</sup> Ben W. Gilbert, "Food System Delay Laid to Wickard," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1943.

<sup>94</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program*, 1943, 188.

<sup>95</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Centralizing and Delegating Authority with Respect to the Production and Distribution of Food," March 25, 1943, Folder "Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1943. II," Box 30, Baldwin Papers; Edward T. Folliard, "Resignation Caused by Lack of Authority; Doubts Subsidy Plan Would Be Effective; Marvin Jones New Administrator," *Washington Post*, June 26, 1943; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 374-76; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 489-91.

<sup>96</sup> Robert M. Hallett, "FSA Streamlined Farm Camps Play Big Part in Saving Crops," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 31, 1942. On the FSA's role in bringing Mexican laborers to the U.S., see the first person account in Hewes, *Boxcar in the Sand*, 176-201.

Even after the FSA's budget was slashed, FSA leaders and allies continued to emphasize the importance of the FSA's role in the farm labor situation. As if to prove the FSA's point, in May 1942 agricultural officials announced that hundreds of tons of crops (particularly asparagus, the first major crop harvested in the Northeast) were rotting in the fields due to labor shortages. Announcing the construction of two migratory labor camps to ameliorate the labor shortage in the area, FSA officials indicated that, with the growing demand for labor because of the draft and expanding defense industries, American agriculture could expect further such shortages. Despite the crisis, the situation was actually better in the Northeast, where income for field hands had doubled since the previous year, than in parts of the country where farm wages had increased less. The message was clear: American agricultural production needed the FSA's proven skill to provide labor.<sup>97</sup>

Agricultural leaders greatly feared the possibilities of labor shortages, but many producers still opposed the FSA for reasons both principled and political. For example, with his crop having lain in the field for several weeks, one Arizona cotton farmer refused to hire FSA-provided labor at the price of 30 cents an hour. This was not due to the cost – the farmer had been willing to pay that kind of wage – but because of unwillingness to accept, on principle, the concept of a minimum wage in agriculture.<sup>98</sup>

Politically motivated agricultural spokesmen also attacked the FSA's role in the labor program. The National Cotton Council's Oscar Johnston criticized the FSA as a "spearhead to drive a labor wedge into agriculture." Instead of improving agriculture, he charged, the FSA only gave a hand to the CIO's organizing efforts and those trying "to build a giant bureaucracy which

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<sup>97</sup> "Huge Crop Losses Faced in Jersey," *New York Times*, May 8, 1942; "Crops Spoiling as Farm Labor Grows Scarcer; Wickard Warns of Shortages," *Washington Post*, May 8, 1942.

<sup>98</sup> Ben W. Gilbert, "Government Defied on 2 Labor Fronts," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1942.

can be used to prosecute a philosophy of state land socialism.”<sup>99</sup> W. R. Ogg, the AFBF’s Director of Research, bitterly attacked the FSA during farm labor hearings in February 1943. It made no sense, he argued, to have more than one agency handling the nation’s agricultural manpower. Ogg recommended instead that the entire responsibility for organizing, transporting, and placing farm labor be placed in the Extension Agency, ideally as decentralized as possible, with each state developing and running its own farm labor program when possible. Tipping his hand, Ogg also recommended that the USDA be prohibited from making any kind of regulation regarding minimum wages, housing standards, maximum work hours, or to impose or enforce any collective bargaining agreements.<sup>100</sup>

Moreover, even supporters recognized that there were fundamental flaws in how the migrant labor program was administered. Corporate farms had made enormous profits by treating labor poorly, and the migrant labor program, in taking over the care of these laborers, simply allowed large farms to continue to do so. As Russell said, these big farms “want to escape their own responsibilities, having been willing to let these people live like dogs when they had no work for them, and now that they can use them, they want the Government to provide their living facilities.” Russell worried was that the program, if expanded, would encourage further such “predatory” practices. To this, Baldwin could only respond that the conditions already existed and he did not believe that the FSA was doing anything to encourage migratory farm movement, but was rather only addressing the problem as it stood. Further, while Baldwin did not want to expand the program, it had become necessary due to wartime demands for “maximum agricultural production.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> “FSA, Farmers’ Union Attacked by Cotton Head,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 25, 1942.

<sup>100</sup> House, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, 131-36. This last reflects how completely the top of the farmers’ organizations had distanced themselves from the bottom of the agricultural labor force

<sup>101</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943* (1942), 309-11.



The FSA was in a weak political position for this fight. FDR had essentially given up on protecting former favorites like the FSA or the National Youth Administration, conceding to Congress official responsibility for making cuts in non-war-related government spending in late 1942.<sup>102</sup> Well into the spring of 1943, the farm program was up in the air; the FSA's \$65 million plan was cut by Congress to \$26 million, while backstage FSA opponents pressured FDR to set up an altogether separate farm labor agency. The FSA finally lost any influence in the farm labor program when FDR signed House Joint Resolution 96 into law on April 29, 1943. That act moved the program to the Office of Labor in the WFA (along with many experienced FSA personnel who had worked in farm and migratory labor programs).<sup>103</sup>

During the 1943 appropriations planning, the House again wanted to cut FSA funding. The Senate Appropriations Committee restored the FSA's funds, but it hinted at a willingness to compromise on the FSA. The new regulations it included would, as Georgia Senator Russell said, "confine the FSA to the purposes to which it was designed," by prohibiting the FSA from purchasing or leasing land, making loans over \$2,500, and recommending the liquidation of the resettlement and subsistence homesteads projects.<sup>104</sup> However, the Senate had to compromise on the amount of the funding, dropping from \$40 million in administration and \$97.5 million for new loans to \$20 million and \$60 million, respectively.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ben W. Gilbert, "Roosevelt Puts Nonwar Economy Up to Congress," *Washington Post*, December 30, 1942.

<sup>103</sup> Drew Pearson, "White House Yielding; FSA Losing Out," *Washington Post*, March 21, 1943; Henry N. Dorriss, "Farm Labor Bill Under House Fire," *New York Times*, March 17, 1943; Mason Barr to Jesse B. Gilmer, July 20, 1943, Folder "30 Organization & Administration July 16 – 31, 1943," Box 2, General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP; Jack H. Bryan to Regional Information Specialists, July 30, 1943, Folder "30 Organization & Administration July 16 – 31, 1943," Box 2, General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 382-83.

<sup>104</sup> "FSA Funds Restored," *Washington Post*, June 4, 1943.

<sup>105</sup> "Compromise on FSA Scores Senate Victory," *Washington Post*, June 29, 1943. The AFBF's part in the successful destruction of the FSA and its general program of reorganizations of the USDA ended up backfiring, to a degree, in helping solidify the movement to split the Farm Bureau from the Extension Services. By the 1950s, formal relations between the two had ceased almost entirely at both the state and federal levels. See Block, *The Separation of the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service*, especially 243-77.

These drastic reductions in the summer of 1943 essentially finished off the FSA as a political force. Funding cuts had already begun to show. The resettlement program, always a small portion of the agency's budget and attention, was almost entirely gone; by 1943, 99% of the FSA's budget went toward its two other field operations, tenant purchase and rural rehabilitation.<sup>106</sup> The FSA rapidly sold off the resettlement projects in 1942 and 1943, selling 500 family units a month by the spring of 1943.<sup>107</sup> Not quite half of the 10,109 units remaining after the non-farm projects were transferred to the National Public Housing Authority were sold by June 1943, when the FSA switched to fee simple sales to more quickly liquidate the projects.<sup>108</sup>

The lack of funds and the new regulations forced other significant changes in FSA policy. Congress both reduced and limited the uses of loans for the rehabilitation program, which de-emphasized supervision in favor of traditional credit practices. Lacking the money to maintain them, the FSA eliminated almost its entire staff of technical experts in farm and home management, debt reduction, cooperatives, and tenure improvement. Farm and home plans were considerably reduced in complexity and purpose. Further, the influence of local farmers committees expanded, which encouraged approval of relatively higher income farmers.<sup>109</sup>

Appropriations reductions left the FSA a shadow of its former self, and C. B. Baldwin in particular had faced enormous criticism. Some of it was professional, regarding his inexperience

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<sup>106</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 615. Specifically, for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1943, the resettlement projects got .29% of FSA funds. *The Annual Report of the Farm Security Administration, 1942-43*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Christine Sadler, "FSA Selling 500 Family Units a Month," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1943.

<sup>108</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 630-31; *The Annual Report of the Farm Security Administration, 1942-43*, 4-5. The need to rapidly liquidate the projects generally meant the FSA got less than it could have otherwise gotten in sales. One notable exception was at Casa Grande, where factionalism among the settlers and simple greed delayed sale and earned the FSA-FHA over \$175,000 in rental fees between 1945 and 1948. This ended up destroying the cooperative at considerable individual cost to the settlers. See Banfield, *Government Project*, 206-21.

<sup>109</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 112-115.

as a farmer or the various failures of the FSA attributed (often unfairly) to his administration.<sup>110</sup> But he also dealt with what National Farmers Union president James Patton called “a highly personalized smear campaign.”<sup>111</sup> Baldwin tried to defend the FSA as best he could, and he turned down a job with the Lend-Lease Administration, as he said, until “the atmosphere clears a bit.”<sup>112</sup> However, the total lack of support from the USDA, especially Secretary Wickard, finally led to Baldwin’s exit; he decided that while the agency might not be able to survive further attacks without him, it certainly could not with him. He was doubtlessly influenced by the rumors swirling that he would be forced out anyway; in June, WFA chief Chester Davis was widely believed to be planning Baldwin’s removal, and Davis’ replacement Marvin Jones told Baldwin that the FSA could not survive with him as administrator.<sup>113</sup> As one United Press farm reporter put it, “Some congressmen were heard to mutter that if Baldwin were ousted they’d gladly vote F-S-A all the funds it asked for.”<sup>114</sup> Baldwin resigned in September 1943 to take a job in the reconstruction of postwar Italy – a position that never actually materialized. To most observers, Baldwin’s resignation reflected the victory of anti-New Deal politicians like Harry Byrd or the influence of the AFBF.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> The best examples being Shenandoah Park and Arthurdale, neither of which the FSA initiated.

<sup>111</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 850.

<sup>112</sup> C. B. Baldwin to E. R. Stettinus, Jr., May 13, 1943, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1943. I,” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>113</sup> C. B. Baldwin to Eleanor Roosevelt, October 12, 1943, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1943. I,” Box 30, Baldwin Papers; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 393. See also the numerous (apparently unsent) versions of his resignation letter, reflecting different levels of Baldwin’s sense of professional, ideological, and personal insult in each, in Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1943. I,” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>114</sup> Lee Mannify, “On the Farm Front” September 6, 1943, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1943. I,” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>115</sup> Samuel B. Bledsoe, “Baldwin May Quit as Farm Unit Chief,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1943; “Agriculture’s Loss,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 1943. The job in Italy may never have existed, at least according to Will Alexander, who saw the whole thing as a sop to Baldwin, who had been organizationally useful but became a political liability. Baldwin began to put together a staff and plans, but the State Department and military had no interest in giving him a job, and FDR was not willing to push for it. This humiliation apparently contributed to his postwar bitterness and shift to the left. *The Reminiscences of Will W. Alexander*, 482-85.

Had the appointment followed the policy of promoting from within the FSA's top leadership, the new administrator probably would have been the capable and experienced Robert W. Hudgens. He had served as both a state and regional director in the RA and had been in the Washington office of the FSA for four years, including as Acting Administrator immediately after Baldwin's exit. Hudgens, however, was unacceptable to the orthodox agriculturalists in the USDA and several members of Congress, who associated Hudgens (and Baldwin) with the early, liberal, Tugwell-influenced New Deal.<sup>116</sup> Marvin Jones in particular had little respect for Hudgens, although he had trouble finding a replacement, being rebuffed by a number of different people before finding a candidate willing to take the job.<sup>117</sup>

Eventually the post fell to Franklin W. Hancock, a moderate southerner and former congressman committed to at least the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. Hancock's background reflected an interest in home ownership – he had served for three years on the Federal Home Loan Bank Board as Director of the Home Owners Loan Corporation.<sup>118</sup> He had no connection with the early New Deal or farm security, and he believed that the FSA had gone too far in promoting unnecessary and expensive social experiments. He began to change FSA policy along these lines. Rural rehabilitation loans were limited to \$1,500, despite congressional allowance that they could be up to \$2,500, and qualifications for all types of loans were raised. Grants dropped from \$1.7 million the year before he was appointed to a request for \$250,000 for the

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<sup>116</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 395-97.

<sup>117</sup> May, *Marvin Jones*, 213.

<sup>118</sup> Marvin Jones, "Administrator's Memorandum No. 33," November 25, 1943, Folder "War Food Administrator's Memoranda," Box 1, War Food Administrators Memoranda (Entry I-54) in Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture (Record Group 16), National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

fiscal year 1945. By the spring of 1944, total FSA employment was down to about 9,500, about 9,000 of those in the field.<sup>119</sup>

It is possible to overstate the importance of the change in leadership. Hancock and Baldwin had different visions of what the FSA should be doing, but under both, the FSA emphasized rural rehabilitation and the tenant purchase program as the agency's most significant activities. Hancock did not oversee a massive shift in the nature of the FSA or in most of its goals. FSA publications under both administrators, like the 1942 pamphlet *Farm Security* and the 1945 pamphlet *Services to Rural Families*, shared many similarities. The latter pamphlet emphasized the tenant purchase program much more, and the 1942 pamphlet went into more detail about other programs the FSA operated like medical aid loans and tenure improvement, but both described supervised loans of some type as the primary work of the FSA.<sup>120</sup> In 1945, Hancock listed the FSA's four major activities in this order: rural rehabilitation, tenant purchase, the water utilization program, and the liquidation of resettlement and cooperative projects.<sup>121</sup> Baldwin's list likely would have looked much the same. More important than leadership philosophy was the decline in available resources. The change from Baldwin to Hancock, and the different approach Hancock took, was a symptom of the FSA's difficulties, not its cause.

Hancock recognized the problem the FSA faced in terms of congressional support, and he tried to impart a similar concern to the rest of the FSA. He wrote to his regional directors that the FSA had received much criticism, with the result that the "present and the future well being of Farm Security is, therefore, being weighed in the balance." He was turning all of his attention to

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<sup>119</sup> House, *Farmers' Home Corporation Act of 1944, Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture on H. R. 4384*, 225-26, 239; Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 209-11; FSA, "Comparison of Regular Salaried Full-Time Employees On Basis of Man-Years, Fiscal Years 1942 Through 1946," NAL.

<sup>120</sup> FSA, *Farm Security*; FSA, *Services to Rural Families* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941). Baldwin later called Hancock "not a bad guy" but lamented that his appointment resulted in "the whole atmosphere of the agency [changing] pretty rapidly." C. B. Baldwin interview with Richard K. Doud, 30.

<sup>121</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1946* (1945), 508.

“meriting the confidence of the people’s representatives in the Congress and of holding the good will of the public.” Toward this end he urged every employee to make whatever changes possible without harming the FSA’s primary goals, for example by substantially reducing their expenses on travel and communication.<sup>122</sup> Hancock also made the case to critics in Congress that the FSA was valuable, but also that it was sticking within its bounds. “To the best of my knowledge, gentlemen,” Hancock said during the House Appropriation Hearings, “we are conducting no program, carrying on no activity, that is not definitely within the authorities given to us.”<sup>123</sup>

Having not yet killed it, the FSA’s opponents tried to eliminate or refashion it. The AFBF recommended, after the budget had been cut, that the FSA be dismembered and its programs (and funding) be divided amongst different agencies.<sup>124</sup> The National Cotton Council commended itself for its opposition to the “socialistic activities” of the overly regulated, overly bureaucratic FSA, and recommended that its most important and valuable functions be moved to other USDA agencies.<sup>125</sup> North Carolina representative Harold Cooley did not want the FSA destroyed; instead he introduced and held hearings on H. R. 4384, the Farmers’ Home Corporation Act of 1944. It would have removed most of the FSA’s functions and emphasized the tenant-purchase program, providing government loans with a preference for veterans.<sup>126</sup> But with the FSA now mostly impotent, and most of the liberal influence removed, the sense of

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<sup>122</sup> Quoted by E. Lee Ozbirn, “To All Employees,” December 2, 1943, Folder “30-Gen Jan-April 1944,” Box 1, General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP; similar language is in several other letters to other regional directors. This letter was apparently sent at the urging of J. H. Wood, director of Region I, who worried that FSA morale was in bad shape because of concerns about the future of the organization. J. H. Wood to R. W. Hudgens, November 10, 1943, Folder “30-Gen Jan-April 1944,” Box 1, General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP.

<sup>123</sup> House, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1946* (1945), 508.

<sup>124</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1944* (1943), 744-47.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 949-50.

<sup>126</sup> House, *Farmer’s Home Corporation Act of 1944*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., H. R. 4384 ; *House Farmers’ Home Corporation Act of 1944, Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture on H. R. 4384*, 1-17; “Bill Would Merge FSA In Home Agency,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1944.

danger about the FSA dissipated. Cooley's bill, and a similar one in 1945, found little congressional interest; not until 1946 did he pass the Farmers Home Administration Act.<sup>127</sup>

During World War II, powerful farm-state congressmen managed to prevent the difficulties of wartime price controls from hitting agribusiness. At the same time, the Senate and House agricultural committees, with the assent of the Farm Bureau Federation, eliminated or altered the programs of the Farm Security Administration and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, programs which favored the less politically influential rural poor.<sup>128</sup> In the FSA's case, administrators would struggle to save the agency in the hostile atmosphere of the mid-1940s. However, changes in administration and personnel, budget cuts and legislative restrictions, and changing goals in the post-war political climate made this impossible. Even the limited goals that administrators aimed for in the period after the 1943 budget cuts proved impossible to meet.

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<sup>127</sup> Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 401.

<sup>128</sup> Shover, *First Majority – Last Minority*, 237; *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, 508-11. On the destruction of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, see Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 195-254.

## EPILOGUE

When Franklin W. Hancock took over the Farm Security Administration in 1943, his primary goal was to maintain, in at least a limited way, the FSA's more popular programs (rural rehabilitation, tenant-purchase, and water utilization) while making sure that the unpopular resettlement program did not derail the whole agency while the projects were being liquidated. In particular Hancock tried to infuse new life into the rural rehabilitation program. An FSA memorandum noted that "the lending aspects of the program have constantly overshadowed the more important supervisory aspects" of rural rehabilitation, with the result that county supervisors had made "more or less a farce of supervision." The solution was a re-emphasis on operating farms for profit and to move away from farm and home management plans and toward farm and home reorganization plans, comparing the performance of a farm before and after supervision started. The FSA should also, the memorandum recommended, accept "only borrowers who need our type of service, who understand what the service is and who want the service," a tacit concession to the belief that small and marginal farms were no longer realistic in the immediate postwar world and that the FSA should instead focus on farmers in a stronger economic position.<sup>1</sup>

Hancock and other FSA administrators believed that there was a need for rural rehabilitation in the postwar world. FSA handbooks instructed committeemen, "Many people are prone to forget the circumstances of thousands of our low-income farm families today because of

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<sup>1</sup> FSA, "Making Supervised Credit Mean What It Implies," 1945, NAL.



the generally improved agricultural situation during the war period.” Small farmers had received a relatively small share of the agricultural gains. “It would be well to remember that it was only ten years ago that about two million farm families in this country were on relief,” problems made worse by, but not caused entirely by, the depression. Poor farm families continued to face problems they could not overcome without assistance, and the FSA’s rural rehabilitation program was to provide that assistance.<sup>2</sup> If anything, new machinery and farming methods meant an even greater need for credit and supervision, if low-income farmers were to increase their production and maintain their farms.<sup>3</sup>

FSA administrators and sympathetic observers asserted that rural rehabilitation had proved its value in wartime. Bela Gold, formerly of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, argued that the “Farm Security Administration provided a most impressive demonstration of small farm production potentials during the growing season immediately following Pearl Harbor.” Although the FSA’s clients had accounted for only 3% of the nation’s production normally, “in 1942, they contributed more than one-third to nation’s total expansion in milk production and approximately 10 percent of the country’s increase in the production of eggs, beef, chickens, peanuts and dry beans.”<sup>4</sup> The implication was clear: if it could be effective during wartime, then rural rehabilitation had a role to play in the peacetime rural economy.

This effort to promote rural rehabilitation did not match up with the interests of Congress. Even before World War II ended, Representative Harold Cooley of North Carolina introduced a bill to eliminate the FSA and replace it with a less expansive program dedicated almost exclusively to farm credit. During the hearings of the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, which he chaired, Cooley opened with a claim that he “participated in the

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<sup>2</sup> FSA, *A Handbook for County FSA Committeemen*, August 1945, NAL, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Gold, *Wartime Economic Planning in Agriculture*, 276.

preparation, presentation, and passage of all legislation pertaining to the Farm Security Administration, and actively supported every appropriation which has been made for this agency and the various programs which it is administrating,” which proved his “friendship for the agency.”<sup>5</sup> He (and his committee) then went on to attack the FSA for ignoring Congress, creating un-American resettlement programs with 99-year leases that made individual ownership impossible, “Tugwellian” influences, unfair and burdensome loans and supervision of clients, duplication of efforts, and general maladministration. His goal, Cooley’s report noted, was to “save and make stronger the good parts of the Farm Security Administration plans for helping worthy farm people.”<sup>6</sup>

Hancock recognized the congressional mood and tried to work with it. In 1944, when Congressman Cooley proposed his first version of a bill replacing the FSA with a more credit-oriented agency, Hancock said that “there is no substantial difference in objectives between myself and the members of the subcommittee which drafted this bill” and praised the proposed bill for stopping certain rural rehabilitation and similar projects that had been “ill-advised and misguided practices which, however well intentioned, tended to defeat rather than promote the advancement of the family’s industry and independence.”<sup>7</sup> Hancock also told Cooley’s committee that he supported the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act and that he was a “strong advocate of the individual family-type farm.”<sup>8</sup> He emphasized the general value of rehabilitation and supervision; the FSA could not be measured by profits made or interest earned, he said, “but

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<sup>5</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*, Part I, 1. The Committee finally released its report a year later, timed to improve the chances of Cooley’s FHA bill (H.R.4384, the text of which was included in the report), House, *Activities of the FSA*. When Baldwin and other FSA employees testified before the Cooley Committee, they must have been aware that many of those members had just tried to kill the FSA by voting it no appropriations for 1944.

<sup>6</sup> House, *Activities of the FSA*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> House *Farmers’ Home Corporation Act of 1944, Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture on H. R. 4384*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1944, 223-24. On Hancock as administrator, see Maddox, “The Farm Security Administration,” 111-13; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 396-401; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 228-33.

<sup>8</sup> House, *Farm Security Hearings*. Part IV, 1475.

by how much can be achieved in family improvement at the least possible cost to both the borrower and to the Government.”<sup>9</sup>

Hancock had limited success in building a better relationship with Congress. He lasted two years as administrator, during which time most of the most prominent liberals in the agency found other positions and a large number of regional directors were replaced. Hancock resigned in the fall of 1945. Numerous individuals and groups, including the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the CIO, the Farmers Union, and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare called for Assistant Administrator Robert Hudgens to replace Hancock. Despite these voices, the conservative Georgian Dillard P. Lasseter, the candidate of Georgia Congressman Malcolm C. Tarver (who had generally proved hostile to the FSA in the past), replaced Hancock as FSA administrator.<sup>10</sup>

Lasseter was an extremely unpopular choice among liberals. C. B. Baldwin called him an “unprincipled reactionary.”<sup>11</sup> Farmers Union President James H. Patton called the appointment “a bitter betrayal of millions of small farmers.”<sup>12</sup> Many small farmers agreed – one woman wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Clinton Anderson to tell him that the appointment of Lasseter meant he had “betrayed the F.S.A. and worked against the interests of small farmers.” She urged Anderson to “cancel that appointment and appoint a man who is honestly interested in the welfare of small farmers in need of aid.”<sup>13</sup> Another complained about the appointment of a man “so poorly qualified as Dillard Lasseter to the F.S.A., when as eminently qualified a man as R.W.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “FSA Leadership,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 1945.

<sup>11</sup> C. B. Baldwin to Pete Hudgens, December 17, 1945, Folder “Dept. of Agriculture – Farm Security Administration. 1944-1945,” Box 30, Baldwin Papers.

<sup>12</sup> “Dillard Lasseter Appointed FSA Administrator,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 11, 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Wunderlich to Clinton P. Anderson, January 21, 1946, Folder “Organization 1 FSA AGL Dept Work,” Box 1325, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

Hudgens was available and was the farmers' choice."<sup>14</sup> USDA officials openly admitted, while claiming to respect his abilities as an administrator, that Lasseter's appointment was intended to ease relations with Congress.<sup>15</sup>

By this point, the FSA was drained most of its commitment to any further fight against rural poverty, and it had begun to look into new activities and new directions.<sup>16</sup> Before World War II ended, the FSA had already started to focus its efforts on aiding veterans. Well before the end of the war, Henry Wallace (then Vice President) suggested that the federal government, possibly through the Farm Security Administration, should give servicemen "some priority" toward purchasing a farm for after the war, perhaps using government-owned land around defense industries.<sup>17</sup> After the war, the FSA became increasingly occupied with the issue of veterans returning to the farm. Applications for rural rehabilitation loans rose rapidly after the end of the war, and close to half of them came from veterans unable to receive loans from other sources. While veterans had GI Bill benefits available to them, red tape and other difficulties made loans difficult to get from private lenders, especially in rural areas. In some cases, bankers in rural counties with small populations simply refused loans to veterans who were low-income farmers, even with the GI Bill guarantee, because they had not made such loans before and saw no reason to begin doing so.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Imogene Rousseau to Clinton P. Anderson, no date [January, 1946], Folder "Organization 1 FSA AGL Dept Work," Box 1325, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>15</sup> See Anderson's responses to critics like Wunderlich and Rousseau in Folder "Organization 1 FSA AGL Dept Work," Box 1325, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence, RG 16, NACP.

<sup>16</sup> Maddox, "The Farm Security Administration," 111-13; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 400-01; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 228-33. Notably, the FSA continued to be criticized by conservative congressmen and senators long after it had ceased to be primarily concerned with rural poverty, and even after it had ceased to exist. Republican Senator Homer Capehart of Indiana displayed and attacked on the Senate floor a stack of "silly, ridiculous pictures," part of a collection that the federal government had spent, he claimed, \$750,000 making. The FSA had taken them, he claimed, but was now defunct, and the Library of Congress wanted to get rid of them. "Minutiae of Life in U.S. Art, \$750,000 Lot, Irks Capehart," *Washington Post*, May 21, 1948.

<sup>17</sup> "Wallace Would Give Farms to Servicemen," *New York Times*, October 27, 1943.

<sup>18</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1947* (1946), 384, 387-91.

The Farmers Home Administration Act of August 14, 1946, provided the authority to create the FSA's successor agency, the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA). Dillard Lasseter continued on as administrator when the new agency began activity on November 1, 1946. The FmHA extended the coverage of the loan program to include farm owners, including those with underdeveloped farms. Preference was given to veterans with farming experience – 42% of the money loaned in the first fiscal year went to veterans, and the number of veteran borrowers rose rapidly. The program also expanded to include government-insured loans from private creditors. The Farmers Home Administration Act also allowed the transfer of existing loans of the Farm Credit Administration's Emergency Crop and Feed Loan Division to the FmHA in order to liquidate them. The 1,980 remaining FSA offices and the 492 Emergency Crop and Feed Loan offices combined into 1,990 FmHA county offices. The combined 23 regional offices of the predecessor agencies were abolished and their functions were transferred to state offices. The FmHA also collected outstanding loans of the Regional Agricultural Credit Corporations, which had been set up by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and operated by the Farm Credit Administration. These loans, intended to provide short-term credit, were secured by liens on crops and livestock.<sup>19</sup>

While this constituted, on paper, a considerable shift from the early goals of farm security, the changes during World War II in personnel, congressional oversight, and available funds meant that the FSA had become little more than a federal credit agency well before the appropriate legislation was passed. Indeed, the FmHA, while specifically designed as a credit agency, carried over some of the functions of the FSA that had withered in the last three years of

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<sup>19</sup> Harding, "Farmers Home Administration," 585-592; United States Department of Agriculture, Farmers Home Administration, "Strengthening the Family Farm: A Report on Activities of the Farmers Home Administration in the 1946-47 Fiscal Year" (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1947), 1-4.

its existence – debt adjustment services, group services, tenure improvement, and agency guidance in farm and home management.<sup>20</sup>

Even those who applauded the new form of the FmHA recognized the significance of what the FSA had done, noting during the transfer that its true value lay not in a loan program, but its interest in “human beings and in the conservation of rural human resources.”<sup>21</sup> To be sure, the FSA had an impressive record in terms of the number of families it helped. By September 30, 1943, the RA and FSA had made standard rural rehabilitation loans to about 695,000 families, or about one out of every nine farm operators in America. Another 334,000 families received non-standard or emergency loans, which did not have home and farm plans and were generally much smaller.<sup>22</sup> When World War II started, perhaps as many as 1.6 million farmers met the eligibility requirements for receiving rehabilitation loans – that is, they were under 65 years of age, not in the extremely low income group, and had the skills to operate a family farm. Thus about two out of every five operators eligible for a standard loan, roughly, received one.<sup>23</sup> Overall, the FSA provided rural rehabilitation loans to over 10 percent of all U.S. farmers.<sup>24</sup> Smaller, but still considerable, numbers of people took part in tenant-purchase, resettlement, and other FSA programs.<sup>25</sup>

While much of the significance of the FSA can be quantified in such terms, and providing aid to over a million rural families is significant, equally important was its place as a reflection of

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<sup>20</sup> USDA-FmHA, “Strengthening the Family Farm,” 5-13.

<sup>21</sup> Harding, “Farmers Home Administration,” 587.

<sup>22</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 84. FERA made about 397,000 rehabilitation loans, but most of these would have been classified as “non-standard” or “grants only” clients by the RA/FSA.

<sup>23</sup> Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States*, 93-5. For further discussion of the reach and impact of the FSA, see Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, 190-91.

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert and O’Connor, “Leaving the Land Behind,” 115.

<sup>25</sup> Banfield, “Ten Years of the Farm Tenant Purchase Program,” 469. While the number of people impacted by the resettlement and tenant programs was smaller than those involved with rural rehabilitation, the results for each individual may have been greater. Lester Salamon found in the 1970s, for example, that “the long-term impact of the resettlement experiments on land retention is substantial” and even more impressive improvements in factors like civic participation and self-perception. Lester M. Salamon, “The Time Dimension in Policy Evaluation: The Case of the New Deal Land-Reform Experiments,” *Public Policy* 27.2 (1979): 163.

New Deal liberalism aimed toward small farmers. The FSA was among the very few New Deal agencies primarily concerned with agricultural laborers, tenants, and small farmers; it was certainly the largest and most influential of such agencies.<sup>26</sup>

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New Deal thought about rural poverty branched into groups of separate but related ideas about the best way to aid the rural poor. Most of these ideas fell out of favor or were altered to fit more closely to rural rehabilitation, which became the dominant New Deal approach to alleviating rural poverty. The FSA more-or-less successfully implemented rural rehabilitation and other similar programs, providing it could be an effective part of an anti-rural poverty effort, though it required years of experimentation and refinement to become so. The FSA's successes did not prove to be sufficient to save the agency politically, however.

By the time that the FSA had developed into a mature organization in the late 1930s, it had gone through a number of bureaucratic moves, transitions, and name changes. Disparate programs in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Department of the Interior brought the concepts of rural rehabilitation and resettlement, respectively, to a new Resettlement Administration, which began as an independent executive agency but in 1937 became a part of the United States Department of Agriculture before changing its name to the Farm Security Administration. This bureaucratic activity and the legislative foundation (or lack of it) profoundly distorted the operations of the FSA. Even as the agency settled on rural rehabilitation and targeted loans as the best solution to rural poverty, earlier, politically unpopular programs like the subsistence homesteads provoked loud criticism. In World War II, just as critics became most emboldened, the FSA found itself with fewer and fewer political allies. As a result, it was

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<sup>26</sup> Gilbert and O'Connor, "Leaving the Land Behind," 114.

effectively impotent by 1943. The FSA and its most effective programs, like rural rehabilitation, thus had no part to play in the changing rural world of post-war America.

The Great Depression interrupted an enormous transition in American agriculture. For decades, the trend was migration from farms and rural areas into urban industrial ones, driven by industrialization creating a demand for labor in cities and mechanization reducing the demand in agriculture. In the 1920s, a net of 6 million people moved from farms to cities, a development particularly evident in the South. But the Depression slowed and, in some cases, reversed this trend. Some large cities even saw an overall decline in population. With the reduction in industrial employment, large numbers of families felt safer staying in rural areas where, even if their income was greatly reduced, they still had some skills to survive.<sup>27</sup>

However, even during the Depression, large numbers of people were leaving rural areas. One community surveyed between 1934 and 1936 found that half of the sons and three-fifths of daughters beyond school age had left the community, which was not particularly unusual given the mobility associated with tenant farming and the rural South, but about half of those had left farming in favor of moving to local cities and towns.<sup>28</sup> The demand for farm labor decreased every year as a result of mechanization. In the South, the most significant mechanical advance came with the spindle cotton harvester. The 1930s saw the introduction of “stripper” style machines that pulled the cotton boll from the plant. These harvesters were really only useful in the dry Southwest; most of the South required a machine that could pick the lint from the bolls. John and Daniel Rust developed such a machine in the late 1930s and demonstrated them in the

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<sup>27</sup> O. E. Baker and Conrad Taeuber, “The Rural People,” in *Farmers in a Changing World*, by United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 841-44.

<sup>28</sup> Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land*, 37.



1942 on Mississippi farms. Large-scale commercial production was delayed by the war but began in 1947.<sup>29</sup>

But it took a while for mechanization to influence southern agriculture – creating a mechanical device to imitate the intricate task of picking cotton was far more difficult than, for example, one designed for harvesting wheat. It took the introduction of corporate resources, companies like International Harvester, to create a successful commercial cotton picker.<sup>30</sup> Even in the Deep South, where the replacement of humans with machines progressed more slowly, agricultural observers recognized that the South had already begun the shift toward a new, mechanized era of agriculture that did not accord with small-scale farming by individuals.<sup>31</sup> The trend toward mechanization occurred faster in the rest of the country than it did in the South, which provided southerners with a picture of what would be happening in their region. Economists wondered about the “displacement” that would come to southern workers; “concern is expressed,” one wrote in 1937, “as to what may happen if success is met with in the efforts to perfect a mechanical cotton picker and to extend methods of check-row planting and cross cultivation as means of decreasing chopping by hand.”<sup>32</sup>

Whatever agricultural trends toward mechanization and agribusiness might exist in the South, nobody expected the transition to be immediate. Sociologist Morton Rubin visited a Deep South plantation in the late 1940s that operated much the same way it had before World War II, or World War I for that matter. “The plantation,” Rubin noted, “remains a last vestige of

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<sup>29</sup> Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 242. On the postwar southern economy in general see 239-74.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Herman Clarence Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938). By no means did all agree. “By the end of the decade,” Gavin Wright says of the South in the 1930s, “many observers thought that little had changed.” Wright, *Old South, New South*, 236.

<sup>32</sup> William T. Ham, “The Status of Agricultural Labor,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4.4 (1937): 562.

beneficent despotism.”<sup>33</sup> The rich but perpetually-at-risk landlord ran a cotton plantation based on the unskilled labor of numerous resident tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers who lived in one- and two-room cabins, made purchases with cash or scrip at the local planter-owned commissary, and depended on credit advances to get them through the winter. The plantation had tractors and other machinery, but skilled and semiskilled labor was not particularly important – unskilled black laborers chopped and picked cotton as they had for centuries. The plantation was just in the beginning of preparing for a shift away from cotton, toward raising beef cattle, as the massive mechanical cotton factories of the West expanded their production. No one was sure what would happen to those unskilled laborers.<sup>34</sup>

Between 1950 and 1970, a change occurred in American agriculture that was almost beyond comprehension for those living through it.<sup>35</sup> The result was that more than ever, farming was a large-scale operation. Small farmers produced a decreasing portion of American agricultural output. This was clear even before mechanization reached its peak; with “efficient practices,” sociologist Rupert Vance noted in 1945, only “half the farm people of the South” could meet the entire domestic and export demands for southern agricultural production.<sup>36</sup> The end of the war also unleashed further mechanization of agriculture, and smaller operators found themselves left behind as they were unable to purchase equipment and machinery to keep up with bigger farms.<sup>37</sup>

Observers at the time and since then have seen this as a change for the better. Historian Donald Holley, for example, describes the “South’s transition from labor-intensive to capital-

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<sup>33</sup> Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 27.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-21.

<sup>35</sup> See Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, particularly Chapter 5, “Dimensions of an Agricultural Revolution,” 97-122.

<sup>36</sup> Rupert B. Vance, *All These People: The Nation’s Human Resources in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), 156.

<sup>37</sup> Senate, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1947* (1946), 389-91.

intensive agriculture, a transition that was both inevitable and necessary for the Cotton South to achieve social and economic modernization”; this added up to a “The Second Great Emancipation [that] freed the Cotton South from the plantation system and its attendant evils—cheap labor, ignorance, and Jim Crow discrimination.”<sup>38</sup> Holley argues, “Clearly, agencies like the Farm Security Administration (FSA) were on the wrong track with their effort to nurture the efforts of small farmers. Even on the most successful FSA projects, the farm units were too small to be economically viable. With the advent of tractors in the 1930s, leading agricultural experts realized that future cotton farms would be mechanized and therefore larger.”<sup>39</sup>

From this perspective, the FSA was too conservative a program, trying to preserve an older style of agriculture based on small farms owned and operated by a single family. Even some FSA administrators agreed, at least to an extent. Paul V. Maris, who was in charge of the tenant-purchase program, claimed in 1944 that the FSA was in effect subsidizing a large number of clients in their decent lifestyles. He pointed to the example of a borrower in Lowndes County, Alabama, who had a car and a furnished home; affording that meant not making any payment on either of his FSA loans that year. The simple fact was, especially in the low-income regions, “we have a greater population on the land than it can be made to support even when good farming practices are followed. We can lift prevailing standards of living in such areas somewhat by better utilization of resources no available, but without subsidies standards must remain very low.” Simply put, there were more people farming than the land could support, and Maris saw a failure to recognize this fact as the FSA’s greatest shortcoming.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation*, xiv.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Paul V. Maris to Frank Hancock, March 2, 1944, Folder “30 Organization & Administration March - 1944,” Box 2, General Administrative Records, RG 96, NACP. Maris was making a relatively conservative case – that the FSA must loan to higher income clients and stick more closely to congressional will while recognizing that some poor farmers were stuck with a lower standard of living – but with a Tugwellian ideal of shifting population and land resources into “reasonable balance.”

Such a perspective reflected the prevailing agriculturalist view that the true goal of federal agricultural policy should be to increase farming efficiency and raise prices. Such a sentiment informed the longest-lasting New Deal agricultural policies, like those of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, whose system of benefit payments provided the capital for thousands of farmers to purchase tractors. Starting in the flatter Southwest and moving to the hillier east with each mechanical advance, each tractor did the work of several tenant or laborer families.<sup>41</sup> The result was more efficient farms and a decreased need for labor.

But there are reasons to question this emphasis on increasing production as the most important measure of agricultural output. It is not clear, most importantly, that production has ever really been the problem with American agriculture; as historian Paul Conkin notes, “the greatest surplus problem in American agricultural history has involved not commodities but people.”<sup>42</sup> It appears that the FSA, or any other agency, could never have raised the efficiency and productivity of small farmers enough to compete nationally in large-scale food production. The efficiencies of large-scale, technologically-advanced agribusiness meant (and continues to mean) that such processes produce at least most food stuffs cheaper. But, one might ask, is farming as cheaply as possible necessarily the best way? The social and environmental costs of modern agriculture indicate that it is a question worth asking.

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<sup>41</sup> Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, 164.

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