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US Farm Security Administration
United States Department of Agriculture



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During the depths of the depression more than one million farm families were forced to turn to the Government for help. Many of them had lost everything they owned through natural calamities, such as floods or prolonged droughts. Many others had been ruined by long-neglected evils in our agricultural system -- unscientific one-crop farming, the collapse of farm prices, unsound tenure systems, and the destruction of millions of acres of soil by erosion.

The task of the Farm Security Administration is to help these people get off the relief rolls and become permanently self-supporting. Often all they need to get a new start is a little financial help, coupled with guidance in sound farming practices. In such cases, the Farm Security Administration makes each family a small loan, under careful supervision, for the purchase of seed, tools, livestock, and other equipment needed to carry on farming operations. More than 600,000 families who could not get adequate credit elsewhere have received such aid; and already they have paid back more than \$52,000,000 into the Federal Treasury.

Sometimes, however, it is impossible to rehabilitate needy farm people by this method alone. Many families had become stranded in worn-out farming areas, cut-over forests, or exhausted mining com-

RURAL COMMUNITIES

munities. They could never make a decent living where they were; they had no money with which to make a new start on better land.

The Farm Security Administration has helped about 8,500 such families -- or more than 40,000 men, women, and children -- to establish new homes on land capable of producing a decent living. They are getting a new start on 108 projects, scattered through virtually every state.

The plan is simple: the Government buys good land, builds inexpensive but adequate homes and outbuildings, and gives the settlers advice on the best farming methods. In some cases the residents rent their new farms; in other cases they buy them outright, spreading their payments over a 40-year period. The Government will be paid back virtually all the money it has invested; most of the projects, in other words, are self-liquidating.

There are two kinds of these projects:

1. Rural Communities, consisting of a number of farm homes clustered together with their own school, store, and sometimes other community facilities, such as a cotton gin. Each family makes its living by full time farming.

2. Scattered Farmsteads, established in rural areas where schools, stores, and other facilities already are adequate. In most cases the government merely repaired buildings and fences, arranged for the relocated family to buy or rent the farm on reasonable terms, and provided advice on sound farming practices.

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RURAL COMMUNITIES

In some areas a single farm family, operating a forty or fifty acre tract, cannot afford to use the most modern and efficient farming methods. Its acreage may not be large enough to justify the use of a tractor or other heavy machinery; pure-bred sires may be too expensive for its small herds of livestock.

As a result the small, individual farm is being gradually displaced in these areas by giant mechanized farms -- "outdoor food factories," functioning with all the impersonal efficiency of a steel mill. Often they are operated, not by a self-reliant farm family, but by a corporation hiring a swarm of wandering seasonal laborers. They are built, not around the traditional farm home, but around a tool shed crowded with tractors and gang plows. Such mechanized farms already have taken over wide stretches of the wheat belt. They are steadily spreading in the fruit and vegetable areas of the West Coast. With the development of increasingly efficient cotton-cultivating machinery, they are beginning to take root in the South.

The small farmer, operating the old-fashioned forty acres and a mule, probably could not hope to survive for long in areas where this kind of large-scale, mechanized farming is more efficient. If a number of small farmers band together, however, they can take advantage of these modern, large-scale methods -- and at the same time preserve the traditional values of independent farm ownership.

This is the principle which the Farm Security Administration has tried to follow in the establishment of its community farms.

The way in which they operate is well illustrated by its project at Lake Dick, Arkansas, 60 miles southeast of Little Rock.

Here 80 families have established homes on 3,661 acres of fertile land. Each family has its own individual tract, on which it raises vegetables, poultry, and other supplies for its own use. Much of the acreage, however, is set aside for the production of cash crops under a co-operative farming arrangement. The co-operative, including every family in its membership, has purchased modern, efficient equipment for raising cotton, sweet potatoes, soy beans, sugar sorghum, peanuts, corn, and other crops. It follows a scientific farm management plan, designed to halt erosion and build up the fertility of the soil.

Additional economies are achieved by raising dairy cows, hogs and work stock on a co-operative basis. In this way everyone benefits from the use of pure-bred sires -- which no single farmer could afford -- and a few large barns can be used instead of many smaller but more expensive structures. Still further savings result from the co-operative use of a sweet potato curing shed, a meat-curing plant, a syrup mill, and a stock feed mill. A general store and a community building, where church services and other meetings can be held, round out the community.

Aside from the economic benefits, the residents in such communities enjoy many advantages which they had never known before. Their children are within easy reach of schools. Electric service is available at far cheaper rates than would be possible for widely-

scattered homesteads. They can enjoy countless little amenities which are commonplace to city dwellers, but almost unknown on isolated farms.

The total direct cost of the Lake Dick project was \$483,265, which includes \$67,342 for the land comprising the farm units; \$226,678 for community and co-operative land and buildings, roads, water, and sanitary facilities; and \$189,245 for homes.

The average house cost was \$2,366, while the average individual unit -- including house, outbuildings, and land -- was only \$3,351. These costs can be amortized over a 40-year period by annual installments about equal to the sums the average tenant would pay in rent.

SCATTERED FARMSTEADS

In other areas, where small, individual farms are still able to compete economically, the government has found it cheaper to re-establish handicapped farm families on scattered farms than in a single community. In many such cases, the lands have been acquired more economically than big tracts could have been.

These developments are known as infiltration projects, because the re-established families are scattered through an already settled area, and use the community facilities already available. Instead of operating community farms, and using community machinery, they are set up as individual farmers on their own establishments.

In some instances, however, several of these families have been close enough together to co-operate in the purchase and use of more expensive equipment.

Generally, the farms are rented to the farm families until they demonstrate their ability to operate them soundly. Once they have proved their ability, with advice from the government experts, they are offered the opportunity to purchase the land. This type of project has now given way to the long range program for helping farm tenants buy farms for themselves under the Bankhead-Jones Act.

An example of how this kind of a project operates is provided by the North Carolina Farm Tenant Security project, located in four eastern counties of North Carolina. Here the government purchased scattered farms containing a total of about 7,500 acres and divided them into units for 100 families.

Families relocated on the project had lived in the area, but had found that because of their tenure conditions, or for other reasons, they could not reach the "American standard" of living. All were cotton or tobacco tenant farmers.

Units on this project vary in size from 35 to 160 acres, but average about 75. Available buildings were repaired, and in some instances new ones were built. In addition the families were loaned enough money to get new starts. They got loans averaging \$550 for the purchase of feed, seed, fertilizer, livestock, work animals and subsistence.

Here, as in its other programs, the Farm Security Administration provided supervision as well as cash. Each farmer was helped to prepare a farm plan for rotating crops, raising subsistence crops, and cash crops. A trained home economist helped the housewife to budget the family money and food supply.

By the spring of 1938, the Farm Security Administration had spent \$506,000 on this project, with a dozen units still incomplete. At that time, 85 families, both white and Negro, had been re-established at an average cost of \$5,568. Their farm plans provide for repayment of this expenditure to the government, in addition to a higher standard of living for the families themselves.

SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEADS

In addition to these two types of projects for hard pressed farm families, the Farm Security Administration has developed a group of projects in rural and suburban areas in which stranded, or low-income families, support themselves partly on industry and partly on agriculture.

There are 29 of these developments, known as subsistence homesteads. While in many cases the residents of the communities are not taken directly from the farms, they usually have come from farms originally and know something about agriculture. The subsistence homesteads are designed to permit them to raise much of their food on garden plots in their communities, but to earn cash income either

in nearby towns, or industries established within the planned communities.

The subsistence homesteads were started in July, 1933, by the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Department of the Interior. The Resettlement Administration and its successor, the Farm Security Administration, later took them over. This Administration has now substantially completed 26 subsistence homesteads projects and three others are nearing completion. Twelve of the completed projects have been turned over for management to non-profit associations formed by the residents.

These associations take title to the property, and give a mortgage to the Government. They are responsible for the collection of individual payments from the homesteaders, for managing and maintaining the community, and for paying off the debt to the Government. The communities are incorporated under the laws of their respective states and are subject to taxation just like any other village.

The 29 projects are intended to provide homes for more than 2,900 families, of which about 2,300 were in residence June 1, 1938. They vary considerably in size; some have only 25 homes, while others have as many as 260. A few have their own schools, stores, and water and sewerage systems; others connect with existing utility systems and depend on schools and shopping centers already established in the neighborhood.

The economic set-up of the subsistence homestead projects

also varies according to local conditions. The residents of most projects work in trades or industries already existing in nearby cities; but in a few cases small industries have been established on the project.

A fairly typical subsistence homestead project is Longview Homesteads, three miles west of Longview, Washington. Here 60 low-income families have found it possible to purchase modest but comfortable homes with monthly payments comparable to their previous rental charges.

Working in nearby Longview for average incomes of \$1,199, the family heads have been able to supplement their incomes and raise their living standards by producing much of their own food on individual farmsteads averaging a little bigger than two acres.

Each family has a frame house equipped with running water, septic tank, and electricity. Each unit has a garage with additional space for storage and a combination cow shed and chicken house. Small orchards, with 23 fruit trees each, are also provided for every family.

This project, initiated by the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Department of the Interior, was completed in the fall of 1935. Total direct costs of the homestead were \$195,908 including \$28,200 for the 141 acres of land, and \$162,000 for construction and improvements.

Average unit cost was \$3,076. The project was turned over to a non-profit community association in May, 1936. Occupants of the

units have contracted to pay the association an average of \$17.55 monthly, which will amortize their debts over a 40-year period.

GREENBELT COMMUNITIES

Three of the Farm Security Administration's projects come under still another category. They are the Greenbelt towns, developed in suburban areas for low-income families in Washington, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee.

These three communities, developed for the dual purpose of providing employment, and demonstrating an improved type of community planning, contain 2,200 family units. Those near Cincinnati and Milwaukee each include 73 farm units, but primarily the projects are designed to provide modest, modern, and improved homes for low-income families in crowded cities.

Operation of these communities is as novel as their planning. They have only one store of each kind, operated on a co-operative basis. Finances are managed by a non-profit corporation, which collects from the residents, pays taxes, municipal expenses, and rent to the government. The city manager form of government has been established.

LOW CONSTRUCTION COSTS

The low cost of construction on the community farms and subsistence homesteads projects is largely the result of improved building methods. Farm Security Administration engineers have worked

out a system of pre-cutting and pre-fabrication on a mass production basis, which makes it possible to build sturdy, attractive rural homes for as little as \$250 a room.

Construction of the earliest projects was started under the pressure of a national emergency, to provide speedy employment for thousands of men on the relief rolls. Under such circumstances it was inevitable that the cost of building some of the first homes should be undesirably high.

When the Resettlement Administration was incorporated in the Department of Agriculture on January 1, 1937, immediate steps were taken to reduce construction costs to an absolute minimum. It was determined that the construction cost of a farm unit, including home and outbuildings, should be limited to between \$2,900 and \$4,200. The higher cost units are located in the Northern States, where more insulation and weather protection is necessary. All buildings are of the highest quality construction, and with reasonable maintenance should last considerably longer than the period required to amortize their cost.

In general, homes with bath and other plumbing cost approximately \$400 a room, while homes without bath cost only about \$250 a room. Barns cost from \$450 to \$1,800, depending on the number of animals to be housed. Some variation from these limits has been permitted in a few cases to meet special local conditions.

The first step in producing homes at such a low cost was to work out scientific plans and specifications, which would give the max-

imum amount of space and utility for the smallest possible expenditure. Every unnecessary gable, beam, and rafter was eliminated, as well as all purely decorative features. Standard materials and sizes were used throughout.

Designs of this type made possible a large degree of pre-cutting and pre-fabrication. A small portable sawmill, for example, was set up on the project site, to cut lumber for a large number of similar houses according to exact specifications. A truck then delivered these pieces to the building site, where they were speedily nailed together. Complicated parts, such as window and door frames, were prefabricated at the mill, so they could be installed with a minimum of labor. Even forms, for pouring concrete foundations were made at the mill. Painted inside with creosote before each pouring, each one could be used six or seven times.

Pre-cutting at the sawmill takes only about one-sixth of the time which would be required for cutting with handsaws at the building site. It also assures machine precision, and makes possible more uniform supervision. Selection of stock is simplified, so that odds and ends of lumber which ordinarily would go on the scrap heap can be put to good use.

These methods made it practicable to use relatively unskilled rural relief labor, without lowering the standards of workmanship. Whenever possible, the homes were built by the people who were to live in them and pay for them; they had every incentive to keep labor costs low.

All of the rural homes, with the exception of a few adobe buildings in the Southwest were constructed of lumber, since this material is best adapted to the pre-cutting technique. The best quality of materials was used throughout. Interior finishing is very simple. In the South, the inside walls usually are made of vertical tongue-and-groove wooden sheathing; in the North, plastered walls and weatherboard exteriors were necessary to cope with the more severe weather conditions. The ceilings of Northern houses are insulated, while the roof peaks of Southern houses are vented to permit a maximum circulation of air.

During the summer of 1937, contracts were let to private builders for the construction of 1,600 units, usually in areas in which the Farm Security Administration was building similar homes with its own organization. In general, the direct field cost of construction by Government engineers was the same -- or slightly less -- than the cost under private contract.

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The 11,000 rural homes completed, under development, or planned by the Farm Security Administration are only a beginning. Hundreds of thousands of farm families can never hope to reach our American standard of living until they get a new start on good land. Even in prosperous 1929, for example, more than 1,700,000 farm families were existing on an average annual income of only \$450 a year --

and that sum included all the food they raised for their own use, and the rent they paid for their farms.

The Farm Security Administration does not now plan to start additional projects; but it believes that its 137 farm and part-time farm projects may point the way toward a solution of one of the Nation's gravest agricultural problems.

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