

AS YOU SOW: CULTURE, AGRICULTURE, AND THE NEW DEAL

by

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(Under the Direction of James C. Cobb)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation reinterprets the New Deal for agriculture, arguing that USDA New Dealers were primarily occupied with revitalizing rural life rather than with simply raising farmers' income. More than anything, agrarian New Dealers thought that a thriving rural life would come from modernizing rural cultures. In the 1910s and 1920s, rural sociology emerged to critique the prevailing orthodoxy of "productionism," the idea that greater agricultural efficiency was the singular solution to the "farm problem." Rural sociologists subverted productionism and argued that the problems of rural life were largely social and cultural. Factory farms would hollow out rural communities when strong and well-populated communities were what rural people needed most.

Agrarian New Dealers came out of this earlier tradition, a fact reflected in their interest in rural life and their commitment to a style of participatory democracy that harkened back to the rural communities of the nineteenth century. USDA New Dealers developed two distinct sets of programs, one for America's "cultures of commerce" and another for its "cultures of poverty." In the cultures of commerce—those places where farmers produced almost exclusively for the market—these experts wanted to rationalize and not simply reduce agricultural production so that most farm families could remain in agriculture. But they also wanted to rein in the cultural excesses that they believed led to soil mining and overproduction.

The New Dealers' programs for the "cultures of poverty" were more problematic. For the most part, rather than attacking the causes of poverty in places like Appalachia and the Cotton

South, the USDA treated poverty as a cultural malaise. This explains what historians have missed about the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration. These were not agencies, as has been so commonly assumed, dedicated to giving land to the landless. These were “rehabilitation” agencies dedicated to alleviating the alleged cultural pathologies that perpetuated poverty.

As the factory farm became dominant after World War II, the kind of rural life that USDA New Dealers tried to foster disappeared. Even today, we have hollowed out rural communities, pervasive rural poverty, and an exploited class of rural proletarians—all of the things that agrarian New Dealers warned were poisonous to a healthy rural life and a sound agriculture.

INDEX WORDS: Rural Sociology, Social Science, New Deal, Agriculture, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Resettlement Administration, Farm Security Administration, Poverty, Rural Poverty, Sharecroppers, Arthur Raper.

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Dedication

For Katherine Farrell Manthorne

And to the memory of Joseph Parker Manthorne

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Introduction

Culture and Agriculture

After he had completed months of fieldwork in 1945, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis saw that some of the kinship groups and “clans” among the agriculturalists that he had been studying lived better than others. Their villages were more harmonious. They tended their crops with greater care and made better use of their tools. They kept the traditions of their ancestors alive. They lived in modest dwellings, but the structures were well-built and well-maintained. Social life for these people revolved around religious ceremonies and the numerous societies that they had formed: societies for song and dance and for consuming the alcoholic beverages that they brewed. Everyone lived modestly and with security, but Lewis thought that these cultivators would also prove receptive to the programs of modernization that had recently come into the area, part of an effort that he called “controlled culture change.” Indeed, when an agent from the local civil government came to teach the women about sanitation and how to prepare and store new foods, they embraced the techniques. Men and women had both responded favorably too when a man from the government came to insist that they stop some of their traditional practices that tended to leach and erode the soil. The only thing that put Lewis off a bit was the strongly patriarchal character of the social relations that he saw during his fieldwork. The anthropologist thought that it circumscribed women’s roles in village life too much. He also noted some resistance to the civil authorities’ efforts to take local children and send them to schools at some distance from their homes.¹

Lewis had done his fieldwork in Bell County, Texas. The people whom he had singled out for their distinction were Czech- and German-American farmers, mostly of the second or even

¹ Oscar Lewis, *On the Edge of the Black Waxy: A Cultural Survey of Bell County, Texas* (Saint Louis: Washington University Studies—New Series, 1948), 18-31, 40-41, 47-49, 52-53, 58-59, 76, 79-82, 85-91, 100.

third generation. The government agents who brought the program of modernization, what Lewis called an effort at “controlled culture change,” were extension- and home-demonstration agents and technicians from agencies like the Soil Conservation Service. The Czech- and German-Americans of Bell County lived in such cohesive little communities, places where nearly everyone was related, that Lewis referred to these as “kinship neighborhoods.” The anthropologist noted that WASP locals jokingly referred to their Euro-American neighbors as “clans.” Indeed, Czech and German neighborhoods in Bell County supported a thriving social life that included “insurance lodges, dance halls, beer parlors, and beef clubs.” Churches played an especially important role for these families, the point around which “the whole social life of the community revolves.” The one part of their “controlled culture change” that Czech farmers particularly had resisted was the county’s program of school consolidation, which they hated precisely because their neighborhood schools were such important centers of community. Lewis noted too his belief that “the Czech and German families are organized along patriarchal lines, with the wife in a subordinate position in the family and taking little or no part in affairs outside the home.”²

Lewis had gone to this east-central Texas county for eleven weeks of fieldwork in 1945 in part because it was a cultural crossroads. It straddled the dividing line between the Deep South and the West and therefore had a mixed ranching and cotton economy. It exhibited “ethnic heterogeneity” too. Czech- and German-Americans made up about 20 percent of the population, African Americans about 7 percent, Mexicans less than 1 percent, and “old-line” WASP families about 72 percent of the population. Lewis’s point of contrast, then, in praising the agriculture and the tightly knit communities of Czech and German farmers was the “old-line Americans” in Bell, people about whom he found less to praise. The Czechs and Germans had cultural values conducive to agricultural and social stability. They raised their own foodstuffs and therefore weathered market downturns without undue difficulty. Owning land mattered to them more

² Ibid., 58-59, 74, 100.

than making money. They structured their lives accordingly. None of this, as a rule, was as true about the other whites in Bell County, as Lewis explained:

Attitudes toward tenancy vary by ethnic groups. Among the Czechs and Germans, when a man remains a tenant for many years after marriage, it is taken as evidence of his inferiority as a farmer. Among the old-line Americans tenure is much less important; they often seek security for themselves, their wives, and their children through the ownership or operation of larger farms and by taking chances in the cycles of seasons and prices. The Czechs and Germans practice thrift and farm almost entirely by the use of family labor, whereas others hire considerable non-family labor and gamble between high costs and high farm returns.³

The “old-line Americans” followed few of the cultural practices conducive to a healthy rural life or to stable communities. WASP families were more prone to investing all their labor and resources in cotton or livestock—market commodities—rather than in feeding themselves first and worrying about making money second. As Lewis said, they “gambled” and went bust from time to time because of that, though this did not appear to affect their sense of themselves and their status. Old-line farmers had little attachment to the land. They had no qualms about selling their farms when they could get a good price. Lewis claimed that when the government built Camp Hood during World War II there was only one issue from the “old-line” farmers who happened to occupy the land: “the only complaint heard was that they didn’t get enough [money] for their land.” Because their attachment to the land was not permanent, “the characteristic attitude of old-line American farmers toward the upkeep of their outbuildings is one of indifference.” Their refusal to erect sheds for their tools and equipment was so notorious that “it is the opinion of some of the better farmers that more machinery rusts than wears out.” Most of the farms in Bell County had gardens but those of the Czechs and the Germans were more bounteous and their flocks of chickens and herds of cows and swine larger. Lewis also noted that in certain parts of the county, among non-ethnic whites “there are farmers who believe that they can remove screw worms from cows by magical means. Others still plant crops

³ Ibid., 19.

and castrate animals by the signs of the zodiac.” Everyone knew that the Czechs and Germans were “superior farmers.”⁴

Lewis’s exertions in Bell County might seem strange or anomalous, but they were not. He admitted that the techniques of the anthropologist were normally brought to bear only on “primitive” societies, but he had found them useful in Bell County. In fact, he had gone there at the forefront of a more widespread and mounting conviction that the cultures of rural Americans mattered. He had not arrived in Bell County without support. The USDA had sent him there. In 1945, its Division of Farm Population and Rural Life had roughly two dozen sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists scouring the countryside and preparing to study 71 different rural counties in just the way that Lewis had approached Bell and its residents. The information that these social scientists generated was supposed to help calibrate all of the USDA’s many programs to the needs and desires of the countless rural cultures that dotted the American landscape. As we have seen, Lewis reconnoitered the differences between Bell’s ethnic and WASP communities. But he also cataloged the county’s soils. He gathered the materials to write a historical sketch of the area’s settlement and development and paid special attention to the cultural elements that he thought predominated in that history, fashioning the county into its present state. (Unfortunately, Lewis had next to nothing to say about the cultural impact of African Americans and Mexicans in Bell County, focusing mostly on “old-line” traditions along with those of the Czechs and Germans). Lewis made sure that he knew something about the rhythms of the land and the seasons too, the ways in which the interaction of climate and crop regime structured the warp and weft of life, at times requiring intense periods of labor and at others allowing people to do not much more than live and socialize. He compiled mountains of data from the census: from detailed statistics on land tenure to a careful accounting of what the area’s farmers produced and the amount of land that they produced it on. He used the schools to drum up all kinds of information on Bell County’s young people,

⁴ Ibid., 21, 26, 28.

especially what their occupational preferences were and whether they hoped to be farmers and ranchers as adults. The anthropologist also made measure of the strength of Bell County's rural "communities" and "neighborhoods." Neighborhoods were the clusters of farm houses that dotted the county and that gave shape to the social lives of farmers and that supported their churches and schools. Lewis found many of Bell County's neighborhoods and communities to be losing their social cohesion, but unsurprisingly, found that to be less true of the Czechs and Germans than their old-line counterparts.⁵

In all of this, *somewhere*, lay an answer. The question was: what was wrong and right about the way that Bell County's people lived and why did some of them live better than others? The answer, of course, was culture. The story in the pages that follow puts rural life and culture at the center of the New Deal for agriculture, the welter of programs and initiatives that emerged from the USDA between 1933 and 1945 and that sought to eliminate the problem of "overproduction," attack rural poverty, and preserve a thriving rural life as the country moved into an uncertain future. Life and culture belong at the center of these things because that is where the architects of the agrarian New Deal put them. They belong there too because they bring a fuller understanding of the manifold contradictions that beset the USDA in its most remarkable period of growth and experimentation. This was the USDA that evinced little interest in defending southern farm tenants when the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's crop control programs gave southern landlords an incentive to evict or downgrade their tenure status. The same USDA that implemented the programs that often managed to only further immiserate the lives of southern landless farmers, at a time when that barely seemed possible, also sent a sociologist called Arthur Raper to live and work as a "participant-observer" in Greene County, Georgia, in 1940. Raper went to Greene to study the most concentrated anti-poverty effort that the Farm Security Administration had ever conceived and that was then underway in this county that was famous for the depth of its social and environmental problems. The FSA

⁵ Ibid., 1-31, 51-54, 68-72.

was pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into healing the county's soils and "rehabilitating" its people toward better standards of living. A deeply humane and extraordinary man, Raper had worked as an activist-sociologist since the 1920s, exposing the unholy alliance of white supremacy and cotton monoculture that had beggared so much of the South and deformed its social relations. The sociologist was made to order from the nightmares of the Deep South planter class, not least of all because he had the mellifluous accent of a native southern and he smiled and his eyes twinkled as he told about the signs he saw every day that the South was slowly unshackling itself from bad tradition and moving toward a democratic future. The same USDA, then, that had helped to unleash untold suffering on southern farm tenants also designed the most extensive rural anti-poverty efforts to that point in American history and, when it came time to study the most ambitious of those efforts, said, "Let's send Raper."⁶

There was more at work here than the mere cross-purposes and contradictions so frequently attributed to the agricultural New Deal and more at work too than a few liberals managing to carve out small fiefdoms for themselves in the mammoth USDA bureaucracy, fiefdoms from which they could clasp a steadying hand on the shoulder of the small farmer even as another USDA hand remained fastened on the rug that it was pulling out from under those same farmers. So much to embrace even as there is much to regret: That is the story of the USDA from the Great Depression through World War II and it is not comprehensible without understanding the concern for and emphasis on rural life and culture that permeated the highest quarters of the USDA. People who shared basic sensibilities with Arthur Raper ran this show. They cared about rural poverty and about preserving a rural life worthy of the name. They cared deeply about democracy too even as they designed programs that proved anti-democratic, that augmented the ranks of the rural proletariat, and that ultimately paved the way for the industrial agriculture that would destroy nearly everything that they valued about farming and

⁶ Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Arthur F. Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943).

rural living. This is a story that makes the Agricultural Adjustment Administration—so often viewed simply as the swift kick that finally forced staggering southern tenants to the ground—look more tragic than malign in its effects. It also casts a deeply ambivalent light on what, other than the Soil Conservation Service, is typically portrayed as the lone “good” USDA agency from the New Deal period: the Farm Security Administration, which was refashioned out of the old Resettlement Administration founded in 1935.

Bringing rural life and culture to the center of the history of the agricultural New Deal allows a number of important advances in historiographies dealing with agricultural expertise, the growth of the American state, and the New Deal itself. For one, it shifts focus away from the class of experts and technicians whom I call “productionists.” Productionist expertise was the knowledge directed toward increasing the efficiency and productivity of American farms. Productionism came to American farmers mostly from agricultural engineers, farm management specialists, and plant and scientists, carried into the countryside by agricultural extension agents. Deborah Fitzgerald has written the definitive account of productionism, showing that these experts created in the twenty or so years before the New Deal an “industrial ideal” for agriculture that both preceded and had to precede the actual fact of agriculture’s industrialization. Fitzgerald argues that the USDA had fixed on the industrialization of agriculture as its primary goal in the years after World War I. The human and environmental consequences of a more productive and efficient agriculture mattered little to these experts and bureaucrats. The emphasis on productivity as the solution to everything meant, according to Fitzgerald, that “it was numbers, not narrative, that became the dominant language of agricultural knowledge.” The historian David Danbom agrees, insisting that from the time of World War I the USDA and rural reformers and experts pushed for the “industrialization of agriculture,” which “was nothing less than the demand of an ascendant urban-industrial America, backed by an increasingly activist state, for an organized and efficient agriculture that would adequately supplement it socially and economically.” In fact, as we will see throughout

the chapters that follow, a rival class of experts that emerged in the 1910s and 1920s developed a broader conception of what was wrong in the countryside, and they had no desire to see American agriculture “industrialized.” The agrarian New Dealers emerged out of this sensibility. The productionist victory in American agriculture was more stealthy and ironic than Fitzgerald and Danbom have allowed.⁷

Understanding the place of life and culture in the agrarian New Deal also helps to connect the seemingly unbridgeable historiographic poles that now exist on the USDA of the 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, the now-classic story that historians Pete Daniel and Jack Kirby have told about the USDA allows the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in the South to stand in for the whole. It is not a pretty picture, centered as it is on the displacement of southern tenants that agricultural adjustment unleashed, and Daniel especially tells it with an appropriate moral indignation. On the other hand, rural sociologist and historian Jess Gilbert has much more recently sparked a fruitful reconsideration of the USDA during this era by telling a story that could not be more different from Kirby and Daniel’s. Gilbert has managed this by doing for the architects of the agrarian New Deal what few historians have done since Richard Kirkendall produced a study of USDA social scientists in 1966: Gilbert, like Kirkendall before him, has taken USDA New Dealers seriously on their own terms. The people who designed the New Deal for agriculture were mostly social scientists and Gilbert has helped to revive interest in how their backgrounds and expertise gave shape to the programs that they developed in the 30s and 40s. Gilbert’s concern, then, has been in what New Dealers intended to do rather than simply the effects of their programs and the compromises that they had to make to get them off the ground. By focusing on the social scientists who designed the policies and programs of the AAA and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Gilbert has argued that the key

⁷ Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 3-6, 34-36, 184-190; David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), 24-31, 97-99, 109-110, 118-119, 138.

New Dealers were, in fact, “progressive reformers.” Their “theory and practice” was “radically democratic.” They were “participatory democrats,” committed to giving ordinary farmers control of all of the USDA’s programs and to integrating social scientific expertise with lay knowledge. A third contingent of scholars—including Sara Gregg, Neil Maher, and Sarah Phillips—has also cast the New Deal in a more positive light by focusing on its least fraught initiative: conservation.⁸

Jess Gilbert is correct. There was a lot more to the USDA of this era than the troubles it both encouraged and allowed southern landlords to inflict on their tenants. Gilbert is right, too, that powerful New Dealers—from the Secretary of Agriculture on down—talked a lot about democracy and ultimately succeeded in 1939 in creating an ostensibly democratic planning process that was supposed to reign over all USDA agencies and generate the bureaucracy’s policies. Gilbert errs, however, in blurring the line between intent and implementation. He argues that the USDA’s liberal social scientists were largely succeeding in their goals until Congressional reactionaries unceremoniously stripped them of their power during World War II. As we will see, however, the plans of agrarian New Dealers were beset with life-threatening problems from the beginning. And neither did they have the full-throated commitment to democracy that their rhetoric (which is Gilbert’s focus) sometimes suggested. Carl Taylor, for

⁸ Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, reprint of 1966 edition (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982); Jess Gilbert, “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy: The Federal-County Land-Use Planning Program, 1938-1942,” *Agricultural History* 70, no. 2 (Spring, 1996); Jess Gilbert, “Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (Spring, 2000); Jess Gilbert, “Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal: A Different Kind of State” in Jane Adams, ed., *Fighting for the Farm: Rural America Transformed* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 131; Jess Gilbert, “Rural Sociology and Democratic Planning in the Third New Deal,” *Agricultural History* 82, no. 4 (Fall, 2008); Jess Gilbert, “Democratizing States and the Use of History,” *Rural Sociology* 74, Issue 1 (March 2009), 5-6; Sara M. Gregg, *Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, the New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal Landscape in Appalachia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

example, the head of Division of Farm Population and Rural Life in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and one of the key agrarian New Dealers, insisted again and again throughout the 1930s that the design and implementation of USDA programs had to be democratic. He seemed to mean that in a real way: the planning process needed to be subject to the control of ordinary people. Taylor also argued that social scientific knowledge of agriculture was useless unless it incorporated the lay knowledge (“common sense”) of regular farmers. But in 1938, Taylor also characterized the USDA’s conservation efforts on the Great Plains, which were problematic at best, this way: “Former Secretary of Agriculture [William] Jardine made the statement that practically every agronomic, physical, and economic fact necessary to the adjustment of agriculture on the Great Plains is known, but that what is not known is how to get the people who live in the Great Plains to utilize this knowledge in the making of right adjustments...In other words, the unknown factor is the human factor and while it is difficult to understand this factor in detail, there can be no excuse for not learning all we can about it and not utilizing what we already know.” Taylor (who would later hire Oscar Lewis and send him to Bell, County, Texas) was making a case for understanding rural cultures because, as he put it, the “habits, customs, traditions, and attitudes of the people are the chief causes of maladjustment and will be the chief vehicles of adjustment.” Even as they talked about democracy and letting farmers control USDA programs, what agrarian New Dealers really meant was elevating those farmers culturally so that they would see the world as experts did. People were the problem. It would not have been so misguided a sentiment had USDA social scientists exhibited more of an understanding of the limitations of their own expertise and had they also worked to create programs that actually attempted to alter the political economy that had sustained those “habits, customs, traditions, and attitudes of the people” that were so troublesome. Neither of these things was forthcoming, however.⁹

⁹ Carl C. Taylor, *Human Relations in Land Use Planning* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1938), 1, 13-14; Carl C. Taylor, “Sociology on the Spot,” *Rural Sociology* 2, Issue 4 (Dec., 1937), 373-381; Carl C. Taylor, “Social

Perhaps more than anything, understanding the role of culture in the New Deal allows us to see the Farm Security Administration and its predecessor the Resettlement Administration for what they were: rehabilitation agencies. These were not bureaucracies primarily dedicated, as is so commonly believed, to helping poor farmers obtain land ownership. Rehabilitation meant relieving poor farmers of the cultural pathologies that New Dealers thought either had made millions of America's farm families poor or, more typically and subtly, had kept them that way. Rehabilitation loans reached upwards of 800,000 farm families. In exchange for sums of typically a few hundred dollars to improve their farm and home operations in some way, poor families agreed to accept the "supervision" of experts who would teach them how to live better. Rehabilitation routinely consumed the supermajorities of the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration's budgets, yet no historian of those agencies has made rehabilitation the center of their histories. The more recent historians of New Deal conservation have focused on RA/FSA efforts to retire millions of acres of "submarginal" land, though exclusively from the perspective that it constituted a conservation victory in that it took terribly denuded land and made forests and grasslands (primarily) out of it. Before this recent turn, historians wrote exclusively on the more experimental (some say radical) parts of the RA/FSA mission, namely those that "resettled" both poor farmers and urban workers into newly built communities where they could either divide their labor between part time industrial employment and cultivating subsistence garden plots or, in the case of purely agricultural communities, farm full time. These efforts ultimately reached about 11,000 families compared to the more than 800,000 farm families that accepted rehabilitation loans and supervision. As important as land retirement and "resettlement" were, they were not the primary activities of

Theory and Social Action," *Rural Sociology* 5, Issue 1, (Mar., 1940), 17-31; Carl C. Taylor, "Sociology and Common Sense," *American Sociological Review* 12, no. 1, (Feb., 1947), 1-9.

either the Resettlement Administration or the Farm Security Administration and treating them as such has created distorted portraits of these agencies.¹⁰

The RA and FSA threw the vast bulk of their resources into a fight against rural poverty cultures. The culture of poverty concept undergirds three of this project's seven chapters so it is worth elaborating up front. Returning to Oscar Lewis sheds some light here. After working for a brief time in the USDA's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life in 1945, Lewis then took a position in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Washington University and not long thereafter headed to the University of Illinois and an anthropology department that he helped to create. Lewis then launched an extraordinary career that made him a leading authority on poverty, especially in Mexico and Puerto Rico. In fact, in 1959 Lewis coined the phrase "culture of poverty," a concept that has troubled discussions and understandings of poverty ever since. To be fair to Lewis, he deployed the term in a much fuller and more nuanced sense than many of its subsequent proponents. It is worth noting too that Lewis continued to use the term in the introduction to his 1961 anthropological masterwork, *The Children of Sanchez*. That book relays, across hundreds of pages, the life histories of each member of the Sanchez family, in their own words. The Sanchezes lived in one of Mexico City's worst slums. Whatever else it might have done, Lewis's cultural understanding of poverty did not stop him from sympathizing deeply with the struggles of the poor or prevent him from rendering an enduring work of anthropology.¹¹

¹⁰ Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow A New World: The New Deal Community Program* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976, c1959); Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Brian Q. Cannon, *Remaking the Agrarian Dream: New Deal Rural Resettlement in the Mountain West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, Press, 1996).

¹¹ Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, 50th Anniversary Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

In the introduction to *The Children of Sanchez*, Lewis argued that the Sanchez family displayed the trappings of a “culture of poverty.” He did not view this as unique to them and neither did he convey his opinion with opprobrium. Lewis described the culture of poverty as common to all poor people (“universal characteristics”) who lived in societies in which others enjoyed some measure of affluence. Lewis’s intent was affirmative. For one, he hoped to signal that poor people did indeed have culture, by which he meant “a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation.” He also wanted to convey that the culture of poverty was adaptive. It had, as he put it, “a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on.”¹²

It is a fraught (and inadequate) thing to say that a people’s culture is somehow universal—common to all poor people—and a product almost exclusively of “defense mechanisms” built up to cope with the effects of poverty. Lewis’s intent was sympathetic, however. He left no doubt that poverty caused the culture and not the other way around. He emphasized poverty’s hard, material dimensions too: “constant struggle for survival, unemployment and underemployment, low wages, a miscellany of unskilled occupations, child labor, the absence of savings, a chronic shortage of cash, the absence of food reserves in the home,” and the many other problems associated with structural poverty ever since. Lewis also credited the Mexican poverty culture with helping poor families to survive their hardships, though he produced, arguably, only one concrete positive example: the “spontaneous informal credit devices (*tandas*)” that Mexico City’s poor organized to get small amounts of credit at non-usurious rates. Lewis’s list of maladaptive cultural traits was far longer, however, and worth conveying at length:

Some of the social and psychological characteristics include living in crowded quarters, a lack of privacy, gregariousness, a high incidence of alcoholism, frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels, frequent use of physical violence in the training of children, wife beating, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages, a

¹² Lewis, *Children of Sanchez*, xxxvi-xxxvii.

relatively high incidence of the abandonment of mothers and children, a trend toward mother-centered families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives, the predominance of the nuclear family, a strong predisposition to authoritarianism, and a great emphasis upon family solidarity—an ideal only rarely achieved. Other traits include a strong present time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation, a belief in male superiority which reaches its crystallization in *machismo* or the cult of masculinity, a corresponding martyr complex among women, and finally, a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.¹³

Because Lewis left no doubt that the causes of poverty were economic, he also suggested that their solutions would have to be economic (and presumably therefore political). But he hastened to add that a rising economic tide would not be enough to lift families like the Sanchezes out of the cultural malaise that he described. People who lived the poverty culture were “badly damaged human beings” and that had to somehow be dealt with on its own terms. The culture of poverty, then, “highlights the social, economic, and psychological complexities which have to be faced in any effort to transform and eliminate the culture of poverty from the world. It suggests that basic changes in the attitudes and value systems of the poor must go hand in hand with improvements in the material conditions of living.” People were part of the problem; addressing their poverty was not enough.¹⁴

The trouble with the culture of poverty thesis was how easily the cart could end up before the horse. Programs to attack the actual causes of poverty could devolve into or settle for treating the (real or imagined) symptoms of poverty. Worse still, the emphasis on culture lent itself to an insistence that poor people could bootstrap their way out of poverty if they had a little guidance and could shed some of the pathologies of the culture of poverty. In focusing on culture and behavior, the culture of poverty thesis suggested that all of these things—from alcoholism to single motherhood—were just as important to causing and perpetuating poverty as

¹³ Ibid., xxxviii-xxxix.

¹⁴ Ibid., xlii.

the history and political economy that actually created it. This was a recipe for small-stakes solutions.

Yet cultural understandings of poverty undergirded the most extensive of the USDA's anti-poverty efforts during the New Deal. It was, in fact, cultures of poverty that made rehabilitation necessary. Rehabilitation proponents did not use the word loosely or to refer solely to the work of rehabilitating the soil on poor farms. It meant teaching poor people to live right. (Arthur Raper once mused that the FSA was not actually in the rehabilitation business but, in most cases, the *habilitation* business). No New Dealer had yet articulated a cultural thesis on the causes and consequences of poverty as directly as Oscar Lewis did in his publications starting in the late 1950s. But culture was everywhere in USDA poverty talk in the 1930s and 40s. Most liberal USDA New Dealers did not argue that culture caused poverty, but they did think that cultures of poverty were the most significant legacy of being poor and were what had kept the nation's millions of poor farmers from climbing out of poverty. They focused especially on apathy and listlessness as the key "psychological" components of the poverty culture. Rehabilitation loans attempted to arrest and reverse the culture of poverty and the alleged social and psychological deformities that it inflicted on the poor by giving poor farmers better diets, access to medical care (in many cases), the time- and work-discipline that came with tending gardens and livestock, and the supervision of experts in farm and home management.¹⁵

Ultimately, rehabilitation tried to give poor farmers hope, some ray of light on the horizon that they could find purpose in struggling toward and, in the process of doing that, remake themselves. Rehabilitation sought to reform personalities as much as anything. It could and did sometimes involve concrete improvements in the lives of the rural poor, most notably in the improved health that it could bring to them through better diets and access to medical care.

¹⁵ Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 288.

That should not obscure the fact, however, that it was a terribly fraught enterprise. It placed the burden of uplift squarely on the shoulders of the rural poor and often came as a thinly or not-even veiled accusation that rehabilitation “clients” were poor because of their own incompetence. Rehabilitation required poor farmers to accept intrusions into and harsh judgments about intimate aspects of their lives. It did all of this while also demanding that they work very hard in circumstances more or less destined to assure that their hard work did not get rewarded.

Chapters One and Two provide crucial pre-history to the culture- and life-orientation of the New Deal for agriculture. Chapter One shows the emergence in the 1910s and 1920s of the expert consensus that the problem with American agriculture was rural life. Rural sociologists crystallized and added a social-scientific gloss to a set of concerns that had been mounting since the Populist revolt of the 1890s. In fact, rural sociology and the broader rural reform impulse of the early twentieth century emerged as a safe and elite-advocated alternative to agrarian radicalism. The Populists had a menacing stare. Their moral tone seemed more or less perpetually set on “*j’accuse*.” They shook a calloused hand at monopolists, financiers, and the pliant government that notarized the plutocrats’ ledger books. The Populists were political, in other words, in a way that struck deeply at the status quo in the late nineteenth century. By contrast, rural sociologists in the Teens and Twenties located rural decline in the failings of farm people. Farmers had failed to stand with their shoulders square to the challenges that modernity had hurtled at them. They needed to get with the program, which meant building up institutions that could allow them to increase their incomes and overcome their isolation and the other deformities of rural life. Led by the pioneering social scientist Charles Galpin, sociologists fixated on the “rural community” as the road to rural salvation. Untold thousands of these largely imaginary social formations dotted the rural American landscape. The entire first

generation of rural sociologists followed Galpin's lead in mapping the boundaries of these sociological entities so that experts could point to them and insist that they were real. Sociologists hoped to see "open-country" farmers and the denizens of rural villages and hamlets (including merchants and bankers) unite in the harmony of geographically specific rural communities. Everyone in each rural community would share the same social and economic institutions, which would create a unity of purpose among all classes of rural people, give them access to modern and efficient institutions, and allow the countryside to then demand its due from urban-industrial America.

Chapter Two casts a critical eye on the findings of early rural sociologists. It turns out that farmers did most of their living in their "neighborhoods," the small clusters of farm homes that covered the peopled parts of America's hinterland. Here farm families supported their churches, schools, cooperative work arrangements, and—until the prolonged economic doldrums of the 1920s—small-scale economic institutions. This was the stuff of their daily lives. Sociologists did their best to ignore or disparage rural neighborhoods because the institutions that they supported were not large enough to be modern and efficient. Ironically, as Chapter Two also shows, early sociologists in the Teens and Twenties also had a real concern for democracy. They insisted, however, that true economic and participatory democracy could only be achieved with the empowerment of broader rural communities. Sociologists advocated the creation of "community councils" that would create participatory-democratic programs of community development in every community in the countryside. But throughout the 1920s, rural people mostly stuck to their neighborhoods. As that fact became increasingly obvious, sociologists turned toward studying these neighborhoods and ultimately accepted their importance in rural life. By the eve of the New Deal, these experts had accumulated a body of knowledge and a set of techniques to map rural social formations that would be the basis of a USDA experiment in mobilizing the countryside's neighborhoods and communities to take control of the USDA planning apparatus as the means of revitalizing rural life.

Chapter Three moves the story into the 1930s, focusing on New Deal programs in what I call “cultures of commerce,” places that had completely market-oriented agricultures. We meet a new set of protagonists, a group of economists who staffed crucial divisions in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE). These economists did not traffic in the exact same set of concerns as the pioneering rural sociologists, but they had the same regard for rural life, broadly conceived, as a thing worth preserving. The economists’ special purview was trying to get control of the explosively bountiful capacity of American agriculture that productionists had helped to unleash and that had depressed commodity prices. Harking back to earlier concerns about the viability of rural communities and their institutions, USDA economists hoped to raise commodity prices while keeping most families on their farms. Starting in 1933, the economists struggled to move the AAA away from its origins as a program of crop reduction and toward a basis of genuine agricultural adjustment. They put in place a planning apparatus that was supposed to guide adjustments democratically and, when the economists moved to the BAE in 1938, was supposed to give farmers control of the USDA and its policies. These economists joined forces with sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists in the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life (DFPRL). Sociologists worked to delineate the countless neighborhoods and rural communities of the countryside so that all farmers could have literal representation in the project of planning agricultural adjustment. Starting in 1939, anthropologists and social psychologists from the DFPRL also joined its sociologists in an effort to survey the scope of America’s rural cultures. The DFPRL designed this effort to help the USDA understand why the cultures of some rural people had failed so miserably in sustaining stable and viable communities. The agency also believed that it would allow the USDA to tailor its programs to the specific needs of the various cultures of commerce and avoid creating programs likely to be non-starters with farmers themselves.

Chapter Four pivots, taking up the cultures of poverty for the first time. The 1930s witnessed an explosion of popular and social-scientific interest in rural poverty. Social scientists cataloged the existence of five regions of pervasive and entrenched poverty: Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Cotton South, the “Cutover” region of the Great Lakes States, and the northern half of New Mexico and Arizona. The results of this attention were mixed, however. Occasionally, social scientists simply blamed the cultures of the rural poor for their poverty. More frequently, poverty experts mixed cultural and structural explanations of poverty. Either way, there was a widespread disposition to understand rural poverty in cultural terms throughout the 1930s, a disposition that assured that most USDA anti-poverty efforts would be directed at cultural pathologies rather than at the causes of poverty. From the beginning, the most pervasive USDA anti-poverty programs focused on rehabilitation. This tendency was present even in the famed resettlement colonies that the RA created and that the FSA later maintained. These communities were sociological laboratories meant to allow poor farmers to start new lives free of the cultural failings that either created or perpetuated their poverty. Chapter Four closes with a consideration of the lengths that the RA went to keep socially and culturally undesirable people out of its communities. It also shows how USDA social scientists used the resettlement communities as laboratories presenting research opportunities and ultimately became implicated in efforts to quash grassroots organizing at the Dyess resettlement colony in Arkansas.

Chapters Five and Six continue the focus on rural cultures of poverty. Chapter Five starts with an extensive account of sociologist Arthur Raper’s career in the 1920s and 30s. That career brought him to the center of USDA efforts to rehabilitate rural cultures during the late 1930s and early 1940s. No New Deal social scientist more brilliantly or more readily exposed the historical and political causes of rural poverty than Raper did in *Preface to Peasantry*, his 1936 masterpiece account of the plantation system in Greene and Macon Counties, Georgia. But even Raper ultimately blinked. He argued that Greene County in particular had a poverty culture that

had turned its farm tenants into listless plodders, people for whom a helping hand and some hope could work wonders. The rest of Chapter Five then shows how the work of rehabilitation, wherever it occurred, was intended primarily to relieve poor farmers of the kind of cultural pathologies that Raper discovered in Greene County.

Chapter Six captures the experience of rehabilitation. In 1939, the FSA launched the most extensive rehabilitation program that it had ever undertaken and did so in Greene County, Georgia. The program amounted to nothing less than an attempt to shock an entire county out of its cultural torpor. Raper went to Greene County in 1940, at the behest of the USDA, to act as a “participant-observer” in the effort there. He had written the book on Greene County’s poverty after all. Raper’s presence—along with a small team of researchers who worked for him—allows for an especially full account of the rehabilitation experience in Greene. The sociologist and his assistants were there to observe and critique the FSA’s efforts and, they hoped, to document the county’s cultural transformation. They did the work of anthropologists, studying the culture and lifeways of a society that they hoped was being transformed. We follow them into sharecropper shacks as they went about that effort. Doing so dramatizes the depth of the poverty that Greene County families faced and the basic inadequacy of rehabilitation as an antidote to that poverty. It helps to establish too that even the most well-intentioned anti-poverty workers made potentially demeaning judgments about the lives of poor families, something that the very concept of rehabilitation made inevitable. Lastly, Greene County gives us an opportunity to see and hear poor farmers responding to their rehabilitation. It was not lost on them that the FSA represented a new landlord who was not completely different from the old landlord. The new landlord, like the old, also took away their right to run their own affairs and asked that they work very hard to not go very far.

Chapter Seven shows the transformation that World War II wrought on the programs and ambitions of the USDA’s liberals. The war allowed them to formulate far bolder plans than

they had contemplated during the Depression. For the first time, the cultures of poverty became a solution rather than a problem. These previously “overpopulated” areas were now “reservoirs” of “manpower” that would be crucial to winning the war. The Farm Security Administration took the lead in “tapping” these reservoirs and expanded its portfolio to include programs for farm laborers. The “manpower” concept allowed the FSA to offer a long-term solution to rural poverty centered on moving people from areas of concentrated poverty to places where they could find jobs. It also allowed the agency to achieve modest improvements in the wages and working conditions of the farm laborers who came under its stewardship. But “manpower” treated the problems of farm labor and rural poverty as neutral, social scientific questions of managing flows of abstract labor from areas of “surplus” to those of “deficit.” It did not offer the rural poor a solution to their poverty “in place,” taking it as a given that they would have to be uprooted. The “manpower” concept, in its generic treatment of people who labored on farms, also papered over the fact that these were America’s most vulnerable and least protected workers and further ignored the reality that much of the nation’s farm “manpower” was childpower and womanpower. “Manpower” therefore allowed the FSA to avoid confronting deep-seated problems while offering a new set of primarily ameliorative solutions to rural poverty.

The BAE’s economists, on the other hand, struggled during the war to keep democratic methods at the heart of the agricultural planning process that they had designed. They ultimately saw their planning apparatus stripped of its democratic pretensions, however, and redirected toward ramping up agricultural production to meet wartime demands even as that planning structure also generated proposals for a set of programs—encompassing everything from healthcare for all rural people to a massive program of rural public works—that had they been implemented, would have truly constituted a New Deal for the countryside. At the same time, the anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life traipsed all over the country performing a “cultural reconnaissance” of dozens of rural communities. Their ambition was nothing less than a comprehensive cultural

survey of the whole nation. That effort had brought Oscar Lewis to Bell County, Texas, in 1945. The point was not to document cultures in their death throes but to build the social-scientific knowledge that would foster what was good about America's rural communities and cultures and that would help to change what was bad about them. This even included shining a light on the place of the plantation and white supremacy in southern rural cultures. But everything slipped from the social scientists' grasp as they figured out what they should have known from the beginning. Their efforts were creating powerful political enemies, enemies from whom they proved almost completely incapable of defending themselves.

The experts who appear in the pages that follow were not wrong. Culture matters. That culture and agriculture are fundamental to one another—in fact are one another—is expressed in the words themselves. All along, agrarian New Dealers held the goal of sustaining vibrant rural communities and cultures, places where people practiced democracy and lived and governed themselves through their own institutions. It was an admirable goal. It is not a vision now much-associated with the USDA of the era, though perhaps that is because its proponents failed so thoroughly in all of their ambitions. One encompassing and grievous mistake explains this fact. Agrarian New Dealers embraced rural life and culture, but they treated politics and political economy as somehow separate from those things. The problem appeared in their programs for the commercial cultures when New Deal economists acted as if the excesses of commercial agriculture came purely out of cultural habits, entirely a product of will and choice, rather than out of the profit motive that was fundamental to market-dominated agriculture. It appeared in their programs for the cultures of poverty when they eschewed attacking the causes of poverty in favor of changing the habits of poor farmers, farmers who would still live on dead-end farms no matter how thoroughly they embraced rehabilitation. It appeared too in their undoing. For all the talk about democracy and community empowerment that emerged in the Progressive era

and that continued through the New Deal, these were social scientists who proposed social-scientific rather than political solutions to the problems that they addressed. The world—its culture and its agriculture—refused to be bent by the ideas alone. That would require a political program. Politics would have meant organizing poor farmers and farm laborers as a political constituency. It would have meant establishing the modest family farm as a goal to be fought for rather than something that would be automatically sheltered through a process of rational agricultural planning. These were the New Dealers' lessons to learn, but before they had to learn them, they fostered a remarkable period of experimentation that sought to reconstruct and therefore preserve something worthy of the name "rural life."

Chapter 1

Searching for Rural Community

Charles Galpin was giddy about his map. In 1910, Galpin was out at the front of an emerging vanguard of social scientists who diagnosed the deficiencies of American rural life. Galpin was America's first true rural sociologist and his map convinced him that he had solved a bedeviling sociological problem, one at the heart of rural backwardness. The budding sociologist had compiled the institutional affiliations of each family in and around the little farming village of Belleville in upstate New York. Every church, Grange, Mason's lodge, milk cooperative, and book club—Galpin had scoured their membership rolls and used them to create a map that showed every farm home in Belleville and how many of the thirty-odd Belleville community groups to which each family belonged. Galpin's map showed that some families were well "socialized" (they belonged to numerous organizations) while others were "poorly socialized" (they belonged to few or none). When he dug into the Belleville's history, Galpin found a pattern: the town had emerged in the early nineteenth century as a place for farmers to trade. Because they went there to transact their business, the area's farmers had eventually located their first school in Belleville, then a Grange hall, then a creamery, and so forth. Farm families' social contacts therefore, as Galpin put it, "radiated to one center." Not only did his map show "socialization," then, it also suggested the pattern to it. That was why his crude delineation had excited him so much that Galpin claimed that "this map did a thing to me which came well nigh to making me burn my books and stop going to libraries." Who needed libraries when the solution to rural problems lay right there in the countryside, awaiting its discovery? What Galpin thought he had uncovered was Belleville's "rural community." Whether they understood

it or not, the people who lived in the town and the farmers who lived near it belonged to this living, ordering thing. Farmers' needed to recognize and embrace that fact. If everyone who traded in Bellville joined and acted in concert through the same institutions—from churches to creameries and salons to schools—then there was no problem that modernity could throw at Belleville, or the countless other American rural hamlets just like it, that Belleville's people could not handle on their own.¹

This chapter traces the emergence, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, of a class of rural experts who took a broad tack when it came to the problems of rural life. In fact, they approached rural life as just that, as having to do with the stuff of life and living: not just income but churches, schools, libraries, civic groups, social organizations, salons, pageants, parades, democracy, and community. Numerous impulses flowed into this concern with country living, and this chapter primarily uses the work of America's early rural sociologists to explore them because these incipient experts crystallized and professionalized a way of looking at rural life that had a much broader currency. The experts in rural sociology who began to proliferate after Galpin made his map in 1910 worked in contradistinction to an also-emerging class of productionist experts, the farm management specialists and agricultural engineers who saw increased efficiency, greater productivity, and higher income as the solution to all rural problems. The "factory farms" (as the sociologists sometimes called them) that productionist expertise fostered threatened the thriving rural communities that rural sociologists longed for. For these experts, rural life succeeded when rural life flourished. Rural life could not flourish with the factory farm at its base because, as a means of producing, it so self-evidently meant fewer farmers. But sociologists did not see themselves as fleeing from the imperatives that modernity imposed. Experts like Charles Galpin embraced the rural community—and worked

¹ Charles J. Galpin, *My Drift into Rural Sociology: Memoirs of Charles Josiah Galpin*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938), 1-17; Lowry Nelson, *Rural Sociology: Its Origin and Growth in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 35; Henry C. Taylor, "Galpin Undertakes the Study of Rural Life," *Rural Sociology* 13, Issue 2 (June 1948), 120; John H. Kolb, "Dr. Galpin at Wisconsin," *Rural Sociology* 13, Issue 2 (June 1948), 140.

feverishly to map it and to convince rural people of its existence—because the rural community was up to the challenges that modernity presented. Efficiency, organization, technology, connectedness, rising standards of living, modernity itself: rural people could have all of these things just as readily as the most well-positioned urbanite, and they could have it with the spirit, the soul, and the participatory democracy of the rural hamlet—but only if the American hinterland found and embraced the rural community.

Rural sociology was born in the city. Or more precisely, rural sociology was born in the long shadow cast by the great, teeming metropolises that so captivated the imaginations of Americans through the country's long period of industrialization, urbanization, and "modernization" from the 1870s and into the early decades of the twentieth century. That shadow contained multitudes; not only what Progressive Era reformers identified as the great social problems of the time (slums, radicalism, labor strife, and so forth) but also what they, and many others, saw as its towering successes: advances in communication, transportation, science, technologies of all kinds, and standards of living. Of course, the newly colossal corporations of the era that partly enabled these advances also threatened the relative independence of people, communities, and government. But those corporations also suggested the very solution to the problems that they created. Everyone was now connected in the great web of society and had to act accordingly. Modernity demanded cooperation and integration. Consumers and producers could organize just as readily as any corporation could to harness the powers of efficiency and good business management. These thoughts did not belong to urban reformers alone. The

historian Charles Postel has demonstrated how thoroughly they permeated the Populist movement that reached its crescendo in the 1890s.²

The shadow of the metropolis also fell across the countryside and made it look different. By the turn of the twentieth century, reformers who looked at rural America saw only former glory. They saw people who had failed to keep up with what the times so self-evidently demanded. Modernity meant connectedness but rural people were still isolated. In the countryside, the railroad revolution in transportation had spread people out rather than drawing them closer. Advances in communication, however substantial they might have been, looked puny in rural parts compared to the cities. Competition required efficiency but rural people had not delivered there either. Even for the many reformers who had no desire to see farms turned into factories, agricultural production now looked embarrassingly inefficient and unproductive. As technology transformed standards of cleanliness and convenience in urban homes, farm homes started to look dirty, dangerous, and pre-modern. Farm women started to look like drudges. As America's cities teemed, thick with activity and organizations, farm people began to look "unorganized" and "isolated." Worst of all, to reformers, much of this appeared willful. Farmers clung to an outmoded and stubborn "individualism." They were anti-social in an era that demanded that they embrace society.³

Rural sociology, then, was not born of the decline of rural areas but of their relative decline. Things were not worse; they had just not gotten better (or better enough). The statistics on rural population reflected this reality. The urban population had grown more rapidly than the rural since at least the turn of the nineteenth century, a fact that originally reflected the much smaller size of America's cities. In 1800, rural areas matched the urban growth rate of

² Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ David Danbom surveys the entire milieu of early twentieth-century rural reform, including some of its productionist elements: David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1979).

roughly 60 percent over the preceding decade with a roughly 34 percent rate of their own; at 1850, it was 90 percent (urban) to 30 percent (rural); at 1900 it was 37 percent to 14 percent. In 1920, rural population increase over the preceding decade had dwindled to roughly 5 percent when it stood at nearly 26 percent for urban America. The population of rural America did not begin to decline absolutely until the 1920s, however. To that point, natural increase had kept rural populations growing even as many country people voted with their feet and headed to the cities. Between 1900 and 1910, according to one rural sociologist from the era, rural migration accounted for roughly 30 percent of the population growth in American cities. Early twentieth-century reformers worried that the more attractive the cities became, especially for younger rural people, the more backward and deficient rural life became, thus adding more people to the cityward flow of migrants. The historic urbanization of America—which became a definite fact when the country became predominately “urban” in 1920—threatened to become rural collapse if something was not done. This was the problem that called forth rural sociology as a discipline along with a variety of rural reform movements.⁴

Nothing better illustrates the extent to which rural life had become a “problem” in the minds of reformers in the early twentieth century than the 1909 report of Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission. The fact that Roosevelt had convened the Commission in the first place indicated the widespread acceptance that there was in fact something wrong with country living. In kicking off the blue-ribbon effort, Roosevelt had lauded the diligent work of the USDA and the state colleges of agriculture in encouraging farmers to adopt scientific agriculture, but also lamented that “our attention has been concentrated almost exclusively on getting better farming.” Roosevelt was saying that it was already time to move beyond narrow productionism and to focus on “better living on the farm” because “agriculture is not the whole of country life.”

⁴ John Morris Gillette, *Rural Sociology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 79-103.

“The great rural interests are human interests,” Roosevelt insisted, “and good crops are of little value to the farmer unless they open the door to a good kind of life on the farm.”⁵

In staffing the Country Life Commission, Roosevelt picked people who already agreed with his assumption that there was something wrong with rural society, in fact who had been and would continue to be instrumental in forging the consensus that lay behind that assumption: Liberty Hyde Bailey (a horticulturalist and president of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell), Henry C. Wallace (editor of the nation’s most popular farm paper, *Wallace’s Farmer*), William A. Beard (editor of a California farm paper), Kenyon Butterfield (president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College and sometimes credited as the country’s first rural sociologist), Gifford Pinchot (Chief of the United States Forest Service), and Walter Hines Page (journalist and editor of *The World’s Work*). Charles S. Barrett, president of the Farmers’ Union, was added to the committee as an afterthought. He was the only member likely to dissent from the idea that rural problems lay primarily with rural life and rural people.⁶

In some ways, the process that the Commission went through was impressive. In November and December of 1908, it held “hearings” in thirty medium- to large-sized cities where anyone from college professors and local and state officials to ordinary dirt farmers were free to turn up to say their piece on the “problems” of rural life or on any topic that they deemed relevant to the proceedings. At the urging of President Roosevelt, the Commission also encouraged “schoolhouse meetings” across the country to discuss the same questions that the Commission had engaged. These meetings occurred in every state in the nation. Roosevelt wanted the meetings to give ordinary farmers (“the men who actually live on the soil,” as he put it, despite the fact that the Commission proudly noted the participation of women in all the meetings) “a sense of ownership in this Commission.” The Commission also mailed out more

⁵ Theodore Roosevelt to Liberty Hyde Bailey, August 10, 1908, in United States Country Life Commission, *Report of the Commission on Country Life; with an Introduction by Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1917), 42-43.

⁶ Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, 43; U.S. Country Life Commission, *Report*, 45, 54.

than half a million questionnaires on the nature of rural life to authorities on the subject. More than 100,000 of those came back and were tabulated to inform the Commission's findings.⁷

The purpose of the Country Life Commission was to pass "judgment as to the main deficiencies of country life" and it should be no surprise, then, that "deficiencies" were what it found. The questionnaires that it mailed out give the clearest sense that the Commission's fact-finding phase was something like an argument in search of its evidence. The forms did not predominately go to ordinary farmers. They "were sent to names supplied by the United States Department of Agriculture, state experiment stations, farmers' societies, women's clubs," and also "to rural free deliverymen, country physicians and ministers, and others." The Commission geared the questionnaire toward soliciting the kind of evidence it already knew it would find. There were questions that dealt with the material aspects of farm life, issues such as prices, the quality of roads and railroad service, and the availability of "farm labor" and sources of credit. There were also questions, though, intended to elicit information on the deficiencies of rural life itself: "Do the farmers and their wives and families in your neighborhood get together for mutual improvement, entertainment and social intercourse as much as they should?" "Are the farmers and their wives in your neighborhood satisfactorily organized to promote their mutual buying and selling interest?" "Are the schools in your neighborhood training boys and girls satisfactorily for life on the farm?" The Commission also expected its questionnaires to elicit data confirming its belief that the physical plant of the average farm home was run down and that rural living conditions were "unsanitary." It was these kinds of questions that Roosevelt suggested that ordinary farmers take up themselves at their schoolhouse meetings so that they might feel an "ownership" stake in the Commission and that it was "responsive to their desires and wishes, no less than to their needs."⁸

⁷ U.S. Country Life Commission, *Report*, 49-58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-55.

In issuing its report, the Commission called for “nothing more or less than the gradual rebuilding of a new agriculture and new rural life.” The Commission made clear that the “new agriculture” would come out of the “new rural life,” and not the other way around, because at every opportunity it noted what it considered deficits in things like “social cohesion” and “community sense and feel” among farmers. Rural people were not living right in relation to one another. Ultimately, the Commission proposed what would fast become a standard list of rural reform goals, including consolidating rural schools and churches, improving transportation and communication in the countryside, and getting farmers organized into buying and selling cooperatives. If the Commission’s effort and findings could be boiled down to any one presumption, it would be that farmers were not sufficiently “organized.” Modern life was placing new organizational demands on rural people that they were not meeting. That had to change.⁹

Not much came of the Commission’s recommendations, but in the first two decades of the twentieth century the emerging rural social sciences would build on the same mantra of the need to reform and better organize rural life. As a class, early rural social scientists were almost exclusively male and overwhelmingly Protestant and Midwestern in their origins. Although most of them had grown up on farms in the late nineteenth century (predominately in the 1880s and 1890s), their parents tended to be among the more prosperous farmers. Unusually for that time, these parents also supported their children’s decision to leave the farm to seek a university education. In leaving agriculture, incipient social scientists began to develop a critical sense of distance from agriculture and rural life. They would be *for* farmers without really quite being *of* them any longer. This helped to make the reforms that social scientists proposed far less radical than those that Populism had generated and also made reformers’ frequently antithetical to the practices and beliefs of farm people themselves.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 24-25, 107-108.

¹⁰ Harry C. McDean, “Professionalism in the Rural Social Sciences, 1896-1919,” *Agricultural History* 58, no. 3 (July 1984), 375-378.

As they enrolled in institutions like the University of Wisconsin, the future rural social scientists entered an atmosphere that was equal parts secular-academic and Social Gospel. When Henry C. Taylor, the founder of the field of agricultural economics, arrived at the University of Wisconsin in 1898 to study under the economist Richard T. Ely, professing his desire to apply economics to the study of farm problems, Ely said to Taylor, “I look upon your coming as an answer to my prayers.” Both the academic and the religious impulses increased the sense among these budding scholars that their mission was to uplift and lead rural people out of something, though they were still figuring out what exactly that meant and how to do it. The atmosphere at the University of Wisconsin especially fostered the reform ethos. In Madison, the economist Richard T. Ely and the economist and labor historian John R. Commons attracted flocks of eager graduate student as those two scholars worked to disprove the tired dogmas of *laissez-faire*, ultimately building the case for much of the legislation that made up not just the hallmarks of the Progressive Era but also the New Deal.¹¹

After the turn of the twentieth century, rural social scientists became inveterate collectors of information. No matter what the question, finding the answer always had to begin with going into the countryside to gather up facts, a ritual that became known as the “survey.” Some of these surveyors were economists, some were experts in what was coming to be called farm management, and others would go on to become pioneers in the field of rural sociology. Along with gathering information that they thought would be helpful in elevating rural life or rural incomes, the other great passion of early rural social scientists was in defining the boundaries of their new disciplines. Academic organizations proliferated especially after 1910: the Farm Management Association, the National Association of Farm Economists, the Association for Agricultural Legislation, and the American Farm Economics Association all

¹¹ Richard T. Ely quoted in McDean, “Rural Social Sciences,” 379; Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 68; Jess Gilbert, “Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (Spring, 2000), 167-168.

arrived in quick succession. Rural sociologists would not form their own distinct Rural Sociological Society until 1937, but they began to meet together informally within the American Sociological Society as early as 1912. They formalized that arrangement in 1921 with the creation of a Rural Sociology Section within the American Sociological Society.¹²

The rural sociologists who began to publish their research bulletins and textbooks and to take up their university postings throughout the 1910s believed, in league with their productionist colleagues, that rural economic life needed revamping. Sociologists derided the productionist mentality, however, that efficiency and increased production were all that was missing in rural life. This critique was in circulation even before the first fully-fledged rural sociologists made it into print in the second half of the 1910s. In 1911, the dean of the University of Wisconsin's College of Agriculture, Harry L. Russell, spoke to the first gathering of the Wisconsin Country Life Conference. Russell criticized the reigning idea "that the function of the agricultural college is largely material—to make two blades of grass grow where but one grew before, or [to get farmers] to make more money to buy more land, to grow more corn to feed more hogs to sell, and [then to] buy more land." Russell was heartened in his belief that an emphasis on efficiency and productivity at all costs was "rapidly being superseded by one in which the element of service to other than the material sides of agriculture is being more and more emphasized." "Living is more than farming," he declared, "and country living should mean the expression of the fullest possible life in the open country."¹³

Rather than productivity and efficiency on the farm as a producing unit, rural sociologists emphasized cooperation and organization as the keys for rural economic prosperity. That was the lesson that so many had taken from the development of vast corporations in the nineteenth century. Ordinary people could harness the modern techniques of corporate management to their own advantage just as readily as business corporations could—provided

¹² McDean, "Rural Social Sciences," 381-383; Nelson, *Rural Sociology*, 126-128.

¹³ Harry L. Russell quoted in Taylor, "Galpin Undertakes," 121-122.

that they organized and cooperated to do so. Indeed, in the earliest days of the discipline, rural sociologists envisioned farmers being organized into vast buying and selling cooperatives that could potentially become national in their scope. American sociologists looked longingly at the system of cooperatives that were the basis of rural life and agriculture in Denmark. The “cooperative idea” had been so prevalent for so long—and touted by so many different groups and interests—that sociologists thought that the obstacle to its adoption in the US had to be social or cultural, rather than practical or political. The problem was people.¹⁴

Because they considered them obstacles to adequately adapting to modernity, more than anything rural sociologists sought to expose and correct what they viewed as deficiencies in the ways that rural people lived. Life-oriented experts thought that they would do no favors for rural people if they pulled their punches, so their assessments were stark. Even as late as 1930, summing up what he had said throughout his career, Charles Galpin declared that “the gravest defects in American rural life are social in character,” adding that “fate has saddled rural life with almost unbelievable social handicaps.” The rural sociologist John M. Gillette was of the same mind, arguing in 1917 that “rural problems are necessarily in their very nature social problems.” Gillette contended that rural life had become “stagnant” because rural areas had not matched the development of cities: “Stagnation means that, relatively speaking, rural life does not keep pace with the corresponding grades of life in the city.” In making these kinds of judgments, rural sociologists were never not “relatively speaking.” The modern character of life had created rural backwardness by making rural living and levels of organization seem torpid to critics. Sociologists thought that the migration of rural people from farm to city had as much to do with a lack of social opportunity as a lack of economic opportunity. The backwardness of

¹⁴ On cooperatives, see John M. Gillette, *Constructive Rural Sociology*, revised and enlarged edition (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1917), 162-190; Gillette, *Rural Sociology*, 223-254; Dwight Sanderson, *The Farmer and His Community* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 71-90; U. S. Country Life Commission, *Report*, 60-62, 132-137.

rural America included, according to Gillette, “deficiencies in intellectual stimulus and outlook, amusement and recreation, associational and institutional agencies, and in education.”¹⁵

The critique of rural society, then, went beyond its economic organization. Rural people needed to dramatically change their habits, attitudes, and the institutions through which they operated. Gillette’s judgments about churches and schools again reflected the prevailing opinion. “The average rural church,” he declared, “is an anachronistic, semi-decadent affair.” The physical plant of the rural church was small and run-down. If it served as any kind of social center—and he believed, along with every other rural sociologist, that it barely rated in this capacity—it had to do so within the incommensurable confines of its single room. The rural pastorate was overworked and under-trained. The schools, Gillette believed, faced exactly the same issues: “The typical country school is likewise a backward institution. It, too, is a small one-room affair, without facilities for diversified instruction, sustaining an ill-adapted course of study, with too few pupils to create competitive interest in class work or to sustain organized play.” If it did not even manage to adequately educate its charges, then the country school certainly did not serve in the other capacity that someone like Gillette thought that it should: as a kind of community center that brought people together to solve the community’s most pressing problems.¹⁶

How had this terrible state of affairs come to pass? Rural sociologists consistently fingered the evils of “individualism” and “isolation.” These experts always gendered “the farmer” as male, and this helped drive their perception of rural individualism. The connection between

¹⁵ Charles J. Galpin, *My Philosophy of Rural Life* (New York: Home Missions Council, 1937), reprint of 1930 speech, 15-16; Gillette, *Constructive Rural Sociology*, 108.

¹⁶ Gillette, *Rural Sociology*, 532.

Others criticizing the rural church: Kenyon L. Butterfield, *Chapters in Rural Progress* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1908), 36-40; Charles J. Galpin, *Types of Rural Churches: A Bulletin on the Problems of the Rural Church* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1917); Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 121-125.

Others criticizing rural schools: Charles J. Galpin and J. A. James, *Rural Relations of High Schools* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1918); Gillette, *Rural Sociology*, 401-427.

“the farmer” (as “he” or “him”) and individualism was so thorough that seemingly the only mental image of farming that early rural sociologists could conjure was of the solitary male striding manfully behind a plow. This image was completely at odds with the variety and cooperative nature of most farm work. It both denied the labor that women contributed to the production of the farm’s food and cash crops and treated the work of women in “the home” as somehow separate from the productive processes of “the farm.” It is a testament to the power of this set of assumptions that the people calling these images to mind had grown up on farms and knew firsthand about the work of farm women and the cooperative nature of much farm work.¹⁷

For the sociologist Charles Galpin, the entrenched “individualism” of “the farmer” began with the fact, as Galpin expressed it in 1918, that “he” was “his own boss.” It was for “him” alone to decide “the details of his land management” and “this constant dependence upon his own judgment has wrought out the habit of self-reliance.” Perhaps more than anything, though, there was some character-shaping (or character-deforming) aspect of spending so much time behind a plow with nothing to contemplate but nature or one’s own thoughts. Galpin put it this way about “the farmer”: “His solitary mode of working in the fields, out in the environing spaces of silence, unbroken by the click of other human wills, where the tick, tick, tick of his own mental machinery is registering his own private judgments, has reinforced the habit of self-reliance.” Because the farmer supposedly worked alone, Galpin believed that it was little wonder that “he” was a “super-individualist” who tended to conflate “his own idea, his own point of view” with “the voice of God.” In other words, the character of farm work explained the common perception that farmers were cantankerous, stubborn, and unwilling to achieve things cooperatively. The farmer (“he”) worked alone and was not, therefore, accustomed to having to accommodate the opinions or ways of other people. The city was Galpin’s point of reference, where he believed

¹⁷ Deborah Fink examines how agrarian mythology obscured the productive work of women and turned the woman farmer into the “farmer’s wife” or “farmer’s daughter.” Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

“the supervision of a factory system” and the simple process of working with others made urban laborers less individualistic, more inclined to cooperate.¹⁸

Perhaps more prone to rhetorical flights of fancy (“tick, tick, tick”) than other early rural sociologists, Galpin was by no means alone in thinking that there was something about the nature of the farmer’s work that inclined “him” to individualism. John Gillette asserted of “the farmer” in 1917 that “his philosophy of life has been developed from his contact with nature and from his apparent aloofness from the social mechanism.” Farmers failed to understand their “social relatedness” to other farmers and to non-farmers. They preferred “intense individualism” to “cooperative effort” and had abjured the idea “that any constant, organised, cooperative effort was necessary.” Theodore Roosevelt’s Commission on Country Life asserted in 1909 of “the farmer” that “the training of generations has made him a strong individualist, and he has been obliged to rely mainly on himself.” The Commission elaborated: “Self-reliance being the essence of his nature, he does not at once feel the need of cooperation for business purposes or of close association for social objects. In the main, he has been prosperous, and he has not felt the need of cooperation. If he is a strong man, he prefers to depend on his own ability.” The result of all this “individualism” was “an arrested social development.” American farmers it seemed, had become stuck in patterns of behavior that were appropriate only to the “frontier” or “pioneer” stage of living.¹⁹

Rural sociologists identified the supposed “isolation” of farm life as the most deleterious product of farmer “individualism.” According to Kenyon Butterfield, writing in his own emphasis in 1908, “*Sociologically the city problem is that of congestion; the rural problem is*

¹⁸ Charles J. Galpin, *Rural Life* (New York: The Century Co., 1918), 43-46; Charles J. Galpin, *The Country Church: An Economic and Social Force* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1917), 13.

¹⁹ Gillette, *Constructive Rural Sociology*, 103-104; Country Life Commission, *Report*, 111; Charles J. Galpin, *Rural Social Problems* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 10-11; Gillette, *Rural Sociology*, 390-391; See also Carl C. Taylor, *Rural Sociology in its Economic, Historical, and Psychological Aspects* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933), 142-150.

that of isolation.” “Isolation,” the rural sociologist Carl C. Taylor was declaring even in 1933, was “the greatest handicap in farm life.” Taylor, in fact, defined the entire notion of progress as the process of overcoming this isolation. Experts like Taylor viewed the “scattered” American farmstead as the primary source of rural “isolation.” They conceded, up to a point, that government policy and the nature of American expansion had dictated this settlement pattern, but this did not absolve farmers of responsibility for its harmful perpetuation. Perhaps living on isolated farms, rather than in rural villages, had been necessary in some places during the “frontier” stage of development, but American farmers had stuck with this pattern resolutely. Charles Galpin complained in 1918 that “apparently total disregard of the claims and the appeals of neighborhood has characterized the selection of building sites on farms, if indeed it is not probable that in many cases remoteness from a neighbor has been considered advantageous.” To Galpin, isolation looked hermitical rather than accidental or unavoidable.²⁰

This supposedly willful individualism and resultant isolation helped to produce but was also the product of a particular historical process of decline. Rural sociologists argued that the people whom they considered America’s first family farmers—English settlers who colonized New England in the seventeenth century—had recreated in American the (supposedly) tightly-knit rural villages of the English countryside. They had built real communities. Rural sociologists defined communities as groupings of people that managed to govern themselves and to satisfy all of their needs through their own social and economic institutions. The New England township had proved so cohesive in its self-government—in living and performing the functions of community—that it had logically, as the rural sociologist Dwight Sanderson explained in 1922, become “the birthplace of representative democratic government in America” through the “New England town meeting.” This kind of governing structure grew organically out of the right kind of community. According to Sanderson, the New England town meeting was a

²⁰ Butterfield, *Chapters in Rural Progress*, 9; Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 146, 209; Galpin, *Rural Life*, 16-17.

“true community meeting, dealing not only with the political government, but considering all religious, educational, and social matters affecting the common life of the town.”²¹

The New England pattern of cohesion and community was not destined to last for very long in America. As sociologist Carl Taylor theorized, “this close community settlement tended to disintegrate almost at the outset of agricultural development in America.” The lure and frenzy of the frontier was too much from the eighteenth century forward. As American farmers covered the American continent, they opted for individually owned land and the “scattered farmstead.” The result was that they reverted to a “primitive” kind of social organization, one that was centered in their “neighborhoods” rather than in a village or town. We will examine rural “neighborhoods” at greater length in Chapter Two. What is important to note now is that rural sociologists defined neighborhood in opposition to community. A community served all its members’ needs, social and economic. A neighborhood was merely a cluster of farm homes fairly near one another. Neighborhoods in the open country, if they were organized around anything, tended to form around a single institution: a church, a mill, a store, a school. Neighborhoods were not places where people could serve all of their needs; they were not communities. Because of America’s dispersed settlement pattern, farmers had to go hither and yon if they expected to get to church, to have social events, to market their crops, and so forth. The result was a willy-nilly and fractured social landscape that weakened social connections because rural people’s affiliations and loyalties did not overlap as often as they might. Making matters worse, when a neighborhood institution that farm people had clustered around—say, a creamery that served as an outlet for milk—became defunct, as many rural institutions did in the early decades of the twentieth century, farmers continued to live right where they were, having lost the already inadequate cohesive focal point that a neighborhood institution could provide. Over time, however, rural people had imbued these illogically ordered and inadequate neighborhoods with meaning, according to sociologists. Charles Galpin described the allegedly vestigial character of

²¹ Galpin, *Rural Life*, 67-70; Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 3-4.

neighborhoods this way in 1924: “The circumstances that had created the variety of various small groups of farm families continued for two or three generations at first, until custom had made the groupings seem right, and the general acceptance of such groups became fixed in the rural urban and mind.” The result amounted to a process whereby farmers “began to ‘adjust themselves backward’ to this social organization, awkward though it might be, without much thought of improvement, taking the penalty of maladjustment into their own souls as a matter of course.” “Maladjustment” meant no community and no cohesion and ultimately rural decline.²²

A great rural disempowerment had grown out of this decline, sociologists thought. We have already seen how they rated country institutions as inadequate, especially churches and schools. Rural neighborhoods—again, clusters of farm homes in what Americans then called the “open-country”—simply did not have enough people to support modern and efficient institutions. Rural people therefore did not have the same access to education and services that urban Americans did and farmers had suffered for that fact. It went beyond that, however. When rural social life had devolved to the neighborhood, rural people had also divided. According to sociologists, farmers did not come into contact with the same people regularly enough to form community because they scattered their institutional loyalties over the open-country, rather than focusing them in a town or village. This divided them from other farmers, but it also divided them from merchants and other people who lived in the small towns where farmers went to trade. The rural banker, therefore, had no community with and no responsibility to the farmer and vice versa. Each had no understanding of the other’s interests and needs and no ability to act in concert. As Charles Galpin explained in 1918, a trip to town for the farmer was an experience of dispossession. Farmers had to “do their business without a resting place of their own, stand on other people’s streets, in other people’s shops, and trade over other people’s counters.” They had no pull with townspeople and no ownership stake in the

²² Carl Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 551-553; Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 9-10; Galpin, *Rural Social Problems*, 10-11.

town institutions that affected them greatly, such as banks and stores. This bred resentment. Town and country had divided, which had placed all rural people at a disadvantage compared to urban workers and urban institutions. Of course, urban workers and captains of industry had not clasped hands and found common cause, either. Rural sociologists believed, however, that those groups had each learned to harness cooperation (workers) and efficiency (employers) to their own advantage. Modernity had imposed new demands upon America's city-dwellers and they had met them. Rural people needed to do the same. Farmers could build the modern institutions that they needed to overcome the grave deficiencies of rural life only if they joined hands with rural townspeople, which is to say only if they found community rather than neighborhood.²³

This entire set of convictions had made Galpin's map, and the community that it purported to show, such a thrilling discovery. Galpin's concept of community would define rural sociology for a generation, so his earliest work is worth another look. We left Galpin in 1910, when he was thinking of burning his books and never entering another library so that he could spend all of his days mapping rural communities. Up to that point, Galpin had enjoyed a peripatetic career, one that drifted almost by accident on to a path that ended in founding an academic discipline. When he began his mapmaking in 1910, Galpin was a "university pastor" at a church in Madison, Wisconsin. He was not a properly ordained minister, so his job was more that of a life counselor to university students through the auspices of his church than that of a conventional pastor. Born in 1865 in Hamilton, New York, Galpin had attended Colgate University. Although he had planned to take up the law, his career became something of an odyssey through the 1880s and 1890s. He taught math and science for a few years at the Union Academy, a secondary school in Belleville, New York (the community that became the eventual object of his mapmaking); he lectured history for a year at a Michigan college; he returned to

²³ Galpin, *Rural Life*, 93-96; Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 611-616; John H. Kolb, *Rural Primary Groups: A Study of Agricultural Neighborhoods* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1921), 75-77; Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 198-201.

Belleville and the Union Academy for an extended stint as headmaster in 1890s. In 1901, Galpin and his wife tried their hands at farming, though they were more or less destined to fail. They purchased their forty acre spread in the “cutover” region of Michigan, which timber companies had devastated and denuded in the late nineteenth century. The Galpins, realizing that their future was probably not in growing stunted potatoes, had to quit after only three years on their farm. Charles accepted a job running a powdered and condensed milk plant in Delavan, Wisconsin. Feeling himself more of a “retired schoolmaster” than a “milk products technician,” however, the by-then forty year-old took his leave of Delavan within a year and in 1905 headed for Madison, Wisconsin, where a brother of his was minister of a local church and had offered him the job of “university pastor.”²⁴

In Madison, Galpin befriended Henry Taylor, a professor in the economics department at the University of Wisconsin who had more or less founded the new field of agricultural economics. In their many talks, which frequently happened as they took long walks over the Wisconsin countryside, Galpin and Taylor mused continually about “the play of social forces in farm life” and lamented that the burgeoning class of rural experts knew “virtually nothing as to the metes and bounds of rural communities.” These discussions had set Galpin to his mapmaking in 1910. He had focused on Belleville, New York, which he knew intimately because of his years as the headmaster of its Union Academy. As we saw, Galpin had marked every farm home in and around Belleville on his map and used a color-coded system of pins to denote the memberships that each farm family held in local organizations. The budding sociologist viewed this as the first step in mapping Belleville’s “rural community,” but he still wanted to know more about what structured it, what gave it its “metes and bounds.”²⁵

When Galpin presented his initial findings about Belleville in 1911 at an early “country life” conference, his explorations impressed the audience enough that Galpin’s friend Henry

²⁴ Galpin, *My Drift*, 1-17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-17.

Taylor offered him a position at the University of Wisconsin where he would “teach courses in rural social problems and the human life factor in agriculture.” Now in his late forties, Galpin’s life and career had just begun a remarkable second act in which he could devote himself to promoting the “rural community” as the countryside’s salvation. Both at the time and subsequently, Galpin portrayed his “discovery” of the nature and structure of the rural community as organic. The rural community was a thing; it existed; he went out and found it. In fact, the rural community that Galpin “discovered” was not the living, ordering entity that he suggested. His rural community was an argument and a solution. Over his wandering life and career, Galpin had developed a sense of what he considered the deficiencies of rural life. As we have already seen, he was instrumental in crafting and crystallizing the consensus on what those problems were once he had become a fully-fledged sociologist. Galpin’s rural community, then, proposed a new way of living for rural people, one that overcame what he considered the defects of rural society. His contribution was to insist that trade structured the boundaries of the countless rural communities that dotted the agricultural landscape. If everyone in a given area went to a single town to trade, they belonged to a single community. If everyone in a given area went to a single town to trade, and therefore belonged to the same community, then it was folly if they did not send their children to school there, go to church there, join their clubs there, attend their social events there, and all the rest. Farmers might *reside* in the open country, but they needed to *live*, and to do their living, at the center of their communities. That would mean stronger social connections and the dissolution of rural problems because everyone would pull together and act through the same institutions. Those intuitions could then be bigger and more modern, overcoming the alleged deficiencies of rural life while also dissolving the antagonisms between town and country. When Charles Galpin talked about rural community, then, it was more an argument and an aspiration than it was a reality.²⁶

²⁶ Kolb “Dr. Galpin at Wisconsin,” 137, 140; Galpin, *My Drift*, 25.

Despite claims to the contrary depicting his discovery as organic, Galpin had already fixed in his mind what delimited the size and shape of the “rural community” when he began to investigate life in Belleville, New York. Presenting his findings about Belleville at a “country life conference” in 1911, Galpin explained how anyone could repeat his discovery:

Start out from a village center on any road into the open country; you come to a home, and deep wear of the wheels out of the yard toward the village indicates that this home naturally goes to this village...the next home the same, and the next and the next, until by and by you come to a home where the ruts run the other way and grass grows a little, perhaps, in the turn toward this village, and you find that this home goes to the adjoining town for its major associations; between these two homes is the bounding line of the community.

If farmers traded in the same place, they belonged to the same “community,” according to Galpin. Anyone could see the truth of this discovery if they spent enough time chasing down wheel ruts. Along with the questionable assertion that trade areas equaled “community,” Galpin had also biased his map of Belleville and his definition of community by simply ignoring all the trade, interaction, and institutions that existed solely within the “open-country” surrounding the town. When Galpin mapped the institutional memberships of farmers who lived in and near the village, he had not bothered to do so with the institutions that existed in its country neighborhoods (as opposed to institutions headquartered in the town proper). In 1911, the vast majority of American farmers still attended churches and sent their children to schools in the “open-country,” however. They also frequently patronized stores and processing facilities there as well. Galpin simply ignored this fact and rated farm families who did not belong to Belleville organizations as “unsocialized.” Both of these tendencies—equating community with trade and ignoring the social relations and institutions of the country neighborhood—would define the rural sociological studies that began to appear in the second half of the 1910s and that proliferated in the 1920s. Behind these assumptions lay Galpin’s (and subsequent sociologists’)

desire to give rural people what they needed: rural communities that could stand up to the demands modernity had placed on country life.²⁷

After accepting his position at the University of Wisconsin in 1911, Galpin decided to elaborate on the method that he had pioneered with his study of Belleville. He moved his efforts closer to home, however, studying and mapping communities in Walworth County, Wisconsin. Galpin studied Walworth County for a number of reasons. He had lived in the town of Delavan, Wisconsin, in Walworth County, when he ran a milk processing facility before he moved to Madison. Galpin knew Walworth's farmers and they knew him. There was also the fact that the sociologist needed material to teach in his new courses at the University of Wisconsin. No body of rural sociological literature existed for him to draw on so he had to generate material for his courses himself. A study of Walworth County would allow him to do just that and to do it in a county that was close to Madison. More than that, though, was Galpin's pressing desire to show country people how to order their lives. He already had a clear idea of how they should do that. Retrospectively, however, he would portray his delineation of Walworth County's "rural communities" as just a matter of "letting the lines fall where they would."²⁸

Galpin headed to Walworth in 1911, just a short while before taking up his new lectureship at the University of Wisconsin. He later claimed that it was shortly after he arrived that "the social significance of goods, services, and trade began to trickle in on me for the first time." In fact, that point was already well-fixed in his mind. During his initial foray into the county, Galpin canvassed every single home in the town of Delavan and the surrounding countryside, collecting information on which organizations and churches the families he contacted belonged to, where their children went to school, and where they conducted their various trading activities. Galpin ultimately wanted to do this for every farm home in the county. His classes in Madison beckoned, however. He eventually arranged to have "responsible

²⁷ Galpin quoted in Kolb, "Galpin at Wisconsin," 131.

²⁸ Galpin, *My Drift*, 21-23.

persons” whom he located in Walworth’s various towns and villages to conduct the rest of the survey for him, a process that took two years to see to completion.²⁹

Galpin published the bulletin that he based on these findings in 1915 in the first true work of rural sociology published in the United States: *The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community*. In the publication, Galpin vacillated between making the tendentiousness of his study obvious and writing as if the questions he had asked and the answers he had arrived at in Walworth County had developed organically. He conceded, for example, that his “survey was very limited in character, being organized specifically to find out how the village or small city plays its part in the life of the farmer and his family.” He wanted to find the kind of “community” that he already thought existed, after all. However, he also presented a list of questions that he claimed animated the study and that he portrayed as neutral:

Is there such a thing as a rural community? If so, what are its characteristics? Can the farm population as a class be considered a community? Or can you cut out of the open country any piece, large or small, square, triangular, or irregular in shape, and treat the farm families in this section as a community, and plan institutions for them?

Galpin had already arrived at answers to those questions, but he presented them as another set of questions:

Is it possible that the farm clusters [i.e. open-country neighborhoods] are related to the village cluster in such an intimate way that in any serious treatment of the one the other must be taken into account? May there not be an important social anatomy here, which needs careful tracing as a factor in any rural social reform? Have we assumed hitherto that the interrelations of farm and village or small agricultural city are all on the surface and easily read? Would it not be well, before imposing a redirected civilization upon the country man, to examine more minutely the larger movements of his ordinary life?³⁰

In his study of Belleville, Galpin had let a list of town-based institutions stand in for “the rural community,” and he had also suggested that trade relations structured the shape of that

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Charles J. Galpin, *The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1915), 1-3.

community. That was what he wanted and needed to find in order to show people that they belonged to communities that could give them consolidated, modern institutions and new ways of living. In his study of Walworth County, Galpin took the same predetermined path. He began by examining trade relations and, unsurprisingly, found that they constituted the basal structure of community; each of Walworth's "communities" had a "center" in one of its villages or towns. In order to arrive at this conclusion, Galpin had enlisted the help of volunteer surveyors: "teachers, high school principals, clergymen, bankers, and librarians." Rather than the complete canvass that he had originally envisioned, Galpin had decided to survey only twelve "villages and cities" in Walworth, excluding most of its "hamlets and smaller villages." The responsible surveyor in each of the county's larger towns possessed a full map of the county that showed its every farm home. To gather the information that Galpin wanted, the surveyor in a given village or town took the map to that place's "leading dry goods merchant." Laying the map before the merchant, the surveyor asked, "Which are the farm homes, north, south, east, and west, that come farthest to trade in your village?" The surveyor marked each home answering to that description. A line drawn on the map connecting these homes formed the outer boundary of an "area having the village as its center." To further refine this radius, the surveyor repeated this process at the town bank and then "the village milk factory, grocery stores, and the like." Having done all this, each surveyor would cut the rest of the map away, confident at having found the rough outlines of that particular "rural community."³¹

Now it was time for the surveyor to fill out a survey schedule for every farm home residing within this crude rendering of each of Walworth's twelve "rural communities." Even at this stage of the process, however, there was apparently no need to actually involve farmers in the mapping of their communities. In order to secure "the name of the farmer" (by which Galpin meant the male head of each farm household) residing at every farm on the truncated map, the surveyor again visited the usual suspects: "Usually the banker, real estate man, livery man, and

³¹ Ibid., 3.

physician in the village could give the bulk of the names.” The surveyor then telephoned³² any homes for which a name was missing. With a name put to every farm, the surveyor now had to fill out a survey schedule for every farm home that fell within the community’s radius, one that would confirm whether or not they actually belonged to that community. This occasioned another round of visits to the economic institutions of the town. Again the surveyor went to the “leading dry goods merchants,” this time giving the merchant the name of a farmer, pointing to “his” farm on the map, and asking whether “he” bought dry goods in that particular town or village. The surveyor noted the answer for every single farm family on its schedule. This process was repeated at “each grocery, bank, [and] milk factory” in the given town or village. For good measure, the surveyor also visited the office of the town newspaper and the town’s churches, schools, and library, making notations on each farm family’s schedule as to who subscribed to the town newspaper, attended one of its churches, used its library, or sent their children to its schools.³³

Once Galpin had all of this information from his surveyors, he began another round of mapmaking intended to integrate his fieldworkers’ findings and to definitively establish the structures of the rural communities in Walworth County. He followed in the steps of his surveyors, mapping a series of “zones” around each of the twelve towns and villages he had tasked his surveyors with investigating. He first mapped the town or village’s “trade zone.” This involved nothing more than allowing the location of the homes of the farmers who traveled the farthest to purchase goods in a given town to establish the outer boundaries of its trade zone. Every farm family living within those boundaries was a part of that “trade zone.” Galpin then worked his way through the remaining categories of data. He mapped twelve “banking zones.” Next came twelve “milk zones,” “church zones,” and then “high school zones” around each of the

³² It is not clear why there would be a telephone number but no name for a farmstead but this was how Galpin described the process. It also, apparently, did not bother Galpin that this method privileged better-off farmers who had telephones.

³³ Ibid., *Social Anatomy*, 5.

twelve towns and villages. Just as with the trade zones, the farmers remotest from a given town or village traveling there to bank, process their milk, attend church, or sending their children to its schools established the size and shape of these zones. Walworth County did not have twelve newspapers so Galpin mapped seven “newspaper zones.”³⁴

Galpin then turned to laying these various zones over one another to find their geographic coincidence. He found a pleasing and completely unsurprising overlap of the trading zones and banking zones for each town and village. Farmers who traveled to a town to buy goods at a store would travel to the same town to bank (if they did any banking). Galpin also found that the seven newspaper zones tracked closely to banking and trading zones. If farmers went to the same bank and bought goods at the same store, then they probably also read the same newspaper (if they read one). Galpin insisted that the tendency for people to patronize the same stores and banks gave them a “common interest.” He also noted that the all the people residing within the same coincident trade and banking zones would “have at least a passing acquaintance with one another.”³⁵

Galpin found less that was pleasing in his maps of Walworth’s “milk zones,” “church zones,” and “high school zones,” but he quickly glossed over what he ultimately treated as anomalies. He had mapped twelve milk zones not because there were twelve milk processing facilities in Walworth County but because there was one in each of the twelve towns and villages that he and his surveyors studied. Galpin himself had once worked for one of these operations, attempting to convince farmers to haul their milk to what was then a newfangled facility producing condensed and powdered milk. Galpin knew something, then, about the milk business. It was, therefore, not lost on him that the “milk industry” in Walworth County was, in fact, “organized very generally upon the neighborhood scale, with small creameries and skimming stations scattered through the open-country.” It was to these little institutions (not to

³⁴ Ibid., 7-16.

³⁵ Ibid., 5-9.

town facilities) that most Walworth farmers hauled their milk, but Galpin was uninterested in whatever social relations structured these economic activities. His maps of the milk zones said less about the way things were than about what he thought they should be.³⁶

Galpin pulled the same sleight (and slight) of map when it came to his church zones and school zones. He duly noted that there was “at least one church” in every one of the numerous small hamlets that he had failed investigate when he limited his study of Walworth’s “communities” to its twelve biggest towns. Even more common were the small churches that dotted the open-country. This was where Walworth’s farmers, as a rule, went to church. Galpin was not interested in exploring these churches as centers of “community,” however. He mapped the “zones” of the churches located in the twelve towns and villages. Their reach into the open-country was non-existent compared to the banking and trade zones. The only farmers who attended town and village churches were those living very near to them. The same was true of the high school zones, which were the most piddling of all. They barely reached into the open-country. Open-country children attended the many primary schools in their own neighborhoods. (Attending high school meant doing so in town, but only 15 percent of the age-eligible young people did that in Walworth County). Galpin was not interested in mapping or exploring the neighborhoods that supported the open-country schools.³⁷

There was considerable evidence, then, that Walworth County’s farmers organized much of their lives within their own neighborhoods. An obvious conclusion would have been that, in some ways, this was where they located their communities. Galpin, however, still felt that his maps allowed him to proclaim of the twelve villages and towns he studied, “It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the conclusion that the trade zone about [each] one of these rather complete agricultural civic centers forms the boundary of an actual, if not legal, community, within which the apparent entanglement of human life is resolved into a fairly unitary system of

³⁶ Ibid., 9-11.

³⁷ Ibid., 11-15.

interrelatedness.” He had found his way of ordering rural life. There was no question for him that his maps had “shown[n] conclusively that farm people on the land are situated on the slopes of social watersheds draining into one specific village or small city.” In using phrases like “community” and “social watersheds,” Galpin was insisting that this was about more than where people serviced their material and economic needs. He insisted that rural people were knit together socially—or at least that they ought to be—within these geographic territories that encompassed some village or town and its small hinterland.³⁸

The beauty of Galpin’s method was that it could be repeated anywhere. Rural America was simply these “communities” *ad infinitum*. They were the key to the rejuvenation of its life because they *were* its life. In 1918, three years after the initial publication of his bulletin on Walworth County, Galpin republished his findings in a book length treatment of “rural life” in America. He doubled down on his earlier claims: “We are now ready to assert with assurance that we have discovered the fundamental, socio-economic rural community unit. This unit is repeated in the structure of rural society as certainly as the cell is repeated in the structure of organic tissue.” Galpin insisted that “within this unit farmer and townsman are inseparable, in actual life and labor. This actual alliance, even though denied in farm theory [i.e. agrarian radicalism] and even though ignored in urban law and charter, must be reckoned with.” Farmers and townspeople had not always done that reckoning, which had beggared and disempowered the open-country. Country-dwellers had no real sense of their own communities, of their own interrelatedness. Farmers who continued to plod along in the churches, schools, organizations, and economic institutions located in the open-country denied this interrelatedness as they simultaneously denied themselves better experiences and services—a better life. Galpin dismissed the solutions that politically mobilized farmers had sought to their problems through the Populist movement and subsequent farmer organizations. Those represented a retreat into “ruralism,” what he had also styled “farm theory.” Other leading rural sociologists echoed this

³⁸ Ibid., 18, 22.

notion. Ruralism emphasized the antagonisms between town and country and demanded that farmers have institutions and agencies all to themselves. To the rural sociologists, this constituted a retreat in the face of modernity's demand for cooperation and organization. Farmers had to embrace what Galpin called "rurbanism," a way of living that recognized their true "interrelatedness" and "community" and that therefore wed them socially and economically to one another and, crucially, to the nearest town.³⁹

Charles Galpin was by no means alone in this preoccupation with "community" and this particular conception of it. In 1922, the sociologist Dwight Sanderson declared, "No phase of the social progress of the Twentieth Century is more significant or promises a more far-reaching influence than the rediscovery of *community* as a fundamental social unit." The italics were his, and he proclaimed this a "rediscovery" because Sanderson thought that throughout history most people had typically lived in closely-knit communities. Americans had squandered their social cohesion in abandoning the "New England township" style of living when the frontier beckoned. The "community" was a sociologically exciting "rediscovery" because it meant that Americans could live that way again. It was such an important thing for Kenyon Butterfield that he declared in 1919, "we must make *the community*—as a unit, an entity, a thing—the point of departure in all our thinking about the rural problem...The building of real local farm *communities* is perhaps the main task in erecting an adequate rural civilization." Everything had to proceed from finding and (re)vivifying the rural community and thus all of rural life: "Here is the real goal of all rural effort, the inner kernel of a sane country-life movement, the moving slogan of the campaign for rural progress that must be waged by the present generation."⁴⁰

³⁹ Galpin, *Social Anatomy*, 32-34; Galpin, *Rural Life*, 98; Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 46-49; Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 559-561.

⁴⁰ Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 3; Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 549-550; Kenyon L. Butterfield, *The Farmer and the New Day* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 142-143. The emphasis is in the original in the Butterfield quotation too.

Part of what these rural reformers wanted to restore was democracy itself. Their relationship to “democracy” was multifaceted. As we have seen, it did not bother sociologists to disregard the institutions and practices of rural people when they found them inadequate or inconvenient. Sometimes when reformers talked democracy what they really meant was didactics or pedagogy. Rural sociologists valued “democracy” in that they wanted to teach rural people to want new ways of living, partly by insisting that they were old ways of living, rather than trying to force a new life upon them. But there were also genuinely robust ideas about democracy in the notion of rural community that sociologists advocated. In 1922, in one of the first rural sociology textbook published, John Gillette, for example, insisted that “complete democracy is the right of the masses of people to a participation in all the essential satisfactions of life and the right to control the means and agencies by which such satisfactions are distributed in society.” Democracy was not democracy if ordinary people did not fully control the economic institutions and agencies that might otherwise control *them*. Gillette intended this to include institutions like banks and the companies that processed agricultural goods. Similarly, Kenyon Butterfield, in a common refrain among country life critics, lamented in 1919 that democracy had lost meaning for rural Americans. Rural denizens lacked the same “opportunities” that urban people enjoyed. Butterfield meant this in a typical country-life-critic sort of way: that rural people had supposedly fewer chances for cultural and social edification in their schools and churches and civic and social organizations. But more than that, he meant that a lack of economic opportunity had hemmed in rural people and threatened to make democracy meaningless. The urban worker, Butterfield thought, rightfully expected “to share in the gains of industry” and to have “a fair chance to decide upon the conditions under which he works.” This was a “test of democracy” and it was one that America was no longer passing in its countryside. Farmers had little stake in the institutions that affected them and had been cut out of prosperity as a result. They needed real democracy.⁴¹

⁴¹ Gillette, *Rural Sociology*, 503; Butterfield, *New Day*, 214-216.

Likewise, Charles Galpin had declared the unity of town and country in the “rural community”—“rurbanism”—as a “new application of democracy.” This was why the “rediscovery” of “rural community” excited so many reformers. It had the potential to make things exactly the right scale for the brand of nineteenth-century democracy to which rural life critics remained committed. Sociologists really did believe that there was not much that modernity could throw at rural Americans that they could not handle on their own, provided that they genuinely acted and operated as “communities.” If everyone in a rural town or village and everyone in its hinterland belonged to the same churches, sent their children to the same schools, joined the same clubs, belonged to the same cooperatives, and shared the same local government, then they could overcome their divisions and solve all their problems. Farmers would be re-empowered. Their children would now finally go to high school, which would be high schools that farmers actually had a say in running. Everyone would attend large and modern churches that had become centers of social activism and that did not stigmatize their farmer members. Economic empowerment would come once everyone belonged to the same credit, marketing, and buying cooperatives, which would come more readily because people now associated and lived among one another in so many other ways. Farmers would join cooperatives not because they wanted to make a quick buck or to wipe the grin from the faces of the “middlemen” that they had reviled for so long, but because they wanted to make business a community affair like everything else. Business would serve the interests of everyone and it would do so because it had been subjected to democracy of community governance. Farmer and merchant would both understand how their livelihoods were intertwined. The rural sociologist Dwight Sanderson insisted in 1922 that it was imperative that “business be put on the basis of public service rather than private profit” and that a properly run cooperative was nothing more than “democracy applied to business.”⁴²

⁴² Sanderson, *Farmer and His Community*, 54, 78.

In the vision of the country life critics and rural sociologists, America's vastness outside of its major cities would become archipelagic, teeming with busy and vital communities wherever one cared to look. Once the affairs of the countryside had been put in their proper order, rural America would be ready to demand its fair treatment from the cities, though ultimately it would need to do little demanding because agriculture's importance to the future would be so manifest. Rural re-empowerment would preserve local autonomy. The community would continue to manage its own affairs—that was what communities, by definition, did. In their own minds, sociologists lusted after no grand imposition of technocracy or expert management. Taking affairs out of the hands of the community made no sense to Dwight Sanderson, for example. "Over-centralization of administration" would only rob the community of "the very ties which have bound it together." This undermined democracy because community was democracy. "Centralized administration tends to become bureaucratic and the people are deprived of that participation in government which is essential for the life of a democracy." Democracy had to flow from the community upward "because [the community] is small enough that there can be personal relations between its members, in which a real consensus of opinion can be formed, and also because only in it can the masses of mankind have a personal experience or participation in government." Any other way would result in "a government democratic in form and theory, but actually a political or economic feudalism, supported by local chieftains who represent not the people, but themselves or some business or other special interests."⁴³

But first the neighborhoods of the open-country would have to give way. Sociologists held it as an article of faith that the neighborhoods were, in fact, doing just that. They were withering at the hands of modernity. It turned out, however, that they were doing no such thing. Chapter Two examines the truth of American farmers' relationships within their neighborhoods, which for the most part were their actual "communities." It also shows how by the cusp of the

⁴³ Ibid., 202, 207.

New Deal, rural sociologists were becoming slowly reconciled to the importance of the neighborhood in rural society. Their “discoveries” and their ability to map neighborhoods and rural communities would eventually form the basis in the 1930s of a remarkable attempt in the USDA to democratize all of its programs. Just as importantly, agrarian New Dealers built much of their reform program on the ideas that we have examined in this chapter, namely that the countryside needed much more than higher commodity prices. It needed a rural life worthy of the name.

Chapter 2

Finding Rural Neighborhoods

It must have been strange for farmers to see Charles Galpin give one of his talks. After 1910, Galpin had devoted his career to, as he put it, using the “established techniques of modern life” to “build up a rural civilization close to the farm so complete, so adequate, that no farmer, good, middling, or poor, would have to leave farming in order to have the benefits which all human beings crave and require.” Galpin had no doubt that the “rural community” that he had “discovered” provided all of that and more as a way of living. He also had no doubt that showing rural people the truth of his discoveries would be enough to get them to fall in line. Galpin decided, therefore, to take to the road. While a professor at the University of Wisconsin, he traveled all over the state between 1911 and 1918 giving his talks to any groups or gatherings where there were liable to be farmers present. He brought speakers with him “from certain communities which had shown exceptional initiative in some respect, such as a consolidation of little schools, a co-operative laundry, [or] a practical merchant-farmer policy.” He also brought his always-growing collection of lantern slides, a stereopticon to project them, and a tank of gas to power this traveling road show of light and rural community in places where there was no electricity. Galpin made his pitch for farm people to adopt “the better things in rural life.” “My theory was simple,” he later explained. “Show farm people what other people have done, and constantly praise farm people for what they are doing. Imitation would do the rest.” The sociologist gladly took this act “anywhere”: “No place was too remote, too small. I ballyhooed like any circus barker for consolidated schools, social centers, farmers’ clubs, farm and town co-operative effort, county fairs, play days for country schools, school district self-surveys, church

interest in social improvement, [and] county country-life conferences.” He ballyhooed for all the things that farmers did not have but desperately needed.¹

Between October of 1911 and October of 1912, Galpin estimated that 3,000 people, mostly farmers, saw him give these presentations. During the same time, he also wrote 142 letters to people who had queried him on “rural social questions,” edited a number of bulletins dealing with rural life, and directed the surveying in Walworth County, Wisconsin, that would form the basis of his bulletin, *The Social Anatomy of Agricultural Community*. The tireless professor of rural life also taught undergraduates and directed the work of graduate students. Galpin had no intention of slowing this pace. In 1912, he gave talks before 6500 Wisconsinites; another 4000 people got the treatment the following year. Galpin also constantly added to his slide collection, maybe a handful illustrating the virtues of Denmark’s rural folk schools, maybe a half-dozen more showing the good work that rural Women’s Clubs were doing all over the state. Galpin kept up this pace of public engagement throughout the eight years he held his position at the University of Wisconsin. He had to. Publicity was the only weapon in the arsenal of the rural life critics before 1933.²

What must have been strange to the farmers seeing Galpin’s lectures was the poor marks that he gave the social lives of their neighborhoods. (Unfortunately, there is no record of farmers reacting directly to Galpin’s presentations. We do know, however, that they demonstrably ignored most of the advice that reformers such as him offered). This chapter is about rural neighborhoods, both in the work and imaginations of sociologists, but also in the actual lives of farm people. Although we will continue to see evidence from the 1910s, the period when rural sociology found its footing, this chapter also advances the story chronologically. It covers the

¹ Charles J. Galpin, *My Philosophy of Rural Life* (New York: Home Missions Council, 1937), 5; Charles J. Galpin, *My Drift Into Rural Sociology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938), 30-31; Henry C. Taylor, “Galpin Undertakes the Study of Rural Life,” *Rural Sociology* 13, Issue 2 (June 1948), 125-127.

² Taylor, “Galpin Undertakes,” 125-127.

period from roughly 1919, when sociologists found an institutional home in the USDA's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, to 1933, when the New Deal presented dramatic new opportunities for action for the experts who wanted to change rural life. Because rural sociologists so consistently disparaged country neighborhoods, this chapter begins with an extended examination of the importance of neighborhood to rural people. Contrary to the portrayals of the rural life critics, American farmers had organized their lives in productive ways in their neighborhoods. The political radicalism that American farmers built up from their neighborhoods offers plenty of evidence of that, as does the quotidian practices that sustained daily life in them.

After examining the nature of these little and vital sociological groupings, we turn to the field investigations that rural sociologists performed throughout the 1920s and up to the cusp of the New Deal. After Galpin had posited the existence of the "rural community," numerous sociologists followed in his footsteps, studying and mapping rural communities around the country. A few of them even ventured even closer to the "grassroots," and applying methods similar to those that Galpin had developed to study the structure and function of rural neighborhoods (as opposed to communities). These sociologists wanted to confirm their suspicions that rural neighborhoods, as sociological entities, had persisted so far past their usefulness that they were finally dying out and giving way to the "rural community," just as Galpin and many others had predicted and hoped that they would. Eventually, the stubborn persistence of rural neighborhoods, even through a period of prolonged economic decline in the 1920s, forced sociologists to come to a reckoning. Rural life experts began to see the purpose and value of the rural neighborhood. Because it embodied an intimate set of social relations, the neighborhood started to look like an important mechanism for fostering participatory democracy in a world in which economic privation, technological progress, and the growth of state bureaucracies threatened to further strip rural people of control over their own lives. Understanding all of this sets the stage for Chapter Three, which shows, among other things,

how a group of USDA agricultural economists turned to sociologists in the USDA's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life during the New Deal to develop a remarkable experiment that sought to place farmers, through the auspices of their neighborhoods and communities, in control of the USDA.

In 1943, the agricultural economist Howard Tolley declared that “the tradition of American farm organizations is a fighting tradition.” That phrase—“fighting tradition”—is an apt characterization of the long history of agrarian radicalism that reached a crescendo with the Populist revolt of the 1890s but that continued, in different forms, well into the twentieth century. Although much of the history of the fighting tradition falls outside the scope of this chapter, it is relevant because it belies the claims of rural reformers that farmers were helpless victims of isolation and individualism and shows more radical and political alternatives to the kind of reformism that experts like Charles Galpin touted. Rural sociologists and kindred reformers liked to shine a light on rural life itself, where they found both rural problems and solutions to rural problems. This approach was not always so different from saying that rural people were the problem. What Tolley called “the fighting tradition of American farmers,” on the other hand, resolutely cast its gaze outward. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, politicized farmers also argued that rural life was not what it ought to be. Unlike reform intellectuals, however, they did not locate the source of that problem in rural life itself. Instead, they found a political economy and a politics that thwarted farmers from achieving the prosperity and security that farmers considered their due.³

A philosophy of producerism animated much of the Populist movement of the 1890s, as well as the earlier traditions that had beget Populism. In the producerist conception of things, laborers created wealth while everyone else consumed it. If farmers and workers collectively fell

³ Howard R. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 110-112.

on hard times, producerism suggested that something sinister was afoot. Indeed, Populist rhetoric often insisted that conniving middlemen and corporations siphoned off the wealth that the farming and working class created. If middlemen and corporations were able to do that, then they had to be doing so in collusion with the government. The radical political agenda of Populism, embodied in the Omaha Platform and the Subtreasury Plan, sought to address these problems. The Populist program intended to restore the machinery of government to the people's control, rein in the power of rogue corporations and monopolies, and force agricultural commodities to trade at their true value, which is to say as crystallizations of the labor that went into their production.⁴

To an extent, the arrival of better times quieted the mass agrarian rebellion of the Populist revolt. In the early twentieth century, agriculture entered its "golden age." Higher prices provided the first ingredient for better times. In 1909, the price of cotton and corn stood at more than double where it had been in 1896. The price of wheat had risen handsomely as well. Part of this prosperity came exactly as the Populists had said it would: from increasing the money supply. New sources of gold after 1897 accomplished what silver inflation and the Subtreasury Plan had not been allowed to do. An expanding market was even more important than the inflation that allowed farmers to pay their debts more easily. Here, the urbanization of the era was the farmer's greatest friend. There were thirty-two million more urban people in the United States in 1920 than there had been in 1890. The financial rewards of this period of prosperity were such that even the Country Life Commission, despite having provided a seemingly exhaustive catalog of rural social pathology and collapse, declared in 1909, "There has

⁴ Bruce Palmer, *'Man Over Money': The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

never been a time when the American farmer was as well off as he is today, when we consider not only his earning power, but the comforts and advantages he may secure.”⁵

When relatively prosperous times took root in the first two decades of the twentieth century, farmers did not become quiet and quiescent after the “death” of Populism, however. In fact, the old agrarian fighting tradition stayed alive and well. Antimonopoly sentiment by no means abated. Farmers persisted in their belief that if times were not as good as it seemed like they ought to be, then it had to be because of the machinations of large businesses. Farmers organizations continued well into the twentieth century to routinely insist that the government had to step in to “restrain” the monopolists and to remove their “unfair advantages.” (As during the Populist revolt, the railroads remained the main target of farmer ire). If the government failed to intercede, farmers had to take control of it and set things right.⁶

The agrarian fighting tradition, according to the historians Theodore Saloutos and John Hicks, “determined the course of political development during the opening years of the twentieth century” in much of the country and especially the Midwest. Wisconsin governor Robert M. La Follett built his famous reform program in the earliest years of the twentieth century on the older tradition of agrarian radicalism, now united with urban Progressivism. The main outlines of La Follett’s program fulfilled what the Populists had earlier demanded: that that government be more directly accountable to the people and that corporations, especially the railroads, be brought to heel. La Follett introduced the direct primary and the practice of regulating “lobbyists.” Wisconsin also made its taxation of railroads more equitable, introduced the regulation of the railroads by a governor-appointed commission, and required the regulation of other utilities such as electricity, gas, water, and phone service. This set of reforms eventually

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 110-111; U. S. Country Life Commission, *Report of the Commission on Country Life; With an Introduction by Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1917), 36; Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 22-23.

⁶ Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, 31-32.

spread to every state in the Midwest. At the national level, Congressional representatives with politically mobilized constituencies of farmers or farmers allied to urban Progressives led the charge on the hallmark reform legislation of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, from the Interstate Commerce Act to the Clayton Antitrust Act.⁷

Farmers made their influence felt and their views of the world known through more than their elected representatives, however. The fighting tradition was alive and well in the farmer organizations of the early twentieth century too. Some of these groups were meteoric, shining brightly for a time but consuming themselves quickly. Founded in Indiana in 1902, the American Society of Equity was one such organization. It quickly spread from Indiana to neighboring Midwestern states and eventually joined forces with southern tobacco farmers engaged in an epic struggle against the monopolistic American Tobacco Company. The Equity scored its greatest victory on that front. American Tobacco had positioned itself to determine the price that tobacco farmers received for the leaf in much of the South. In league with the Equity, Tennessee and Kentucky tobacco farmers pledged in 1906 not to sell their crops to American Tobacco until prices had risen. In 1907, the Equity continued its efforts to get farmers to withhold their leaf from the market and also introduced the idea of “dropping” the 1908 crop altogether. Cooperating farmers would plant no tobacco in 1908 as a means of driving up prices and selling off their surplus tobacco. Difficulties beset the project from the beginning, both when participating farmers resorted to violence against those who refused to cooperate and when most farmers refused to cooperate in the first place. The American Society of Equity and its members did, however, succeed in sharply reducing the amount of tobacco planted and in wringing higher prices out of the American Tobacco Company.⁸

⁷ Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, 33-40, 51; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 153-154, 185-313.

⁸ Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, 113-148.

The Equity also worked to foster buying and selling directly between producers and consumers and established cooperative purchasing and marketing associations in a number of Midwestern states. It acted too as a political pressure group, enjoying its greatest lobbying successes in Wisconsin. In fact, Equity campaigns helped make the 1911 Wisconsin legislative session, according to historians Saloutos and Hicks, “one of the most remarkable in the history of the state.” The legislature passed “measures providing for an industrial commission, workers’ compensation, state life insurance, an income tax, limitations on the labor of women and children, a state binder-twine plant, a cooperative-marketing law, and a state board of public affairs.”⁹

No farmers’ organization from the early decades of the twentieth century was more radical than the Nonpartisan League. It especially hammered away on the old Populist conviction that special interests had stolen the machine of government away from the people. The League got its start in North Dakota in 1915. Its founder and driving force, the remarkable Arthur C. Townley, had developed his organizing skills working for the Socialist Party. The League maintained a strident agrarian fundamentalism, proclaiming agriculture “the most important industry under the shining sun.” Agriculture was the source of all wealth and the average farmer the picture of virtue. “Yet,” the League asserted, the farmer “has had but little direct voice in the affairs of government that determine his weal or woe. Men who can hardly tell the difference between a cotton boll and a chrysanthemum, are expected to legislate for the most vital industry of all.” The rascals had to be thrown out and to a remarkable degree they were when the League endorsed candidates in North Dakota for the legislature and for all the important state offices. By 1916 it had taken outright control of North Dakota’s government. In that year, League-endorsed candidates captured the governorship, every statewide office save one, both houses of the state legislature, and three judgeships. The League only expanded its grip on government in 1918. It had called for public ownership of the banking, transportation,

⁹ Ibid.

storage, and processing facilities that its farmer members used. League elected officials rapidly set to work creating a state owned bank and mill and elevator facilities and a compulsory system of statewide hail insurance. They also generously funded rural credit programs and created a powerful commission that would oversee and coordinate industrial development in the state. The League-dominated legislature also enacted a series of reforms related to education, taxation, the regulation of businesses, and passed limited woman's suffrage. Despite its impressive accomplishments, the Nonpartisan League quickly collapsed into infighting and to the anti-radical hysteria that gripped the nation during World War I. Its founder and most capable organizer, Arthur Townley, served six months in prison on disloyalty and sedition charges and somewhat abruptly resigned from the organization after his release.¹⁰

The Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, known more simply as the Farmers' Union, lasted even longer than the Nonpartisan League. Strongest in the South in its earliest years, a Texas farmer founded the organization in 1902. It soon expanded into the West and Midwest, however, and had become a fully-fledged national organization by 1905. Its membership numbers are impossible to know with certainty. Farmers' Union leaders gave what may well have been wildly inflated estimates, ranging from one to three million. Much more conservative estimates put its membership between 1915 and 1919 at well over 100,000. Like all the other farmers organizations of the era, this one advocated a variety of ways for farmers to capture better prices for their crops, especially through purchasing and marketing cooperatives and schemes to control production and the flow of crops to market. In the South alone, the Farmers' Union built roughly 1,600 cooperative cotton warehouses. Nationally, it created many cooperative stores and many more processing and storage facilities. One of its most successful ventures, the Farmers' Union Terminal Marketing Association, in Minnesota, became the biggest grain cooperative in the country. The Farmers' Union had enough staying power that it would eventually weigh in on all the great questions relating to agriculture that emerged in the

¹⁰ Ibid., 149-218.

New Deal era. During the 1930s and early 1940s, it rated as the only broad-based farmer's organization that consistently defended the interests of poor and landless farmers.¹¹

The agrarian fighting tradition would not have been possible had farmers been as isolated and individualistic as rural life critics alleged. Early rural sociologists disregarded the strength of the social connections that farmers had with one another because they did not find those connections adequate for building the modern institutions that experts thought rural people needed. Kenyon Butterfield had been a member of the Theodore Roosevelt's County Life Commission and is sometimes credited as America's first rural sociologist, though that distinction belongs more accurately to Charles Galpin. In 1918, Butterfield upheld the distinction between community and neighborhood that all sociologists agreed upon:

I wish to emphasize one point very strongly. We must not confuse a "community" with a "neighborhood." A neighborhood is simply a group of families living conveniently near together. The neighborhood can do a great many things, but it is not a community. A true community is a social group that is more or less self-sufficing. It is big enough to have its own centers of interest—its trading center, its social center, its own church, its own schoolhouse, its own grange, its own library, and to possess such other institutions as the people of the community need.

"Community" was big enough, in other words, to be modern and to overcome the debilities of rural life; the neighborhood was not.¹²

Because they were biased against the rural neighborhood, sociologists of the 1910s and 1920s had little appreciation for the ways that rural people fulfilled their social and material needs within their neighborhoods. These small groupings were far more than just clusters of homes in the countryside, places where a handful of people happened to live. Overwhelmingly, neighborhoods were where open-country farmers went to church and where they sent their children school (rather than in town). They were also where farmers pulled together to perform

¹¹ Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, 219-254; Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 150-153.

¹² Kenyon Butterfield's "Introduction" to E. L. Morgan, *Rural Community Organization: What it is. How it may be done. The benefits to be derived*. (Amherst: The Massachusetts Agricultural College Extension Service, 1918), 9.

the labor that a single family could not do on its own. These cooperative and quotidian habits, the historian Robert McMath has argued, even helped to foster the radical proposals that the Populists put forth in the 1890s; the cooperative practices of the neighborhood beget the national vision of a “cooperative commonwealth.” Neighborhoods were often, in fact, the most meaningful sites of community for rural people, precisely because they could embody the elective and affective aspects of community that had little place in the “communities” that sociologists “discovered” when they drew irregular circles on maps around trade watersheds.¹³

The failure of rural sociologists to recognize the importance of neighborhoods as sites of social relations and even of meaningful community could lead them to some rather startling conclusions. It moved Charles Galpin to ponder in 1920, “why it is that so large a proportion of our farm population presents us with communities possessing no community-ness; groups of people, but no institutions; people enough to be organized, but no adequate rural organization?” Sociologists and reformers had a litany of complaints that they lodged against farmers. They were not sufficiently “organized” and that it was imperative that they “should learn to work together...and to establish an effective community spirit.” To the extent that rural people did socialize and come together as a community, the critics complained that it tended to be “informal,” even “spasmodic.” The level of organization was not “complete” enough, failing to serve farmers’ needs in the most rational way possible. The social contacts of rural people were “superficial” and thus in need of a “deepening, as well as a widening.” As we shall shortly see, the irony of this was that it was the rural sociologists more than anyone who documented the active neighborhood and community lives of America’s farmers.¹⁴

¹³ McMath, *American Populism*, 41-43.

¹⁴ Charles J. Galpin, “The Human Side of Farming,” *Rural Sociology* 13, Issue 2 (June 1948), 159 [reprint of address Galpin gave in 1920]; Kenyon L. Butterfield, *Chapters in Rural Progress* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1908), 22-27; U.S. Country Life Commission, *Report*, 128-131; Charles J. Galpin, *Rural Life* (New York: The Century Co., 1918), 178.

As it turned out, community (in a more expansive sense than sociologists used) was everywhere in the American countryside, often in its rural “neighborhoods” in fact. Community served to unite (and, of course, divide) rural people in ways that were complex. Contrary to the arguments of rural life critics, isolation and individualism were not the definitive experiences of American farmers. In fact, community was central in defining their lives. Even though the lone pioneer family heading west to prove up its homestead has reigned in the imagery of American agricultural expansion in the nineteenth century, it was by no means the sole or even the most prevalent experience. Groups larger than the single family often undertook the move west together. At times, entire communities made the trip together. In other words, the “frontier” process was often itself a community experience. Indeed, nationality, ethnicity, and religion have to be reckoned as the most powerful community forces of westering farmers in nineteenth-century America. It is impossible to treat these identities as discrete categories because they all intermingled to form the basis of community. Migrating farmers did not discover these identities on the frontier or imbue them with some kind of retrospective meaning after the trials of the frontier had passed. They had carried them west in the first place. A very short list of the “ethnic” groups that moved west and settled as communities in the nineteenth century might include German Amanas, German Catholics, German Lutherans, German Mennonites, Dunkers, Poles, Russians, Bohemians, Moravians, Jews, Swedish Nonconformists, Swedish Methodists, Swedish Lutherans, Danes, Norwegian Lutherans, Welsh, and Irish Catholics. Again, that amounts to a very short list that only hints at the diversity of western settlement and the ways in which religion, nationality, and ethnicity mingled and served as the basis of many rural communities. The Mormons should also be counted as part of the community-based migrations. They were famous even among rural sociologists for their social cohesion.¹⁵

¹⁵ Robert V. Hine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 175-199. For the rural sociological perspective on the Mormons, one that elaborated long-standing beliefs: Lowry Nelson, *The Mormon Village: A Pattern and Technique of Land Settlement* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1952).

The above list also fails to touch on one of the most neglected community experiences in Western history: that of African Americans. Thousands of African Americans migrated to Nebraska, Oklahoma, and especially Kansas in the 1870s and 1880s as the failures of Reconstruction in the southern states became manifest. This was neither a helter-skelter migration nor one that accrued as the accidental effect of thousands of individual decisions. The migrants left in communities and then settled and lived their lives as such. The settlement of the Great Plains more generally, however, during the same period most resembled the willy-nilly and “individualistic” process that sociologists ascribed to American expansion. The rates of transience in the Plains communities created in the late-nineteenth century were often astounding. That much was true. This was not the result of a willful or stubborn individualism on the part of farmers, however. Western boosters and railroad companies had lured farmers to the Plains by touting the region as a place where any family could own its farm and make a prosperous living raising wheat. That turned out to be spectacularly untrue. The high rates of turnover in Plains communities came from those families that went bust or decided that they could make a better go of it somewhere else. This could and did make it more difficult to form the community institutions that supported rewarding social lives. Community, however, is the product of those who stay and not those who leave. Even in the forbidding environment of the Plains, farmers drew together with their kin and their neighbors to satisfy those needs that they could not serve as individual families.¹⁶

Rural people built the most common and everyday form of community around the quotidian custom of visiting. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, American farmers did not make a sharp division between time set aside for work and time set aside for socializing. Except during critical harvest periods, the work at hand was often of the kind that

¹⁶ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 330-339; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Hine, *Community*, 93-126.

could be put off for a few hours or longer. That was a good thing because friends, neighbors, and kin frequently dropped in unannounced for “visits” and those visits were known to become stays of a day or more. The lives of most rural people in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were thick with this kind of socializing. As one historian, writing about farmers in Wisconsin explained, anyone who spent much time perusing the diaries of the men and women who kept them would quickly know that “these were not lonely or isolated people.” Much of the visiting was “informal,” but it could take on more ritual and formal aspects as it did in a variety of cases: on Sundays, when a family welcomed a newborn into the world, when someone fell ill or died, or on special occasions such as birthdays and holidays.¹⁷

Farmers were not simply setting aside work when the visitors turned up, however. The practice of visiting was intimately tied up with the work that rural Americans performed cooperatively. A neighbor, friend, or relative might come by with the ostensible or immediate purpose of helping with, say, butchering an animal and stay for several days more of visiting and additional helping. There was all kinds of work that families could not perform individually, but American farmers did not deal with that in such an ad hoc a fashion as the forgoing example suggests. In fact, there were particular times of year and particular tasks that brought them into more sustained cooperation through their social networks: chopping wood, butchering hogs, husking corn, stripping tobacco, threshing wheat, cutting ice, raising barns, and hauling crops to market were but a handful of the tasks that rural people performed cooperatively all over the country. In the Midwest especially, farmers often shared important pieces of equipment such as threshing machines and saw rigs. None of this meant, however, that farmers had opted out of the market for pre-modern social forms. Market relations mingled with or sat side by side

¹⁷ Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 188-191, 200; Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 44-53, 64-67; Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 53-55; McMath, *American Populism*, 40-43.

exchange regulated by traditional forms of reciprocity. The labor for a family's barn-raising might come primarily from neighbors and relatives who worked out of a sense of social obligation and in the anticipation of a favor returned at some point, but the family whose barn was being raised would probably also hire local farm laborers to make sure that all the work got done. The entire effort might be capped off with a special feast to celebrate the occasion—a barn raising was usually the culmination of years of hauling logs and other preparations—and it is unlikely that those who had worked for cash wages would be excluded from the affair. The ways in which these traditional and market-oriented forms of exchange mixed were potentially endless. The arrival of more modern farm equipment such as threshers did not disrupt these practices in many places until the 1940s or later. Only one family in a rural neighborhood might own a thresher, for example, but through a combination of cash and in-kind exchanges, all the families in the neighborhood would get their grain threshed. All of this suggests the adaptability and flexibility of the social relations that rural critics had derided as inadequate.¹⁸

The role of ethnicity has to be accorded a special place in the bonds of community among rural Americans. (Here I use “ethnic” in the sense of a distinct group whose ties are some combination of cultural, linguistic, religious, and/or national). Ethnic neighborhoods and settlements were ubiquitous, especially in the Midwest, and they usually rated highly in those areas that critics of rural life claimed to value most. Ethnic neighborhoods tended to have the strongest churches and schools. They were more likely to have successful economic cooperatives too. Social and associational lives among rural ethnics were often the busiest. The children of American ethnics remained in farming at higher rates than those of old-line WASP families. When the children of first-generation ethnics did leave the family farm—whether it was to start farming somewhere else or to try and make a go of it in the city—their ethnic bonds tended to improve their odds of success because they typically migrated in groups and went places where fellow community members had gone before them. Ethnicity was, in short, an effective and

¹⁸ Neth, *Preserving*, 54-59; Pederson, *Between Memory*, 148-151.

powerful way for rural people to order their lives in their neighborhoods and their communities. It was also highly adaptable, meeting new challenges and opportunities as they arose.¹⁹

Ethnicity's utility as a cohesive force was predicated on the extent to which ethnics maintained the use of their native languages and the extent to which they preserved their own churches, schools, and economic institutions. In parts of the Midwest, the insularity of some ethnic communities did not erode substantially until World War II or later. This was true at least partly because of how adaptable ethnicity could be. In her study of rural life in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, between 1870 and 1970, the historian Jane Marie Pederson cites a compelling example of this phenomenon: the Norwegian-Americans of Trempealeau turned out to be its most patriotic citizens during World War I, a fact that they demonstrated in their support of initiatives such as war bond drives. It was precisely their distinctively Norwegian community forms and organizations that Norwegian-Americans drew on in mobilizing this support. This was not simply a linear process of "Americanization" because out-mobilizing other ethnic groups and the old-line WASP community in Trempealeau only reinforced the pride of Norwegian identity. In this case, loyalties to one another as Norwegians made loyalty to an American nation both meaningful and effective.²⁰

It is ironic that the work of rural sociologists themselves did much to elucidate the strength of rural life and social structures even as sociologists often derided the quality of those very things among the people whom they studied. Early rural sociologists documented just how often rural people came together for purposes both frivolous and serious and occasions both major and minor. Charles Galpin devoted an entire chapter in one of his books, published in 1918, to what he called "country fetes"—the social occasions of farm people. Rural "work-

¹⁹ Neth, *Preserving*, 82-88; Pederson, *Between Memory*, 60-138. Oscar Lewis, the anthropologist whose work in Bell, County, Texas, opened this dissertation found all of these things to be true about Czech- and German-American farmers there: Oscar Lewis, *On the Edge of the Black Waxy: A Cultural Survey of Bell County, Texas* (Saint Louis: Washington University Studies—New Series, 1948).

²⁰ Pederson, *Between Memory*, 51.

parties” merited their own category and included “husking-bees, paring-bees, chopping-bees, quilting-bees, barn-raisings, ‘round-ups,’ ‘boiling-downs,’ and ‘sugaring-offs.’” There were also more purely social events, which Galpin called “sociables and entertainments.” Those might include the “straw-ride or sleigh-ride,” “the country dance,” and the “camp-meeting or revival.” Picnics were so frequent that Galpin awarded them their own category, which might include “family picnics, school picnics, Sunday school picnics, [and] farmers’ clubs picnics.” Country people had their “celebrations” too. Galpin rattled off those that were common in rural Wisconsin: there was “Hallowe’en” and “the national feast days and holidays, Memorial day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Watch Night, the Fourth of July...Arbor day, May day, Old Settlers day, and latterly Alfalfa day, Good Roads day, Cheese day, [and] Home Coming.” All of those occasioned some kind of coming together of the community. Galpin also explored rural “tournaments,” “pageants,” and “community fairs.” The rural sociologists Edmund de S. Brunner and John H. Kolb, as late as 1933, found that “typical” listings in a country newspaper would include but not be limited to the following kinds of social occasions:

Home-talent plays, waffle suppers, chicken-pie suppers, oyster suppers, family reunions, family parties, poverty socials, good-time socials, doll parties, chain parties, house parties, lawn parties, bridge parties and luncheons, line parties, box socials, basket dinners, picnics, ice-cream socials, swimming parties, turkey shoots, rook parties, old-fiddler contests, croquet and tennis tournaments and parties.²¹

Rural people also joined countless lodges, clubs, and fraternal and sororal organizations. Although few early rural sociologists ventured below the Mason-Dixon Line to conduct their studies, the South’s African Americans surely the most active associational lives in America. Arthur F. Raper was one sociologist who did make the rural South his special object of study. He spent years studying nearly every aspect of life in two counties in the Georgia Black Belt as the

²¹ Galpin, *Rural Life*, 261-284; Edmund de S. Brunner and John H. Kolb, *Rural Social Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), 266.

plantation system of agriculture collapsed in the 1930s. During his time in those two counties, Raper found “eighty-seven Negro lodges and societies,” which included:

Thirteen Knights of Pythias, nine Masons, one Odd Fellows, twelve Courts of Calanthe, eight United Gospel Aid, and one or more of each of the following: Kings of Honor, Builders of the Walls of Jerusalem, Progressives, Brothers and Sisters Benevolent Society, Sons and Daughters of Esther, Daughters of Tabor, Devoted Brothers and Sisters, Independent Fraternal Union of America, Mutual Benefit and Aid Society, Travelers Home of Rest, Internal Benevolent Society, American Woodmen, Improved Good Samaritan, Good Samaritan of Golden Heart, Home Mission, Brothers and Sisters of Charity, Improved Charity, Brothers and Sisters of Love, Young Shepherd of Pleasant Home, and Sons and Daughters of Peace.²²

The depth and breadth of the associational lives of rural, southern African Americans was unique to them and had much to do with the way they were denied access to the civic and public spaces that whites mostly controlled. One does not have to contemplate Raper’s list for long to see the role of the church as a community institution in African American life. The lodges and associations that did not meet in churches would have almost certainly met in black schools. The church and the school as loci of community was by no means peculiar to African Americans, however. These were the most enduring institutions in the open-country precisely because they were the institutional forms of the neighborhood and community relations around which rural people ordered their lives. Humble though they might have been, wherever the one-room schoolhouse and small country church sat, they expressed some kind of community and served as the center of activities that went beyond the purely educational and religious.²³

It is not easy to categorize the social relations of open-country farmers in the neat terms that rural sociologists did. As far as the experts were concerned, a “neighborhood” was simply where people happened to reside. Sociologists situated the neighborhood in opposition to “the

²² Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 374.

²³ On the associational lives of rural African Americans in the South, see Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) and Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

community.” It ultimately made little sense, though, to draw hard lines between “neighborhood” and “community” or to insist that either had to be fully linked to a strict geographic territory. Take the “neighborhood,” for example: sociologists found that when asked for the name of their neighborhood, farmers almost always could provide an answer. At a minimum, neighborhoods were real in that sense and their names came most often from a local church or school. The neighborhood definitely had some geographic dimension to it and it makes a certain sense to oppose that geographic unit to a larger one comprising a broader community. One family could hardly “neighbor” with another family as readily if it lived twenty miles away rather than two, though that would not preclude sharing some kind of identity with the family living twenty miles distant. But neither did a family necessarily have its most neighborly relations with the handful of families that happened to live nearest to it. One family might most prefer the company of another living a few miles further down the road. Its members might prefer that company because the other family was kin or went to the same church or spoke the same native tongue or some combination of those things. But this kind of elective preference was unlikely to prevent a farm family from getting together with its immediate neighbors when it was time to thresh the wheat or to do the ditching work on the road that they all shared. Given that country neighborhoods had such variations in relations within them, one could hardly expect to be able to draw a circle around a “trade zone” and declare everyone within it entangled in some undifferentiated community relationship. And this does not even begin to consider the neighborhood and community landscape of the South where an African American family could live in a neighborhood named after a school that its children were not allowed to attend. That did not render such an African American family without community or even, necessarily, without their own notion of a neighborhood that they belonged to. In their own way, these exclusions were what helped to make African American neighborhoods and communities so vital.²⁴

²⁴ I have drawn heavily on Mary Neth’s conception of “neighborhood” and “community”: Neth,

Neighborhood and community were constantly shifting things that could be expressed through multiple loyalties experienced at different levels of meaning across differing geographies. They might bring one group together for a baptism, another for a Fourth of July picnic, another for the work of the harvest, another for a town council meeting, and so forth. These were matters of geographic proximity, economic necessity, and collective interest but also of ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and even personality. Neighborhoods and communities could be more expansive here and more narrow there, depending on the object at hand. They were also made up of things that could and did divide people. That was necessary for there to be an actual community feeling. In that sense, divisions could be productive and in many cases transcended when it was most necessary. As in the case of white southerners and the color line, those divisions could also be more or less permanent and full of hatred and antagonism, though also themselves constitutive of community. Ultimately, however, sociologists and other rural life critics had no use for all this variability and, from their perspective, irrationality in the way that farmers lived. Experts like Charles Galpin wanted to standardize, homogenize, and enlarge rural social patterns to create *the* rural community. Surprisingly, rural reformers also thought that they could achieve their goals democratically. They envisioned a participatory process in which the kinds of communities that they wanted to call into existence would be awakened when sociologists publicized the results of their studies and challenged ordinary farmers to study, map, and uplift their own communities.

In 1918, Charles Galpin imagined this process of community awakening thusly:

It only remains for some rural mind once vividly to conceive of the entangling unity of all the farm homes that stand on the same slopes of the social watersheds draining into one village or small city—the unity of these farm homes and those village homes. When this vivid idea is once visualized so that a whole rural community shall see its oneness in the same degree—at least in as great a degree as that in which the inhabitants of a modern city see their oneness and organize for protection and development—then we may look for rapid rural organization.²⁵

Preserving, 40-44.

²⁵ Galpin, *Rural Life*, 181.

How would sociologists get rural people to see this “oneness” and then to develop the appropriate community institutions and initiatives in response? For getting this process started, country life critics put much stock in what they called “the survey.” A “survey” was an attempt to gather a set of facts that revealed the social reality of a community or, more narrowly, the social reality of a particular problem. In 1922, for example, the sociologists J.A. Dickey and E.C. Branson conducted a survey of farm tenancy in Chatham County, North Carolina—one of the rare efforts to confront the problems of southern tenancy directly, which must be why the authors decided to tone down the potential ire their findings might draw by excluding black tenants from their purview. Dickey and Branson explained, in the conventionally gendered language of the time, that they had no less a goal than using their survey to portray “the tenant as a human being—his home life, his church and school interests, his habits and hopes, and the part he has played in lifting or lowering the level of civilization in his home community.” To do that, Dickey and Branson marshaled an impressive array of both statistical and anecdotal evidence on the lives of (white) tenants in Chatham County. The sociologists covered everything from tenants yearly income and the value of their home furnishings to the regularity of their church attendance and the nature of their “social occasions and contacts.” It was not a pretty picture. They found the level of living of white tenants frequently reduced to its “lowest terms.”²⁶

Rural sociologists were hardly alone in their enthusiasm for the survey. Activists and reformers who focused on urban areas and issues during the Progressive Era had pioneered the

²⁶ J.A. Dickey and E.C. Branson, *How Farm Tenants Live, A Social-Economic Survey in Chatham County, N.C.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1922), 9, 11, and passim. For similar surveys, see George H. Von Tungeln, E. L. Kirkpatrick, C. R. Hoffer, and J. F. Thaden, *The Social Aspects of Rural Life and Farm Tenantry, Cedar County, Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State College of Agricultural and Mechanic Arts Agricultural Experiment Station, 1923) and J.O. Rankin, *The Nebraska Farm Family, Some Land Tenure Phases*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Agricultural Experiment Station, 1923). The rural sociologist Carl C. Taylor was so enamored of the survey as a means of showing a community to itself that he did his doctoral thesis on what he called “the survey movement”: Carl C. Taylor, *The Social Survey, Its History and Methods* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1919). Other than Taylor’s account, the only broad treatment of the survey as an historical phenomenon is Jean M. Converse, *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence, 1890-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

survey as a method of calling attention to problems and awakening communities. The most comprehensive and impressive of the early surveys was the famed Pittsburgh Survey, which was begun in 1906 with funding from the Russell Sage Foundation. A reformer and editor of a New York muckraking paper, Paul Kellogg, headed the effort. He and a team that would eventually comprise more than seventy researchers, including such luminaries as Florence Kelley and John R. Commons, descended on the city to gather seemingly every piece of data on life and labor that they could find. The point was not so much to goad the local government into addressing the city's social ills as it was to awaken Pittsburgh's middle class to pressing problems. Accordingly, Kellogg and his fellow researchers and authors bombarded Pittsburghers with a steady stream of articles, public exhibitions, and talks meant to dramatize and publicize the results of their findings to the community at large. All of this culminated in publishing the survey's findings in six volumes, which especially focused on the conditions of Pittsburgh steel workers and their families' home lives and standards of living. The ultimate aim of the survey was to create something that was irrefutable, something that was so comprehensive in the array of facts that it presented that not even the steel magnates could dismiss the social reality that it presented. To wade through the volumes of the survey was, in theory, not simply to learn this or that deplorable fact about this or that aspect of life in Pittsburgh or even to learn a whole parade of those facts. Leafing through the six volumes of published material, the reader was supposed to *know* Pittsburgh as a complete social reality. The point was to realize Pittsburgh between book covers. Then Pittsburgh could see itself and heal itself.²⁷

Proponents of the rural survey expressed the same themes. Here is how Charles Galpin put it in 1912, three years before he published his seminal article on the "social anatomy" of Walworth County, Wisconsin:

²⁷ Margo Anderson and Maurine W. Greenwald, "Introduction: The Pittsburgh Survey in Historical Perspective" and Martin Bulmer, "The Social Survey Movement and Early Twentieth-Century Sociological Methodology," both in Margo Anderson and Maurine W. Greenwald eds., *Pittsburgh Surveyed: Social Science and Social Reform in the Early Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

A social survey is an attempt to photograph, so to speak, the community so as to show every home in all its social connections with all the other homes in the community. A glance at this socialized community photograph will reveal the lines of strong, healthy socialization and at the same time disclose the spots and lines of feeble association. An intelligent social planning for the community can be based on the social facts thus discovered.

In 1919, the sociologist Carl Taylor put things in basically the same terms. The survey was actually constitutive of community, according to Taylor. He contrasted it with a census, which was a mere enumeration of facts: “The social survey has, however, to do not only with the gathering and tabulation of social facts, but also with the creation of social facts, so to speak, that is, with the problems of creating social consciousness of social situations.” It did this by breaking down the ignorance of rural people, who lived unawares of what their real social and community connections were: “The social survey not only reveals the problems of community but often reveals the community itself.”²⁸

For the survey to reveal the community to itself, it was important to have members of the community themselves perform the fact-finding. The early advocates of the survey wrote their treatises essentially as “how-to manuals.” Survey proponents sometimes included hundreds of blank schedules in their bulletins advocating rural surveying so that readers could perform the process on their own. Alternately, authors offered to send schedules along at cost if a group of people in a community wished to conduct a survey. In this way, the “community minded” and “responsible persons” could learn how to survey and undertake the house-to-house gathering of facts that the survey’s proponents envisioned. This, of course, had the added virtue of keeping down costs. Carl Taylor wondered whether the “trustworthiness” of information gathered in this way was “not as great” as that which a professional survey could generate but concluded that the

²⁸ Charles J. Galpin, *A Method of Making A Social Survey of a Rural Community* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station, 1912), 3; Taylor, *The Social Survey*, 13-14, 27.

“community consciousness” that the process created was more than enough to justify it as a method.²⁹

Publicizing and dramatizing the results of the survey was just as important as enlisting the help of the community in conducting the fact-finding. At the most basic level this meant publishing the findings as bulletins and books, which farmers could request from their state agricultural experiment stations. Rural life experts also relied heavily on graphic forms of presentation in their publications, thinking that they therefore did their part to make the material accessible to the lay readers. They also put a good deal of emphasis on plays and pageants as a means of publicizing and dramatizing the results of community surveys. In rural areas, the pageant would do a double duty by providing the kind of edifying social occasion that rural life critics considered so absent in the countryside. A pageant might tell a community's history, the story of its agricultural development, or the ways in which new technologies supposedly promised to ease the burdens of rural life. More than anything, though, pageants could show rural people their actual social relations. As Carl Taylor put it in 1919, in this kind of spectacle staged in front of rural audiences, “a community in miniature will pass before their eyes in order that they might see the actual interwoven, living tensions, forces, and factors of their common life.” In fact, the pageant would dissolve any difference between the rural community as people actually lived it, the rural community as sociologists envisioned it, and the program necessary to bridge the difference between the two. Taylor again: “When this stage is reached, as it surely will be, scientific knowledge and social consciousness will have become

²⁹ Galpin, *Social Survey*, 10; Ralph A. Felton, *Study of a Rural Parish. A Method of Survey* (New York: Missionary Education Movement, 1915); George Frederick Wells, *A Social Survey for Rural Communities: A Practical Scheme for the Investigation of the Structure, Problems, and Possibilities of Rural, Village and other Communities from the Point of View of the Church and Its Work* (New York: Willett Press, 1911); Taylor, *Social Survey*, 40-41.

mutual cause and effect, scientific knowledge and social enterprise will have become one, the social expert and the community will have joined hands to solve their common problems.”³⁰

Once a community had been shown itself, it needed to develop the institutional means to address the problems of which its survey had made the community aware. Early sociologists put a fair amount of stock in consolidated churches and schools as loci of community action; rural people would go to church and school there, of course, but these institutions would also become centers of community organization. If farmers in the open-country could be convinced to attend church in town and to send their children to school there as well, then those institutions could become large and modern enough to organize the action of the “rural community” to address its problems. More specifically, sociologists envisioned rural people forming what experts called “community councils.” The community council would be an umbrella organization that coordinated the activities of individual committees created to address specific problems in a rural community. T.N. Carver, an agricultural economist who thought and acted like a rural sociologist, had concluded in 1915 that “the average rural community” had “10 principal needs,” which could be divided into two major categories, “business needs” and “social needs.” “Business needs” included things like “better marketing facilities” and “better means of communication.” “Social needs” included things like “better educational facilities” and “better sanitation.” In this scenario, a community council would oversee the committees that developed plans to address each of these “needs.”³¹

³⁰ Galpin, *Rural Life*, 276-277; Dwight Sanderson, *The Farmer and His Community* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 161; Taylor, *Social Survey*, 63.

³¹ T. N. Carver, “The Organization of the Rural Community,” in *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1914* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1915).

For other sociologists and rural experts advocating the community council, see Walter Burr, *Rural Organization* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921); B. A. McClenahan, *Organizing the Community: A Review of Practical Principle* (New York: The Century Co., 1922); John H. Kolb and A. F. Wilden, *Rural Organizations Handbook*, (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1926); Benton LaRue Hummel, *Community Organization in Missouri*, (Columbia: Missouri Agricultural Extension Service, 1928); Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 577-587.

The democratic impulse behind the community council idea was in many ways remarkable. In 1918, the sociologist E.L. Morgan described the process as one of participatory democratic rural development. Morgan envisioned a series of “mass meetings” that would generate community interest in the idea of forming a community council and all the requisite subcommittees. (Sociologists sometimes called the people who would gin up this interest “community organizers”). Further “mass meetings” would allow interested citizens to express their own ideas about how the community could or should be improved and to express their approval or disapproval of the plans that the community council was developing, what Morgan called the “community’s working program.” Every single matter of importance in the life and development of the community would become subject to its community democracy and community planning. Sociologists envisioned community councils doing anything from overseeing the development of school curricula to planning new cooperative facilities for people’s use. E.L. Morgan insisted that the planning process would raise community consciousness. It would replace an old set of tendencies (“indifference,” “cross purposes,” “misunderstanding,” and “prejudices”) in which there was no “community purpose” with a new “community spirit” that included tendencies such as “loyalty,” “understanding,” “fairness,” and “cooperation.” The process would never end because it was not really a process but a way of living: rural community.³²

The community council idea, as rural sociologists envisioned it, never got very far off the ground, though sociologists did have some luck in getting rural people to form them in a number of places, especially Massachusetts. The truth, however, was that the habits of rural people were not changing in the way that sociologists wanted. Open-country farmers did not switch their allegiance to town-based institutions or to the sociological entity of the “rural community.” They still preferred the small and closer-to-home churches, schools, and, sometimes, economic services where they lived: in their neighborhoods. In order to see the truth of this, we need to

³² Morgan, *Rural Community Organization*, 12, 21-26.

return to Charles Galpin. The pioneering rural sociologist found himself in a position to sponsor a number of studies in the 1920s and 1930s that would, ironically enough, disprove his claims about the emergent rural community and show rural sociologists the importance of the neighborhood.

Galpin's tenure at the University of Wisconsin ended in 1919. His old friend Henry Taylor, the agricultural economist who had given Galpin his position in Madison, had become the leader of the USDA's new Office of Farm Management and Farm Economics. Taylor then recruited Galpin to head a "Farm Life Studies" unit within the new bureau. In 1922, Galpin's outfit would achieve divisional status within the newly created Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) as the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life (DFPRL). The establishment of the DFPRL is a testament to the widespread and persistent nature of the assumption that there were problems in "rural life" that involved life in the way that sociologists approached it, rather than simply as productionists did (as matters of prices, profits, and farm management). Galpin would helm the DFPRL until the early years of the New Deal and fashioned it into a welcoming institutional home for USDA sociologists.³³

After 1933, the staff and mission of the DFPRL would change dramatically. During the bulk of Galpin's tenure in the 1920s, however, a small staff and budget confined his efforts mostly to promoting further research into rural life. As he put it, with his budget of \$15,000 in 1919, "I began to plan drillings here and there into the unknown elements of our Nation's rural life." He charged one of his staff members, Wayne C. Nason, with working on a series of investigations meant to highlight the "prideful features in rural life, to neutralize the prevailing pessimism about farm people, to hearten discouraged farm women, [and] to stir up emulation among farm youth." This culminated in a series of USDA Farmers' Bulletins that began

³³ Olaf F. Larson and Julie N. Zimmerman, assisted by Edward O. Moe, *Sociology in Government: The Galpin-Taylor Years in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1919-1953* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 17-21.

appearing in 1922, over a million of which were printed and distributed, and that touted the benefits of country people erecting “community buildings” and libraries and engaging in “rural planning” as the means of solving problems and creating the kinds of “rural communities” that Galpin had insisted were the natural social structures of the countryside. Galpin also hired E. L. Kirkpatrick. In 1923, Kirkpatrick published the first of his “standard of life” studies, which attempted to quantify “material” indices of rural levels of living but also what Kirkpatrick somewhat oddly labeled “spiritual” ones, like the amount of education farmers were able to obtain and the amount of time they were able to devote to cultivating their minds or visiting with neighbors.³⁴

Galpin also hired onto the DFPRL staff a former student of his, the economist Emily F. Hoag. He dispatched her to study his old stomping grounds in Belleville, New York, and especially the Union Academy. Galpin wanted Hoag to demonstrate that there were actually places in which rural people lived their lives successfully. The study that Hoag produced in 1921 was an overt defense of the viability of the “farm community” and “farm life” in modern America. It was fool-hardy to think that urbanization could be arrested or that it ought to be, Hoag insisted. But there was a viable way of living in the countryside that would stanch the flow of people to the cities and make life rich for those who remained. Just as Galpin had done before her, Hoag held up Belleville and the social networks centered on the Union Academy as exemplary of the right kind of rural living. Creating more “rural communities” like Belleville would revitalize rural life and bring about a desperately needed “balance” between the rural and the urban as America continued modernize.³⁵

³⁴ Charles J. Galpin, *My Drift*, 36-40, 47-49; Lowry Nelson, *Rural Sociology: Its Origin and Growth in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 39-41; Wayne C. Nason, *Uses of Rural Community Buildings* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1922); Wayne C. Nason, *Rural Planning: The Social Aspects* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1923); E. L. Kirkpatrick, *The Standard of Life in a Typical Section of Diversified Farming* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, 1923).

³⁵ Emily F. Hoag, *The National Influence of a Single Farm Community: A Story of Flow into National Life of Migration from the Farms* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1921).

More than anything, Galpin used the funds available to him to sponsor studies that sent sociologists into the field around the country to confirm the truth—Galpin hoped—of his prediction that rural neighborhoods were, sociologically speaking, passing from the scene and giving way to the fellowship of the rural community. The sociologist John H. Kolb published the first such study in 1921, based on research he had conducted in Dane County, Wisconsin. Kolb basically applied the mapping techniques that Galpin had invented but to the level of the rural neighborhood rather than that of the “rural community.” Kolb defined the neighborhood “as the first grouping beyond the family which has social significance and which is conscious of some local unity.” Kolb sent questionnaires home via Dane County school children that asked their parents, “By what name is the country neighborhood called in which you live?” He used that information to map 121 different rural neighborhoods in Dane County and then began a more intensive process of investigating them.³⁶

Kolb’s efforts were impressive. He used the data he gathered not only to map the neighborhoods as they presently existed in Dane County, but also to show how they had changed over time. Climbing atop an old sociological hobby horse, Kolb insisted that a neighborhood was a functioning sociological entity—a “going concern” as sociologists liked to say—only if its member families could satisfy a preponderance of their social and economic needs in the neighborhood proper. Among the needs that Kolb considered were the “educational” (presence of a school), the “religious” (presence of a church), and the “economic” (presence of a store or processing facility, for example). In this way, Kolb rated 26 of Dane’s 121 rural neighborhoods as “without social significance” and suggested that, in fact, something closer to half of them could be rated that way. Because Kolb insisted that neighborhoods had to support multiple institutions to be “significant” as sociological entities, in some cases he was rating neighborhoods in which his own data indicated that every single family attended the same

³⁶ John H. Kolb, *Rural Primary Groups: A Study of Agricultural Neighborhoods* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1921), 5-6, 11-16.

church (the church the neighborhood would have been named after) as “without social significance” because those neighborhoods did not support other institutions. It is hard to imagine that the neighborhood felt “insignificant” to all its residents who shared the same church. But Kolb more or less wanted to find rural neighborhoods on the wane and was happy to report that farmers made the trip to town more frequently than ever in order to shop and to process their farm products. These economic functions were undoubtedly migrating out of open-country neighborhoods. To Charles Galpin and his acolytes, that fact meant the emergence of the trade watershed-as-rural community. Kolb noted hopefully that “about each village or city [in Dane County] was found a grouping or focusing of the open country toward this center [of trade].”³⁷

Kolb’s study was the first in a style of neighborhood investigations that would continue to appear with frequency throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. In each of these studies, the authors based their claims about the increasing irrelevance of the country neighborhood on the fact that during the 1920s, farmers increasingly made trips to town to shop and to process their commodities. Sociologists took this as evidence that Galpin’s “rural community”—an entity centered on a “trade watershed”—was coming into existence, despite the fact that they were also aware that farmers resolutely persisted in their patronage of open-county churches and schools. In 1923, in a study of the neighborhoods of Otsego County, New York, Dwight Sanderson and Warren S. Thompson made the sweeping assertion that a full two-thirds of Otsego’s rural neighborhoods performed no sociological function. Studies by rural sociologists of the neighborhoods of Wake County, North Carolina, and Boone County, Missouri, made similar conclusions in the 1920s. John Kolb, who had done the study of Dane County, Wisconsin’s rural neighborhoods, published a study of five Wisconsin County’s in 1927 in which Kolb and a co-

³⁷ Ibid., 67-70

author declared, “Neighborhood groups are no longer the important organization units” in rural society.³⁸

As Kolb himself would eventually have to admit, though, these neighborhoods ultimately did something unexpected. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s—very trying times for country institutions—these neighborhoods persisted, adapted, and, in their own ways, even thrived. In 1931, John Kolb returned to Dane County, where he had conducted a first-of-its-kind study of its rural neighborhoods in 1921. He went there for a “restudy” of its neighborhoods and more or less to confirm his earlier prediction that they were passing into irrelevancy. What Kolb found surprised him. Dane County’s neighborhoods had not gone anywhere or lost any of their purpose. These little sociological groupings had persisted because of the continued loyalty of open-country farmers to their neighborhood schools, churches, and social organizations. Farmers maintained that loyalty despite the fact that they were also making the trip to town more than ever before to buy goods and do things like attend the movies. Most (roughly two-thirds) of the neighborhoods that Kolb had declared active in 1921 were still active at the time of his restudy of in 1931. (Remember too that his standards were restrictive in determining which neighborhoods rated as “active”). Some of the neighborhoods that the sociologist had classed as inactive had even moved into the “active” category; enough of them had done so to offset the number that had supposedly lapsed into inactivity. New neighborhood groupings had appeared too. Kolb also concluded that those neighborhoods that had persisted had become even more active in the ten years that had passed since 1921. Nearly all of the “active” neighborhoods had their own schools, 63 percent of them had what Kolb called “Mothers’ Club[s] or P. T. A.[s],” 44

³⁸ Dwight Sanderson and Warren S. Thompson, *The Social Areas of Otsego County* (Ithaca: Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, 1923), 23-24; E. L. Morgan and Owen Howells, *Rural Population Groups* (Columbia: University of Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station, 1925); Carle C. Zimmerman and Carl C. Taylor, *Rural Organization: A Study of Primary Groups in Wake County, N. C.* (Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station, 1922); John H. Kolb and A. F. Wiledon, *Special Interest Groups in Rural Society* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1927), 1-2.

percent had churches, and 38 percent had 4-H clubs. Almost half the neighborhoods had at least four of these kinds of “activities.” This thickening in the strength of the bonds of neighborhood had occurred across a period as economically difficult and seemingly destabilizing as any that rural Americans had yet experienced. It had also occurred in a county that contained not only numerous towns and villages but also the city of Madison, Wisconsin, where open-country farmers could have centered their social lives. They had decided not to.³⁹

In the face of these findings, Kolb evinced a new willingness to give the neighborhood its due as one of the ways that rural people could order their lives. He also began to recognize the extent to which neighborhood loyalties were not exclusive of a variety of other loyalties. The sociologist finally saw that the bonds of neighborhood were, in fact, often vital in supporting wider forms of association and community. Kolb even detected the stirrings of the kind of “community movement” in Dane County that rural life critics so ardently desired, but one that was ultimately rooted in activities that began in the neighborhood:

The whole history and pattern of neighborhood life in the county has formed the foundation and background for the newer and present-day social movement. Fifty-four local groups and organizations had formed themselves into a county federation by 1931. They have promoted dramatics, music, social gatherings, recreational activities and 4-H club work, on a county-wide scale but always through home talent and leadership in the local groups [i.e. neighborhood organizations]. Judged by such achievements, social activities hold real possibilities for country people in their determination to maintain their own vitality and cultural life.

All of this pushed Kolb toward a more sophisticated understanding of the interlocking and overlapping social relations at work in rural society. It was not “rural community” and nothing else. Kolb concluded that there “are inter-relationships of increasing importance, both practical and theoretical, among the various groups in rural society—family, neighborhood, hamlet, village, or town-country, community and city.” This was a more subtle understanding and one that Kolb speculated meant that “rural society,” if its neighborhood groups were properly used,

³⁹ John H. Kolb, *Trends of Country Neighborhoods: A Restudy of Rural Primary Groups, 1921-1931* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1933), 1-11.

“may become dynamic, articulate, [and] group conscious in the constructive sense to the end that its interests, its groups, its objectives, may be mutually respected and made serviceable in the larger drama of national life.” Both the spirit and the form of the rural neighborhood would be essential, in other words, in revitalizing rural America.⁴⁰

Kolb’s about face on the virtues of the neighborhood rested not just on its persistence in Dane County, Wisconsin, but across the nation. In 1929, President Herbert Hoover had created a Research Committee on Social Trends and charged it with conducting a massive and extraordinary survey of the whole country, one meant to guide what Hoover—barely a month before the 1929 stock market crash—assumed would be the enlightened, social scientific management of America’s society and economy into its bright and prosperous future. That did not quite come to pass, but for the next four years, legions of social scientists compiled vast amounts of data on everything from America’s natural resources to the state of its culture and arts. John Kolb and another rural sociologist, Edmund de. S Brunner, oversaw the research that went into producing the volume on “rural social trends.” As part of that broader effort, Kolb and Brunner directed an unprecedented gathering of data about rural neighborhoods in dozens of counties and also the “restudying” of neighborhoods in counties where rural sociologists had already explored the topic. Brunner and Kolb made particular use of investigations of rural neighborhoods around the country that an organization called the Institute of Social and Religious Research (ISRR) had conducted in 1921 and 1924. This data allowed Brunner and Kolb to track changes in the prevalence and purpose of rural neighborhoods over time.⁴¹

The neighborhoods had more than held their own across the 1920s. Brunner and Kolb noted, “one of the interesting and, to some, one of the surprising discoveries of the restudy, is the persistence of country neighborhoods.” Those neighborhoods, as always, were organized around “rural schools, churches, stores, or other forms of local activity.” Of the neighborhoods

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22, 49, 54.

⁴¹ Brunner and Kolb, *Rural Social Trends*, vii-viii.

that the ISRR had “found” in its initial studies in the 1920s, more than 75 percent of them were located again in the national restudy. The majority of those that could not be “found” or that had “disintegrated” were in the South, a fact that Brunner and Kolb attributed to the more recent appearance of improved roads there. Enough new neighborhoods “had appeared,” however, that Brunner and Kolb ultimately estimated less than a 17 percent decline in the number of neighborhoods that the ISRR had originally investigated. The most common factor holding these neighborhoods together was the combination of a church and a school. Brunner and Kolb found themselves surprised at “how frequently local people showed that they still thought in terms of the locality [i.e. neighborhood].” It is little wonder that they did, though, given how active their neighborhoods had remained. Brunner and Kolb cited the case of a neighborhood called Spring Hill. (They did not identify its location). Thirty families, amounting to 150 people, composed the Spring Hill neighborhood. Despite its modest size, Spring Hill had “a two-teacher school; an adult and a juvenile Grange; and a Methodist church with organized Sunday-school classes, including a men’s class, a Ladies Aid and Boy Scouts.” The Grange had been in nearly continuous operation since 1878. Its hall had burned to the ground in the mid-1920s, but in its place the people of the neighborhood quickly, as Brunner and Kolb explained, “erected a community hall that is one in every sense.” All of the neighborhoods’ organizations met there and one of the churches held its Sunday school meetings in the building. It also hosted “many plays, suppers and the like” and housed the traveling library when it came to the neighborhood. Brunner and Kolb estimated that Spring Hill residents used the hall around 150 times a year.⁴²

Brunner and Kolb’s consistent finding, in addition to the “persistence” of country neighborhoods, was that open-country farmers desired to maintain the identity of their neighborhoods and to keep “possession” of those institutions most important to them: their schools, churches, and social organizations. This seemed the case not *despite* those same farmers’ increasing willingness to venture to town to seek out entertainments or better buying

⁴² Ibid., 67-70.

opportunities but precisely *because* these “wider contacts” also made their neighborhood relations meaningful in new ways. Brunner and Kolb found that even as open-country farmers increasingly joined “special interest” organizations (i.e. those that transcended the neighborhood), their neighborhood ties remained important both in and of themselves but also in supporting those associations that did reach outside the neighborhood. “Special interest groups” were increasing in number and as a form of social contact but were considerably more common in neighborhoods with strong locality ties. Bruner and Kolb also noted that all of the neighborhood studies made clear that the simple custom of “visiting” was strongest within neighborhood groups and that it still constituted the most common form of social activity.⁴³

These findings pushed the two sociologists in the direction of a more subtle and sensitive understanding of the way change and “progress” worked within farmerss lives. Brunner and Kolb concluded that improved communication and transportation not only increased the frequency of “outside contacts” for farmers (especially those of a commercial nature) but that they increased the “local ones at an even greater rate.” In other words, automobiles and better roads meant more frequent trips to town but even more frequent trips to visit neighbors. A telephone meant calls to the town doctor but even more calls to neighbors to plan the next get-together in the open-country. Modernity habitually refused to look the way social scientists insisted that it would. The “rural community” as the country life critics and rural sociologists had originally imagined it had not arrived. Sociologists like John Kolb had not abandoned their desire for reconstructing rural life, but they increasingly saw the neighborhood as vital to their plans and as embodying a cohesion and spirit that could productively support a reform program.⁴⁴

In 1941, Kolb returned to Dane County, Wisconsin, yet again to map and study the neighborhoods that he had first examined in 1921 and then restudied in 1931. He did this work

⁴³ Ibid., 71-72, 99-104, 326-332.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

in league with another rural sociologist, Douglas G. Marshall. Most of the neighborhoods were still there and as active as ever. They had added another decade to their defiance. Kolb and Marshall's study represented the most sophisticated study of neighborhoods undertaken by any sociologists up to that point. The sociologists used more sophisticated methods to examine the neighborhoods and ultimately seemed nearly as interested in exploring social relations as they actually were rather than as the experts wanted them to be. Kolb and Marshall had developed a means of attempting to understand why certain neighborhoods appeared more active and successful than others and tried to gauge the likelihood of a neighborhood's continued persistence based on those factors. They did not do this with a sense of dismay about the stubborn persistence of rural neighborhoods, but with an understanding that neighborhoods would have to be part of any plan to revitalize the countryside exactly because of the fact that they had proven themselves so persistent and important in farmers' lives.⁴⁵

In an especially important development, Kolb and Marshall surveyed and mapped the prevalence of "informal" relations like "visiting" and "exchanging work." More than anything, rather than trying to order everything around an arbitrary "rural community," the sociologists had a relatively new-found appreciation for the "complex social fabric we call society." That social fabric, they now recognized, involved farmers having social contacts within neighborhoods, between neighborhoods, with small towns, and, in the case of Dane County, with urban places like Madison, Wisconsin. Kolb and Marshall now recognized that farm families had choices to make about how to order their lives and that they were making them. Open-country farmers still visited and exchanged in their neighborhoods. They still further mediated those relationships through identities built around kinship, nationality, and religion. Dane County farmers still predominantly joined "social organizations" in the open-country, but now they also tended to couple that with a willingness (an eager willingness among young

⁴⁵ John H. Kolb and Douglas G. Marshall, *Neighborhood-Community Relationships in Rural Society* (Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin, 1944).

people) to participate in social activities in nearby small towns or in Madison. Schooling and churching still took place most typically outside of the larger towns and villages. Some functions and activities took place at the neighborhood level, others within the “community” scale that rural sociologists had so long been enamored of, and others still were now centered on urban places. This was indeed a “social fabric.” Like so many of the rural life critics before them, the sociologists wanted to see rural people organized more effectively and in control of the agencies and institutions that affected rural life. Kolb and Marshall had not abandoned the idea of the “rural community”—that was more necessary than ever—but they now felt that such a thing would be meaningless without the neighborhood.⁴⁶

These commitments are all the more remarkable given all that had transpired in the decade since Kolb had last studied the neighborhoods of Dane County in 1931. That had been the period of the Depression, the New Deal, and the outbreak of war in Europe. The kinds of “agencies” that farmers needed to subject to the democracy of the rural community had shifted dramatically. This was no longer a conversation about churches, schools, community councils, and economic cooperatives. The conversation had shifted to neighborhood and community control of all the USDA agencies and programs that had proliferated because of the Depression. Kolb and Marshall talked about subjecting a newly powerful state and its legions of bureaucrats and experts to the democracy of the rural neighborhood and community. The sociologists wanted rural neighborhoods and communities to “become the crossroads in a modern democratic rural society,” the place where farmers would take control of and direct all of the efforts that were supposed to operate on their behalf and that now carried the weight and power of federal authority. Kolb and Marshall were not alone in their concerns. We will see in the chapters that follow that democracy and the substance of rural life and culture were major preoccupations in the New Deal for agriculture.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., 24-26.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 34.

Chapter 3

Cultures of Commerce and the New Deal

It looked increasingly like the Great Depression was going to bring to life the specter that had always perturbed the minds and at least partly driven the actions of rural reformers: rural collapse, chaos, and, potentially, rebellion on a scale not seen since the 1890s. Farmers had watched their collective income stagnate and decline throughout the 1920s, stewing with increasing resentment at the seeming prosperity of the rest of the country. Their anger was understandable. Many of them had heeded the government's admonitions during World War I to plant fencerow to fencerow. Many farmers bought more land and the newest equipment at inflated, prosperity prices. They doubled-down on cash crops. They told themselves, as the government told them too, that these were patriotic actions, which only heightened their sense that higher incomes were correcting historic injustices. The flush times proved fleeting, of course, ending as soon World War I price supports did. The value of commodities began a seemingly inexorable slide. Because the price of manufactured goods did not fall, however, farmers had to produce more and more to buy less and less.¹

The national catastrophe that settled in after 1929 only worsened the depression that had plagued the countryside throughout the 20s. At Roosevelt's election in 1932, the major staples fetched amounts that would have made antebellum producers scoff: corn brought thirty-eight cents a bushel (it would be up to eighty-six cents in 1934) while cotton stabilized at an unheard of seven centers per pound. Just as they had throughout the 20s, the farmers who managed to

¹ Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm A Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2, 17-21.

hang on tried to borrow, plant, and mortgage their way out of this mess, but the results were predictable: billions more in debt, thousands of farms put into foreclosure every single month, and commodity prices that continued to fall. It was too much to bear. The countryside would either break or erupt, which was the possibility that the reformers of country life had worried about for so long.²

Farmers were not silent during all of this. Some of the old fighting tradition of agrarian radicalism still lived, which meant that farmers' voices would register in more than just the solicitous, insinuating tones of the Farm Bureau lobbyist in Congress or through the press releases of yet another farm organization shouting itself hoarse about the virtues of an export dumping scheme. The countryside also convulsed with protest. Farmers frequently disrupted the foreclosure auctions that had become routine on courthouse steps throughout the nation. They shouted down and threatened anyone audacious enough to try to profit from their neighbors' misfortune by bidding on a foreclosed farm. They brandished firearms against them, too, to make sure that their seriousness was understood.³

The eruption that drew the most attention came in Iowa, where the dairy farmer Milo Reno had organized the Farmers' Holiday Association, an organization that launched a milk producers' strike in the summer of 1932. The action originated in Sioux City. Cooperating farmers decided to force up milk prices by refusing to deliver their product to city processors. Reno's farm activists had a plan for non-cooperators too. Strikers blockaded all the roads to Sioux City, stopping any milk trucks that attempted to enter the town and dumping hundreds of gallons of dairy in ditches along the roadside. With their own trucks, the blockaders forced from the highway anyone foolish enough to try to run the gauntlets that they had set up. On the road

² David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207; Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 6-10.

³ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 249-250.

into town from Elk Point, South Dakota, farmers opened water mains, using them to deluge and force back anyone attempting to defy the embargo. On another highway, hundreds of assembled farmers managed to stop and turn back dozens of trucks. Some of the bolder strikebreakers, however, used their vehicles to ram their way through a steel cable that the protestors had strung across a bridge. They almost succeeded in breaking the blockade, but railroad ties heaved into the road and under their wheels finally stopped them. The strikers, clear in their conviction that this was a people's movement, also happily provided hundreds of gallons of free milk to the Sioux City residents who were willing to come to the outskirts of town and claim it.⁴

The Farmers' Holiday Association's populist marketing control measures caught on, expanding from milk to other farm commodities and then spreading from Sioux City to other municipalities in Iowa and Nebraska. In the most brazen action associated with the movement, more than 600 farmers in Le Mars, Iowa, disrupted the court of a judge who refused to stop signing mortgage foreclosures. The mob then dragged him from his bench, drove him to a remote crossroads, stripped him, stuffed his clothes with dirt, covered him in grease and filth, choked him to a point of near unconsciousness, and crowned him with a hubcap. The judge, Charles C. Bradley, could have spared himself this treatment had he promised to stop signing mortgage foreclosures. He apparently had the courage of his own convictions, however. Bradley refused to take the oath and even goaded on his attackers. They eventually gave up, as a *New York Times* journalist noted, "leaving the begrimed jurist standing in the middle of the road." Presumably, Bradley continued to issue his eviction notices signed with a firm hand and a clear conscience.⁵

Most of the anger and despair in the countryside did not, of course, register itself in violence. In fact, most rural people simply dug in and tried to survive, but strange things

⁴ This account of the Farmers' Holiday Association comes from the *New York Times* articles on these events contained in Fred A. Shannon, *American Farmers' Movements* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Norstrand Company, 1957), 178-182.

⁵ Shannon, *Farmers' Movements*, 178-182.

continued to happen across the land. In 1934, thousands of African American sharecroppers and day laborers banded together to form the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) in the Arkansas Delta. They organized a series of cotton pickers strikes that brought forth a "reign of terror" that was brutal even by the standards of the local planters' junta. African Americans comprised the overwhelming majority of STFU members, but the dogged efforts of the union's socialist leaders and of its black and white organizers managed to bring a significant minority of whites into the fold, though these members typically preferred to remain in segregated locals. Although it is doubtful that they succeeded in raising wages, the STFU's tactics prefigured some of the best-known phases of the Civil Rights Movement: the community-by-community organizing tactics, the bi-racial alliances, the emphasis on economic rights as preludes to civil rights, and the protest songs and movement culture.⁶

That farmers had reached a point of desperation in numerous parts of the country came as no surprise to reformers and social scientists who had long addressed themselves to the "farm problem." In the previous two chapters, we saw the emergence of a class of experts, rural sociologists predominately, who offered a very different critique of American agriculture and rural life than the productionists who focused on efficiency and increasing the productivity of farms. Sociologists valued farming as a way of *life*. They worried about the survival of the elements that they thought constituted that life: small farms, churches, schools, civic and social organizations, neighborhoods, communities, and the participatory democracy that they assumed animated each of the former. As we saw, these experts seized on the largely imaginary social formation of the "rural community" as the solution to all the problems that troubled the countryside. The "rural community" allowed sociologists to insist that farmers could pull together in new, though sociologically ordained, ways to create modern institutions that would

⁶ Two standard accounts of the STFU are Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 259-271.

serve their needs and be the salvation of rural life. Sociologists put such stock in the rural community that they largely ignored all the evidence that farm people preferred to do most of their living closer to home. Their churches and schools in the open-country remained important to them. This ultimately became obvious enough that, by 1933, even the most ardent mappers of “rural communities” had begun to come around to the virtues of the neighborhood.

This chapter advances the story of reform movements centered on rural life and culture forward into the New Deal. In their early work in the 1910s and 1920s, sociologists had crystalized and professionalized a pervasive set of convictions about both the virtues and deficiencies of rural life. They added a social-scientific gloss to a prevalent set of ideas, ideas so widespread, in fact, that the economists who came to dominate agricultural policy during the New Deal largely shared similar convictions. Farming as a way of life mattered to them too; agriculture was not just a means of making a living. Sociologists would no longer be the sole standard bearers of the broader concern for rural life that their expertise represented. The New Deal for agriculture was going to be about far more than prices and production controls. It too was going to tackle the problems of rural life in a broad way.⁷

To support that point, this chapter introduces a new set of protagonists. It focuses on a group of economists who thought that they had figured out how to do the seemingly impossible: to bridge the difference between the productionist emphasis on efficiency and rationality in agriculture and the more diffuse concern that sociologists had espoused about a thriving rural life. They thought that they could have both an efficient and rational agriculture and one that supported enough farms to keep rural life and rural communities strong. These economists’ had an institutional home from 1933 in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s Program Planning Division. In 1938, they migrated to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, especially its

⁷ Richard Kirendall is the only historian who has broadly considered the role of social scientists in the USDA during the New Deal: Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, reprint edition (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982).

Division of State and Local Planning, where they technically had full run of the USDA's planning apparatus for agriculture. Among the most important of these economists were M.L. Wilson, Howard Tolley, Foster Elliott, and Bushrod Allin. The economists had two goals in their effort to sustain a healthy rural life: to "adjust" American agriculture so that farmers only grew what they produced most efficiently and to foster the necessary adjustments democratically. Their concern for fostering participatory democracy and operating through local neighborhoods and communities would be their point of strongest connection to earlier rural life reformers.

Ever since 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) has been associated with "crop control" or, more colloquially, "paying farmers not to farm." In fact, AAA economists did not want to simply *reduce* agricultural output but, as the very name of the agency suggests, to *adjust* it. AAA economists believed that most farmers could grow *something* profitably even if their present operations did not fit the bill. Planning-minded economists did not want to see millions of families lose (or leave) their farms and neither did they want to subsidize the triumph of the country's factory farms; that would undermine the quality of rural life that the economists hoped to sustain. A great deal of land in the country's commercial agricultural regions would need to be "retired," but most struggling farmers in those places could simply re-tool their operations along more profitable lines; only custom and ignorance had prevented them from doing so already. True programs of agricultural adjustment, the planning economists thought, would avoid the need for permanent and draconian production controls and keep most farmers in agriculture. AAA and BAE planning economists thought that they could unite the (profit) virtues of productionism with the sociological concern for rural life as a thing in and of itself worth preserving. They would make agriculture more rational and efficient but not by driving the inefficient cultivators from it.⁸

⁸ For the economists' case for adjustment rather than reduction: *Regional Problems in Agricultural Adjustment* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1935).

The terrain of reform, of course, shifted radically with the coming of the New Deal. The sociologists of the 1910s and 1920s had focused on social solutions to social problems. They hoped to activate communities into creating their own programs of uplift and development. These social scientists had embraced that strategy because they were committed democrats, but they were also forced to choose that route almost by default. In the Teens and Twenties, the USDA did not yet have any of the “action programs” that would proliferate after 1933. On the other hand, New Deal economists embraced the state and government action with verve. They remained grounded, however, in the earlier idea that rural communities had to do most things for themselves. Most famously, the AAA relied on “democratic” committees for implementing its crop control measures. The economists in the AAA (and later BAE) also devised the means to incorporate ordinary farmers into the planning process of agricultural adjustment. They hoped to forge all farmers into citizen-experts, people who saw the world like economists even as they worked like farmers. With M.L. Wilson and Howard Tolley leading the charge, the economists succeeded in having their style of planning ordained as the official policy of all the USDA. They called it County Land Use Planning (CLUP), and after 1939 it was supposed to place ordinary farmers in control of all the USDA’s agencies. To make this a reality, the economists turned to the large and growing stable of rural sociologists in the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life. The sociologists worked to delineate all of the rural communities and neighborhoods in every agricultural county in the country. Those neighborhoods and communities would serve as the conduit for electing farmers who would work with USDA technocrats on the CLUP committees. These committees were charged with channeling the desires and wisdom of farmers into the upper reaches of the USDA, remaking every echelon of that massive bureaucracy as that knowledge wended its way to the top.⁹

⁹ I base my information and conclusions about CLUP on my own research, but historian and rural sociologist Jess Gilbert has also recognized the importance of democracy and the CLUP experiment to the USDA planners. We have different conclusions about the nature and efficacy of that experiment, however: Jess Gilbert “Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy: The Federal-County Land-Use Planning

As USDA economists and sociologists worked to integrate rural neighborhoods and communities into agricultural planning, their interests also shifted from the social to the cultural. The sociologists that we saw at work in Chapters One and Two had concerned themselves with a social explanation of and a social solution to rural problems. Their understanding of “social” consisted of relationships between people, groups, and their institutions. As disciplines such as social psychology and cultural anthropology developed in the 1930s, New Deal social scientists gravitated toward the belief that understanding “culture” was the key to knowing both the origins of rural problems and also to implementing the programs that experts had developed to solve them. What most separated the “cultural approach” from the earlier social understanding was its emphasis on “habits,” “beliefs,” “values”—even “psychologies”—as the key cultural elements that explained the whole range of farm problems that the USDA tackled in the 1930s, from “overproduction” to the prevalence of devastating erosion across the countryside. USDA social scientists believed that distinct and numerous rural cultures existed across the United States. Some of those had developed the habits, values, and other cultural elements conducive to agricultural permanence and success. Others of them had failed to do that and had, in fact, developed cultures conducive to mining and exploiting the soil, overproducing, and ultimately destabilizing their own ways of life. As the USDA sociologist Carl Taylor explained in 1938, “the habits, customs, traditions, and attitudes of the people are the chief causes of maladjustment and will be the chief vehicles of adjustment.” People were the problem, in other words; or at least certain people. Farmers’ habits had created the problems

Program, 1938-1942,” *Agricultural History* 70, no. 2 (Spring, 1996), 232-250; Jess Gilbert, “Rural Sociology and Democratic Planning in the Third New Deal,” *Agricultural History* 82, no. 4 (Fall, 2008), 421-438.

that USDA New Dealers needed to address and their various cultures would also set the limits of possible reform. Culture mattered. It had to be understood.¹⁰

In order to accommodate these facts, in 1938, Carl Taylor, who had become the head of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life when Charles Galpin retired in 1936, launched an ambitious initiative with the help of Undersecretary of Agriculture M.L. Wilson. Taylor began to hire anthropologists and social psychologists into the DFPRL to join the sociologists already on its staff. He sent a number of these experts to live in and study various rural communities around the country chosen to represent a continuum of cultural success to failure. This began a long-term effort to understand America's rural cultures and to place a social scientific understanding of them at the center of the USDA's initiative to preserve a thriving rural life. This chapter, then, examines the efforts spearheaded by AAA and BAE economists and by sociologists and anthropologists from the BAE's DFPRL in what I call "cultures of commerce." In the broadest sense, the 50 percent of farmers who produced 90 percent of nation's bounty made up the commercial cultures. In a more spatially specific sense, the nation's various "belts" formed the heart of the cultures of commerce: the Wheat Belt, Corn Belt, Dairy Belt, and so forth. Understanding New Deal programs for the commercial cultures establishes an important contrast that frames Chapters Four, Five and Six: USDA New Dealers devised drastically different, and even more culturally oriented programs, for America's cultures of poverty, those places where many or even most farmers did not produce predominately for the market.

I will call the economists, sociologist, anthropologists who are the central figures in this chapter "agrarian liberals." I call them agrarians because they were indeed committed to preserving farming as a way of life: that meant an agriculture that supported millions of

¹⁰ M.L. Wilson made the general case for a cultural approach: M.L. Wilson, "The Democratic Processes and the Formulation of Agricultural Policy," *Social Forces* 19, no. 1 (Oct., 1940), 1-11; Carl C. Taylor, *Human Relations in Land Use Planning* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1938), 14.

modestly sized and modestly commercial farms, operations that sustained healthy rural communities, which meant communities that could support all the institutions that sociologists had worried over so much. I call them liberals because they were liberals in the sense of the word that Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal were in the process of making meaningful. These experts wanted to use the agency of government to make the lives of most Americans better. They committed themselves to a great deal of experimentation and active effort within that framework. Henry Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture from 1933 to 1940, was an agrarian liberal; so were the two most important USDA agricultural economists, M.L. Wilson and Howard Tolley. Carl C. Taylor, the most influential government sociologist of this period, was an agrarian liberal too.¹¹

The phrase “agrarian liberals” also serves to distinguish these social scientists from other factions in the USDA and especially the AAA. The AAA was home to numerous agrarian liberals but also to a camp of “urban liberals,” people with nonfarm backgrounds, lawyers typically, who fought for the rights of urban consumers and for the sharecroppers whom the AAA’s policies helped to dispossess. The agrarian liberals remained regrettably silent during the contretemps that the urban liberals stirred up, unwilling to sacrifice their broader goals to the cause of equity and decency toward southern sharecroppers. They still stood to the left, however, of a third influential faction: agrarian fundamentalists. The most prominent fundamentalists were political appointees who, oddly enough, had no time for all the talk about rural life as a way of living that so excited agrarian liberals. Fundamentalists cared about prices, namely the higher kind. They wanted subsidies for agriculture and to let the consequences of those subsidies fall where they may. The most prominent (in government) fundamentalists were political

¹¹ Alan Brinkley gives the history of American liberalism during this period: Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

appointees George Peek, the original head of the AAA, and Cully Cobb, the head of the AAA's Cotton Section.¹²

Agrarian liberalism, and the cultural approach that it fostered, had both strengths and weaknesses. The liberals sponsored truly remarkable experiments in democratic planning. Their programs were “democratic,” however, in the same way that the earlier reforms that sociologists had proposed had been. Democracy meant teaching ordinary people to accept what experts had devised. It did not mean actually allowing farmers to make their own decisions or addressing the profoundly political questions that agricultural planning raised, such as what was going to happen when government programs began to jerk the slack of the South's system of tenancy that kept millions of poor farmers on the land. The liberals never had an answer for questions of this kind, insisting that rational planning would take care of everything. The liberals' tendency to flee when politics intruded onto their well-laid plans would ultimately prove to be their undoing. In addition to that, the agrarian liberals' emphasis on culture tended to blunt the potential for them to develop more substantial critiques of American agriculture and rural life. Carl Taylor and M.L. Wilson and others talked about culture because they thought that rural people were the problem with agriculture. Maybe that was not entirely wrong, but the “cultural approach” treated farmers as if they somehow operated through custom (read ignorance) and individual will alone. Soil mining, for example, appeared as a reflexive cultural “habit” rather than as a product of an American political economy that had impelled farmers for generations. Rural cultures needed healing, surely, but the liberals had nothing to say about what to do about the deeper structures that had sustained the more problematic rural cultures to begin with. Lastly, the liberals failed to perceive the most basic contradiction in everything they tried to do. They wanted to bring order and rationality to the agricultural landscape while also preserving a

¹² David Eugene Conrad does not use the term “agrarian liberal,” but he does provide an important discussion of the factions that split the AAA and the USDA more generally: David Eugene Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 105-119.

thriving rural life. They had not managed to untangle themselves, however, from the primary curse of productionism: its ineluctable tendency to drive people from the land. It would turn out that everything the liberals did actually increased America's farm bounty. That served the country well during World War II, but it also assured that there would be an eventual reckoning that would have to mean millions fewer farmers. Many historians have noted the "contradictions" of New Deal agricultural policy, but this was its most basic. The liberals sought to rationalize agriculture even as they insisted THAT they could do so while preserving something worthy of the name "rural life." The contradictions in these two ambitions could not be reconciled, but they could be resolved. The process would not be complete until after World War II, but the resolution would not come in favor of strong rural communities or a sound agriculture.

The USDA's liberal economists were cut from the same cloth that we saw rural sociologists made from in Chapter One. Typically born in the 1880s or 1890s, they almost uniformly grew up on farms. They did so before tractors had come into common use, before the automobile and paved roads had remade the countryside and rural life, and would have begun walking behind a plow around the age of twelve. Even if they came from Republican families, some of them could recall traveling miles to see William Jennings Bryan make his inevitable appearance at the nearest town to make his case for the imminence of the agrarian restoration. In short, the future New Dealers grew up in the twilight between the agrarian radicalism of the nineteenth century and the interest group farm politics of the twentieth century. Because of their origins, they valued small farms and rural life and thought that American democracy

needed both of those things, though the country's farms and the people living on them would have to become "modern" if they were to survive in agriculture.¹³

Most of the future economists achieved perches at a young age that created in them the sense that they could survey the problems of "farm life" in a way that most farmers could not. In the 1950s, Howard Tolley, among the most important of all the New Deal economists, recalled one such vista. In 1906, at the age of seventeen, Tolley had been hired to teach students in the first through sixth grades in Converse, Indiana. In his first year, Tolley had eleven pupils, whom he taught in "a little old red schoolhouse." "I can remember walking back and forth to that school and wondering about what makes the world go around and how the universe [was] built the way it was, wondering what the people in the houses along the road were doing and what their aims and aspirations were and wondering how these kids were going to grow up." For Tolley, the teaching position was a first step toward a common experience of virtually all of the agrarian New Dealers: being the first in their families to leave farming as a way of life to make a career out of studying it as a way of living. After the turn of the twentieth century, students began to flock to academic programs that promised to teach them how to improve agriculture and rural life. M.L. Wilson, the most important of the New Deal agricultural economist, estimated that in 1900 approximately 100 students studied agriculture at what is today Iowa State University. He guessed that roughly 400 of them did that in Ames by 1905 while Wilson himself was enrolled there.¹⁴

¹³ *The Reminiscences of Howard Tolley*, microfiche of the Columbia University Oral History Collection, 1-25. Hereafter *Tolley Reminiscences*, CUOHC. Jess Gilbert gives the best contextualization of the Midwestern agrarian milieu: "Eastern Urban Intellectuals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (Spring, 2000), 162-180.

¹⁴ *Tolley Reminiscences*, 24-25, CUOHC; *The Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson*, microfiche of the Columbia University Oral History Collection, hereafter *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, p. 40; Harry C. McDean, "Professionalism in the Rural Social Sciences, 1896-1919," *Agricultural History* 58, no. 3 (July 1984), 375-379; David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban American and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979).

Before the agrarian liberals began to enter government, the USDA existed solely in the service of productionism. Abraham Lincoln had created the department proper in 1862. Before the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the USDA was not much more than a dispenser of improved seeds and a clearinghouse of productionist bulletins and research. It had an uncertain relationship with the state structures of agricultural research and education. Those got their start with the Morrill Act of 1862, which established the country's original land grant colleges of agriculture. The Hatch Act of 1887 then provided federal dollars for agricultural experiment stations. Additionally, the states developed ad hoc means of promoting or "extending" the knowledge of the colleges and experiment stations to "the people" through vehicles such as farmer' institutes. A county agent concept also emerged whereby an expert placed in a county would promote the latest in "scientific agriculture" among "progressive farmers." The early county agents drew their pay from a combination of funds that came from the states but also banks, farm supply companies, and philanthropic organizations. Farm bureaus, which had originated as one of the ad hoc means of organizing farmers to receive the good word about business farming, sometimes employed the county agents. These farm bureaus eventually federated into the American Farm Bureau Federation, a private lobbying organization. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 institutionalized the county agent system as the Extension Service, funded it with a combination of federal and state money, included "home demonstration" in the Extension Service's mandate to bring the discipline of home economics to bear on the farm household, and ordained that the whole enterprise be operated through the state agricultural colleges. The Smith-Lever act also placed the USDA atop these unwieldy and still largely independent state structures. The federal government's entry into funding this educational apparatus, however, did not eliminate the connection between the county agents and the Farm Bureau. For the USDA, this meant that up until the New Deal its role was to coordinate the activities of forty-eight agricultural fiefdoms, each devoted to the cause of increasing production among the most

commercially-oriented producers in their respective states and each associated to one degree or another with a private lobbying organization.¹⁵

Initially, these were not tricky shoals for the USDA to navigate. It was happy to let the extension agents whose salaries it now partially paid do the bidding of the state agricultural colleges. The USDA's bureaus in Washington all devoted themselves to developing the knowledge and technologies that would increase production and agricultural efficiency. The tenor of the USDA bureaucracy began to change, however, in the 1910s and early 1920s. A number of farm management experts had managed to jump the productionist fence. They began to contemplate the social consequences of using increased productivity as the solution to every dimension of the "farm problem." These people became the earliest agricultural economists, such as William J. Spillman and Henry C. Taylor. Both men headed the USDA's Office of Farm Management and either hired like-minded people into that agency or simply fostered the environment that would prove inviting to such people in later years, including economists such as Howard Tolley, L. C. Gray, O.E. Baker, M. L. Wilson, and Foster F. Elliott. Their concern for the social consequences of technological "progress" in agriculture separated the economists from the productionists who dominated the colleges of agriculture and the rest of the bureaus of the USDA. These experts increasingly turned toward developing schemes to manage the country's massive bounty rather than simply increasing it.¹⁶

Although the economist Henry Taylor was no longer in government during the New Deal, he proved especially instrumental in fostering the agrarian liberalism that would define it. In the USDA's Office of Farm Management, he worked to separate agricultural economics from the productionist domain of farm management and established the Division of Farm Population

¹⁵ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 2nd edition (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 113-114, 144; Deborah Fitzgerald gives an especially illuminating discussion of all these tangled relationships in *Business of Breeding: Hybrid Corn in Illinois, 1890-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ *Tolley Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 52, 62-72, 93-94, 161-162, 165, 303; Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory*, 43-45.

and Rural Life (DFPRL) in 1919 with the rural sociologist Charles Galpin at its head, thus creating the first USDA bureau concerned directly with increasing the quality of farm life and not simply the efficiency of production. The DFPRL would become the home of the USDA's sociologists and later its anthropologists and social psychologists. When the Bureau of Agricultural Economics was founded in 1922, Taylor became the head of that agency, which would go on to house the liberal economists once they have moved out of the AAA in the late 1930s. For Taylor and his cohort to even worry about the social consequences of productionism was somewhat subversive in the Teens and Twenties. Howard Tolley remembered that these economists stuck to the word "economic" when they discussed farm problems, but what they really meant was the "economic and social"—"social" was still a word people were "afraid" to use. But in the 20s, the economists already challenged the "old line" productionists in the USDA, people who, as Tolley put it, "had only a secondary interest in the farm problem and the welfare of farmers as distinguished from technological phases of agriculture." These were the "agricultural technologists" in the USDA's Bureau of Plant Industry, Bureau of Animal Industry, and the Extension Service, people who either did not perceive or did not care that more production often meant lower income and fewer farmers.¹⁷

The 1920s felt like a wilderness period for the liberals since most of them had cast their lot behind the McNary-Haugen Plan as one of the means of managing the consequences of productionism. Herbert Hoover refused to countenance McNary-Haugenism, however. It proffered a scheme to prop up commodity prices by dumping American surpluses abroad, something that Hoover rightfully believed would draw the government into an endless and thankless task of managing farm prices. Instead, Hoover threw his weight behind the Farm Board, which was created in 1929. In what was supposed to be a temporary measure, the Farm Board attempted to shore up commodity prices first by buying up and storing agricultural surpluses. It then worked to herd producers and their existing cooperatives into a handful of

¹⁷ *Tolley Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 304.

giant, national cooperatives that Hoover and the people who staffed the Farm Board thought could privately manage the volume and flow of farm production. This process started even before the Depression hit, with Hoover hoping that government involvement would be brief and pulled off on the cheap. With the country plunging into financial catastrophe just as the Farm Board got off the ground, however, it ended up spending many millions of dollars in its efforts to stabilize prices. Getting producers and the existing cooperatives to work together proved a nightmare. None of this made a difference. As the liberal economists watched this unfold, they began to formulate their own plans, which they would implement after Roosevelt became president and handed them control of the USDA.¹⁸

By the time Roosevelt took office, farmers faced prices lower than any in living memory and staggering and unparalleled surpluses in all the major commodities. The economist M.L. Wilson proved especially influential in designing the response. As early as 1930, Wilson was the primary mover behind a bill (the Christgau Bill) that disclosed some of the long-term ambitions of the agrarian liberals. He called the bill “agricultural planning.” It sought to invest heavily in research to study why farmers grew what they did and where, as well as whether they might grow something else more profitably. In discovering and introducing “comparative costs of production,” Wilson thought farmers would not necessarily have to receive much higher prices for what they marketed because they could produce it at less expense. Planners would delineate “type of farming regions” where a particular commodity could be grown most efficiently. The Christgau Bill envisioned an intensive educational campaign to inform farmers of the shifts required.¹⁹

The principles of the Christgau bill languished throughout the early 30s and had more time still before their moment came even after Roosevelt assumed the presidency. No one

¹⁸ All the details of the Farm Board can be found in, David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁹ *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 1818-1819; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists*, 18-20.

wanted “planning” as the solution to a full-blown crisis. Another M.L. Wilson scheme, the Voluntary Domestic Allotment Plan, came to the fore as more politically palatable. In Wilson’s plan, which drew liberally from the ideas of others, a tax on the processors of agricultural commodities paid cooperating farmers to make a blanket reduction from the “historic base” of the commodity produced on their land. Wilson’s plan became the heart of the Agricultural Adjustment Act passed in 1933 as part of New Deal’s famed Hundred Days, the equivalent for agriculture of the National Industrial Recovery Act. In Wilson’s mind, the provision of the AAA that paid farmers to cut their output was just an emergency measure and an inducement to get farmers to go along with a much more ambitious program of agricultural adjustment. Wilson referred to the reduction payments as the “cat’s paw which at least will drag into the discussion the principles of the Christgau bill.” Wilson became the head of the AAA’s Wheat Section. Numerous like-minded liberal economists joined him in the AAA, including Howard Tolley, Foster Elliott, and Lewis C. Gray. Other influential New Dealers also shared the same commitment of moving the AAA from a program of crop reduction to one of major adjustments in land use, including Henry Wallace (Secretary of Agriculture), Mordecai Ezekiel (an economist and Economic Advisor to the Secretary of Agriculture), and Rexford Tugwell (an economist and Assistant Secretary/Undersecretary of Agriculture and later head of the Resettlement Administration).²⁰

The AAA came none too soon. The “carryover” of cotton had been nearly 5 million bales in the 1929-1930 season. By 1932-1933, it had swelled to 13 million. The wheat situation looked just as dire. The carryover there had mushroomed to a mind-bending 400 million bushels in 1933, up from the now modest-seeming 100 million bushels that sat in reserve in 1929. Because southern farmers had already planted 1933’s crop when Congress passed the AAA legislation, a portion of the cotton would have to be plowed up to begin the process of reducing

²⁰ Keith J. Volanto, *Texas, Cotton, and the New Deal* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 20-23; Wilson quoted in Kirkendall, *Social Scientists*, 28; *The Reminiscences of Mordecai Ezekiel*, microfiche of the Columbia University Oral History Collection, 52-63; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists*, 63-69.

the enormous stockpiles and boosting prices before a program of adjustment could be implemented. More than a million growers, controlling nearly 75 percent of the acres planted in the fiber, signed up for the AAA's cotton program. Ultimately, cooperating farmers destroyed the cotton covering more than 10 million acres of land, which would have produced 4.4 million additional bales. The AAA projected that this held the cotton carryover to 13 million bales, rather than the 17.6 million bales that it might have been, causing the value of 1933's crop to double. Wheat, on the other hand, needed no plow-up. That program could begin straight away with "production adjustment payments." More than half a million wheat farmers (out of the country's roughly 1.2 million) signed restriction contracts covering 51 million acres of wheat, which amounted to 77 percent of the nation's crop. This kept 7.5 million acres of wheat from heaping their bounty onto the nation's carryover. The cash income for wheat, including the payments to keep acres out of production, rose to \$366 million in 1933 and \$380 million in 1934, up from \$195 million in 1932.²¹

Wheat and cotton constituted the country's two most important crops. In 1933, the programs for milk and tobacco had not yet taken the shape that they would later assume, but the AAA arranged tentative programs in those commodities as well. In some ways, the AAA's hog program would prove to be the most controversial. The price of hogs sat at its lowest level in fifty years. Reducing the number of swine may well have been the trickiest task facing the agency—it certainly was the most gruesome—because meatpackers had to be cajoled into performing excess slaughter. The AAA established a multi-front program that had "surplus" hogs butchered and distributed to poor families through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) or alternately processed into soap, fertilizer, and grease. The latter part of the program stirred controversy because along with targeting underweight and diseased sows, it also slaughtered piglets and pregnant sows. Through the program, FERA distributed tens of millions of pounds of

²¹ Howard R. Tolley, *The Philosophy of Agricultural Adjustment* (Corvallis: Oregon State College, 1935), 3-4.

pork and lard to poor families and the meatpackers rendered 22 million pounds of grease and 12,000 tons of “tank residue” (the dried residue that comes from fat and gelatin, which went into certain fertilizers).²²

In either destroying or forestalling such a massive surplus, the AAA had pulled off an undeniably impressive logistical feat. In a short amount of time and operating under “desperate conditions,” the AAA had managed quite a lot. Cotton had presented the most logistical difficulties. As with all the other commodities, the Extension Service administered the program. In more than 800 counties, thousands of extension workers had to publicize the advent of the program, present farmers with their varying options under the legislation, get those who were willing to cooperate signed up, and set up the committees of local notables who had to review each contract and inspect the compliance of each farm. Already, though, there were doubts about the decision to rely on the Extension Service/county agents to implement the program. Rexford Tugwell, then Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, and a number of congressional Democrats had demanded that the USDA set up an independent force of AAA workers to implement the program, viewing the county agents as hopelessly politicized and biased against smaller growers. The AAA’s liberals demurred, believing that the Extension Service provided the only means of implementing the program in an effective and timely fashion. Eventually the AAA’s liberal economists would learn the difficulty of trying to exert authority over this administrative structure that they had established as well as the consequences of continually insisting that problems could be worked out through planning rather than politics.²³

Still, the economists recognized at least some of the ways that the early AAA was problematic. The government had waded into a nightmare of gripes and disputes that it had to

²² Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1982), 70-73; Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 1981), 56.

²³ Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 92-93; *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 1177-1178.

adjudicate amongst producers and processors (to say nothing of the legal uncertainties that would affect the programs for years). Processors of agricultural commodities opposed the AAA implacably. They did so understandably because it reduced the bounty that existed for them to process and paid for the whole program with a tax on their operations. Additionally, the earliest iteration of the AAA also provided two of the images that would haunt and define it for millions of Americans. The first image was of balky mules. A farmer might not be able to teach a mule much, but one thing a mule knew was that its job was to walk between rows of cotton and not directly on them. Plowing up the cotton required them to walk right over the prickly shrub when it was at its thickest. For many Americans, the image of farmers having to beat a frightened animal to get it to destroy the plants and fibers that someone's labor had coaxed out of the earth said all there was to say about the merits of the AAA. The even more portentous and pervasive image was of slaughtered "little piggies." The AAA's hog program actually became known popularly as the Little Pig Program. Killing thousands of piglets and pregnant sows for grease and fertilizer repulsed a nation in which hunger threatened millions.²⁴

The agricultural economist Howard Tolley mocked the "crocodile tears." He noted sardonically that many AAA critics must have been "reduced to tears by the sad fate of the little pigs" while dividing their attention between plates of "breakfast bacon or sausages" and the morning papers that brought the disturbing news. Tolley's sentiments reflected the frustration of the AAA's liberals at their perception that everyone—producers, processors, and consumers—refused to see the bigger picture when it came to agriculture. As far as farmers went, the AAA's liberals took up a grumble that they would return to until World War II: that "agrarian fundamentalists" wanted a permanent subsidy for agriculture rather than the genuine agricultural "adjustment" that would bring production more into line with demand and eventually dissolve the need for heavy-handed government intervention in the farm economy.

²⁴ Tolley, *Agricultural Adjustment*, 5.

These “fundamentalists” included not just rank-and-file farmers but lobbying groups like the Farm Bureau and a good deal of the country’s agricultural press.²⁵

The first battle that the liberals faced in their effort to move toward a program of adjustment came within the ranks of the AAA itself. The staffing of the agency had institutionalized a clash between the liberals and a group of agrarian fundamentalists. The liberals, as we have seen, were typically agricultural economists and often had already worked in the USDA for a decade and more. The fundamentalists, on the other hand, were political appointees, people like George Peek (original head of the AAA) and Cully Cobb (head of the AAA’s cotton section) who typically had earlier careers in farm interest-group politics and farm journalism. As far as the planners were concerned, the fundamentalists only cared about higher prices. The fundamentalist mantra seemed to be “subsidize it all and let who-knows sort it out.” Howard Tolley condemned the fundamentalists, in league with most farmers and county agents, as people who were “simply interested in receiving government checks and getting largesse from the government.”²⁶

That did not stop them from winning important battles, largely because the agrarian liberals proved unwilling to do any fighting. The earliest consequences of this fact fell on southern farm tenants, especially sharecroppers. Southerners dominated the AAA’s Cotton Section, which designed and oversaw implementation of the agency’s cotton program. In 1934, when it came time for the AAA to shift from destroying cotton that had already been planted to keeping too much of it from being planted in the first place, the Cotton Section turned to Oscar Johnston to design the new contracts it would issue. Johnston managed the South’s largest cotton plantation. He was not an advocate for the landlord class; he was the landlord class. Johnston aimed to use the AAA to benefit landlords and the most efficient cotton growers because it was lost on no one that reducing the South’s cotton acreage threatened to create

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Tolley Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 212-213, 245, 442.

instability in a number of ways. If the AAA elected to get tenants to enter into contracts with the agency directly and disbursed payments directly to them as well, southern landlords would have balked. It was also lost on no one that reducing cotton acreage would create an incentive for landlords to evict their tenants. But Johnston designed a cotton contract for 1934 that, in phrasing that would become infamous, merely required landlords to maintain the present number of tenants on their land “insofar as possible.” The Johnston-devised contract also allowed landlords to join the crop control effort on behalf of their sharecroppers and divided payments between landlords and tenants in a way that encouraged landlords to downgrade their tenants’ tenure status. (Sharecroppers were legally defined as wage laborers who received a portion of the crop as their wage. Their status entitled them to less of the money than landless renters received. True wage laborers, who received cash wages, were not entitled to any AAA money). The 1934 AAA contract offered eight dollars to a landlord for every one dollar it offered a cotton sharecropper.²⁷

A group of lawyers in the AAA’s Legal Division, men with nonfarm backgrounds, pointed out that the contract provisions suggesting that southern landlords should not evict their tenants were legally unenforceable. That was the point of the way that Johnston had written it, after all, and the administrators in the Cotton Section made sure that the contracts went unaltered. It therefore did not take long for it to become obvious in 1934 that many landlords were evicting or downgrading the status of their farm tenants or defrauding them outright of the paltry payments due them. The AAA’s lawyers attempted to see that sharecropper complaints of fraud received a fair hearing and also to insist that the AAA contracts required landlords to keep their tenants on the land (though they clearly did not do that). The agrarian fundamentalists of the Cotton Section then succeeded in having all but one of the lawyers fired from the AAA. The agrarian liberals remained shamefully silent during all of this controversy. Henry Wallace, an

²⁷ Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 51-61. On the intricacies of the southern tenure ladder: Harold D. Woodman, *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

agrarian liberal par excellence and the Secretary of Agriculture, had to give his approval to the purge of the lawyers. Agrarian liberals fled from the most pressing problem in American agriculture because it required them to engage in a political battle that threatened their broader program of agricultural adjustment. (Had Wallace attempted to see to it that AAA contracts *required* certain standards of fairness and decency toward sharecroppers rather than asking for them “insofar as possible,” the attacks from southern Congressmen would have been furious). The liberals took a troubling position, though one they could adopt by default since they had left defenders of the southern landlord class in charge of the AAA’s cotton program out of political expediency in the first place.²⁸

The AAA’s economists stayed out of the tenant controversies that started to emerge in 1934 partly because they believed that they had won an important victory late in 1933 when Chester Davis, who had replaced George Peek as the head of the AAA, authorized the creation of the Program Planning Division (PPD) within the agency. Davis appointed Howard Tolley as the head of the PPD, and the liberal economist Foster F. Elliott became the de facto assistant chief of the Division. The PPD served as the most important center of agrarian liberalism until it shifted to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in 1938. Across its various sections, the PPD would attempt to coordinate the work of rationalizing agriculture along the lines that the economists envisioned. It estimated the likely demand for major agricultural commodities and determined how many acres would be necessary to meet that demand. It studied where crops could be grown most efficiently and where land was so poor that it would be best retired from cultivation entirely. PPD planners contemplated what crops could replace those that they advocated shifting into other regions. They also struggled to find the means to get farmers and the state

²⁸ Ibid., 120-153.

agricultural authorities to go along with their programs and to implement them fairly and “democratically.”²⁹

Foster Elliott, Tolley’s assistant in the PPD, is especially illustrative of the ambitions and assumptions behind the organization. Like a number of the agrarian liberals, Elliott was an agricultural economist who had worked in the BAE’s Office of Farm Management in the late 1920s and early 1930s. One of his primary preoccupations had been making some kind of regional sense of American agriculture as a means of guiding desirable “adjustments” to agriculture. A number of economists had made earlier efforts to divide the country in agricultural regions, but Elliott disliked these techniques because they masked an enormous amount of variation on the agricultural landscape by dividing the country into just a few sprawling regions. Before he joined the Program Planning Division in 1933, Elliott was already working on a new system of classification, based on income information newly available from the 1930 census, which allowed him to map a much more nuanced set of agricultural regions. Income allowed him to do things that researchers had been unable to do in earlier studies. It allowed him to show the proportion of all the crops or livestock produced on individual farms rather than classing something simply as a cotton farm or grain farm, as early methods had done. Perhaps most importantly of all, Elliott’s income data allowed him to assess what he called “intensity.” The tendency cruder mapping methods to treat farms as equal had vexed him. One hundred acres of played-out cotton land in Greene County, Georgia, was cotton land all the same as one hundred acres of prime land in the Mississippi Delta in earlier methods of classification. Elliott marshaled his data to show not only that a given farm or area produced something but also which among them produced most “intensively.”³⁰

²⁹ *Tolley Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 279-286.

³⁰ Foster F. Elliott, *Fifteenth Census of the United States. Census of Agriculture. Types of Farming in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1933), 71-75.

Elliott produced an illuminating series of maps and charts based on his information. One series was simple dot maps that showed the centers of production of all the major commodities—not just the places where there was a lot of land in, say, cotton but where farmers grew the cotton (or corn or oats or anything else) most productively, as measured by their income from it. Elliott’s crowning achievement, however, was his “type of farming map” of the whole nation, which divided it into 514 distinct “major types of farming areas.” These became the regions that the liberal economists thought could be studied as a means of understanding what each area could produce most efficiently and then used to create a program of adjustment. To accompany the map, Elliott also produced tables that illustrated the “typical” farms in some of the important type of farming regions and some of the counties within those regions. A planner flipping through these tables could know, for example, that in 1929 the “cash grain” farms in Swisher County, Texas, grew winter wheat, while those in Roberts County, South Dakota, grew durum, a variety of spring wheat. A planner could also see that the Texas wheat farmers had a much higher percentage of their farms in the grain. In fact, in Roberts County there was only one farm out of the 144 farms of 280 to 399 acres in size that had 180 to 220 of their acres in wheat. Swisher County had 30 percent of its farms that size growing that proportion of wheat.³¹

Once the liberal economists were ensconced in the AAA’s Program Planning Division in 1934, they thought this kind of knowledge could be used to create careful and unobjectionable adjustments in agriculture. Armed with this kind of information—along with maps depicting the soil, climate, and topography of a given region—the AAA’s planners could assess whether each region produced to its “comparative advantages.” They could avoid the pitfall of subsidizing agriculture in the places where producers did not farm based on the best “economies.” Even more basically, they knew, at a glance, what was happening on the ground on the various types of farms and in the various types of farming regions around the country—or, at least the things

³¹ Ibid., 20-46, 76-120, 160.

about those farms that mattered to them. It seemed too like information likely to meet with little objection. If the data showed that cotton growers in the Mississippi Delta produced the staple more efficiently than farmers elsewhere, who could object if the AAA required Delta producers to make smaller cuts to their production in deference to their efficiency?³²

Elliott's methods are revealing for what they illustrate about the USDA liberals' ambition to create a program of actual agricultural adjustment. They also shed light on the contradictions within their own thinking that would contribute to the undoing of their carefully-laid plans. The economists frequently proclaimed their commitment to developing programs that treated all cultivators fairly. Their ultimate ambition was to preserve a rural life that had to have as its base millions of farm families living and working on modest operations. Yet the more that economists fixated on income, the more they slighted the smaller and less thoroughly commercial farms. The problem was built into the method that Elliott used to develop his mapped simulacra of agriculture. Despite his pride in being able to render the "variations" in the agricultural landscape, Elliott still sought to "reduce" (his word) all of farming to a lone variable: that of income. Elliott warned that if a researcher relied on something other than income to classify agricultural regions, then "the small farms may be given a weight far beyond their real importance." Elliott meant that in terms of creating a workable system of classification, but the statement revealed more than he realized. In the country as a whole, small and modestly commercial farms were in a majority. And yet the liberals thought that they could defend those farms while designing programs that catered to, and even shifted some production toward, the most commercial farmers based on their ability to produce efficiently and intensively.³³

Elliott's insistence on the primary importance of income in classifying regions and developing a program of adjustment revealed his presumption that the best farms were those

³² Elliott, *Types of Farming*, 122-123; *Regional Problems*, 24-27; *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 1846-1847, 1868-1871.

³³ Ibid., *Types of Farming*, 72-73.

that produced crops of the highest value and sold those crops on the market. That was his assumption as an economist, but one that would ultimately undermine his broader goal of keeping most farmers in farming. His assumptions and methods could lead to some strange conclusions about farming. It made the factory farms of California's Central Valley and the Mississippi Delta appear ideal while representing the subsistence farms of Appalachia as the picture of perfect backwardness. In fact, it marked all farms that did not produce wholly for the market as poor and hopeless. These farms, which predominated in places like Appalachia and the Ozarks, received the designation of being "self-sufficing" (i.e. noncommercial). On his national type of farming map, Elliott gave the self-sufficing type of farming areas the same crosshatching as he did forests, "mountains, deserts, [and] swamps." (He only had a limited number of crosshatches to work with in designing his map; still, it was a revealing choice). Whatever social problems the plantations of the Mississippi Delta or the big farms on the Great Plains created, these were places that either had or could have high incomes; it was a language the economists spoke. It seemed unfair and illogical that any program of "adjustment" might ask the most "efficient" producers to cut their output as much as all other farmers. The point of an adjustment program was to help smaller or less productive farms find their own efficiencies.³⁴

This kind of thinking led Howard Tolley to ask rhetorically about the future of the AAA's program after 1933: "If there was to be another 15% reduction in cotton acreage in the year ahead, should it be 15% on every cotton production farm in the country or should it be 20%, we'll say, on the poor farms in Georgia and South Carolina and only 5% on the more productive farms in Texas and maybe no reduction on the highly productive irrigated lands of New Mexico, Arizona and California?" The question answered itself. In its first year, the AAA had relied on blanket cuts that fell evenly on all producers. After that period of simple agricultural reduction, the liberals in the AAA's Program Planning Division worked to move away from that method and toward one of "adjustment." Early on they settled on the idea that "conservation" should be

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

central to this adjustment. Farmers would reduce “soil depleting” crops (i.e. corn, cotton, wheat, and tobacco) and introduce “soil holding” and “soil building” crops (e.g. legumes, grasses, oats) along with new soil conservation practices. The liberals eventually received a helping hand from the Supreme Court when it ruled the original AAA unconstitutional early in 1936; the reauthorized AAA used payments from general revenues (rather than a tax on agricultural processors) to get farmers to reduce crop acreage as “conservation” measures. The liberals even did away with the AAA’s commodity sections, which symbolized the old approach of paying farmers to reduce whatever they produced, wherever they produced it. They pulled out an old copy of Foster Elliott’s type of farming map of the whole country and used it to create five regional divisions over the whole country that they hoped would facilitate genuine agricultural adjustment.³⁵

Because the economists thought that most of the land in the country was ideally suited to producing at least something, they did not believe that adjustment needed involve too much pain for farmers or pain distributed inequitably. From 1933 and throughout the 1930s, the PPD liberals worked to find the best “democratic” means of gathering the information necessary for this adjustment and to get farmers and other authorities in agriculture to cooperate with it. It apparently did not occur to the planners that all of their measures—shifting crop production to the areas of the most intensive production and introducing “conservation” techniques—would only increase agricultural productivity and therefore compound the problems that they tried to address.

First, the economists of the AAA’s Program Planning Division turned to the state and local agricultural authorities. Their purpose was twofold: they wanted to gather information from them about the likely impact that conservation measures (those that would “maintain soil fertility and control erosion”) might have on crop production and to convince them that farmers’

³⁵ *Tolley Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 383-387; Volanto, *Cotton and the New Deal*, 89-95.

interests would be best served by “adjustment” rather than blanket reductions to cash crops that the county agents and agricultural colleges tended to favor. The economists hoped that the result would be a joint project between the USDA and the land grant colleges to adjust agriculture in the dual interest of conservation and bringing agricultural supply and demand into better alignment. Therefore, in 1934, they inaugurated the Regional Adjustment Project. A series of meetings around the country brought together the AAA’s PPD staff and the deans of the colleges of agriculture, the state directors of extension, the directors of the state experiment stations, and the prominent agricultural economists in each state.³⁶

The meetings seemed useful. In their aftermath, all the states dutifully convened committees of relevant experts to study the new crops and methods that could be introduced and to estimate the impact of “soil conservation and good farm management” on county and state production totals. The committees worked through the summer of 1935 generating the information; then another series of meetings served the purpose of totaling up all those figures and contemplating the likely results at the regional and national level. The projected numbers seemed promising: 11 million fewer acres in corn (a 12 percent reduction); 5 million fewer acres in cotton (an 11 percent reduction); 650,000 fewer acres in tobacco (a 2 percent reduction); and 10 million fewer acres in wheat (a 16 percent reduction). The land taken out of these “soil depleting” crops was not just to be idled. The Regional Adjustment Project adduced that conservation practices would mean a 22 percent increase, for example, in the acres planted in “tame hay” (11 million acres) and a 47 percent increase in alfalfa hay.³⁷

Starting in the fall of 1935, as the Regional Adjustment Project proceeded, the PPD set up a County Agricultural Planning Project to operate in tandem with it. The Regional Adjustment Project reflected the liberals’ desire to reorient the colleges of agriculture to the idea

³⁶ “The County Planning Project: A Statistical Summary of Results Obtained in 1935-1936,” Records of H. R. Tolley, Box 1, Agricultural Marketing Administration, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. [Hereafter, RG 83, NARA II].

³⁷ *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 2143-2145.

of adjustment as well as their ambition to derive more finely honed information to facilitate that adjustment. The County Project illustrated more fully the scope of their ambitions. It showed their desire to use “democratic” means to facilitate agricultural adjustment. The County Project was the first step for the liberals in drawing ordinary farmers into the planning process. From late 1935 and into the spring of 1936, the PPD convened meetings where farmers could gather to tell the experts what *they* thought the likely impact of conservation measures would be. Working with the state extension services, the PPD arranged gatherings in more than 2400 counties. Naturally, the AAA’s economists wanted to compare the numbers that ordinary farmers came up with to those that the experts had adduced in the Regional Adjustment Project. In some cases, the County Project suggested that farmers believed that conservation measures would bring even greater reductions in cash crops (e. g., a 26 percent reduction in cotton compared the Regional Adjustment Project’s projection of 11 percent) and in other cases that they thought they would bring about lesser reductions (e.g., a 6 percent reduction in wheat compared to the Regional Adjustment Project’s 16 percent).³⁸

Howard Tolley and C.W. Warburton, the USDA’s Director of Extension Work, triumphantly declared the County Project a new departure in developing “a democratic procedure in adjustment.” In truth, the county meetings were carefully scripted and mostly rote exercises that reached few farmers. Even the ideal county meeting that the planners envisioned would bring together only 30 to 50 farmers (selected by the county extension agent). Revealing the limits of what the liberals meant when they talked about “democracy,” for the most part the meetings aimed to teach this handful of influential farmers to think like planners. The county agent, working in tandem with vocational teachers from the agricultural colleges, presented farmers with a series of charts depicting the recent historical trends in production and land use in the county. A series of questions attempted to walk farmers through the impact of their

³⁸ “The County Planning Project” and “County Agricultural Planning and County Participation in Continuing National Agricultural Adjustment,” [n.d.], both in Records of H. R. Tolley, Box 1, Agricultural Marketing Administration, RG 83, NARA II.

individual decisions on overall production and prices. Everyone crunched numbers. Subsequent meetings addressed the potential readjustments that farmers could make on typical farms in a given county and generally sought to show farmers the utility of government sponsored adjustment.³⁹

With the information that it gleaned from the County Project, the PPD hoped to develop an expanded program. The Planning Division devised plans to roll out conservation-minded adjustment initiatives in a series of carefully selected “experimental counties” around the country. The PPD wanted to set up around 25 of these, choosing counties that ran the gamut of “type of farming areas”: from those with relatively homogenous farms in a given area to those that presented more variety; from areas that prospered and had high rates of landownership to those of instability and high rates of tenancy. The experimental programs would provide a sense of the possible conservation programs for different kinds of farms in the various “type of farming” regions. It was, according to the planners, “both an experiment and a demonstration in adapting national programs to fit the diversified needs of individual farms and local communities.” The planners intended to apply the lessons that they learned to the whole country.⁴⁰

The more conservative elements in the state agricultural colleges and extension services grew increasingly restive under the planning pretensions of the USDA’s liberals. Not only did some of the states look askance at the initiatives coming out of the PPD, but they also disliked the proliferation of action agencies that the New Deal had engendered. The AAA, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) had each built up rival administrative structures and now had constituencies that they could potentially mobilize

³⁹ Howard Tolley and C.W. Warburton to State Directors of Extension, 11/11/36, Records of H.R. Tolley, Box 1, Agricultural Marketing Administration, RG 83, NARA II; “County Agricultural Adjustment Planning Project, Georgia – June 1936,” especially Exhibits 3, and 10-12, Records of the Division of State and Local Planning, County Agricultural Adjustment Planning Project, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II.

⁴⁰ *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 1868-1871; “Agricultural Adjustment Planning in Selected Counties for 1937,” Records of H.R. Tolley, Box 1, Agricultural Marketing Administration, RG 83, NARA II.

without the assent of the Farm Bureau or the state authorities. Each new agency threatened to pull agricultural policy in a direction that the colleges and the Farm Bureau could not control. The Farm Bureau, originally a prime supporter of the AAA, had grown hostile to it as the agency had gravitated away from simple production controls and toward conservation and planning. The colleges too had started making noise about how soil conservation was properly an educational issue and therefore belonged in their portfolio and not that of the SCS. Some county agents and extension workers grumbled about what they viewed as the overly complicated conservation programs that the PPD had developed. Things only became worse after Howard Tolley was elevated to head of the entire AAA in 1936 and consistently worked to reduce the influence of the extension services and agricultural colleges in agricultural adjustment. These complaints had picked up steam since 1936; by 1937 they had come out into the open in a full scale rebellion that threatened to thwart all of the planners' efforts.⁴¹

Rational and levelheaded as always, the USDA liberals—from Secretary Wallace on down—thought that they could come to an arrangement that would satisfy all parties while preserving and furthering each of the liberals' basic aims. In July of 1938, they convened all of the appropriate authorities at Mt. Weather, a climatological research station in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, about 70 miles outside of Washington. The planning-minded economists hoped to broker a deal that would quash the incipient revolt of some of the state authorities while avoiding some of Washington's stifling summer heat. Representatives from the USDA, the experiment stations, agricultural colleges, and action agencies (Soil Conservation Service, Farm Security Administration, Forest Service, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and Farm Credit Administration) attended, and Henry Wallace was there too presiding over everything. Proposals that planners within the USDA had worked on for some time served as the basis of the discussion. Over two days the parties hammered out an agreement (the Mt. Weather Agreement), which they touted as the most significant development in agriculture since the

⁴¹ *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 2003-2013; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists*, 152-160.

Smith-Lever legislation of 1914 that had put the colleges and experiment stations into their uneasy relationship with the USDA. The USDA itself had struggled for some time to bring the state authorities to heel and, within its own house, to bring about a greater coordination in the activities of all its various action agencies. With the Mt. Weather Agreement, the liberals thought that they had finally established the framework to achieve that while also advancing their planning goals and finding the means of dissolving the hostility of some of the colleges and extension services. The agreement set into motion a number of changes. It paved the way for Henry Wallace to substantially reorganize the USDA. Howard Tolley stepped down as head of the AAA and agreed to take over as the head of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, which would now serve as the “central planning agency” of all the USDA. In particular, the BAE’s new Division of State and Local Planning would face the task of finding the means to advance democratic planning and adjustment.⁴²

The liberals viewed the shakeup in the USDA as an opportunity to reshape and redouble their efforts from their new base in the BAE and especially its Division of State and Local Planning. They still wanted a program of agricultural adjustment, one that would shift production to those places most suited to efficiently growing a given crop and repurpose poorly used land to something more productive. In all of this, their goal remained, as one of the planners put it, “A more abundant life for all tillers of the soil.” The most pressing new problem that had presented itself was the very proliferation of USDA action agencies that the state colleges and extension services had rebelled against. Planning would never be effective if it happened within just one agency—which was the task the AAA’s PPD had faced. The BAE’s mandate, as the new central planning agency of the USDA, was to achieve coordination *across* agencies, to get them all working toward the planners’ goals and to do so while converting the state authorities and ordinary farmers to the same purposes. The planners also succeeded in expanding their commitment to democratic forms. Bringing farmers into the planning process

⁴² *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 2013-2023.

would be the means of gathering data, tailoring programs to specific regions, getting farmers to think like planners, convincing federal agencies to cooperate with one another, and even of bringing the gospel of planning to the colleges and state extension services. The new initiative was called “County Land Use Planning (CLUP)”.⁴³

Starting in 1939, the BAE, where most of the liberal economists had moved after the Mt. Weather shake-up, rolled out CLUP in thousands of counties in cooperation with the state agricultural colleges and extension services. The work proceeded in three stages. The BAE encouraged the states to launch CLUP first in a handful of counties that represented the prevalent types of farming areas in each state and then to expand it over the entire state in the following years. The first, “preparatory stage” of CLUP publicized the new and more expansive style of planning and began the work of building its democratic base. The county extension agent arranged public meetings designed to draw representatives from all the neighborhoods, communities, and classes of people in the county. At the meetings, farmers discussed their perceptions of the current state and federal programs for agriculture and any improvements or changes that they wished to see enacted. Along with community meetings in every county, the planners envisioned substantial leafleting of farmers concerning the program and advised the county authorities on how to use schools and churches as agencies for advertising the new initiative.⁴⁴

Next, farmers either elected the lay-members of a county-wide CLUP committee or, in some cases, local agricultural authorities appointed them. Representatives of all the state and federal agricultural agencies also held positions on these county committee. To inaugurate the second stage of the process, the “intensive stage,” the county committee then worked with rural

⁴³ The quotation comes from “Work Outline for Cooperative Land-Use Planning in Georgia,” 9, Records of the Division of State and Local Planning, State Procedural Material, 1939-1941, Georgia - Procedure & Instructions - WO No. 1, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II.

⁴⁴ Ellery A. Foster and Harold A. Vogel, “Cooperative Land Use Planning—A New Development in Democracy,” in *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940), 1142.

sociologists from the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life to "delineate" (i.e. map the boundaries of) all of the neighborhoods and communities in the county. In less ideal circumstances, the BAE's rural sociologists allowed farmers and county agents to perform these delineations themselves, with the understanding that the work would eventually be refined with help from experts. All of the liberals agreed that the delineation constituted an essential step, without which the democratic pretensions of the program could not succeed. The county committee used its map outlining all of the county's neighborhoods and communities as the basis for establishing the "community committees" that would actually preside over most of the planning in CLUP. Every community in a county had to have its own committee; ideally these committees were elected, and the BAE planners expected them to have representatives from each of the neighborhoods that constituted the wider communities. Additionally, the BAE required that both men and women have membership on the community committees.⁴⁵

The community committees then began the work of land use planning. Armed with more maps, they divided their respective communities into different land-use areas. This step reflected the long-standing ambition of the liberal economists of taking hold of agriculture based on relatively homogeneous type of farming areas. They instructed the committees to divide their communities "into a number of *local land use areas*, each of which is relatively uniform throughout with respect to the similarity or pattern of its physical features, present land use, and existing land use problems." The community CLUP committees made frequent field trips to make sure that the data and maps that the state and national authorities provided them accurately reflected the situation on the ground and to gather facts that their maps and tables

⁴⁵ "Work Outline," 23-24, 30-32.

could not provide. The community committees also frequently consulted with one another to make sure that they worked along similar lines and that their findings would be comparable.⁴⁶

In the process of defining the counties' land use areas, the committees identified "problem areas"—places where, for example, environmental degradation was acute, income low, or rates of tenancy and part time farming high. More generally, they classified the land based on its use and productivity. They classified areas not in use that might be productive for farming. They designated areas then in use that were so poor—because the farms were too small, the soil too poor, or any other reason—that they would be best retired from cultivation completely. They marked off places where the farms would need to be reorganized (perhaps through enlargement, introducing new crop rotations, or developing methods to combat erosion) to provide better incomes. The committees also worked to avoid future problems by categorizing areas that were not in farms or ranches and that should be prevented from being put to those purposes in the future. And, of course, they noted those areas where the farms could more or less be left alone. The BAE's planners envisioned the entire process as sustained throughout by continual public meetings at the county level and in each of the communities of the county. These meetings would apprise the public of the latest developments, seek its input, and, through debate and discussion, inculcate in both the committee members and the lay public an increasing ability to see the "farm problem" in the same way that the USDA's liberals did.⁴⁷

Eventually, the committees progressed from simply classifying land use areas with an eye toward their appropriateness to developing a county-wide program of adjustment that reflected their findings. At this stage of "intensive" planning, each community committee worked up a report of its findings and recommendations, which were then synthesized into a

⁴⁶ "County Land Use Planning: Work Outline Number 1: Area Mapping and Classification Project," January 1939, p. 4, Records of H.R. Tolley, "Summary of Doc Dealing with Agrl Planning," Box 1, RG 83, NARA II; Foster and Vogel, "Cooperative Land Use Planning," 1142-1143. The emphasis in the quotation is in the original.

⁴⁷ "Work Outline," 32-41; "Area Mapping and Classification Project," 6-28.

county-wide report by the county CLUP committee. All along, the BAE planners encouraged the community and county committees to be as ambitious as they cared to be in their recommendations, which were to constitute a program of total rural development for the county. This could mean anything: retiring land that was “submarginal” to agriculture or converting it to more productive uses, such forest or pasture; making farms bigger here or smaller there; developing credit programs for poor farmers or health cooperatives that everyone could join; creating tailored conservation programs to different areas of the county, and so forth. The idea was that every county of the country needed its own unique program of adjustment and development, one that involved farmers every step of the way in gathering information and making decisions. The liberals also hoped that the process would lead to suggestions about how federal action agencies could better coordinate their programs and made it clear that the farmers could suggest new programs too. They further encouraged the committees to make recommendations involving improvements in local government, especially involving taxes, schools, and roads. The implementation of the recommendations of the county committee would constitute the third the stage of planning, that of creating a “unified program” of development for the whole county. This was not a final stage. The economists of the BAE’s Division of State and Local Planning viewed it as the beginning of a permanent process that would continue in every county in the country, constantly refining and perfecting a county’s agriculture, constantly renewing the program’s democratic legitimacy, and ultimately creating a better life for all rural people. There would be no need for draconian production controls. The orderly and harmonious farming regions that the planners had dreamed of for years would finally come into existence, bringing fair incomes to farmers and reasonable prices to consumers.⁴⁸

The theories behind CLUP seemed as admirable as they would prove chimerical. The liberals of the BAE’s Division of State and Local Planning talked openly of their desire to see

⁴⁸ “Work Outline,” 59-86.

farmers “dominate” not just county planning but the programs of all of the USDA. Again and again, they returned to the idea that all planning had to originate not simply in the counties but in the neighborhoods of the countryside. This would assure that all farmers had representation in the planning process. The BAE’s liberals meant this in the broadest sense: farmers from all income levels, backgrounds, and even races. Everyone would have their ideas heard and accommodated because the process began in the neighborhoods where farmers were already accustomed to meeting, where they had their own leaders, and were comfortable expressing their views. CLUP would allow all cultivators to put forward their chosen representatives to make sure that their interests were not trampled in the wider stages of the planning process. Ultimately, however, CLUP’s proponents had put too much faith in their ability to get people from all backgrounds onto the planning committees and attending the community and county meetings. Furthermore, they overestimated the persuasive power of the rationality and discussion that they worked to engender at the CLUP meetings. USDA planners embraced a naïve pluralism that assumed people with different “interests” could sit together, intelligently discuss their perspectives, and come to a common agreement fair to all parties. But they pressed ahead, bombarding the committees with literature designed to facilitate this process, down to making suggestions about the best seating arrangements for discussion meetings and the best ways of keeping discussions on track and of maintaining civility when disagreements arose. Planners matter-of-factly advised the people on CLUP committees that it was absolutely imperative that all “social groups, geographic groups, racial groups, and others” participate and find representation in CLUP; this included “small neighborhoods,” “tenants,” and “sharecroppers.” The liberals insisted that everyone had “real contributions to make to any decisions that apply to all. This is the road to understanding, and understanding is necessary between groups before they can cooperate effectively.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ “Foundations of Agricultural Planning,” Records of the Division of State and Local Planning, State Procedural Materials, 1939-41, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II; *County Planning Series No. 2* (Washington, D.C.:

CLUP advocates saw their program inducing a kind of consciousness-raising in which everyone drawn into the planning process would begin to see the bigger picture, as well as the points where their own views and interests were legitimate or tended toward the parochial. CLUP would engender this new outlook not just among ordinary farmers but also among all of the state and local technicians who had to assist the farmers in the planning work. Moreover, it would have the same effect on the agents of the federal bureaucracies. They would begin to see where their programs had worked at cross purposes, where they had been inattentive to local concerns and variations in need, and the places where individual agencies had organized to defend their turf rather than to do what was best for all farmers. CLUP's architects had no doubt that this enlightenment would work its way up from the grassroots, reaching all the way into the upper reaches of the USDA. Along with putting the BAE in charge of coordinating this planning, one of steps that Henry Wallace had taken after the Mt. Weather agreement was to establish committees within the USDA to assimilate and disseminate the wisdom of the county planning process and to retool its programs in accord with the findings of the county committees. The BAE began producing strikingly idealistic organizational charts of the USDA in which its entire structure flowed from the "farm family" situated in every neighborhood of the country and in which the Secretary of Agriculture took his orders from dirt farmers.⁵⁰

The BAE's agricultural economists turned to the rural sociologists of the agency's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life (DFPRL) to make these lofty theories work in actual practice. Chapters One and Two showed that sociologists had been concerned with the nature and structure of country neighborhoods and communities since the 1910s. The substantial number of sociologists who had gone into government, joining the DFPRL during the early New Deal years, had been instrumental in boosting the idea that these sociological groupings should provide the basis for effective, democratic administration of CLUP. As sociological entities, the

GPO, 1940-1941), 2-4.

⁵⁰ "Foundations of Agricultural Planning"; "Work Outline," 22.

neighborhood and community constituted the only “direct line” to the people, the level at which they could be mobilized into the planning process and have their interests represented. Now the sociologists busied themselves assisting in the work of bringing these programs to life in every neighborhood and community of the countryside. They helped CLUP committees delineate thousands of these entities around the nation. They also redoubled their efforts to understand the sociological variety that existed across rural America. As far as the DFPRL was concerned, each neighborhood and wider community to which it belonged represented a unique social formation, the workings of which had to be understood in order for the democracy of CLUP to become operative in that particular place. Therefore, the agency dispatched its sociologists around the country to study how effectively CLUP had accessed these “direct lines” to the people and how to make the initiative more effective in the variety of contexts that existed at the grassroots. In each county that the sociologists visited, they delineated dozens of neighborhoods and communities and deployed quite elaborate procedures to assess the character and quality of life in them. They studied the degree of “integration” of various neighborhoods and the “needs” that people satisfied within them and those that they had to supply by going elsewhere. If the developments of recent years—the advent of the automobile or programs of school consolidation, for example—had weakened traditional neighborhood and community institutions, they wanted to know if anything had replaced them and whether these new institutions and relations might be better for mobilizing people into the planning process. If sociologists did rate certain neighborhoods or communities as “weak” or “disintegrated,” they worked to discover what had made them so and whether those places might still have “natural leaders” who could be brought into the planning process. They even examined the socio-economic backgrounds of the people on the CLUP committees: from their level of educational attainment to the size and income of the farms they operated. DFPRL social scientists wanted to use this information to counteract any tendencies to over- or under-represent certain groups.

The sociologists did all of this to realize the agrarian liberals' ambition of reaching and mobilizing everyone who had a stake in CLUP.⁵¹

The DFPRL sociologists thought they could use all of this knowledge to help keep the local committees operating in a truly democratic fashion. They checked behind the delineations that CLUP committees performed on their own and offered advice on how those delineations could be refined to more accurately reflect the "natural groupings" within a given county. They offered lists of neighborhoods that the CLUP committees had missed in their delineations. They pointed out that the county and community committees were top-heavy with people who lived in towns and wealthier farmers and short on smaller farmers and people from more marginal neighborhoods. They identified neighborhoods that did not participate in CLUP and implored the local committees to engage those people in the planning process. They urged the committees to continually venture out into the neighborhoods and communities, to discern what the people wanted but also to understand what kinds of initiatives they were likely to accept or reject. In the South, the sociologists pointed out the need for both whites and blacks to have representation on the planning committees. All across the board, DFPRL social scientists insisted that a CLUP process that did not include all neighborhoods, communities, and people of all backgrounds and incomes was not one that carried through the spirit or the letter of the program.⁵²

⁵¹ This sketch of the efforts of the BAE's rural sociologists comes from the work that they published, along with the state authorities whom they worked with, as a result of it: Irwin T. Sanders and Douglas Ensminger, *Alabama Rural Communities: A Study of Chilton County* (Montevallo: Alabama College Bulletin, 1940); *Kansas Rural Communities: A Study of Nemaha County* (Amarillo, TX: BAE in cooperation with Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station, 1940); John B. Holt, *Rural Neighborhoods and Communities of Lee County, Alabama* (Washington, D. C.: BAE, 1941); Harold Hoffsommer and Herbert Pryor, *Neighborhood and Community Areas in Covington County, Mississippi* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1941); Howard W. Beers, Robin M. Williams, John S. Page and Douglas Ensminger, *Community Land-Use Committees: Organization, Leadership, and Attitudes, Garrard County, Kentucky* (Lexington: Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station, 1941); Charles P. Loomis and Douglas Ensminger, "Governmental Administration and Informal Local Groups," *Applied Anthropology* 1, no. 2 (January-March 1942), 41-62; Robin M. Williams and Howard Beers, *Farmers on Local Planning Committees in Three Kentucky Counties, 1939-1940* (Lexington: Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station, 1943).

⁵² Ibid.

Publicly, the USDA's liberals touted the successes of CLUP. Caswell County, North Carolina, provided a good example of the wonders that they thought it could work. Tobacco had dominated the life and culture of this piedmont county since the middle of the nineteenth century, subjecting it to all the familiar ills of monoculture: soil depletion and the vagaries of the market foremost among them. Everything began to change in 1939 with the advent of CLUP, however. The citizens of the county, recognizing the need for change, gamely formed all the requisite committees—one set of them for whites and another for African Americans. After the preparatory and intensive phases of the program, the citizen-planners launched a program to generate extra income from selling surplus milk and established a variety of cooperative arrangements for farmers to purchase and share the use of much-needed farm equipment, like combines and lime-spreaders. The centerpiece of Caswell's CLUP program, however, was an effort to combat erosion in the county, an initiative that showcased CLUP's ambition to bring about greater cooperation among state and federal agencies. The Extension Service threw itself into an educational campaign on erosion control that included both field demonstrations and extensive community meetings. The Soil Conservation Service contributed the resources to terrace 1500 acres of the county's land. It also trained crews of boys working for the National Youth Administration to perform additional terracing work and made the men and equipment at a local CCC camp available to farmers doing erosion control work. The Farm Security Administration pitched in too, initiating a project to build terraces on the farms of 50 of its "clients" and sponsoring "12 community service loans" to pay for the equipment necessary for that work. As was typical of these projects, CLUP's architects claimed that dividends arrived not just in the form of higher income and healthier soil but also in an improved "psychology and morals of the people." The residents of Caswell County had remade themselves as they remade their agriculture. That result did not represent a "measurable quantity," but the USDA's agrarian

liberals had no doubt that it could be achieved in all the rural communities that actively engaged CLUP.⁵³

The actual planning process hardly resembled the participatory democracy that the planners hoped to engender and that they publicly touted, however. As the investigations of the DFPRL's rural sociologists had revealed, small and poor farmers did not receive adequate representation in the planning process. Local notables and prosperous farmers dominated the county and community CLUP committees, and it was not at all clear that such farmer participation as CLUP did manage to create did anything to actually change the kinds of land planning recommendations that the committees devised. Those recommendations scarcely deviated from the goals that the AAA's and later BAE's liberals had always espoused. The committees proposed retiring or repurposing the least productive land (where the poorest farmers lived) and shifting cultivation to the more productive lands, all the while insisting that some other arrangement could be found for those that land planning would displace. Perhaps the process could have worked fairly well in those places with more egalitarian social structures, but counties with demonstrably severe economic and social disparities produced deeply anti-democratic CLUP recommendations. For example, Greene County, Georgia's, CLUP committee estimated that only 10 percent of the county's African American farm tenants would become successful if they managed to buy the land they worked—this in a county where nearly 75 percent of the cultivators did not own their farms. The CLUP committee in Kern County, California—home to the country's most intensely capitalized farming—declared that the Farm Security Administration was a plague upon the county and that “relief” payments from the federal government had created a labor “shortage” and therefore ought to be lowered. In extreme form, these kinds of assessments were what the USDA's liberals wanted farmers to “discuss” their way through, hoping against all behavioral logic that a structurally democratic

⁵³ “Operating Report Covering the Cooperative Land-Use Planning Program for the Year Ended June 30, 1940,” 22-23, Records of the Division of State and Local Planning, Reports on the Organization and Status of Land Use Planning, 1939-43, Annual Report 1939-40, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II.

process would somehow forge a consensus in which everyone's rights and interests would be respected equally. One of the main reasons why the planners wanted to bring ordinary farmers into land planning was to convince them that the amount of tolerable production had to be allocated based on efficiency. But the fact was that no amount of analysis or rational discussion was going to convince the smaller or more marginal producers that their land was too poor to be saved or that they were primarily responsible for "overproduction." And that is assuming that those farmers actually managed to become involved in land planning. In reality, there is little indication that they managed or even sought to do that very often. What the USDA's liberals had done was effectively cloak the socioeconomic status quo within a mantle of ostensibly democratic legitimacy.⁵⁴

As the liberal economists placed their faith in planning to create a rising tide through agricultural adjustment and to remake farmers into incipient planners, an allied camp of liberals laid the groundwork for what they hoped would be a larger cultural transformation in the cultures of commerce. This "cultural approach" was centered in the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, which was home to the rural sociologists who performed CLUP's neighborhood and community delineations. Its method's major proponents were Carl C. Taylor (the rural sociologist who headed the DFPRL) and the economist M.L. Wilson, primary author of the AAA legislation and who worked in that agency and in the Department of the Interior's Division of Subsistence Homesteads before becoming Assistant (later Undersecretary) of Agriculture. (In 1940, Wilson became the USDA's Director of Extension Work, a position he took primarily for the opportunity it afforded him to inject the "cultural approach" into that far-reaching arm of the state). The cultural approach insisted that the problems of American agriculture were neither primarily economic nor environmental nor anything else; they were,

⁵⁴ *Greene County, Georgia: The Story of One Southern County* (Washington, D.C.: Farm Security Administration, 1941), 10-11; *Brief of Land Use Survey of Kern County: Description, Problems, Recommendations by County and Community Committees of Farmers* (Bakersfield: University of California Agricultural Extension Service, 1940), 3; Walter Goldschmidt, *As You Sow* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), 169.

above all, cultural. If farmers failed to earn an adequate living then this was but an economic manifestation of a cultural malaise. If farmers plundered and denuded the land, they were simply writing their cultural inadequacies onto the landscape in the language of soil wastage. It was an understanding that, in short, tended to blame farmers for problems that were, in fact, very deeply rooted in American history and political economy.

Carl Taylor gave as good a definition as anyone of what the liberals meant when they talked about culture:

Culture is a cluster of things that hangs together with a comparatively high degree of unity. This unity is a living thing, the component parts of which are the physical products that the environment yields, the tools and implements used by the people, their habits and techniques of work and play, their forms of human association, their customs and traditions, their art, music, and drama, and their beliefs, theories, valuations, and philosophies about their own life and work.

According to the cultural model, then, the problem with American farmers was that many of them had developed cultures that were appropriate to the frontier period of American history. The promise of endless land and the ability to pull up stakes and make for more promising pastures had turned American farmers in numerous parts of the country into undiscerning automatons who reflexively over-produced and exploited the soil to its breaking point. This, according to Taylor, was the result of “habit” (a “national habit,” in fact); it was a result of farmers’ “ideologies,” “philosophies,” and “ways of thinking about agriculture.” It was a result of culture and it had become “automatic and unconscious.” Not only did farmers *do* these things, but they *believed* in them (“unconsciously,” in fact). Farmers “believed in expansion...believed in exploitation...believed deeply though unconsciously in speculation.” But the frontier had closed and the most “maladjusted” of the cultures of commerce could no longer be sustained as they

had traditionally operated. Many farmers would have to change their old habits; they would have to create new cultures.⁵⁵

This understanding of culture wrenched it out of its relationship to the political economy that had indeed created so much profligacy in American agriculture. Instead, this perspective largely put its weight on “values” and “value systems” as the lone cause of success and failure. Taylor and Wilson believed that interested observers could read the values of particular cultures on the agricultural landscape. Wilson particularly liked to tell stories about the culture-lessons he learned cruising the country in his Model A Ford during the Depression as his work for the USDA sent him hither and yon. Once, in the central part of cotton-plagued Texas, he happened upon an idyllic farmstead. The farm stood out because its owners lived so differently from the farmers that Wilson had heretofore observed in the state: their house was handsome, made of stone, and sheltered by a stand of fruit trees; the family had built itself a sturdy barn; they tended a large garden too, fenced tightly enough to keep out the chickens that they also raised; during the hard times of the Depression, these people ate well while others went hungry. Though they marketed some of their produce, in the parlance of the time, these farmers “lived at home” and clearly did so with great determination and care. To Wilson’s surprise, the next farmstead that he saw answered to the same description; then the next one and the one after that. He had stumbled upon a “cultural island,” a group of German farmers in a community called Fredericksburg. These farmers prized permanence, while most of their neighbors valued convenience; their ultimate ambition in life was land ownership as a means of perpetuating their culture, whereas most of their neighbors had settled for making quick dollars. Convenience and money worked in flush times, but the Depression had revealed who lived in ways more

⁵⁵ Carl C. Taylor, “The Restoration of Rural Culture,” 11/9/1937, 2-3, National Agricultural Library Special Collections, USDA Division of Farm Population and Rural Life Records, Box 1, Folder 103.

appropriate to central Texas. The Germans had an appropriate culture; most of their neighbors did not and had suffered for it.⁵⁶

Wilson and Taylor believed that these lessons repeated themselves endlessly across the landscape. There were places where people valued land ownership (and passing it on the next generation) above all else. Those people built their entire culture to serve that end, in the process committing themselves to permanence and conservation. Other cultures valued farming not as a way of life but as a means of making a “living.” These cultures valued money and instant gratification, frittering away their chance at owning land, preferring to spend cash on automobiles, clothes, and entertainment. Rather than conserving and husbanding the soil, these cultures turned their farms into factories, places that robbed the land to produce commodities. These farmers could hardly be bothered with “living at home.” And rather than abhorring debt, they mortgaged everything to the hilt and made grim jokes about doing so, the size of the hole that they had dug for themselves becoming a matter of twisted pride.⁵⁷

To Wilson and Taylor, these things were a matter of cultural choice and not much more. Cultures could choose permanence and landownership just as money and convenience. Culture mattered. Indeed, it ruled. The truth of this became all the more obvious to the liberals as they developed the confidence that the New Deal farm programs that they had designed could solve the imbalances of agricultural production and consumption. This conviction led Wilson to declare in 1940 that the “greatest need in agricultural research today is for scientific knowledge regarding the various farm cultures and the value systems within them.” Federal and state

⁵⁶ Wilson, “Democratic Processes,” 3-5.

Wilson told a similar story where he contrasted the thriving Mormon farmsteads in Utah to those of the unhappy and chronically strapped farmers of Montana, whom he spent the better part of his early career working with: *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 1193-1197.

Along with the insistence on the primacy of culture, the “culture island” concept was also common among USDA sociologists and anthropologists: See also Walter M. Kollmorgen, *The German-Swiss in Franklin County, Tennessee: A Study of the Significance of Cultural Considerations in Farming Enterprises* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1940).

⁵⁷ Wilson, “Democratic Processes,” 4-6.

experts had studied the “physical, chemical, and biological aspects of farm problems.” That had produced great advances in production but also the problem of overproduction. The USDA had therefore begun approaching the farm problem from the perspective of “marketing”—developing the means of bringing reasonable prices to farmers under conditions of abundance. This culminated in the various New Deal programs but especially the AAA as the means of rationalizing agricultural production. Because problems still persisted, however, the liberals could only conclude that farmers and their cultures had to be at fault. It was, therefore, time to take the next step and develop a “science of man” so that the maladjustments of people and their cultures, which had persisted in the face of all thoughtful, scientific efforts could be corrected. As Wilson put it:

Above all, we are trying to keep in mind that the people themselves along with their habits, customs, traditions, and attitudes are the primary factors in the explanation of how maladjustments have come into existence and that they will be the controlling factors in making any adjustments. We have in the past talked a great deal about human and social effects of the maladjustments which are implied by soil erosion, improper land use, farm abandonment, rural poverty, etc., but we have tended to forget that human and social factors—the attitudes and habits of the people—are usually basic to these maladjustments.⁵⁸

For Wilson and Taylor, this meant that culture had to be at the heart of the USDA’s CLUP program. Land planning would have to aid in bringing desirable cultural changes to the countryside, in fostering cultures that did not mindlessly plunder the soil and overproduce. To encourage desirable adjustments, extension workers and USDA technicians had to have a deep understanding of the cultures with which they dealt. Above all, they had to know the “values” of a given culture. If they did not, they would end up fighting a people’s culture rather than working within it to bring about change. A culturally informed state could both develop and propose its programs in terms consonant with the values of a given people. And it could turn all of its experts and technicians into what Wilson called, unashamedly, “social engineers.” As “social engineers,” the agents of the state would not only understand the cultures with which

⁵⁸ Ibid., 8-10.

they worked, they would understand that the farm problem was not a matter of discrete and purely material issues—“farm income, farm practices, conservation, and the like”—but a matter of those things embedded in and as products of cultures. Understanding, using, and manipulating culture would have to be the next step for the USDA to salvage life in the cultures of commerce.⁵⁹

In May of 1939, to begin the work of putting culture and culture-knowledge at the center of the USDA’s efforts, Wilson sponsored a conference (“Culture and Agriculture”) that brought some of the leading sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and social psychologists in the country to the USDA headquarters in Washington to discuss the contributions that a social scientific understanding of culture could make to agency’s programs. Wilson hoped that the conference would encourage the USDA employees who attended to believe that anthropology in particular could shed light on “modern man and modern society” and not just, as he put it in an attempt at humor, on “cannibals and pigmies.” In the wake of the conference, Carl Taylor hired additional anthropologists and social psychologists into the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life.⁶⁰

The most important initiative growing out of the 1939 conference was a project called a “Cultural, Structural, and Socio-Psychological Study of Selected American Farm Communities.” Taylor co-directed the effort with fellow sociologist Charles Loomis, the anthropologist John Provinse, and the social psychologists J. E. Hulett, Jr., and Kimball Young. These men selected six communities intended to represent a range of cultural success and failure and a continuum of “stability” and “instability”: El Cerrito, New Mexico; Sublette, Kansas; Landaff, New Hampshire; Irwin, Iowa; Harmony, Georgia; and the Old Order Amish community of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The DFPRL dispatched social scientists to live and work in these

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁰ “Culture and Agriculture,” mimeo. prepared by Paul Johnstone (Washington, D.C.: BAE, n.d.); Olaf F. Larson and Julie N. Zimmerman assisted by Edward O. Moe, *Sociology in Government: The Galpin-Taylor Years in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1919-1953* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 100-102, 156.

communities as “participant-observers” for a period of four or five months. They also sent an anthropologist to Hardin County, Iowa, to immerse himself in the “corn belt culture.” Taylor and his co-directors charged their fieldworkers with conducting interviews, gathering statistical information from local sources, and generally digging into the whole range of factors that made up culture and, they all agreed, explained why some rural communities thrived while others decayed. The “participant-observers” studied the history of their respective communities, particularly with an eye toward understanding unique cultural (especially ethnic) elements handed down from the communities’ founders. Like the rural sociologists of the 1910s and 1920s, the fieldworkers generally gave quite elaborate attention to the character and quality of the communities’ neighborhoods. Above all, though, they scrutinized “values.” Whether the values showed themselves in the communities’ schools, churches, farm practices, or anything else, the social scientists wanted to understand their character and impact on the life of each community. They were confident that these “values” held the key to understanding why some places had developed systems of farming that undermined the health of the soil and the strength of the community. They also wanted to know to what extent “outside influences” and the “changing world” had intruded into the locality. Did the people read magazines, listen to the radio, or go to the movies? This provided a gauge of whether a community had undermined its strength by adopting values foreign to itself, but also a measure of its amenability to the interventions of the USDA. Naturally, the fieldworkers also collected information on how these communities had received and adapted to the New Deal programs that they had encountered to date. Overall, their findings had to reveal the level of each communities’ “stability” or “instability” and the cultural cause of such a state.⁶¹

⁶¹ Larson, Zimmerman, and Moe, *Sociology in Government*, 100-102, 156.

My characterization of what the social scientists looked for in these communities comes from reading the reports that publicized their findings. Those are: Olen Leonard and C. P. Loomis, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: El Cerrito, New Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1941); Earl H. Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Sublette, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942); Kenneth MacLeish and Kimball Young, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Landaff, New Hampshire* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942); Walter M. Kollmorgen, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural*

Walter Kollmorgen, a geographer by training and a rural sociologist by practice, went to live with the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Kollmorgen had no thought of “modernizing” life among these farmers who called themselves the Plain People. His sojourn into Amish country reflected the longstanding conviction that “cultural islands,” especially the most “traditional” among them, could shed light on how certain communities managed to maintain a high degree of “stability” even as the forces of “instability” and cultural decay surrounded them. Indeed, there was much to ponder in what Kollmorgen encountered among the Old Order Amish in Lancaster County. For starters, he found a community lacking in most of the institutions and spatial patterns that rural sociologists had insisted for decades ordered healthy communities. Churches did not provide a literal center of the community, as sociologists expected them to, because Amish worship services happened in homes and not church buildings. Public schools did not provide a “focal point” for the community either, nor did they create unity between the Plain People and the non-Amish (or other Amish sects for that matter) of Lancaster County as sociologists would have hoped. The Old Order Amish sent their children to primary school so long as the institutions remained one-room affairs located in their neighborhoods where parents could be sure that a majority of the children were Amish. They ferociously resisted the efforts of local authorities to consolidate schools and especially reviled the notion of compulsory high school. (The one way to get the Amish to attend meetings of the local secular government was for it to take up matters affecting the schools). The Amish did not order their lives within trade watersheds centered on towns or villages either—this was an old hobbyhorse of the sociologists—because those places were worldly and therefore sinful. And, for good measure, as Kollmorgen discovered, Plain People also mostly rejected membership in

Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942); Edward O. Moe and Carl C. Taylor, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Irwin, Iowa* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942); Waller Wynne, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Harmony, Georgia* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1943).

secular cooperative organizations, which rural community reformers had touted for decades as the only way farm people could achieve modern standards of living.⁶²

And yet, Kollmorgen also witnessed a more active, cohesive, and prosperous rural culture and community life than sociologists ever expected to find anywhere, this among a community flung over 150 square miles. Kollmorgen saw firsthand that the Plain People's lives belied the reputation of Amish existence as dour and unhappy. He studied and immersed himself in all of these less well-known elements of this particular Amish culture. He attended their "singings": festive, Sunday-evening gatherings especially favored by young Plain People for which everyone donned their finest and that featured church hymns, refreshments, and group riddling games that could run nearly till midnight. Kollmorgen also saw how the Old Order Amish cemented the bonds of their culture and their values through constant socializing and visiting. It was nothing for an Amish family to set aside a week or two (or even more) in which to travel and visit widely-scattered relatives. There were entire days too set aside for visiting: New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Pentecost, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and second Christmas Day. These contacts with kith and kin also served as the basis for cooperative work, which was surely more central to Amish culture than any other in the country. The Plain People harvested wheat, filled grain silos, and made hay cooperatively; they organized "bees" for activities as diverse as timber cutting and quilting; when someone fell ill or died, neighbors simply took over whatever farm activities had been disrupted for the stricken or bereaved family; and, of course, they had their famous barn-raising.⁶³

Belying another inaccurate stigma frequently placed on them, Kollmorgen documented that the culture of the Old Order Amish was highly adaptable in its relation to innovation and technology. Amish adaptations, as he discovered, were selective. The Plain People picked and chose which technologies and practices to adopt or reject based on their understanding of the

⁶² Kollmorgen, *Old Order Amish*, 9, 64-67, 72-75.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

Bible, but also on their desire to generate enough cash to buy more land so that their children could perpetuate the Old Order culture. Kollmorgen found that these Amished used trucks in their daily farming operations and to haul their produce to market, but eschewed their use for local travel, relying on their famous buggies instead. They rejected the use of tractors for cultivating the land, but they were not forbidden to use a tractor's belt power to run equipment out of the fields, which they often did. In fact, the typical Amish farm had more than \$1000 worth of machinery (most of which relied, of course, on old-fashioned horsepower and human musclepower). Their farms had perfectly modern milking facilities, and the Plain People built ingenious waterwheel pumps along their streams that provided running water for multiple farms from a single source.⁶⁴

The agriculture that Kollmorgen saw the Old Order Amish practicing said a lot about their culture too. The Plain People practiced a truly intensive and also thoroughly commercial farming. They especially turned to tobacco to generate the cash that they needed. The average Old Order farm was “only” 48 acres, but the Plain People harvested from about 40 of those acres. The gross income from one of their typical farms was about \$5000, high by anyone's standards. This level of living required no soil mining. It did require a lot of manure (husbandry was at the center of all their agriculture, where it had to be) and, of course, a lot of hard work. Like any appropriate and sensitive agriculture, the Amish farms were nearly orchestral in how they operated. It was nothing, over the course of year, to see clover, alfalfa, timothy, potatoes, oats, corn, barley, wheat, and tobacco on a single farm. This is to say nothing of the Amish vegetable gardens, livestock (chickens, cows, sheep), and dairying operations. Old Order farm women canned hundreds of quarts of vegetables every year and probably did “more needlework and sewing” than anyone anywhere, producing clothes, quilts, carpets, linens, and the like—and this in addition to all the labor they put into tending gardens, milking cows, processing dairy products, keeping chickens, and doing some harvesting in the fields. And contrary to popular

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5, 43, 53.

perceptions about them, the Plain People did not shy from agricultural innovation. They frequently experimented with new crops and rotations, the knowledge of which they gathered and disseminated in their frequent visits with one another. (One of the reasons the Old Order Amish kept their children out of high school was the fact that good farming is complicated. Children had too much to learn to leave them in school all day).⁶⁵

After taking all of this in, Kollmorgen concluded, unsurprisingly and no doubt accurately, that their unique religious commitments and historical experiences forged the Plain People's culture in Lancaster County. The social scientist was especially perceptive in his understanding that the dynamism and movement of Amish culture happened in the space between its people's desire to live within their understanding of the bible and their need to acquire more land so that their culture could perpetuate itself. They had to strike a delicate balance between subsistence and commerce. Too much subsistence meant not enough land to perpetuate their culture and too much commerce meant the steady erosion of what made their culture meaningful. Amish opposition to using tractors for cultivating fields, for example, was anything but reactionary: they understood that it meant laying out their fields to serve a machine's needs rather than their own, but also that it would mean bigger and fewer farms. Despite all of the light that he generated on these matters, Kollmorgen could not get himself to name explicitly one of the most important things these farmers held at bay with the strength of their culture: market-based social relations. Using tractors to generate more cash income would have meant a greater role for capital in dictating Amish agriculture when they explicitly shunned most borrowing from banks (and also the FSA) because of the loss of control that it represented. That the Amish had thwarted market-based social relations meant that there were no land booms in Lancaster County. It meant a tenancy ladder that actually functioned. It meant credit relations that constituted and cemented the bonds of kinship and community rather than disregarding or dissolving them. It meant that there were no farm foreclosures and there were

⁶⁵ Ibid., 43-50, 90.

no bankers looking over shoulders, making sure that capital got the largest increment possible from land and labor. Above all, it meant something close to permanence and therefore the perpetuation of Amish culture in Lancaster County. Kollmorgen's findings could have suggested to the USDA's social scientists a more critical perspective on the business farming that they championed, but this was not a lesson they were willing to absorb.⁶⁶

The anthropologist Horace Miner went to immerse himself in the culture of Hardin County, Iowa. The DFPRL dispatched Kollmorgen to Lancaster County to study it as a suggestive curiosity. It sent Miner to Iowa to study something much more typical: "corn belt culture." If anything was exemplary of the cultures of commerce, it was this. Miner arrived in Iowa with the unobjectionable "hypothesis" that the "nature of a culture" set the limits of change that could take place within it. He wanted to assess as exactly as possible the nature of that culture in Hardin County and its impact on the efficacy of the USDA's programs there. Miner used an elaborate procedure to settle on Hardin County as Iowa's most typical; fittingly, it resided roughly in the middle of that rather symmetrical state. Miner spent the better part of four months there late in 1939. He took his role as a "participant-observer" seriously. He made every effort to blend into the prevailing "culture." He wore clothes in the local fashion; his car carried a local tag; he lived, with his family, in Hardin's county seat; he told locals the half-truth that he was a college professor studying farm life, purposefully omitting the fact that he worked for the USDA and asking the county agent to help him keep that fact quiet. And rather than traveling under the aegis of that county agent, Miner met the people of county on his own terms and theirs: in their churches, fields, and barns as they went about their work and their lives. He did all of this confident that it would bring him closer to discovering the inner workings of Hardin's culture.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 24-26, 30-34, 51-52.

⁶⁷ Horace Miner, *Culture and Agriculture: An Anthropological Study of a Corn Belt Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1949), 1-7.

Just as rural sociologists had done in their community studies since the 1910s and 20s, Miner went down the rabbit hole of attempting to gather enough information to depict a total social, and now cultural, reality. Along with conducting extensive interviews and studying the history of the county, Miner compiled copious amounts of information about Hardin County's people, their neighborhoods, institutions, customs, beliefs, and values. He left no stone unturned in his quest for understanding. At the end of his time in Hardin County, Miner could hold forth on the "attitudes" of young Hardin residents toward farm work and recite, in detail, what the typical work day of a farm man and a farm woman looked like. He had spent enough time in the county's churches to confidently describe how and whether they transmitted religious values. When a farm family went to town on Saturday, Miner could confidently predict the activities and entertainments each member of the family, based on age and gender, would gravitate toward. If nothing else, after four months in Iowa, Miner could have drowned the people of Hardin County in information about themselves: from the number of them that owned radio sets (and the kinds of programs that they favored) to how much they typically spent on food each year.⁶⁸

And still, Miner's efforts showed not only the difficulty of applying the "anthropological" information he had gathered but also the fallacy of assigning "values" the most important causal force in "culture." The anthropologist had much to say about the "values" that caused overproduction and soil mining but nothing about the deeper history and political economy that fostered those values. Miner believed that the AAA, for example, had tried to introduce into Hardin County "new values," among them "crop reduction" and "soil conservation." These either "fit" or "conflicted" with the local culture and where there was conflict, either "the old ways or the new ways had to change." Unsurprisingly, the social scientist found that "farm values were not attuned to crop reduction." Reduction flew in the face of "the whole farm philosophy" that had reigned in Hardin County since its settlement. Overproduction was a matter of habit and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 37-74.

culture. In fact, locals viewed producing abundantly as a matter of “men’s status and even their character.” Farmers had accepted the AAA program (and its payments) because they needed the money and because they could tell themselves that they had earned it. It was not relief. It did not, Miner concluded, “change their philosophy of life,” which was why Hardin’s farmers had turned to hybrid corn even after the introduction of the AAA’s crop control measures. He made the same judgment of the effort to introduce the “value” of “soil conservation” in the county. That work had been “very popular” because its virtues conformed to the cultural values of “increased production and proper care of the soil.” The emphasis, though, was on the increased production because the mantra in the county, even among conservation workers, was, “Mine your soil when the prices are high.” The programs that the SCS introduced were another way of doing that. Miner was left to conclude, limply, that these kinds of “values” and the local culture had to be given primary consideration when implementing programs, though he offered no suggestions as to how they might affect the USDA initiatives. He also cautioned—again in a way rendered irrelevant in the lack of specificity and applicability—that USDA social scientists had to keep in mind that it was not their job to “fit the people to the plan” but to fit the plan to the people because, in the early stages of any program, “the plan is the adaptable element.”⁶⁹

If there was anywhere that an agrarian liberal should have been able to confront not only the role of heedless business-farming in rural “cultures” but also experts’ own role in fostering it, it would have been on the Great Plains. That was where the DFPRL sent the anthropologist Earl H. Bell, specifically to Sublette, Kansas, in the Southwestern part of the state—the area that had reeled from the Dust Bowl. When he arrived there, Bell found a rural sociological nightmare. One of the things that agrarians had always prized about rural life (and elevated to the level of a cliché) was its “rhythm”—the slow and even pace of life that the sun, the seasons, and the biological requirements of plants and animals imparted to farm communities. There was no “rhythm of the land” in Sublette—or in all of Haskell County for that matter. The character of life

⁶⁹ Ibid., 86-89, 94.

there was manic. There were periodic frenzies of activity that the wheat crop and the rhythms and needs of machines demanded and which were then punctuated by long periods of idleness and indifference to most of the practices (cultivating gardens, tending livestock, etc.) that filled out the seasons in other farming communities. The mania came on strongest in July, when farmers harvested the wheat crop. In vast fields, tractors and combines worked in tandem, cutting ten or twenty foot swaths through the fields. The machines set the pace of work, each pair commanding four men. One man operated the combine and another the tractor. A third man drove a truck that ran alongside the combine catching the grain while a fourth emptied wheat from a second truck that would slide in the place of the first as soon as it was full. The operation ran from the time the sun came up until it set; some farmers used lights so that they could continue to harvest at night. This managed to set the pace for nearly everyone in the county: for the women who had to feed the teams of workers; for the mechanics in town who were roused in the middle of the night to repair broken-down rigs; and for the old-timers who had moved to town but who still chattered endlessly about where prices stood. Trucks zoomed up and down the highways, some carrying grain to the elevators, others delivering parts to repair broken machinery, and others still carrying the fuel and oil that kept this whole operation running. But Earl Bell found that once the harvest stopped, so did most of the agriculture. People rested, recovered, sometimes went on vacations, and mostly waited until the fall when it was time to plant wheat again.⁷⁰

Bell also found a culture in Sublette just as offensive to agrarian sensibilities as its farming. As the anthropologist documented, there was a constant and high rate of population turnover. Most of Sublette's farmers did not own the land that they farmed; even worse, many of them did not even want to—it was not always a good business proposition for them to do so. Forty percent of Haskell County's farmers did not live on the farms that they "operated" and some of these non-resident operators did not even live in Kansas, much less in Haskell or a

⁷⁰ Earl Bell, *Sublette Kansas*, 50-51.

neighboring county. It was not uncommon for the larger farmers to own \$20,000 worth of equipment. One of Haskell County's four equipment dealers had sold 72 combines in 1929. There were not even 200 horses in the entire county. The farmers of Sublette had even managed to dispatch some the basic features that defined agricultural landscapes. Many of them did not keep gardens. The more transient among them had gotten rid of their livestock because they did not want anything other than the harvest bringing them to their "farms." And once those farmers got rid of the livestock, they often razed their barns so they did not have to pay taxes on them. Naturally, all of this had hollowed out Sublette as a "community." There were no neighborhoods to speak of in the county, and life did not center around Sublette or any other single town. People drove wherever it best suited them depending on the business at hand. It was the kind of place where people, rather than "visiting" or organizing the activities (various bakes, roasts, parades and the like) that sociologists loved to see, would drive dozens of miles to take in a motion picture. It was nothing for a farm family with children of driving age to put 25,000 clicks on the odometer in a year. Bell estimated that some traveled as many as 75,000 miles if their farm "holdings" were non-contiguous.⁷¹

Staring Bell in the face was a place where the kind of agriculture that sought only profit had met its match. Not only had the extremes of that system of agriculture produced the Dust Bowl, it had produced a culture that violated every basic precept of cohesiveness and permanence. Bell was by no means ignorant of the role that the government and railroad companies had played in luring farmers to this part of Kansas, nor of the overproduction and speculative bubble that the government had encouraged during World War I. He was not deluded about this region's climate either: he well-knew that cyclical "drought" was normal on this part of the Plains. He had not been duped into thinking that the Dust Bowl was a cruel and unforeseeable tragedy inflicted by "nature." He explicitly rejected such an interpretation. And yet, after his time in Sublette, Bell insisted that this was purely a "cultural" failure. When

⁷¹ Ibid., 34-43, 48-50, 68-69.

farmers came onto the Plains, they had carried with them “a cultural heritage” that had worked well for them in the east, where the climate was wetter and a 160 acre farm was perfectly large, but that same culture had sabotaged them on the Plains. If the people would just rein in a little bit of their excessive zeal for cash crops, settle down, stay in one place awhile, and sink roots, then everything would be fine. They would develop a culture and agriculture appropriate to this environment, especially its aridity. They would not chase after every single fad that came along in seeds and equipment. They would learn to understand the land and its needs and how to live and operate within those. They would build actual neighborhoods and communities. Above all, they would learn “that good years and bad years are both to be expected, that eventually bad years are sure to follow good ones. When that is recognized, the basis for a stable agriculture and social life may be developed.” It would not have been an unreasonable indictment had it come with an understanding that it was the completely commercial orientation of agriculture, in the environmental context of the Great Plains, that had precluded those things.⁷²

Again and again, the New Deal agrarian liberals—both the economists of the AAA and the BAE and the other social scientists of the BAE’s DFPRL—failed to perceive that these problems were not just a matter of cultural will or even of developing mechanisms to deliver higher incomes to farmers. They could not get themselves to see that there was, in fact, an inverse relationship between healthy rural communities and an agriculture that sought only cash profits. The programs that they designed to bolster farmers’ income in the commercial cultures had the ultimate effect of further consolidating that agriculture and further undermining the strength of many rural communities. Their program for the Great Plains illustrates this. Despite the liberals’ emphasis on building stable and permanent rural cultures, the New Deal offered solutions that only made the problems worse. In the wake of devastating droughts in 1934 and 1936, after the Dust Bowl had showered the detritus of environmental catastrophe over the whole country, Roosevelt commissioned a blue ribbon panel to find

⁷² Ibid., 7, 29, 109.

solutions for the Plains. Lewis Cecil Gray, an agrarian liberal *par excellence* who worked both in the Resettlement Administration and the Program Planning Division of the AAA, was the driving force on the President's Great Plains Committee. In the main, the committee prescribed a program of government sponsored consolidation. Plains farmers needed *even bigger* farms because they had to convert their land to more extensive uses, either switching to ranching or introducing crop rotations and soil conservation practices that required more land. The government began buying up the land with the "lowest productivity" from the smaller producers. These were people who, according to the Plains Committee, could never make an adequate income from their farms, people who were "stranded" and whom the government sought to "relieve" of their "uneconomic holdings." Then the government extended liberal credit through the Farm Credit Administration so that the larger producers could further consolidate their holdings. Armies of CCC and SCS workers then moved in to teach (and pay) farmers to irrigate, terrace, contour, and list their land—all so that they could earn a living from cash crops in a place hostile to that kind of farming. The historian Donald Worster estimated that 22 million acres "were given the SCS treatment" on the southern Plains alone. All of this work came on top of the initial \$525 million dollars of "relief" that the government had allocated in 1934 for the states hardest hit by the drought. But in deciding that farms needed to be bigger and more profitable, the New Dealers were only contributing to the dispossession that had already hollowed out Plains communities and further assuring that the remaining farms produced even more cash crops than they had in the past. About one million people left the Plains between 1930 and 1935; another 2.5 million did so in the second half of the decade. The new farming techniques (and the now-endless subsidies from government) meant that fewer farmers could now produce more than they had in the even the most frenzied of earlier years. By the 1940s, with the demands from another global war, millions more acres were being brought under the plow on the Plains, including land that had been "reclaimed" and put back into grass at great

cost to taxpayers in the 1930s. In the 1950s, the dust storms returned. Naturally, none of this helped to revitalize the rural communities of places like Sublette.⁷³

The Plains offer only a particularly absurd version of the dilemma that the New Deal agrarians had put themselves in across the whole country: the more they worked to simultaneously boost farm income and hold down production, the more production increased, the more farmers were driven from agriculture, and the more their strategies ultimately undermined the quality and substance of the rural life that they thought they were defending. The impact of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in the South is only the best-known and most direct example of this process. A majority of the South's farmers did not own the land that they worked. When the AAA began paying southern landlords to reduce their cotton acreage, many of them ignored its guidelines suggesting that they should not evict their renters and croppers. The tenants who avoided that sad fate universally faced the indignity of seeing most of the AAA payments go to their landlords. And that was only if their landlords did not defraud them outright, depriving them of even the pittance due them under the program. The complaints the poured into AAA headquarters in Washington suggest that many landlords could not tolerate seeing any of the money going to their croppers and tenants. All of this happened under the aegis of "democratic" county AAA committees that left sharecroppers in the position of having to appeal to the wealthiest landlords in their counties for redress on these grievances. The AAA's agrarian liberals remained shamefully silent through the evictions and fraud because they could not reconcile their genuine sympathy for southern sharecroppers and their desire to see most farmers remain on the land with their desire to rationalize agricultural production. If

⁷³ *The Future of the Great Plains: Report of the Great Plains Committee* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1936), 74-75; *Wilson Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 1508-1509, 1512-1513; Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 25th anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39-40, 48-50, 222-230.

there was anywhere in the country where a more efficient and fully rational agriculture could be brought to bear, it should have been the South. Yet this was what that process looked like.⁷⁴

Less understood is the fact that a great deal of the undoing of the liberals' plans would come from the "soil conservation" practices that they introduced and that made the American agricultural landscape so much healthier. The dimensions of this problem would not become fully perceptible until after World War II, however. Recall that after the initial reductions that the AAA sponsored in 1933, the agrarian liberals had worked to move the AAA toward a program of "adjustment" by introducing "conservation practices" into American agriculture. The reconfigured AAA of 1936, which came in the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling that the original legislation was unconstitutional, officially made soil conservation the basis of the AAA's entire operation. The effects were dramatic. By the late 1930s, the American farm plant was more terraced, contoured, rotated, manured, and top-dressed than it ever had been before. There were 12 million fewer acres in corn, 3 million fewer in wheat, and 16 million fewer in cotton. There were now millions more acres in soil-conserving grasses. There was three times as much land in green manure crops (grasses and legumes that got plowed into the soil as part of a crop rotation) and cover crops as there had been before the New Deal. (Cover crops reduced erosion in otherwise idle fields and also when planted between rows of cash crops). But all of this increased the land's productivity. One estimate had it that the introduction of cover cropping in the South increased an acre's yield by 100 pounds of cotton or 12 bushels of corn. These conservation practices go a long way in explaining why even by the late 1930s, the AAA was still having to push through huge reductions to the country's major crops. It helps explain too the fact that despite programs of adjustment and reduction that had been in place since 1933, the country's overall agricultural output was up by 10 percent in 1940. Amazingly, that bounty came from 38 million fewer acres of land. (Increased use of machinery, fertilizer, and

⁷⁴ Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 64-135; Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 207-210; Volanto, *Texas, Cotton, and the New Deal*, 55-56, 60, 62.

soil amendments and the introduction of hybrid corn also bolstered productivity. New Deal dollars played their part in fostering those changes too).⁷⁵

Agrarian New Dealers were not going to be able to escape this dilemma, though World War II would briefly hold out the illusion that these were not problems at all. The impact of the USDA's programs in the cultures of commerce should not have surprised them, however. They built all of their income-raising initiatives around the assumption that farmers had to predominantly grow cash crops for the market and that they had to grow those as efficiently as possible. The benefits from their programs targeting commercial producers had therefore flowed largely to the most commercial producers, helping them to reach new heights of productivity. Even the AAA's liberals understood that bigger farmers were more likely to participate in reduction and adjustment programs and that most of the benefits went to those farmers. And the AAA program was only one large part of a much larger iceberg. Along with many billions in direct subsidy payments, by the end of the 1930s, the larger and more prosperous farmers in the cultures of commerce had received billions more in cheap, government-supplied credit—aid that by definition only went to the relatively better-off producers. They had deposited hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of their crops in government owned warehouses in exchange for nonrecourse loans equaling more than the market value of their crops. If the value of those crops rose, they could sell them; if not, the government ate the loss. They now bought crop insurance from the federal government too, which also had programs that distributed millions of pounds of their surplus commodities to the poor. Along with constantly raising the price of “business farming” and requiring ever-larger farms, all of this would eventually add up to a

⁷⁵ *Technology on the Farm: A Special Report by an Interbureau Committee and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1940), 28-29, 78; Walter W. Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War* (Ames: The Iowa State College Press, 1947), 6, 11.

massive and permanent subvention that would support fewer and fewer farmers every year as it also continued to produce ever more mountainous surpluses.⁷⁶

Chapter Four will examine the dramatically different programs that the USDA's liberals designed for what they designated as cultures of poverty. The terrain of action will shift from the AAA and the BAE to the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration. In the broadest sense, the poverty cultures were composed of the 50 percent of the country's farmers who produced only 10 percent of the nation's bounty. But the USDA's liberals also consistently singled out certain regions as the geographic centers of the cultures of poverty: especially Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Great Lakes Cutover Region, parts of the Cotton Belt, and the northern portion of Arizona and New Mexico. The USDA's efforts in the poverty cultures centered on "rehabilitation," which meant trying to alter the cultures that social scientists thought contributed to rural poverty.

⁷⁶ Howard Tolley had commissioned a study that quantified to whom AAA benefit payments went. Henry Wallace toyed with the idea of having it suppressed before allowing it to be published: *Participation Under A. A. A. Programs, 1933-35: A Report of a Study Made to Determine the Extent of Farmer Participation in the Original Agricultural Adjustment Programs According to Commodities, Type of Farm Tenure, and Size of Benefit Payments* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1938). For the liberal credit and other farm programs under the New Deal see Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982); Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981).

Chapter 4

Cultures of Poverty and the New Deal

A new day had dawned in El Pueblo. The Farm Security Administration insisted that it had because the agency had arrived in 1938 in San Miguel County, New Mexico, and in these three tiny villages to jolt their “Spanish-American” residents out of the cultural inertia that allegedly engulfed them. El Pueblo was poorer than most of the places that the FSA ventured, which was precisely why the agency had gone there. Some poor farmers had just seemed beyond the supervised credit (“rehabilitation”) programs that it had to offer. That had nagged at FSA administrators, however, so in 1938 they devised an initiative to take on roughly 500 of the poorest families in the most impoverished regions of the country: the Cotton South, southern Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Great Lakes Cutover Region, and the northern half of New Mexico and Arizona. Because these 500 families were among the hardest cases, the FSA arranged to have some of its best technicians to provide the “supervision” that its rehabilitation programs entailed. In El Pueblo, supervisors offered classes on farm management and record keeping, hoping to bolster the income of the local residents. The FSA lent money for El Pueblo families to cooperatively purchase a grain thresher and other farm equipment, including plows and cultivators. The agency organized a health cooperative that gave members access medical care, though most of the villagers did not join because the cooperating doctors lived too far from El Pueblo. FSA home supervisors taught village women the techniques of home canning. The families’ loans covered the equipment needed for home food preservation as well as the cost of adding more chickens and cows to their modest livestock holdings. The FSA calculated that the dozens of village families who participated in the program were canning more than 300 quarts

of vegetables per year by 1942. Their flocks of chickens had doubled in size; 35 of the families now owned cows compared to five of them previously.¹

The Farm Security Administration had not gone to El Pueblo, however, simply to help its families to eat better. It had gone there to teach them how to live better too. Social scientists who studied the initiative there on the FSA's behalf reported their conviction that the program had changed the people's personalities. The sociologists Rachel Rowe Swiger and Olaf F. Larson believed by 1943 that the FSA's activities in El Pueblo "have broadened the vision of these families. It has also stimulated faith in their ability to solve their own problems." After the FSA's rehabilitation efforts had taken root, these social scientists detected "pride" in the way the families talked about the community building that the agency had asked them to build. Larson and Swiger saw too a reportedly newfound willingness among the villagers to do things for themselves. New leaders had emerged. The social scientists reported that the FSA's farm and home supervisors in El Pueblo had intentionally cultivated these changes. The supervisors worked, according to Swiger and Larson, "quietly behind the scenes providing needed inspiration and guidance for the development of direct leaders among the families themselves. The role of the supervisors has been chiefly to suggest or to point out various activities and to explain how they might be put into operation." From there, it was "left entirely up to the families themselves" as to whether they took action. Sometimes they did. FSA clients in El Pueblo formed purchasing and marketing associations, built a community laundry, and started a lunch program for the local school. The "group activities," according to the FSA's social scientists, had begun to foster "human adjustments." "Neighbors who were not on speaking terms are now working together, accomplishing tasks that would have been impossible through isolated and

¹ Conrad Taeuber and Rachel Rowe, *Five Hundred Families Rehabilitate Themselves: Summarized from Annual Reports of Twenty-two Farm Security Administration Farm and Home Supervisors* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1941), 1-18, 23-25; Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *Solving Problems Through Cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1942), 1-4; Rachel Rowe Swiger and Olaf F. Larson, *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: Five Hundred Low-Income Farm Families In Wartime* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1943), 3, 14.

individual effort. Frustrated individuals, finding a way through participation in group action to satisfy their inherent craving ‘to be’ and ‘to belong’ have developed into respected and responsible community leaders.” These people were being rehabilitated.²

Unfortunately, we have no record of whether the villagers of El Pueblo shared this impression of the effects of the FSA’s efforts in their villages. But we do know why the FSA framed the solution to the villages’ poverty in this way. Here is what the FSA farm and home supervisors on the ground in San Miguel County reported about the state of the villagers before the agency had arrived in 1938 to help them live better:

They are an uneducated people, culturally, socially, and emotionally bound to the traditions and practices of their great-grandfathers, ignorant of what lies within their reach, and with no knowledge of how to reach for it. Compelled to live in the world in which they found themselves and to identify themselves with the country, they have learned to accept their lot with an attitude closely akin to fatalism. More than 300 years of cultural stagnation has closed their eyes to the vision of a better future, and their experiences contain nothing that would cause them to anticipate a better way of life. They are a people without a leader in need of being awakened to a realization of their needs and fired with a desire for progress.³

This was how the people who conceived and designed the USDA’s most extensive anti-poverty efforts during the New Deal talked when they talked about poverty. They talked about culture. They talked about the need for leaders and hope and “self-direction.” They did not quite blame the rural poor for their poverty because they freely credited its material and economic dimensions. In fact, as we will see, they did more than any others to document those things. But USDA anti-poverty authorities fixated on what they considered the cultural effects of that poverty. In the eyes of the FSA, the only thing that set the people of El Pueblo apart from the rural poor in other areas of concentrated poverty was that the New Mexicans cultural deficiencies, their defeatedness and their ignorance, were allegedly rooted in a deeper past than

² Swiger and Larson, *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 18-19, 22-23; Swiger and Taeuber, *Solving Problems*, 3-4.

³ Swiger and Taeuber, *Solving Problems*, 2.

was the case with most poor cultivators. Everywhere they found widespread poverty, USDA New Dealers found “apathy,” “fatalism,” people without leaders, and people without hope. They found people who needed to be healed and awakened to their long-forgotten or never-known ability to do things for themselves. Rather than designing programs that removed the actual causes of poverty, then, the key USDA anti-poverty agencies believed that if the poverty cultures of the rural poor could be arrested and reversed, then the downtrodden could save themselves. (In fact, they would have already done that had it not been for their cultures).

Cultures of poverty sat at the heart of the USDA’s New Deal in two senses. They were there as the bundle of material and non-material traits that the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration tried to beat back, but they were there too as geographically definable regions in which poverty predominated. Poor families who could not or no longer cared to do for themselves *had* poverty cultures; the Plantation South *was* a poverty culture; so were southern Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Cutover Region of the Great Lakes states, and the northern half of Arizona and New Mexico. When New Dealers talked about poverty, they always singled out these same places. To be sure, attacking cultures of poverty did involve affronting some of its material dimensions, especially working to improve the diets and health of poor farmers. Those measures were intended, however, to change people’s personalities and therefore to reform their cultures. These anti-poverty efforts were also, of course, palliative, no matter how much they might also ease the suffering of a poor family and bring some additional measure of dignity to the way that it could live. The programs’ proponents did not talk about them in these terms, however. Rehabilitation was supposed to equal salvation for all the families it reached by addressing the insidiousness of the cultures that had kept them from saving themselves.

This chapter begins with an overview of the depth of the rural poverty that social scientists uncovered when the Great Depression finally forced them to reckon with problems

that, in fact, far preceded the calamity that settled over the nation after 1929. We then turn to examining how culture was always in the air when social scientists and USDA New Dealers (who were frequently the same people) talked about rural poverty. Only rarely did these experts blame poor people and their cultures as the direct cause of their original poverty. More typically, as we will see, they mixed cultural and economic explanations and treated the economic dimensions of poverty as something that produced a downward spiral, a spiral that bottomed out in a culture of poverty that rendered its victims helpless and damaged. The USDA's remedy for that culture was rehabilitation. Even though the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration have always been known as the originators of noble experiments that gave land to the landless, these were, in fact, overwhelmingly rehabilitation agencies. For the vast majority of the families who experienced it after the government created the RA in 1935, rehabilitation meant, at best, more food and better health. That was supposed to give poor farmers the "hope" and "self-direction" to beat back the cultural pathologies that had allegedly perpetuated their poverty. Rehabilitation also therefore involved a potentially intrusive and frequently demeaning "supervision" from the FSA's experts in farm and home management. Chapters Five and Six detail the most common kind of RA/FSA rehabilitation, which came to hundreds of thousands of poor farm families through these agencies' "standard rehabilitation loans." Before taking up that story in the subsequent chapters, we will examine how the RA and the FSA (after 1937) tried to use their famed resettlement communities as sociological laboratories of rehabilitation for the relatively small number of families whose program of uplift did, in fact, involve settling them on better farms.

It is ironic that the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration ultimately offered mostly palliative solutions to rural poverty when social scientists working for those agencies (along with cohorts in other government agencies) did so much to also establish the longstanding and deep-seated nature of the misery in so much of the countryside. Even after

so many decades of studying the “farm problem,” the plight of poor farmers caught agricultural experts flatfooted when Great Depression hit. The productionist-oriented Extension Service had always ignored non-commercial cultivators. Rural sociologists had mostly done their studies in Midwestern communities where poverty was comparatively rare and understood as the plight of village eccentrics or ne’er-do-wells. As we saw in Chapter Three, the AAA and BAE’s liberal agricultural economists thought that they had solutions for the income problems of the cultures of commerce, but those acted as if poor farmers did not exist or would not be adversely affected by land planning. Despite this wishful thinking, the Depression did force a reckoning on the part of social scientists concerned with agriculture. Suddenly, millions of rural families clamored for relief. By 1940, 3.5 million rural families, roughly one of every four, had received some kind of “public assistance.” And that was only the rural people who had managed to get it, not a reflection of all of those who actually needed it. As social scientists began to dig into the nature and scope of this problem for the first time, they made a horrifying discovery: the existence of pervasive rural poverty.⁴

As sociologists and economists began to delve into the facts, they uncovered a genuinely disturbing picture. About one-third of America’s farm population had living standards that could be declared “submarginal.” More than one-quarter of the nation’s farmers either sold, traded, or consumed less than \$600 worth of goods in a given year, \$600 being considered a benchmark of poverty. Nearly a million farms had less than \$400 in gross income and roughly 400,000 of them had less than \$250. In 1935, 13 million Americans lived on farms that their families did not own. And this is to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who worked as farm laborers and who would not become an object of sustained social scientific interest until World War II. Concentrations of this poverty created “rural slums,” places characterized by “poor housing, lack of household facilities and sanitation, ill health, insufficient income to buy even the physical necessities of life, and few or no opportunities to participate in

⁴ M. L. Wilson, “Problem of Poverty in Agriculture,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 22, no. 1 (Feb., 1940), 11.

the consumption of cultural goods and services.” Perhaps most alarming of all was that this poverty was clearly “chronic” and not a product of the Depression itself. As one group of social scientists, attempting to synthesize the new poverty literature late in the 1930s, put it: “The data reveal conditions as they existed in 1929 and earlier...They therefore reveal chronic sore spots and persistent problems, not merely emergency issues and problems, and not issues that can be easily resolved.” For millions of America’s farmers, the agrarian dream was apparently a nightmare. Gove Hambridge, a public relations officer for the USDA, called this poverty a “cancer” in 1940, even after years of New Deal anti-poverty initiatives. In the same year, Paul Maris, a high-ranking official in the Farm Security Administration, warned, “The spirit of democracy cannot flourish where ignorance, poverty, insecurity, ill health, and despair are the lot of vast numbers of rural people.”⁵

There should be no question that genuine concern drove these social scientists in their investigations, but they also operated out of a definite fear. They returned again and again to what they considered an alarming fact: the poorest areas also tended to have the highest birthrates. They worried that high rates of population increase in the poverty cultures pushed already overtaxed natural resources to the breaking point and compounded the problem of poverty. Nonetheless, their concern shaded into an unseemly population alarmism. They worried that an upswing in the industrial economy might cause the areas of most heavily concentrated rural poverty to disgorge themselves—to use an unfortunate phrase, but one evocative of their concerns—of their “surplus” population. They assumed that this potentially mobile population would have low educational levels and be ill-prepared for life and “assimilation” into the nation’s cities. Throughout the 1930s, social scientists became increasingly interested in quantifying the scope and the nature of rural population mobility. The

⁵ Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler, and E.L. Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1938), 3-7; Gove Hambridge, “Farmers in a Changing World—A Summary,” 3 and Paul V. Maris, “Farm Tenancy,” 888, both in *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940).

specter of this rural lumpen population overrunning its present confines lingered at the edges of even the most genuine sympathy for the rural poor.⁶

Social scientists consistently singled out the same areas as constituting the greatest concentrations of rural poverty: southern Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Cotton Belt, the Great Lakes “Cutover Region” of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, and the northern half of Arizona and New Mexico. Appalachia and the Ozarks (sometimes designated jointly as the “Appalachian-Ozark Highlands”) actually contained the highest percentages of farmers that social scientists designated as poor. The Ozark poverty region included the greater part of southern Missouri and northern Arkansas. The Appalachian poverty region stretched from north Alabama and Georgia up to West Virginia and western Virginia, engulfing the eastern portion of Tennessee and the western portion of North Carolina along the way. All of this might be termed the Mountain South, and New Dealers understood its topography as key to what they considered the region’s grinding poverty. Nowhere did more farm families live on less than \$600 each year and nowhere did more counties have the majority of their populations below that threshold. Because of its topography, the farms in this region were small, as many as one-fifth of them smaller than 20 acres. Much of the land rated as “submarginal”: too poor to wring a living from. Before the Depression, farmers had frequently supplemented their incomes with work in the lumber and coal industries, though in many places these off-farm work opportunities had evaporated. Along with the supposed “submarginality” of the land, studies of the region tended to point to high birthrates and a general cultural backwardness and “relative isolation” of the people as key factors in the low-income of southern Appalachia and the Ozarks.⁷

⁶ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 1-2, 71-82; O.E Baker and Conrad Taeuber, “The Rural People,” 827-847 in *Farmers in a Changing World*; C.E. Lively and Conrad Taeuber, *Rural Migration in the United States*, reprint of the 1939 ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971).

⁷ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 12-15, 65-66; Linden S. Dodson, *Living Conditions and Population Migration in Four Appalachian Counties* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1937); Charles P. Loomis and Linden S. Dodson, *Standards of Living in Four Southern Appalachian*

Even if Appalachia and the Ozarks technically had greater concentrations of poverty, no area loomed larger than the Cotton South as the center of a poverty culture, in both the popular imagination and the work of social scientists. Poor farmers made majorities in fewer counties than in the Appalachian-Ozark Highlands, but the problem sprawled over a wider area: from the North Carolina piedmont, down through the Black Belt of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, and across Louisiana and into the piney woods of east Texas. Unlike those in the Mountain South, these farmers did not practice “subsistence agriculture.” This was a commercial poverty culture and its major ills were white supremacy, monoculture, environmental degradation, and extraordinarily high rates of tenancy. The rural sociologist Arthur Raper found the cash income of the average white farm family in Greene County, Georgia, was roughly \$300. It was half that for African American farmers. In a study of 632 southern cotton plantations, the sociologist T.J. Woofter reported that the average sharecropper family had an income of \$312. Unlike in Appalachia, most of these farmers did not or could not supplement their income through off-farm work. The region also exhibited a high correlation between farms that grew cotton and those that tenants operated: nearly three-quarters of the families on the cotton farms in the South did not own the land that they farmed. One report on tenancy declared, “The cotton tenant’s standard of living approaches the level of bare animal existence.”⁸

Despite its designation as a poverty culture, social scientists had done less to quantify its poverty compared to other regions of concentrated low income. This was another mountainous region, one mostly populated by the mestizo descendants of earlier Spanish and indigenous

Mountain Counties (Washington, D.C.: FSA and BAE, 1938); *Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Southern Appalachians* (Washington, D.C.: USDA, 1935).

⁸ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 15-16, 48-53; Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 37, 39-41; Thomas Jackson Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, reprint of 1936 edition (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 86-87; 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: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 14.

inhabitants. Many of them did not own land and worked as laborers on ranches or large irrigated farms. The families that did have their own plots had very small holdings and usually sent their sons to find off-farm work away from their villages to supplement the family income. As we will eventually see, the USDA sociologists and farm and home supervisors who worked in this region believed that its people lived outside the normal stream of history. Time had “bypassed” them. They had exhibited a cultural “inertia” in the face of the collapse of their traditional ways of life, refusing to adopt the same modern methods of cultivation and living that the region’s large landholders and Anglos did.⁹

Lastly, social scientists in the 1930s identified the Cutover Region of the Great Lakes states as a culture of poverty. The Cutover was unique among the poverty cultures in that it stood out as part of a farming region that typically had high standards of living. It comprised the northern counties of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, a vast forest had covered the Cutover: maples, elms, birches, and, most alluringly it would turn out, white pines. White pine made for especially good lumber and it floated and therefore could be transported through streams, into Lake Michigan, and down to Chicago. As the historian William Cronon has shown, the more the farmsteads of the prairies proliferated and the more the city of Chicago grew, the more these northern forests shrank. Ultimately, they proved no match for Chicago capital and the surplus value it found in the northern woods, especially once railroads began to penetrate them in the 1870s. The forests vanished with astonishing rapidity and what was left, by the turn of the century, was a wasteland almost lunar in its desolation. Resourceful as ever, lumber and mining companies and boosters of various stripes began to market the land to farmers. These unlucky tillers snatched up much of it and duly discovered that it was almost impossible to scratch a living from it. Potatoes were

⁹ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 16-17; Charles P. Loomis and Olen E. Leonard, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: El Cerito, New Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1941); Charles P. Loomis and Olen E. Leonard, *Standards of Living in an Indian-Mexican Village and On a Reclamation Project* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1938), 1-2.

really all that had a chance in the poor soil and the cold climate. Productionist experts from the agricultural colleges insisted that farming could be made to work in the Cutover, but never managed to make that dream a reality. Cutover cultivators were stuck with the bill of goods they had been sold. Sociologists studying the area in the late 1930s found that for the “farmers” there, nearly as much of their income came from various forms of government “relief” as did from their actual farming operations. Understandably, the Cutover became one of the prime areas that New Dealers targeted for large-scale land retirement.¹⁰

Even though social scientists in the 1930s and early 1940s did much to elucidate the deeper issues causing rural poverty, they also produced works that could do as much to stigmatize poor people and their ways of living as those works did to suggest programs for attacking the underlying causes of poverty. In the late 1930s, A.R. Mangus, an Ohio State University sociologist with funding from the Works Progress Administration’s Social Research Division, developed a method to divide the country into what he called “cultural regions.” The problem with Mangus’s method was its tendentious, near-circular approach. Mangus mostly relied on material indicators of poverty to single out deeply poor regions but then insisted that this was proof of the supposedly cultural factors creating poverty in those places. Mangus simply relied on fairly standard indicators of poverty (or affluence), with a few cherry picked indicators to single out certain areas, to derive his “cultural regions of the United States.” He argued that cultural differences had to explain why certain rural areas had such high percentages of their population on relief. He selected a dizzying array of 83 “cultural indices” by which he might begin to go about discerning the boundaries of rural cultural regions. (These included a whole range of factors from farm size and infant mortality to the number of children enrolled in one-

¹⁰ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 16-17, 66-67; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 151-154, 193, 200-203; Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 96-97; Charles P. Loomis, Joseph J. Lister, and Dwight M. Davidson, Jr., *Standards of Living in the Great Lakes Cut-Over Area* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1938).

room schools). He eliminated indices that he felt measured redundant or closely related phenomena and then subjected the remaining indices to “correlation analyses” to select ones that correlated highly with other of his indices without being so highly correlated as to cross into the category of redundant. He settled on eleven “variables” as those that could identify distinct rural cultural regions:

(1) A rural-farm plane of living index...(2) a rural-farm population-fertility index...(3) the percentage of farms producing less than \$1000 gross income in 1929; (4) the percentage of farm tenancy in 1935; (5) land value per capita of the rural-farm population; (6) the percentage of food farm produce consumed on the farms; (7) the percentage of Negroes in the South; (8) the percentage of ‘other races’ in the Southwest; (9) the percentage of farm wage workers in the West; (10) illiteracy rates; and (11) physiographic features in places where these were prominent elements.¹¹

Mangus revealed more than he knew when he stated that he used his eleven “variables” to “search for regions and subregions.” Indeed, he was searching for and singling out certain places that he undoubtedly already identified as poverty cultures. His style of investigation was, in fact, basically circular. As the eleven indices that he settled on reveal, he picked factors that he already associated with the poverty of certain places. The most obvious example is his inclusion of the “percentage of Negroes in the South” and “the percentage of ‘other races’ in the Southwest” as among his “cultural indices.” He ultimately included enough carefully selected indices that he could isolate the usual suspects in the poverty cultures. For example, he noted that Southern Appalachia, the Ozarks, “various parts of the Old South,” and “a large section of the Southwest where Indians and Spanish-Americans” predominated, stood out dramatically when one looked for the counties that exhibited the lowest “plane of living” and the highest rate of “fertility” simultaneously. Mangus then insisted that the fact that these places were already known to be the “location of distinctive cultures” vindicated the soundness of his method in

¹¹ A.R. Mangus, “Regional Aspects of Contemporary Culture,” *American Sociological Review* 4, no. 4 (Aug., 1939), 506-509. Another investigation in the same vein as Mangus’s: C.E. Lively and R.B. Almack, *A Method of Determining Social Sub-Areas with Special Application to Ohio* (Columbus: Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station, 1938).

identifying these distinctive “cultural regions.” (Using the factors of the lowest fertility and the highest income simultaneously revealed the regions that apparently stood as the cultural opposite of the poverty cultures: among them “central New England and central New York” and “the great Midwest”). Mangus ultimately identified 34 “cultural regions” and 264 rural cultural “subregions” in the country with his method. Carl Taylor, the head of the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, declared Mangus’s efforts a “pioneering piece of work” and claimed that the map that he produced “offers an interesting and useful guide to the analysis and interpretation of the rural cultural areas of the United States.” In fact, the economist O.E. Baker began to use the map as the basis tracking population movement within and between rural “regions,” which Taylor thought was “one of many possible uses of the delineation of cultural areas which are open to rural sociologists in future research.”¹²

The University of Wisconsin rural sociologist George W. Hill did for Wisconsin in 1941 what A.R. Magus had done for the whole country in attempting to classify it by “culture regions.” No other researcher more thoroughly stigmatized people and their culture as the cause of poverty as did Hill. Hill borrowed anthropology’s “culture area concept,” modifying it to what he called the “culture-type classification,” and tried to divide the rural areas of Wisconsin into distinct cultures, which mean an effort “to classify areas of social behavior rather than material traits.” In doing so, Hill turned to “culture types” to answer a set of riddles that he and many other agricultural experts had puzzled over: why did farms that sat side by side sometimes have substantially or even vastly different levels of income? Why did “tenancy patterns” sometimes vary so significantly within a single area? And why did “sociologists and welfare workers” sometimes find such “dissimilar case-load distributions from town to town within counties”? Hill concluded that it was, in fact, differences in “culture types” that explained these variations.

¹² Mangus, “Regional Aspects,” 509-510; A.R. Mangus, *Rural Regions of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940); Carl C. Taylor, “Psychological Adjustments and Historical Change,” 16-17, 5/11/1939, National Agricultural Library Special Collections, USDA Division of Farm Population and Rural Life Records, Box 1, Folder 118.

Based on anecdotal observations, Hill and colleagues from the University of Wisconsin had decided that these culture types correlated strongly with Wisconsin's "nationalities" (ethnic groups) and believed that they had "observed how patterns of behavior—sociological and economic—differed from locality to locality, or within localities, as the dominating nationalities change."

Along with some co-researchers, Hill used hundreds of thousands of census schedules to identify the "numerous nationality stocks" in all of Wisconsin's townships. Hill viewed this information as simply suggestive, however, of how to guide future studies. Along with colleagues in the University of Wisconsin, Hill therefore launched a study of Wisconsin's churches to understand the influence of religion in "culture types," and planned studies of various communities to find out whether, for example, "there is more or less difference between Roman Catholics of two differing nationalities than among Catholics, Lutherans, and Evangelicals of the same nationality." The major "culture types" they settled on studying were "the Germans, Polish, Norwegian, native American [i.e. WASPs], and the heterogeneous inhabitants" of the transitional culture types that existed in the areas between settlements of each of the former.¹³

Hill also decided to use his "culture types" method to analyze the heart of poverty and environmental catastrophe in Wisconsin: the Cutover. Hill gathered his data through most of the 1930s and began releasing his findings in the early 1940s. The sociologists rejected the idea that the Cutover, as a region, constituted one of the country's "problem areas" in the way that social scientists had frequently viewed it. Instead, he insisted that the Cutover had a significant but relatively small underclass mired in a culture of poverty. (In analyzing the Cutover, Hill dropped his interest in nationality-as-culture in favor of describing a more general set of pathologies allegedly common to the poorest people). Hill insisted that investigators and reformers had taken this supposed underclass as representative of the Cutover's people as a

¹³ George W. Hill, "The Use of the Culture-Area Concept in Social Research," *American Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 1 (Jul., 1941), 39, 42-45.

whole, which had led them to falsely malign the region as a “problem area.” Hill referred to these hardcore cases variously as “agricultural misfits,” “social derelicts,” and “chronics” — people who habitually relied on either public or private “relief” to support themselves. Hill rejected the idea that the Cutover’s widespread poverty came from its “submarginal” land and the environmental devastation it had suffered at the hands of ravenous lumber companies. His understanding of its poverty can be summed up in the folk adage that he invoked to explain why some people were so poor: “It’s not the *land*. It’s the *man* on the land.”¹⁴

Hill acknowledged the material and economic deficiencies of Wisconsin’s cutover area. He rated its soil as the worst in the state, its growing season short, its farms small, its income low, and its population scattered. He understood the region’s history of despoilment and the blatantly dishonest boosterism that had lured farmers there, but he insisted that this was not the source of “the real social problems of the ‘cut-over’” and that there was “little to be gained” by dwelling on it. Hill believed that many and even most of the region’s farmers had overcome the considerable disadvantages of the area and managed to create at least modestly successful farms. How to explain the poverty that did exist in the Cutover?: “Historically, poor land has attracted poor people, people whose capital and whose abilities have not permitted them to compete in better farm areas.” The Cutover, then, had drawn an unusually large “misfit” class. The sociologist believed that these ne’er-do-wells had poisoned the reputation of the whole area. At every turn during the course of his investigations, Hill devised methods to single out this class of “misfits” and to show that behavior and culture explained its poverty.¹⁵

In order to quantify the dimensions of the problem, Hill compiled information that divided Wisconsin Cutover residents into a “relief class” and a “nonrelief class.” “Relief” included private charity but also grants from the FSA and social security payments for indigents.

¹⁴ George W. Hill and Ronald A. Smith, *Man in the ‘Cut-Over’: A Study of Family-Farm Resources in Northern Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station, 1941), 1-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

Hill then found three categories of people within his “relief class.” At the one extreme, there were the “chronic indigents” that Americans in the 1930s typically associated with the “relief class”: “the shiftless, the indolent, the drunkards, and the mentally or physically sub-normal.” For shorthand, Hill called these people and families “chronics.” The sympathetic and deserving poor resided at the other end of the spectrum, people whom Hill labeled as “emergencies.” These families had fallen into hardship through “circumstances entirely beyond their control.” Their “independence has been temporarily interrupted or destroyed by sickness, unemployment, loss of resources, or even permanently through old age.” “Opportunists” occupied the middle ground between the “chronics” and the “emergencies.” These were people for whom “one can find no reason for their receiving relief other than in their attitude, which has been expressed time and again in the stereotype: ‘Everybody else is getting it, why shouldn’t I.’” Hill believed that the data from a sample that he performed on one Wisconsin Cutover county revealed that of the “relief class” there, 36 percent of the families were “chronics,” 23 percent “opportunists,” and 41 percent “emergencies.”¹⁶

In analyzing his relief data, Hill routinely singled out the “chronics” in his sample to distinguish them and their behaviors from the deserving “emergencies” on relief or even the cynical “opportunists.” In each case, he identified characteristics that could have explained why these families found it harder to stay out of poverty but instead interpreted them as signs of poor character or choices that had supposedly caused poverty in the first place. For example, his data suggested to him that the stereotype that “relief families have many children” was not accurate. The size of relief and nonrelief families was basically the same. But Hill then isolated data on the “chronics” to single them out as the source of a problem: “The chronics averaged 5.3 members in 1938, and the emergencies, 3.95! In other words, it is the chronic relief family, the one that is least able to support itself, that is producing children.” About the “relief class” in

¹⁶ Hill and Smith, *Man in the Cut-Over*, 11-16; George W. Hill and Ronald A. Smith, *Rural Relief Trends in Wisconsin, from 1934-1937* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1939).

general, Hill found that their families were twice as likely to be “broken”—most typically with women heading and supporting families alone—and warned that the higher birth rates among relief families meant that “replacement is coming, therefore, from the most seriously disadvantaged social class in our population.”¹⁷

Because he believed that “social and cultural influences” explained why some people went on relief while others did not, Hill decided to investigate “ability, aptitude, and generalized attitude” among the “relief class” and the “nonrelief class.” The sociologist developed a system where he could quantify and rate those characteristics on a scale of one to twelve. He also decided to rate the “wives and homemakers” of relief and nonrelief families based on “neatness and general cleanliness of the home...interest in learning and adopting new ideas, the keeping of household accounts, interest in balanced meals, and several additional factors.” Nonrelief women scored a 7.7 on Hill’s scale while those on relief scored a 5.0. Hill then isolated the women of the “chronic” families to show that they had scored a 2.8. The sociologist then rated the “character, stability, and responsibility” of families as a whole and concluded that nonrelief families rated a 4.1 and relief families a 2.8.¹⁸

Hill also decided to study a rural Cutover neighborhood called Scandenburg, which had a high percentage of families that he labeled as “chronics.” To a sympathetic eye, Scandenburg would have appeared as a place that struggled economically but that still had a tightly knit and supportive social structure. Despite the fact that 40 of Scandenburg’s 80 families belonged to Hill’s “relief class,” the neighborhood supported a Women’s Welfare Club, had “visiting” patterns just as dense as the neighborhoods Hill judged as more successful, and its residents had organized to defend their schools against a program of consolidation. Because the neighborhood had a high number of “chronics,” however, Hill presented it as a tangle of pathologies and described its social strengths as evidence of its backwardness. Of Scandenburg’s “chronic

¹⁷ Ibid., 26-28.

¹⁸ Ibid., 28-31.

families,” Hill concluded, “Social problems, in their cases, seem to be rooted in a common social and cultural matrix” and that there was “little hope of establishing the independence of these families in their present home environment.” To prove this point, Hill decided to quantify and map the social interactions of Scandenburg’s families. He found that for families on relief, about half of their visits were to other families on relief and half were to non-relief families. True to form, Hill then singled out the “chronics” for scrutiny and found that three-quarters of their visits were to other families on relief, which meant that they were “outside the generalized pattern of social relationships.” Once Hill had identified this phenomenon, he also tracked Scandenburg’s “familialism,” tracing the way “stem families” accounted for most of the people in the neighborhood on relief. Unable to contain his excitement at the finding, Hill explained that three-quarters of the families on relief could, in fact, be “traced to four stem families!” One of those families, the sociologist found, “has produced four second-generation families and eleven third-generation families, all but one of whom are on relief.” Another “stem family” had bred relieferism into its members into second and third generations with only a single person in the third generation able to escape the relief category. These families were not hard to spot and nor did Hill have to wonder about the source of the problem: “Their farms, if they are farming, are hopelessly mismanaged; their homes are in keeping with the farmsteads; complex and baffling social problems prevail in cases after case. Their situations have not resulted from unemployment alone; they reflect a long and continuous history of insecurity and disorganization.”¹⁹

There was no point in trying to settle the ne’er-do-wells on better land. They needed to be put to work on conservation projects on Cutover lands. The work itself would perform the work of rehabilitating the “chronic” families culturally. Hill called this a “social welfare that is as firm as it is humane.” He explained that the problems of the Cutover were “human problems” and the solutions would therefore have to be human solutions. If they were not approached in

¹⁹ Ibid., 37-46.

that way, Hill warned that there would be trouble for urban areas: “Human problems do not stop at artificial barriers,” like the division between town and country. If something was not done about the Cutover “misfit” class, Midwestern cities could count the days until its worst elements found their way to them, to tax urban resources and to plague new environs with their longstanding cultural pathologies.²⁰

Hill’s relentless pursuit of cultural explanations for poverty is revealing because it shows in extreme form tendencies that were present in much more subtle ways in the work of more thoughtful social scientists throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Hill refused to credit the difficulty of earning a living in the Cutover at all as explaining its poverty. But even experts who explained the economic causes of deep-seated rural poverty also focused on behaviors and cultural patterns that they thought *perpetuated* that poverty, even if they did not go so far as Hill and point to culture as the original cause of poverty. This became a recipe for settling for solutions that fell short of attacking the causes of poverty. If behavior or “cultural lags” explained why people had failed to climb out of poverty, then changing their cultures could cure their poverty. This can be seen in the work of the sociologists Charles P. Loomis and Olen E. Leonard who went to El Cerrito, New Mexico, in 1939 on behalf of the USDA to live there as “participant-observers.” The village was 30 miles southwest of Las Vegas, New Mexico, in San Miguel County on the Pecos River and just a few miles from the villages of El Pueblo, where the FSA had launched its experimental program of rural development. Loomis and Leonard called El Cerrito’s residents “Spanish-Americans,” people of mixed indigenous and Iberian ancestry. The sociologists settled upon El Cerrito for “fieldwork” because they found it typical of the area’s many small villages located in places where the river valley widened enough to admit a few adobe dwellings and modest tracts of food crops. Both men each lived in the village for a period of months, working slowly and steadily to win the trust and acceptance of El Cerrito’s residents (their “informants”)—a feat that they did not doubt that they had managed. Loomis and Leonard

²⁰ Ibid., 63-71.

were both gifted sociologists (Loomis would eventually be president of the American Sociological Society), and they studied and interacted with people of El Cerrito sympathetically. In fact, after their time there, the men offered a nuanced historical understanding of what had made the village and, in fact, the entire region, so poor. They emphasized the process of historical dispossession that had destroyed the ability of most of the region's residents to subsist. For centuries, the people of villages like El Cerrito had tended small irrigated plots located at their village sites while ranging their sheep in the vast spaces outside of their villages. "Grants" from successive Spanish, Mexican, and American governments had acknowledged the right of the villagers to these grazing lands. Over decades, however, they had "lost" the right to most of that land. Heavy tax burdens required El Cerrito's residents to sell or to lease much of it to commercial livestock operations or else lose it to foreclosure. Theft and fraud deprived them of the legal right to much of it as well. As far as Loomis and Leonard could discern, residents of villages like El Cerrito had managed to maintain decent standards of living up through the better portion of the 1920s. Even if the local ranchers paid pittance wages, young and mobile male villagers traveled to find higher paying jobs so that their families might continue to live in their villages. But eventually the better paying jobs evaporated and, without the bulk of their original grazing lands, the residents had to rely more heavily on their irrigated plots, which were never meant to support them alone. The absence of primogeniture in the culture meant that men and women inherited alike and that the plots became smaller and smaller every year. When social scientists like Loomis and Leonard began to study the consequences of this dispossession in New Mexico and Arizona, they found that the mestizo population had incredibly low levels of income and rates of infant mortality and preventable disease that had to be reckoned as among the highest in the country.²¹

²¹ Olen E. Leonard and Charles P. Loomis, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: El Cerrito, New Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1941), 1-12.

Despite their understanding of this long history, Loomis and Leonard also resorted to culture to explain the poverty of the people of El Cerrito and northern New Mexico. As they explained, the sociologists had roamed north central New Mexico in 1939 “looking for a typical Spanish-American village to study. For hours we had been bouncing along wondering whether our car would make it through another sandy arroyo or over the next rock ridge.” In their reckoning, El Cerrito was the kind of place that one could only arrive at accidentally. In fact, with Leonard behind the wheel, they had been more preoccupied with navigating a steep incline and the “hard grade along the edge of a cliff” when El Cerrito “hove into sight,” like a vision from a different time. Leonard braked the car to a stop and both men, wordlessly Loomis claimed, exited the vehicle and beheld the site in the valley below them. Loomis then turned to Leonard and commented that, “If old Toennies were here he would say that village has the aspect of a *Gemeinschaft*.” Toennies was Ferdinand Toennies, the German sociologist who had elaborated the distinctions between traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*) and modern society (*Gesellschaft*). It was, in fact, the conviction that traditional communities were inevitably giving way to more complex modern societies that had led to the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century. To Loomis and Leonard, El Cerrito represented an opportunity to observe a place where the social forces that brought about the transition to modernity elsewhere had failed to intrude. They could take in El Cerrito’s social simplicity even from a distance, with its homes tightly clustered around the church, suggesting to them that “centuries of living together away from the trade centers of the earth has almost made a village into a large family.” And this was the core of what they came to believe about El Cerrito, after they had come down from their vista and lived in the village for months: that time had bypassed its people. In a way, they admired that about the villagers, because it had allowed for such an “integrated” and close-knit way of life. But the alleged failure of El Cerrito’s people to change

had also impoverished them. They would have to come into the “modern world” if their level of living was to improve.²²

As Loomis and Leonard described it, after their fieldwork, El Cerrito was “well-hidden from the outside world.” It had an “exotic appearance” and was a “bit of rural life far removed from the modern everyday world.” It had a “placid routine of everyday life.” When “approached in winter the village seems as quiet and lifeless as the little cemetery just above it.” It was “a community that has existed in its own way and with little physical change for many decades.” The sociologists claimed that “until recently it has existed with little concern or dependence upon the outside world.” Change came only when dire and prolonged circumstance forced it on the people: “Until absolute necessity deprived them of choice, the villagers were able to resist change and adjustment.” The supposed “economy of abundance” that had reigned before their dispossession—they could range their sheep anywhere and had to think little of the “temporary depletion of the grass” that it caused—had not prepared this culture for modern, intensive forms of agriculture. “There was little diversification. The same piece of land might be planted to the same crop year after year.” The people had stuck to their old ways: “The general pattern for agriculture is little changed in present-day El Cerrito. Little attempt is made to experiment with new crops.” Despite their increased reliance on their garden plots, “apparently attitudes toward conserving this land have undergone only slight modification.” The reason for all of this was that the “people of El Cerrito” could only “think in terms of their immediate problems. There is little thought or planning with a view to accumulating property and advancing toward a status that would enable them to live from their own resources.” To all of the political and environmental difficulties that had impinged on the villagers’ ability to keep livestock, Loomis and Leonard “added a certain inertia. Years and even decades of living without the benefits that may be derived from domestic livestock has conditioned these people to make little effort to obtain

²² Charles P. Loomis, “Informal Groupings in a Spanish-American Village,” *Sociometry* 4, no. 1 (Feb., 1941), 36-39.

them.” When they did have livestock, they made no effort to “improve” them and tended them carelessly—they did not know any better. In general, “modern machinery and the science of agriculture” had “little influence here.” “The farm equipment and machinery used in this area are of the simplest sort. Large machinery is neither used nor appreciated.” “Labor saving devices” were rare because “efficiency and saving of time mean little where already manpower is far in excess of the work to be done.” The people had never fully rationalized their use of time by creating a rigid work day. They punctuated their labor with meals, midday naps, and “brief chats and frequent exchanges of advice with passing friends or relatives.” Loomis and Leonard observed, with more sympathy and less condemnation than was typical among social scientists, “These natives are able to see neither sin nor moral corruption in idleness and leisure time. They see neither virtue nor common sense in keeping busy for the sake of occupying the hands and the mind. Work is simply a means to an end...It is not believed that it adds to the moral fiber of the individual.”²³

All of this brought them to their point: the people of El Cerrito would not have been so poor had they managed to keep up with the times and the demands that modernity had so self-evidently put on them when it had intruded upon their lives. Change had come to El Cerrito but the people had proved unwilling or unable to adapt to it. As was so often the case when social scientists put on their cultural blinkers, the sociologists’ own evidence contradicted their assertions. Loomis and Leonard insisted on El Cerrito as a timeless place even as they catalogued the history that had brought its present poverty. History had very much happened in El Cerrito. Undoubtedly, the researchers were correct that its people lacked the strident commitment to filling their lives with work and routine that Euro-Americans so often admired. But they had certainly adapted to new circumstances. As the sociologists themselves chronicled, for as long as any of the villagers could remember, young men had sought wage work outside of the village so that they and their families could preserve the aspects of their lives that they

²³ Leonard and Loomis, *El Cerrito*, 2, 9, 12, 15, 17, 21, 25-28.

valued most. And it was that commitment to adopting new ways of life in order to preserve certain older traditions that was the source of a particular consternation for Loomis and Leonard: the villagers picked and chose the federal programs in which they were willing to participate. They accepted loans (and even grants) from the Farm Security Administration with great reluctance even as they eagerly sought out certification to labor on projects for the Works Progress Administration. Loomis and Leonard could not see the logic: FSA money required that residents of El Cerrito grant some measure of control over their lives to outside authorities whereas WPA *wages* meant supplemental income that allowed them to maintain their lives in the village as they saw fit. The sociologists saw this as a product of stubbornness and cultural inertia when it was so obviously a strategic adaptation. Despite their deep sympathy, then, Loomis and Leonard persisted in their cultural stigmatization of the people of El Cerrito. The villagers had to learn to live different. They had to change their culture. When they had done that, then they could match the standards of efficiency and the standards of living that modern life would bring.²⁴

Because the South loomed so large in discourses involving poverty, it added another layer to the tendency to understand poverty in at least partly cultural terms. Indeed, one of the reasons social scientists resorted so readily to cultural explanations of poverty had to do with the thorough association between rural poverty and the South, a region whose backwardness had long been perceived in strongly cultural terms. Sharecropping and southern poverty became something of a national sensation in the 1930s, in both journalism and popular fiction, though the results of this attention were mixed. After 1934, the eviction of farm tenants under the AAA and the “reign of terror” that planters in the Arkansas Delta launched against the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union particularly galvanized sympathy for landless farmers. High ranking USDA officials—Henry Wallace, M.L. Wilson, and Howard Tolley among them—made ritual tours of the South to take in the depth of the misery that existed there, each professing in his

²⁴ Ibid., 21-22, 30.

turn to have been deeply moved by the experience, though not always with much evidence of it in their policy decisions. Experts touring the South's poverty inevitably found a sharecropper cabin to visit. And therein lay part of the problem: so much of this attention focused on the way that poor people lived (or supposedly lived) rather than on the direct causes of their poverty. James Agee's masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was interested in invoking what it looked, felt, and smelled like to occupy an Alabama sharecropper shack in July but not in sussing out any reasons why the three families that Agee focused on were so poor. (Agee gave one of the families the pathologizing pseudonym "Ricketts"). Erskine Caldwell's enormously popular novels *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre* were arguably prurient in their fixation on the personal lives and living circumstances of poor southern whites. In an assertion that nearly seems fabricated, Caldwell claimed to have visited a Georgia sharecropper cabin where the children were so near starvation and so neglected that he witnessed this scene: "on the floor before an open fire lay two babies, neither a year old, sucking the dry teats of a mongrel bitch." Whether true or not, as a claim, it was one calculated to shock and as likely to trigger revulsion as sympathy toward the people whose plight Caldwell hoped to dramatize. Even the famous Farm Security Administration photographs quite literally "framed" the poverty of southern tenant families as a matter of how they lived because the photographs so frequently depicted people in and around their homes.²⁵

Social scientists produced many classic studies on the South throughout the Depression years and in doing so helped to elevate it as a matter of national concern. Their work illustrates how difficult it was to assign culture an appropriate place in structural interpretations of poverty

²⁵ Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); *The Reminiscences of Howard R. Tolley*, CUOHC, 396-398; James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: The American Classic, In Words and Photographs, of Three Tenant Families in the Deep South*, First Mariner Books Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (New York: Grosett & Dunlap, 1932); Erskine Caldwell, *God's Little Acre* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, c1933); Erskine Caldwell quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 208; Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, (New York: Arno Press, 1975, c1937).

and how easily, when it came to developing solutions to poverty, deeper “cultural” problems (like racism) could be set aside for targeting the apathy and disillusionment that poverty created in the poor. The “regional” sociologists Howard Odum and Rupert Vance both depicted the South’s poverty and its sharecropping system as direct legacies of slavery and the plantation system. Both men also argued that southern elites had allowed northern capital to underdevelop the South by foisting an extractive economy on the region. They argued too that one of the most profound legacies of this history was an absence of thrift, industry, and time- and work-discipline among southerners. Southern farm tenants particularly were “shiftless,” “indolent,” footloose, and enervated by disease and poor diet. Landless farmers were those things because the plantation system required that they be them. As true as this may have been, trying to change this kind of culture would go nowhere without a program to attack the underlying problems that had created it. Arthur Raper, who will be a central figure in Chapters Five and Six, proffered deeper and more penetrating critiques of the sources of southern poverty than any other social scientist of the 1930s. Yet even he was prone to identifying a culturally produced “apathy” as one of the central causes of continued poverty and decline in the South. It would be far easier and more politically palatable to target “apathy” and various behaviors among the poor than it would be to go after the deep-seated sources of southern poverty that sustained such a culture.²⁶

It is worth noting too that there was a new and increasing tendency toward abstraction in the social-scientific knowledge generated during the 1930s. Abstraction itself would not have been a problem if it had been directed at studying the political economy that produced poverty, but these new studies cataloged the various characteristics of the poor and poor families in place

²⁶ Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934); Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and Will W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935); Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Rupert B. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the Cotton South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929); Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography in the South: A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935); Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*.

of doing that. In doing so, they at least implicitly posited that a person or family's characteristics produced their poverty as readily as they expressed it. Ironically, two sympathetic impulses drove this phenomenon: one was a genuine concern for the plight of the poor and the other was the fact that the federal government was now spending quite a lot of money on the problem of rural poverty. Suddenly, many millions of dollars flowed from federal agencies. Unsurprisingly, the government wanted to know where this money went and who received it. (It is worth noting that there was virtually zero interest in doing the same analysis of AAA money). Along with the finely honed and elaborately rendered community studies that they had been doing for decades, social scientists began compiling statistics on the people who received relief. The most important centers of study were the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, the Rural Research Division of the Resettlement Administration, and the Rural Surveys Section of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was the successor agency to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Social scientists working for these institutions wrote some of the classic works of sociology from this era, such as T.J. Woofter's *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*. But many of these experts also served this new function of compiling abstract data about relief clients, data that counted them in increasingly elaborate ways but that offered no real context on their lives or on the causes of their poverty. We have seen enough of the sociological studies of rural communities to know that they did not always offer very good context, but context was their entire point nonetheless; that would not be the case with much of the information generated on relief clients. The Works Progress Administration was especially important in demanding and funding these kinds of studies.

Some of this information might have been useful for debunking certain misconceptions. Woofter, for example, in his examination of more than 600 cotton plantations, quite easily punctured the myth of planter paternalism. He revealed that landlords, who had an average income of \$2,576, provided an average contributed an average \$1.80 each year to the education of the children of their tenants. Much of the WPA's efforts, however, simply catalogued facts

about the people who either received or tried to receive relief. The WPA compiled information not only on the prevalence of “broken homes” (their phrase) among a portion of cotton farmers in the South, but also broke that information down by tenure status (owners, tenants, and sharecroppers) and also by race. In fact, whenever African Americans received relief, the WPA was interested in compiling information specifically on them. In Atlanta, for example, the WPA gathered data on the amount of debt that black relief clients carried, and in Macon, Georgia, it charted the number of relief clients by race who were “disabled.” The WPA also consistently evinced an interest in comparing the number of female-headed households receiving relief to the prevalence of female-headed households among non-relief families and then breaking that down by race. They also investigated the size of the families receiving relief (again, further broken down by race when African American clients were involved). The title of the synopsis of one such investigation in 24 counties got straight to the point: “Rural Relief Families Considerably Larger on the Average than Rural Non-Relief Families.” The WPA piled on top of all this information data on education, marital status, rates of migration/mobility, “nativity,” and relief history. Perhaps some of this could have had its uses, had there been more political will to publicize the scandalous disparities between whites and African Americans. It could be useful to know, for example, that African American and female relief clients had less income when they applied for relief and received smaller payments when they did get relief. But none of these investigations seemed to change the way poor people or poor African Americans were treated. They just piled up endless amounts of information about the characteristics of people on relief, most of which could only serve demeaning and behaviorist interpretations of poverty that dwelled on the “instability” of poor families as their major problem. This was not the study of poverty but the study of poor people. Here then were so many of the ingredients associated with “culture of poverty” arguments then and ever since: “broken homes,” female-headed

households, run down homes, family “instability,” and a fixation on comparing the rates of all of these things among African Americans to that of whites.²⁷

Culture was very much in the air, then, when USDA New Dealers set to work tackling the problem of rural poverty. Most of them did not quite blame poor people for their poverty, but they did tend to talk about poverty as an economic condition that produced a cultural malaise. The logic of the outlook suggested that removing that malaise would somehow remove the poverty that caused it. A report that the sociologists Carl C. Taylor, Helen Wheeler, and E.L. Kirkpatrick produced in 1938, synthesizing the social scientific literature on poverty that had proliferated during the New Deal years, illustrates this point. (Taylor was a high-ranking official in the Resettlement Administration in its early days before becoming the head of the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life). In their synthetic findings, Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick offered a number of macro-level causes of rural poverty, including low income, “the disappearance of the frontier,” the settlement of “submarginal” land, increasing rates of tenancy, the declining equity that farmers held in their land, and the fact that the “gradual commercialization of agriculture” had “thrust practically all farm families into the price and market system and has subjected them much more directly than in the past to economic depression.” When the same three authors turned to the topic of tenancy in the South, they left no doubt that it directly caused a host of ills: “At its worst, tenancy forces family living standards below levels of decency; develops rural slums; and breeds poverty, illiteracy, and disease. In such circumstances, tenant families live in houses of poor construction, almost universally in

²⁷ Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, 78-79, 87-88, 205; *Subject Index of Research Bulletins and Monographs issued by Federal Emergency Relief Administration and Works Progress Administration – Division of Social Research* (Washington, D.C.: FERA, 1937); *Rural Relief Families Considerably Larger on the Average than Rural Non-Relief Families*, Confidential Research Bulletin (Washington, D.C.: FERA, 1934); along with Woofter’s *Landlord and Tenant*, “Research Monographs” issued by the WPA’s Division of Social Research dealing specifically with rural areas: Philip Garrett Beck and M.C. Forster, *Six Rural Problem Areas: Relief, Resources, Rehabilitation: An Analysis of the Human and Material Resources in Six Rural Areas with High Relief Rates* (Washington, D.C.: FERA, 1935); Berta Asch and A.R. Mangus, *Farmers on Relief and Rehabilitation* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1937); Bruce L. Melvin and Elna N. Smith, *Rural Youth: Their Situation and Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1938); Carle C. Zimmerman and Nathan L. Whetten, *Rural Families on Relief* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1938).

need of repair, often without doors and windows, with leaky roofs, and sometimes even without floors. Seldom are these houses equipped with running water, electricity, bathrooms, or indoor toilets.” But then their tone took a subtle turn. The authors noted that the farms and homes of tenant families were run down, but they were also “unsightly and devoid of beauty.” Not only did tenants have deficient diets and nutrition but the food that they ate “lacks variety.” Not only did they have to wear threadbare clothes that failed to protect them from the elements, but the garments did not “provide any sense of satisfaction.” All of this, and being driven pillar to post every year, meant the “gradual development of an inferior status,” which in turn meant “a loss of desire on the part of disadvantaged persons to attain social well-being,” which in its own turn meant that “the whole institutional, social, and cultural life of these communities is lowered.” The social scientists concluded about southern farm tenants that “a sense of fear pervades their thoughts and actions,” which could manifest itself in lashing out (“organized, direct, and violent action”) or dissipate itself in equally harmful behaviors: “It is probably this sense of fear and uncertainty that leads them to grasp rather desperately at will-o’-the-wisp, get-rich quick, money-making schemes – enterprises about which they know little and for which they are almost totally unfitted.” These were people who apparently managed to be listless, apathetic, striving, and potentially dangerous all at the same time. And thus, even though these experts had thoughtfully explored the deeper causes of poverty, their description had morphed into the cliché of the “vicious circle” that always seems to be at the heart of the more sympathetic cultural understandings of poverty. It would be far easier for New Dealers to focus on changing these supposed cultural pathologies than it would be to remove the actual causes of poverty, especially with the persistent blurring of cause and effect between the supposedly flawed behavior patterns of poor people and their actual poverty itself.²⁸

The people who designed and implemented the USDA’s anti-poverty programs continually emphasized and intermingled what they viewed as the non-material dimensions of

²⁸ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 2-6, 38-39.

poverty with its economic causes. In 1942, Joe King, a high-ranking official in the Farm Security Administration summarized what he characterized as the “philosophical attitude” that the FSA and the RA had developed over their seven years of trying to uplift poor farmers: “poverty is relative, is not solely economic, is often mental, and rather than being a result of unalterable hereditary factors, is mainly the result of environmental influences and consequently subject to correction and perpetual improvement.” King clearly acknowledged certain economic factors as causing poverty (“poor land...industrialized farming....a maldistribution of economic income,” etc.) but returned repeatedly to the idea that poverty was primarily a “mental” condition that manifested itself mostly in non-economic ways: “Some are impoverished from a lack of ideas. Others are impoverished from lack of vitamins or medical care. Still others are impoverished from a lack of faith in the democratic process...Others are impoverished from a lack of participation in community and social life.” (“Mental” poverty was, in fact, the most “insidious” kind). After M.L. Wilson had spoken to Arthur Raper about a program of rural development in Greene County, Georgia, and which is the subject of Chapter Six, Wilson came away with the impression in 1940 that the poverty there meant that the people “were primarily sick people; they were sick physically because they had never had the proper diet and the right kind of biological environment. They were also sick mentally. They had little ambition, little skill and little culture, and they did not know how to do anything for themselves. They had to be told. They were also sick spiritually, and seemed to have little to live for as well as little to live with.” What perpetuated poverty in Greene County, then, was that the people were “sick and abnormal.” Wilson contrasted that with the undeniable poverty that existed among Great Plains farmers, which came not because of a “lack of character and personality development” but because of “circumstances and misfortune.” Little wonder that when Wilson came up with a list of factors for social scientists to investigate when it came to rural poverty, he took it as a given that they should focus on the alleged shortcomings of the poor themselves:

Why do people live as they do? How did they come to lose the simple skills of everyday life which their ancestors took for granted? What are their aspirations and motivations? What are the circumstances under which they would be willing to make serious efforts to improve their own conditions? How can such self-sufficing items as gardens, food preservation, pressure cookers, home repairs, better health, conservation, etc., be introduced into the folkways and again become habits of low income people? What are the cultural patterns which have developed in problem areas and which lead people to accept what most of us would call substandard conditions? What are the institutional changes which are needed to bring about desired improvements, and how can they be achieved?

Carl Taylor argued in 1938 that where farm poverty existed, “The problems involved are economic, of course, but they are also sociological and psychological problems of remaking the habits, attitudes, and practices of these people.”²⁹

The “habits, attitudes, and practices” of poor farmers were the major components of their culture of poverty. In the most basic sense, the culture of poverty was a culture because it had its own cultural momentum. The culture of poverty perpetuated itself. But rather than removing the economic conditions that caused the (real or imagined) components of the poverty culture, USDA programs for the rural poor overwhelmingly tried to treat the culture itself. This could and did involve palliative measures to ease material dimensions of poverty, such as bad diet and health. But those needed attention precisely because they enabled the psychological and other superstructural elements of the culture of poverty. These were all the elements we have seen New Dealers and social scientists discussing: poverty as a mental, spiritual, or personality condition above all else. The cultural approach treated poor farmers as “damaged” or “sick” people primarily. It treated them as if their attitudes and habits were the most important obstacle to their future success. What the New Deal USDA primarily offered to poor farmers, then, was rehabilitation. Rehabilitation was a cultural intervention into the lives of poor

²⁹ Joe J. King, “The Farm Security Administration and Its Attack on Rural Poverty,” *Rural Sociology* 7, no. 2 (Jun., 1942), 155-158, 160; Wilson, “Problem of Poverty,” 15-16; Carl C. Taylor, “Rural Rehabilitation and Resettlement,” 2-3, 8/27/1938, National Agricultural Library Special Collections, USDA Division of Farm Population and Rural Life Records, Box 1, Folder 107.

farmers. The two agencies primarily responsible for fostering this rehabilitation were the Resettlement Administration and its successor, the Farm Security Administration.

Rehabilitation came to farmers in two ways. Most commonly (to the tune of more than 800,000 families), farm families accepted a “rehabilitation loan.” The nature and experience of this kind of rehabilitation is the subject of Chapters Five and Six. To outline it briefly here, poor families accepted small loans (usually of a few hundred dollars) earmarked for some kind of improvement to a family’s farm and its way of living. The loans could cover some improvement to the farm’s physical plant or homestead, though the fact that many rehabilitation clients did not own the land that they farmed made earmarking loan money for these purposes more difficult. Most commonly, the loans helped families to feed themselves. They covered the cost, for example, of gardening implements, livestock (chickens and cows, most commonly), and of equipment for home food preservation. In exchange for accepting a loan, families agreed to accept the supervision of experts in farm and home management. These “farm and home supervisors” taught families how to live and farm properly. A supervisor with training in farm management worked out a crop plan for the male household head to follow and a supervisor with training in social work or home economics set food production and preservation targets for the female household head to achieve. Home supervisors also typically encouraged farm women to take better care of their houses and to find creative ways of crafting furnishings that would increase the comfort of farm homes. In accepting a rehabilitation loan, poor families assented to follow the plans that their supervisors designed and to allow periodic “visits” (inspections, really) from their supervisors. The families also had to cede control of their finances and farm and home management decisions.

The other avenue to rehabilitation was “resettlement” into the famed communities that the Resettlement Administration built and that the Farm Security Administration later administered. At full capacity, these communities had space for about 11,000 families. Slightly

fewer than half of these spaces were full-fledged farms, however. Most of them were houses that had garden plots of one to three acres. These were known as “subsistence homesteads” and both urban workers and farmers were admitted into these “communities.” Had the RA simply wanted to provide houses, gardens, and/or farms to its resettlement “clients,” it would have been logistically easier to let families accept loans to purchase the abodes that best suited them, where they could find them. But the point of this kind of rehabilitation was not simply to give families an economic advantage. The point was to settle poor or struggling families in communities that could serve as cultural and sociological laboratories for their uplift. RA communities were places where the slate of cultural and social pathology could be wiped clean. Client families were, as we shall see, carefully screened to weed out socially undesirable people. Once in the communities, clients not only lived under the watchful eye and management of farm and home supervisors and project administrators, but also had access to the accoutrements of a healthy community: churches, schools, social and civic groups, and so forth.

Because it is so commonly assumed that the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration attacked rural poverty primarily by providing land to the landless, it is important to put the agencies’ land programs into perspective before turning to their programs of rehabilitation. The truth is that these were land retiring agencies more fully than they were land granting agencies. When the President authorized the creation of the RA in 1935, one of its primary missions was to “retire” what social scientists called “submarginal” land. Indeed, an important camp of New Dealers eschewed cultural arguments about poverty and insisted that poor land caused most rural poverty. Submarginal land might be too poor for farming because of its inherent characteristics or because the people farming it had abused it and robbed it of its productive capacity. Advocates of land retirement viewed each of the concentrated areas of rural poverty (Appalachia, the Cotton South, etc.) as generally having submarginal land. The proponents of land retirement originally found their institutional home in AAA’s Land Policy Section. The economist L.C. Gray was the most important intellectual author of the land

retirement concept, but Rexford Tugwell, who was Undersecretary of Agriculture before becoming the head of the Resettlement Administration in 1935, was its most vocal proponent. Advocates of land retirement were realists. They believed that no amount of sentiment about farming “as a way of life” was going to make a dead-end farm provide a poor family with a decent living. The only thing to do for areas of concentrated rural poverty was, effectively, to evacuate them and to convert the land to forest, grass, or wildlife preserves. The land retirement camp settled on the astonishing figure that 75 million acres of US land was “submarginal.” They wanted to retire it all. They ultimately succeeded in retiring nearly 12 million acres. Most of that land was on the Great Plains, but the substantial majority of the 25,000 families who sold their farms to the government resided in country’s poorest regions, especially in Appalachia and the Cutover region of the Great Lakes States.³⁰

Tugwell was a brilliant economist and long before most New Dealers had picked up the idea, he foresaw government-fostered full employment as the antidote to the Depression. Advocates of land retirement envisioned a future in which poor farmers would leave concentrated areas of poverty and find industrial jobs in the cities. When the President created the Resettlement Administration in 1935, that was obviously a distant prospect. Proponents of land retirement therefore accepted as a corollary of their position that in the meantime poor farmers displaced through land retirements could be “resettled” onto better farms where they could be taught to thrive. The Resettlement Administration’s motto was “Rescues Victims, Restores Land to Proper Use.” The RA called itself the Resettlement Administration, in other words, to suggest that it was not decreasing the number of farmers in the country or leaving them to fend for themselves after it purchased their land. The agency was helping them to

³⁰ Tolley *Reminiscences*, CUOHC, 280-282; Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 62-69; Sara M. Gregg, *Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, the New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal Landscape in Appalachia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 92, 183-186; John D. Black, “Notes on ‘Poor Land,’ and ‘Submarginal Land,’” *Journal of Farm Economics* 7, no. 2 (May, 1945), 345-374; *A Report on National Planning and Public Works in Relation to Natural Resources and Including Land Use and Water Resources with Findings and Recommendations* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1934), 105-113.

succeed while also keeping their bad land from visiting its misfortune on subsequent families. This was not true, however. The RA did indeed retire nearly 12 million acres of submarginal land, but it relocated a mere nine percent of the 25,000 families whose land it had purchased into its much-vaunted resettlement communities. Eighty-seven percent of the families whose land the government purchased had vacated their farms by 1942. Three-quarters of those families made their moves without any contributions from the government for their moving expenses. The government did not track the progress of the displaced families. Perhaps they found better lives once the Depression lifted. It is unlikely that they found better farms, however. The government had paid them for what their land was worth, which was very little. As we will see, one reason why the RA actually resettled so few families whose land it purchased was because the poorest people—by definition those whose land the RA was most likely to buy—were also, by definition, not good prospects for “rehabilitation” in the agency’s communities.³¹

As with most New Deal initiatives, there were numerous and overlapping agencies involved in “rehabilitation.” The rehabilitation approach gained force in tandem with efforts to provide “relief” to the rural poor. Relief grants of food, clothing, and occasionally cash flowed to both the urban and rural needy from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which had been created in May of 1933 as part of the New Deal’s famed Hundred Days. FERA provided funds to state and local relief agencies with mostly minimal strings attached. In 1933, FERA determined that there were already more than one million farm families receiving some kind of relief money. Harry Hopkins, the head of FERA, had always considered this kind of direct aid deeply degrading, and the agency moved toward using its funds to provide jobs. But Hopkins rejected that as an appropriate avenue for poor farmers. In March of 1934, he discontinued FERA’s efforts to provide jobs to rural people through public works projects and

³¹ H.H. Wooten, a USDA social scientist whom the agency tasked with writing a history of its land retirement programs, is the only person to have ever calculated how few of the families who sold their land to the government ended up in RA communities. I am using his numbers. H. H. Wooten, *The Land Utilization Program, 1934-1964: Origin, Development, and Present Status* (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1965), v-vi, 5-15, 17-23, 73.

ordered the creation of FERA's Division of Rural Rehabilitation and Stranded Populations. As Hopkins put it, "I want to see the hundreds of thousands of farm families on our relief rolls given aid which will enable them to make their own way, and which they will fully repay. Our rural rehabilitation program is not predicated on charity." Distressed residents of the towns and cities got "relief" and public works jobs, when they could get it, and rural Americans got rehabilitation, which they would have to repay because it came in the form of loans.³²

FERA created three approaches to "rehabilitating" rural people toward self-sufficiency. The first, which would always be the mainstay of these efforts, was what would eventually be known as the "standard rehabilitation loan." Small loans to farm families to improve their operations in some way required that they submit to the "supervision" and operate their farms and homes in accordance with a pre-approved "farm and home plan." (The "standard" in the loan title actually referred to people as much as it did the commonplace nature of the loans. Families that did not qualify for these loans were rated as "substandard.") Second, FERA contributed money for the establishment of part time "farming" or "rural-industrial" communities. Located near small and medium sized cities, these "communities" provided homes and small garden plots to either "underemployed" farmers or industrial workers. For workers, these subsistence homesteads were intended to supplement their industrial wages with the production of their own foodstuffs. For farmers, they were intended to supplement the subsistence products of their farms with part time industrial work. The "community" aspect was meant to provide the edifying social and cultural lives that the designers of these projects assumed that these people lacked. Third FERA provided some of the money for the purchase of "submarginal" lands."³³

³² Harry Hopkins, quoted in, Olaf F. Larson, *Ten Years of Rural Rehabilitation in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1947), 42.

³³ Larson, *Ten Years*, 28-31; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 58-68.

An even more ambitious program of “rehabilitation” originated in the Department of the Interior’s Division of Subsistence Homesteads. M.L. Wilson was the driving force there. As we have seen, Wilson was enamored of the concept of “cultural islands,” places where cohesive cultural groups had managed to buck the poverty and “maladjustments” of the predominant culture that surrounded them. His observations of Mormon farming villages had suggested to him not only the virtues of life in the small rural village but also that combining part time farming with part time work in village industries (“beet factories and milk condenseries,” for example) offered what he called a “kind of middle way development”: it would bring about a better balance between agriculture and industry and ameliorate what, in the early years of the Depression, many considered to be a now permanently stagnant state in the country’s “mature” capitalist economy. Wilson, then, more than any other high-ranking USDA official, championed the decentralization of industry. A little noticed or debated provision in the National Industrial Recovery Act allowed the President to establish an agency to bring about a more advantageous balance between the industrial and agricultural populations. The president authorized the Department of the Interior to create the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in 1933. M.L. Wilson headed the agency and Carl Taylor joined the staff as well. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads mostly created rural-industrial communities (25 of them in all). These communities ranged from around 100 to 300 acres in size, accommodating from 25 to 125 families, their houses, and gardens of two to seven acres in size. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads also established a handful of communities for farmers and one proper “resettlement” community that located a small number of the families who had been dispossessed in the creation of Shenandoah National Park.³⁴

³⁴ *The Reminiscences of Milburn Lincoln Wilson*, CUOHC, 1193-1197; M.L. Wilson, “The Place of Subsistence Homesteads in Our National Economy,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 16, no. 1 (Jan., 1934), 80-81 and passim; Wilson, “Problem of Poverty,” 14; Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, reprint edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976, c1959), 86-89, 97-98, 107-110; Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 52-55.

Harold Ickes, the head of the Department of the Interior, had little use for these homestead projects and even less use for M.L. Wilson and his commitment to decentralized planning. Ickes was happy to dump the projects when the opportunity arose. (Wilson had departed the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in June of 1934 to become Assistant Secretary of Agriculture; Carl Taylor left shortly thereafter for the AAA's Land Policy Section and from thence to a stint as the Director of the Resettlement Administration's Division of Resettlement and Rural Rehabilitation, and eventually to his position atop the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life). During the fall of 1934, Wilson, Henry Wallace, and Rexford Tugwell began discussing the possibility of moving the various rehabilitation/homestead projects into the USDA. Tugwell and Wallace were both dubious of the subsistence homesteads as offering much worthwhile to the people who lived on them. Both men, and especially Tugwell, thought that massive land retirement offered the only viable approach to solving the problem of rural poverty. Momentum had been building for some time to create an agency that ministered directly to the needs of poor farmers, that could do so without the influence of the Extension Service-Farm Bureau axis that the AAA's liberals had to contend with, and that also consolidated the far flung and various efforts directed at the rural poor. In 1935, Roosevelt ordered the creation of the Resettlement Administration and appointed Tugwell as its head. (At first, the agency was independent of the USDA, but eventually the now-mammoth bureaucracy absorbed it too). As far as Tugwell was concerned, the purpose of the RA was the style of "land reform" that he had consistently advocated. Indeed, the agency took over the existing land retirement projects and doubled down on efforts along those lines. Along with these efforts, Tugwell inherited the programs of which he was more skeptical and, in fact, considered to be cruel to the people to whom they held out hope: the various "subsistence homestead" communities and the programs of rehabilitation loans. This was a motley agency even by New Deal standards.³⁵

³⁵ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 74-76, 104-106.

Tugwell was brilliant but too impatient to ever be wholly effective, and this despite his close relationship to the President and Roosevelt's (and even many of Tugwell's USDA rivals') genuine affection for him. He watched as his "land reform" mostly languished, incurring too much expense and too many nightmares of red tape and proving politically unpopular. Tugwell himself—who always offered great copy to reporters with his colorful and evocative dismissals of people of lesser lights than his own—became a favorite target for New Deal critics who lambasted its supposedly radical tendencies: Rex the Red. The RA's minor and relatively fleeting experiments in cooperative land leasing and management in some of its communities especially raised the hackles of conservatives and reactionaries of various stripes, including the redoubtable Farm Bureau. Even as it should have been increasingly obvious that this was primarily a "rehabilitation" organization, the name of the Resettlement Administration had become too fraught for it to continue its confused mission. Some critics had started to lambaste the agency for not focusing on helping landless farmers to buy farms. Tugwell stepped down as head of the RA at the end of 1936, after relentless badgering and pillorying from Congress.³⁶

Because the AAA-induced displacement of southern tenants had become a major political embarrassment, the President appointed his Committee on Farm Tenancy shortly after his reelection in 1936. The Committee brought together some of the best and most sympathetic social scientists to formulate recommendations on the problems of landlessness and rural poverty. The President commended the Committee's findings to Congress early in 1937. The blue-ribbon commission recommended a program to sell land to qualified tenants but insisted that sale contracts had to follow a "trial lease period" of as long as five years in which "the farmer" would prove "his integrity, industry, and capacity as a potential owner." As sympathetic as the report was to the plight of the rural poor and as headline-grabbing as was its proposed tenant ownership program, the Committee primarily advocated a "system of rehabilitation loans associated with technical guidance," especially in the South, as the most expedient and effective

³⁶ On Tugwell's resignation: Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 180-181.

means of alleviating rural poverty. The Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead had proposed legislation for years by this point that would offer both “rehabilitation” and eventual landownership to select farm tenants. The stars had finally aligned. Congress passed the Bankhead-Jones Bill in July of 1937, which funded a modest loan program for landless farmers who agreed to abide programs of “rehabilitation” and a period in which they leased their farms. The legislation also acceded to the Committee on Farm Tenancy’s recommendation that the new program be housed in a proposed “Farm Security Administration.” To give the RA its quiet death, in September of 1937, Henry Wallace created the FSA to operate the new tenant loan program and to assume all of the programs and responsibilities of the RA. The FSA would be a “rehabilitation” agency even more exclusively than any of its predecessor agencies and efforts, however.³⁷

What is most striking in all of this is an absence of interest in using landownership as the means to bolster the fortunes of struggling rural families. No greater myth surrounds the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration than that their primary purpose was to “grant” landownership to poor and landless farmers. As we have already seen, only a small fraction of the poor farmers whose land the government purchased in its retirement programs ended up being “resettled” onto farms with better land. Most of the people who lived in the various “communities” that these agencies created came from the areas surrounding the projects. Despite all of the attention these communities have received, the 99 of them that the government created provided space for a mere 10,938 families,³⁸ while the actual purchase of the submarginal land displaced in the neighborhood of 25,000 families. A slim majority of the families that managed to end up on “units” that the government created resided not on farms

³⁷ *Farm Tenancy: Report of the President’s Committee* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1937), 9-15, 25-27. On the odyssey of the Bankhead-Jones Bill in Congress, see Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 133-140, 177-187.

³⁸ This was after the consolidation of some of the landholdings in certain communities where the farms were too small; the embarrassingly high rates of turnover that afflicted many of the projects meant that far more families cycled through the programs than the 10,938 figure, but that number reflects the maximum number of families the projects could accommodate after the consolidations in a few of the communities.

but on the homesteads that provided a small garden to feed them. A majority of the “homesteads” that FERA, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, the RA, and the FSA created were not, strictly speaking, even farms. Most tellingly of all, the Farm Security Administration was the first of all of these agencies to make the tentative steps toward *actually selling* a homestead to the families who lived on them. It did so in 1940 and only under Congressional pressure. Up until 1940, the families had only leased these properties with the understanding that their rent would eventually be converted to mortgage payments. What the FSA began to issue to select families in 1940 was actually a “lease and purchase contract,” which still promised only a sale at a future date provided that the family remained in the good graces of the FSA and managed to meet agreed upon payments toward the cost of the homestead. The Farm Security Administration did not relinquish its right to change a client’s mortgage or to intervene in its affairs for a minimum of 41 years. In this way, the FSA had “sold” what the historian Paul Conkin reckons to be “approximately 2,586 units” to families by 1942.³⁹

The RA and FSA were not “resettlement” agencies, and they were not agencies intended primarily to sell land to farm tenants. These were rehabilitation agencies and that mission received the bulk of their attention and resources. The money expended on “rehabilitation” always dwarfed that spent on retiring land and on “resettlement.” The Farm Security Administration spent less than 10 percent of its expenditures on retiring submarginal land *and* resettling the families onto new lands even at the height of those efforts. Rather than devoting most of its resources to resettling families onto better land or to granting loans to landless farmers, the RA and FSA (picking up where FERA and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads left off) built up a veritable army of farm and home supervisors to perform their “rehabilitation” efforts. In 1941, the FSA operated nearly 2300 county offices, which employed more than 4000

³⁹ In deriving this information, I have used the historian Paul Conkin’s “Appendix: Complete List of New Deal Communities”: Conkin, *Tomorrow A New World*, 332-337. I have also verified the information by going to Conkin’s original source: *Hearings on the Farm Security Administration*, U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee of the Committee on Agriculture, 78th Cong., 1st Session, 1943-1944. For the details on the FSA’s contracts, see also Conkin, 218-219.

farm supervisors and more than 2500 home supervisors. Under the care of these technicians were more than 800,000 rehabilitation “client” *families*. More than 10 percent of all farm families by 1943 had received one of the FSA’s “standard rehabilitation loans” and thus had agreed, to one degree or another, to submit themselves to “supervision.” In Chapter Five, we will take a closer look at what this “supervision” entailed for those families who received “rehabilitation loans.” For the rest of this chapter, we will examine how these agencies conceived of and treated their resettlement communities as sociological laboratories, environments in which the cultural traits that they thought caused or pretuated poverty could be wiped away.⁴⁰

M.L. Wilson was one of the prime movers behind creating new communities as the means of engineering better lives for select Americans. There was no question for him during the Depression that the country’s problems were not exclusively or even primarily economic. In 1934, Wilson apparently thought that Americans were still staging a revolt “against the crass materialism and the shallowness of the jazz age.” Americans now shared a “yearning...for security, for wholesome recreation, and for things which seem to be typified best by what might be called the community idea.” Whether they came from rural or urban backgrounds, the people who settled in the communities that the government created could find a “new pattern of life,” consisting of the things that the “jazz age” had apparently frittered away: “continuity of employment, of education, of recreation, of security and other factors which go into the better living to which we all aspire.” In short, “subsistence homestead communities can be a sort of new synthesis of present day ideals and aspirations for community life.”⁴¹

In 1940, seven years after the government had first got itself in the homesteading business, the sociologist Charles Loomis, who had lived and worked as a “participant-observer” in El Cerrito, New Mexico, still insisted that the point of the projects was to conduct an experiment in the “rebuilding” and “revitalization of American community.” He warned that

⁴⁰ These figures come from Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 200, 215, 249-250.

⁴¹ Wilson, “Subsistence Homesteads,” 80-81.

“houses, roads, and telephone lines can be built and rebuilt,” but that people posed a knottier problem because “human beings cannot be handled like sticks and stones.” He insisted, though, that “social processes and change can be nurtured” provided that the managers of the resettlement communities were willing to adopt a “slow” approach to the “nurturing process.” Loomis thought that the best homestead projects did, in fact, do this “nurturing.” They nurtured not just strong and cohesive communities but a new (or perhaps recovered) culture for their residents. Loomis believed that one of the primary problems afflicting American farmers was that they had learned to “belittle the importance of goods produced for home use” and had turned to purchasing what they should have produced on their own. This represented a rejection of their cultural heritage, a “peasant heritage” that had come from Europe. Loomis particularly admired, as all rural sociologists did, the ethnic communities that had maintained strong cooperative traditions and a commitment to subsistence production. In making this argument, Loomis ignored the histories and experiences of all non-Euro-Americans. Nonetheless, he thought that American farmers had to rediscover this subsistence orientation, which he traced back to a European peasantry. As he saw it, the primary purpose of the subsistence homesteads was to reorient farmers in this direction. The point of the cooperative activities and enterprises that were so prominent on these projects was not solely economic, then. It was also cultural. The cooperatives would serve to inculcate the “social structure, prevailing attitudes, and ideals”—the characteristics of “highly integrated communities”—that had served ethnic communities so well and spared them some of the worst ravages of the Depression.⁴²

New communities allowed New Dealers to address concerns about rural culture and rural life that, as we saw in Chapter One, had circulated for decades. Rural sociologists and community reformers had long believed that modernization had distended many rural communities and neighborhoods and their institutions to the point of collapse. Sociologists

⁴² Charles P. Loomis, “Rebuilding American Community Life,” *American Sociological Review* 5, no. 3 (Jun., 1940), 311-312, 314-317.

faulted rural people for failing to adapt to the declining populations that existed in many “open-country neighborhoods” by switching their allegiance to “modern” and consolidated institutions—churches, schools, civic and community organizations—in nearby towns. They felt rural people had paid for this stubbornness in cultural and social decline. That decline might not have explained the onset of rural problems, but these experts had no doubt that it explained why difficulties persisted. The community projects, then, offered the chance to wipe away this social and cultural torpor. Their architects could use the colonies to provide rural people with the constructive and edifying lives and habits that rural life critics thought they frequently lacked. The communities could offer their residents modern churches and schools. They could foster a wider variety “social contacts” for their residents. The project planners could require residents to keep gardens and teach them proper nutrition and sanitation. They could offer classes on parenting. The close supervision of farm and home managers would raise standards of living on a whole host of factors, from food and clothing to shelter. The project administrators could expose their “clients” to the arts. They could teach them to practice small-scale, participatory democracy. They could initiate cooperative projects. All of this would militate against the scourge of “individualism.” Resettlement communities could give their residents, in short, appropriate lives and cultures. The communities offered the chance to do all of this and to do it, as one sociologist suggested in 1939, “without assuming, or seeming to assume, prerogatives of leadership and responsibility which have traditionally belonged to the local community.”⁴³

And they did do all of these things; or at least they tried to. The relevant agencies built schools and community buildings on the projects. Those became the centers of all the activities aimed at the residents’ elevation: lectures, cooking classes, music recitals, plays, dances, reading groups, community meetings, gatherings of cooperative associations, parent-teacher conferences, and more. Some of the colonies tried to revive handicraft industries and “folk arts.”

⁴³ Lowry Nelson, “Action Programs for the Conservation of Rural Life and Culture,” *Rural Sociology* 4, no. 4 (Dec., 1939), 428-429.

Architects laid out the communities to reflect the order and “integration” they expected the communities to achieve; art installations frequently graced the premises; the homes were meant, of course, to be neat, orderly, and “sanitary.” Project managers even dictated (or tried) how “clients” should arrange the furniture in their homes. Most famously, the communities hosted countless cooperative associations. Typically, these provided the use of farm equipment or certain services (especially marketing cooperatives and medical care), but some of the more adventurous of them included barber shops and filling stations. Eventually the FSA created “neighborhood action groups” and many programs that included “group discussion” partly because of the agency’s sense that the families did not really know how to practice democracy or govern their own lives.⁴⁴

Because this was a sociological and cultural experiment, the people who ran these communities took great care to keep undesirables out of them. Most of the families admitted onto the projects came from the “relief rolls” of state and local agencies and therefore had already submitted to the investigations of social workers. But the relevant agencies—FERA, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, RA, FSA—built up their own imposing edifices to keep out undesirables too, people who threatened to poison the experiment. The ostensible purpose, of course, was to assess the families as credit risks, but that was inseparable from the equally important purpose: using various means to assess the “character” of the families and their fitness for forming the right kind of communities. The aged, the indigent, the childless, the desperately poor, and non-nuclear (“broken”) families all faced automatic exclusion. Again, part of the justification was that these people lacked the ability to run successful farms (or homesteads) and therefore to pay back their loans. But just as important was that these families would not make for the dynamic communities that the project planners sought to forge; they

⁴⁴ Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 192-211; “Cooperative Division Letter No. 4: Administrative Effectiveness of Neighborhood Action Groups,” 12/10/1942 and “Neighborhood Discussion Groups: FSA Region VIII,” July 1942, Neighborhood Groups, General Correspondence Maintained in the Cincinnati Office, 1935 - 1942, Box 223, Records of the Farmers Home Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. [Hereafter RG 96, NARA II].

either had character flaws or were past or had skipped the part of a family's life cycle the planners thought most desirable. As one social scientist who studied how to best screen RA/FSA resettlement clients put it in 1937, the communities amounted to a "social experiment" and the agencies therefore had to adopt "the best sociological approaches and techniques" in selecting certain families and excluding others. He offered the following précis of the basic requirements that the Resettlement Administration set for its clients:

The Resettlement Administration requires initiative and resourcefulness, ability to enter into community life and to profit from instruction and guidance, stability and reliability, married status with one or more children or other dependents, freedom from infectious disease or other disabilities preventing fulfillment of obligations, the experience necessary for the particular project, and inability to obtain credit elsewhere for shelter, food, and farming purposes.⁴⁵

Because these were precisely the characteristics (excepting the inability to get credit) that social scientists tended to find wanting in the poverty cultures, it is little wonder that the "Resettlement" Administration resettled only 10 percent of the families that it displaced through land retirements. To get on a project, a family first had to be referred by a state relief agency. If a family had a referral, it then filled out an application. The applications, which varied, depending on the agencies, typically solicited information on the size and "age-sex composition" of the families; the educational attainments of the family members; the extent of their farming and other occupational experience; their capital assets and debts; the amount they produced in previous years for the market and home consumption; the frequency with which they had moved; their "relief history"; information on their health; memberships they held in cooperative or social organizations; their "attitudes" about farm life; and sometimes the extent of their

⁴⁵ John B. Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1937), 18.

“religiosity.” (Here the concern primarily was in weeding out zealots likely to stir up sectarian controversies at community churches).⁴⁶

The applications then served as the basis for “investigations” of the families that caseworkers performed. Social workers interviewed potential client families. But they also sought outside confirmation of as much of the information that the families provided as possible from elite, gatekeeping members of the community: bankers, ministers, doctors, teachers, extension agents, landlords, and other various leaders. Caseworkers gleaned information from these references on a family’s “credit rating, character, reliability and capital assets”; on the “character and natural intelligence of the children”; the quality of the family’s “care and management of the home”; the “health and stamina of the family”; its “religiosity or idealism” and “cooperative spirit and harmony”; the “intelligence, alertness, resourcefulness, and judgment of the family head”; the family’s “attitude toward farm life and the desire to succeed in the settlement opportunity offered”; and, above all, the “character, stability, and sense of responsibility of the family members.” If a family had managed to successfully run the gauntlet of home inspections and interviews, then it still typically had to face additional interviews with its potential farm and home management specialists and then had to receive final approval from a committee (or committees) overseeing the development of a given community. These families also had to pass medical examinations (“physicals”), in some cases including a syphilis tests. Some families had to submit to intelligence tests.⁴⁷

Once the USDA had thousands of families settled into communities (and many, many thousands more answerable to it through its “rehabilitation loans”), it had too good a social scientific opportunity to resist. Carl Taylor, as head of the USDA’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life (DFPRL), was especially influential in encouraging USDA social scientists to treat

⁴⁶ Holt, *Methods and Criteria*, 25-26; “Application for Rehabilitation,” in Swiger and Taeuber, *500 Families*; “Farm Security Administration Application,” Farm Ownership Division, Plans - General, General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II.

⁴⁷ Holt, *Methods and Criteria*, 20-21, 42, 45-50; Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, 40-41.

the communities as “laboratories” and to use “rehabilitation clients” as a vast and captive data set. In his presidential address before the Rural Sociological Society in 1939, Taylor exhorted his fellows to understand that since the advent of the New Deal, “fields and laboratories filled with social phenomena stare the rural sociologist in the face on all hands.” USDA sociologists Charles Loomis and Dwight Davidson agreed, offering in 1939 that “the recently established rural resettlement colonies furnish excellent laboratories for sociological investigation.”

Separate from Davidson, Loomis described the unique social scientific questions the communities offered the chance to answer: “When families, most of which are unacquainted, take up their residences in an uninhabited rural area in the United States, what type of local society will evolve? What will be the significant trends in the development of institutions and informal associations and the level of living of settlers? What will be the fundamental changes in attitudes?” Above all, the communities offered the rare chance to observe what happened when people had their social contacts and cultural habits wiped away. Social scientists could watch community aborning, as Loomis explained: “In the early stages of community development, settlers find themselves living together with neighbors with whom they are not acquainted. Long distances often stand between them and the communities of previous residence which contain their friends and relatives, churches, schools, and other social agencies upon which they were once dependent. New institutions to take the place of the old must be created. New friends must be found if a satisfying existence on the project is to be achieved.” Indeed, Carl Taylor could not help but crow about how good the New Deal had been for the sociology business. By the late 1930s, the social scientists of the DFPRL were engaged in dozens of projects generating sociological information on clients of the New Deal state. The DFPRL and the agencies that had requested the information (the Bureau of Reclamation, the Farm Security Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, to name the most important) hoped it would be of use in making their programs more effective. Recall too that Taylor’s DFPRL had placed sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists to live and

work as “participant-observers” in six different rural communities, turning those communities into “laboratories” as well. And this was in addition to the County Land Use Planning neighborhood and community delineations we have already seen these social scientists performing. At the cusp of American entry in World War II, the BAE, which housed the DFPRL and was the USDA’s “central planning agency,” would employ at least 60 of what Taylor called “professional sociology research workers.”⁴⁸

Taylor directed a concerted effort to make use of these unique sociological opportunities. He tasked social scientists with investigating the “standards of living” of the families in various resettlement communities. He also charged the sociologist E.L. Kirkpatrick with studying a sample of 70,000 rural rehabilitation clients. Kirkpatrick compiled an enormous amount of information about people who received rehabilitation loans: their prior occupational experiences, the frequency with which they moved, their net worth, their educational attainments, the size of their families, their age, how often men headed their households, the size of their farms, their tenure status, the size of their debts, the kind of equipment they owned and its worth, and on and on. (All of this could be compared at the state level).⁴⁹

The sociologists Charles Loomis and Dwight Davidson were especially interested in using the resettlement communities, at Carl Taylor’s behest, to study processes of social formation and to advance the relatively new field of “sociometry.” (Sociometry sought to measure and quantify social relations, frequently through mapping). Loomis and Davidson and their assistants interviewed and gathered data from more than 1500 families. They studied or commissioned

⁴⁸ Carl C. Taylor, “Social Theory and Social Action,” *Rural Sociology* 5, Issue 1, (Mar., 1940), 22; Charles P. Loomis and Dwight Davidson, Jr., “Sociometrics and the Study of New Rural Communities,” *Sociometry* 2, no. 1 (Jan., 1939), 57; Charles P. Loomis, “The Development of Planned Rural Communities,” *Rural Sociology* 3, Issue 4 (Dec. 1938), 385; Taylor, “Psychological Adjustments,” NAL Special Collections, 10-13; Carl C. Taylor, “Social Science and Social Action in Agriculture,” *Social Forces* 20, no. 2 (Dec., 1941), 154-159.

⁴⁹ Charles P. Loomis and Linden S. Dodson, *Standards of Living of the Residents of Seven Rural Resettlement Communities* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1938); Loomis and Leonard, *Indian-Mexican Village*; E.L. Kirkpatrick, *Analysis of 70,000 Rural Rehabilitation Families* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1938).

studies of seven “new” resettlement communities and five established “control communities” for comparative purposes. Their main interest was the “formal and informal association patterns of families in these various communities” and their “social participation.” In other words, they looked at things that sociologists had studied for decades: what kinds of organizations people joined, whether they went to church, how often they visited or “swapped work” with their neighbors, and so forth. The “control communities” provided a baseline of what Loomis and Davidson considered normal patterns. When it came to the residents of the resettlement communities, Loomis and Davidson wanted to contrast their rates of social participation before and after they had joined a resettlement community but also to establish a baseline of comparison within each resettlement community for the purposes of assessing the future levels of community “integration” or “disintegration” on those projects. Loomis and Davidson also hoped that all of this information would prove of use to the project managers in screening candidates for these communities by identifying the sociological types who tended to succeed and fail in them.⁵⁰

Loomis and Davidson discovered, among other things, that families in the resettlement communities visited and swapped work more frequently than they had in their previous communities. (The sociologists speculated that the “pioneer situation” of the communities encouraged this). Although the families had fewer kinship ties with their neighbors than was normal, the families did not generally lack “social cohesion” or “intimacy and familiarity” with one another. As proof of this, the social scientists held up the fact that seven out of the ten families who “visited, borrowed, or exchanged work” with other families also had children that played together. (The more that these kinds of factors overlapped with one another, the more sociologists thought they found the “cohesion” and “integration” in social life that they valued so much). As that particular statistic indicates—they had quantified the play habits of children of

⁵⁰ On the established communities: Loomis and Leonard, *Indian-Mexican Village*; Linden S. Dodson, *Social Relations and Institutions in an Established Rurban Community, South Holland, Illinois* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1939).

1500 families—Loomis and Davidson wanted to leave no sociological stone unturned. They compiled copious amounts of information from their interviews. For example, they broke down the “circumstances under which families became acquainted” in the communities: whether through “purposeful initiative” (a planned visit) or through “fortuitous circumstances” (broken down into categories such as chance meetings “in the road” or meeting because of loose livestock, etc.) or through “formal institutions and clubs” and a number of other possibilities. The sociologists even had a crude measure of the class relationships on the projects: they found that closely associated families tended to have the same “level of living” and to participate in the same social activities. Because Loomis and Davidson favored sociometric methods, they frequently produced maps that illustrated the various connections that families forged in the colonies. Their ultimate recommendation to the people who ran these farm communities, to better screen the families admitted, was to select families who “moved infrequently, have several children of school age, and participate in the activities of the institutions of the community.” They also recommended picking people who could be identified as leaders in their former communities because they tended to become leaders on the projects. This would add up to more highly “integrated” communities and a more successful sociological experiment.⁵¹

Despite the sociological pretensions of these communities, many of them faced considerable internal problems that stemmed directly from the mismanagement or incompetence of the people running them or from the well-intentioned but ill-conceived nature of the communities themselves. The problem began with the land: the government bought cheap, and members of the communities paid for that fact. Frequently, the farms were too small and the land too poor for colonists to make adequate payments on their leases. On some projects, the managers had to consolidate the holdings to address this or to make efficient use of

⁵¹ Charles P. Loomis, *Social Relationships and Institutions in Seven Rural Communities* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1940), 1-2, 21-43, 48-49; Loomis and Davidson, “Study of New Rural Communities,” 56-57; Charles P. Loomis and Dwight M. Davidson, Jr., “Measurement of the Dissolution of In-Groups in the Integration of a Rural Resettlement Project,” *Sociometry* 2, no. 2 (Apr., 1939), 84-94.

tractors and farm equipment. The contracts that the government issued were confusing and misleading. Project managers exercised their right to change them at will and then blamed the resentment that families developed because of this on their “lack of education.” (The contracts were, in fact, confusing, a natural consequence of the barriers placed in the way of the families actually owning the farms). As if this was not already “paternalistic” enough, the government also held a lien on all of the families’ property; they needed permission to withdraw money from their bank accounts and to make basic decisions about how to run their farms and homes. When colonists organized to defend their interests—which is to say when they practiced the community and democracy that the project planners claimed to want to inculcate—they frequently earned the “troublemaker” label and got themselves booted from their farms. The bylaws of the cooperative associations—intended as vehicles of participatory democracy—gave project managers veto rights over the associations’ decisions. Perhaps, most importantly, though, the projects saddled their “clients” with loans that they were unlikely to be able to repay. Here, even seeming dreams could become nightmares. The families frequently lacked basic home furnishings. The agencies provided it (or taught clients to build it) but added the expense to what they owed on their land and their newly built homes; the same happened with the costs of the “improvements” that had to happen on the substandard land the government provided them. The amount that the families ultimately owed alarmed them and seemed contrived, even fraudulent. Confrontations over bills and payments were endless and often rancorous. The more families complained about the troubles or organized to fix problems, the more the project managers blamed them for the failures.⁵²

⁵² All of this was ably documented by Marion Clawson, an economist whom the BAE and FSA tasked with studying the issues that the resettlement communities had encountered. According to Clawson, Howard Tolley received his report favorably but it was suppressed by C.B. Baldwin, who became the head of the FSA after Will Alexander. Clawson published the report himself decades later: Marion Clawson, “Resettlement Experience on Nine Selected Projects,” *Agricultural History* 52, no. 1 (Jan., 1978), passim but especially, 22, 28-29, 37-40, 63-64, 72-74.

No resettlement community was more notorious in its problems than the Dyess Colony in the Delta of northeast Arkansas. Between 1936 and 1938, 40 percent of the families living in the community left. The colony occupied what had formerly been a swamp, one that had been logged of its best timber and that the government had acquired from a distressed lumber company. At great effort and expense, rehabilitation authorities drained the land, built roads and other infrastructure, and cleared a portion of the impenetrable underbrush that had grown up in the wake of the area's logging. The families would have to do most of the clearing work themselves, however, and the colony was still prone to repeated flooding. Many of the families in the colony also found themselves cut off and isolated from neighbors by the ditches and dykes that the government had built to conduct a sociological experiment in what had been a swamp. Still, the government provided the colonists with what it hoped would be the basis of a thriving community. Dyess ultimately contained homes for 500 farm families and a Main Street built from scratch, replete with a general store, barber shop, post office, and a community building that housed a library and movie theatre; a nearby recreation facility provided ball fields and a swimming pool.⁵³

The colonists at Dyess, however, ultimately developed an especially contentious relationship with the project's management. It was one of the colonies where holdings had to be consolidated because the farms were too small. A man who managed the project for a time behaved in the manner of a southern riding boss, developing an imperious (even thuggish) posture toward residents. More than anything, though, the colonists bristled at what they were being asked to pay for their farms. The government had bought a swamp and paid swamp prices, but it was nothing for a family, when shown the books, to see that it owed several thousand dollars. The colonists at Dyess became especially active in organizing protest meetings, telegramming the White House, and advocating the direct election of project

⁵³ Loomis, *Social Relationships*, 1-2; Loomis and Davidson, "Study of New Rural Communities," 65; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 30-51.

managers. The colony even hosted an active local of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, which sought to become the "bargaining agent" of the residents. The managers responded with intimidation and evictions. They resorted to the canard that a few "troublemaking" families stirred up unfounded resentments. (That does not speak well, apparently, of the job done by the fourteen full time workers who had screened the families admitted to the colony. In fact, Dyess had one of the most elaborate processes of any of the resettlement communities to keep out "undesirables.") The turnover on the project became incredibly high and the many community facilities quickly fell into relative disuse.⁵⁴

At a project as vexed as Dyess, it was perhaps inevitable the work of USDA sociologists would become a form of surveillance, and, indeed, it did. Charles Loomis led the way in attempting to analyze what had gone wrong. Despite the abundant problems in the colony, Loomis originally found the exodus difficult to fathom. He asked incredulously, "Why had such a large proportion of the settlers abandoned the project to return to the status of sharecroppers in the Delta plantation area, leaving a place where they had the best houses they had ever lived in, the best schools their children had ever attended, the best and most reasonable hospitalization and medical service, probably the best library and cooperatives they would ever know, and doubtless the best opportunity they would have for ownership?" To answer that question, Loomis, sometimes working with the sociologist Dwight Davidson, compiled information on 252 families that had left Dyess between 1934 and 1938 and found abundant evidence of their real, material grievances. Most of them had cited as reasons for leaving better opportunities elsewhere, "objections" to the project (e.g. to their mortgages or the floods), or the fact that illness or the death of a family member had changed their ability to operate their farms.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 202-215, 224-239.

⁵⁵ Loomis, *Social Relationships*, 10-12.

Although Loomis was well aware of the troubles that had plagued Dyess, he refused to acknowledge them as the cause of the community's evident failure. Instead, he read it as a sociological problem—one that could be pinned on naysaying families—and used his “sociometric” techniques to surveil the social networks of the families he identified as malcontents. Loomis cast about for what differentiated the people who ultimately left the colony from those who stayed. As part of the concerted effort to treat the communities as laboratories, Loomis already had data from 1936 on the social interactions of its families. When he began to look into Dyess's troubles, Loomis then used the information that hundreds of Dyess families had provided on their social and “visiting” habits to conduct a retroactive surveillance of those that had decamped from the colony. He tracked their personal associations in the colony and found that the people who moved from Dyess between 1936 and 1938 tended to associate, while still in the colony, with other families who would eventually move too. Loomis ultimately argued that there were two kinds of people at Dyess: “movers” and “non-movers.” He mapped these networks of “movers” to prove his point and even isolated certain sections of Dyess where the tendency of “movers” to associate with one another was especially “pronounced.”⁵⁶

Loomis eschewed a number of obvious interpretations of these groups' activities. The families lived near one another, for example, and were therefore likely to share similar problems that would bring them together, whether the issues had to do with flooding, the quality of their land, or anything else. The networks also provide evidence of why the families at Dyess proved so effective at organizing to protest and change their treatment. The “in-groups” of “movers” that Loomis identified could easily be read as families forging solidarity (community, even) in the face of shabby treatment and difficult conditions, ultimately leading to their decision that they had better prospects elsewhere. Loomis, however, did not care to offer these interpretations. Instead, he couched the problem in sociological terms. The point of the “social contacts” so beloved by sociologists and so laboriously mapped by Loomis, was to achieve

⁵⁶ Loomis and Davidson, “Study of New Rural Communities,” 57-69

“integration” and “harmony” within communities. These networks had failed to do that and therefore the problem lay with the people who had formed them and with the networks themselves—not the problems that had, in all likelihood, galvanized the connections between them in the first place. These families became dissatisfied because they shared poisoned social contacts, as far as Loomis was concerned. He determined that “these groupings played an important part in determining whether or not settlers were satisfied with their new way of life.” He believed that when it came to “movers,” “these small groups insisted upon exaggerating the disadvantages of living on the project, refused to listen to the counsel of groups of individuals who believed in the projects, and moved away to become sharecroppers and laborers again.” He contrasted that with networks of “non-movers” that “seemed to discount false and exaggerated rumors about the disadvantages of the projects, the prices consumer-cooperatives were charging, and objectionable characteristics of leasing and property arrangements.” Loomis did not pause to consider that perhaps these “non-mover” families had experienced the community in more positive ways; instead, he suggested that, sociologically speaking, they made for better community material.⁵⁷

In identifying and mapping these networks, Loomis was at least partly hoping to trace the source and course of what he called “rumors” about Dyess. Loomis’s word choice was poor. He acknowledged the real problems that the colony’s residents faced: policies that were unclear and often changed, frequent personnel changes, and overbearing and anti-democratic management. None of these things were “rumors” and even if the colonists’ perceptions about them were overblown or unfair, that would still not make them “rumors.” But Loomis treated the basic problem as one of how the networks of movers and non-movers dealt differently with “rumors” about Dyess. In networks of “movers,” “rumors became magnified, reworded and misinterpreted.” The families that vacated Dyess had fallen into the trap of “giving these rumors an adverse interpretation” and, in fact, “took these rumors so seriously that the dissatisfaction

⁵⁷ Loomis, *Social Relationships*, 1-2.

thus created was at least partially responsible for the family's moving from the colony." The sociologist complained too that "even outside agitation, stirred up by people on the outside of the colony with malicious intent, circulated with great rapidity along the grapevine. Again, some were selective and critical while others were receptive and uncritical." The problem was not with what spurred the complaints but with the people who refused to treat them as unfounded.⁵⁸

Loomis thought that his reconnaissance of these networks suggested a number of fruitful avenues for greater harmony in all the communities. For one, the managers had to recognize that "small informal groupings are very important in the lives of the settlers" and learn to accommodate that fact. Because he could not see the complaints about the affairs at Dyess as legitimate, Loomis claimed these groups "played an important part in determining whether or not settlers were satisfied with their new way of life." Because of their importance, Loomis recommended infiltrating them, and using them to spread what he considered more accurate information about the projects and to quash "rumors" that he considered false. It was important, though, to do so "in such a way that the settlers do not feel they are being propagandized." Like the New Deal liberal that he was, Loomis also recommended the use of "discussion groups" in the communities. Through rational discussion, the clients could be guided to see which grievances were legitimate and which were not. On troubled projects, such as Dyess, regularized discussion "would counteract the tendency for certain groups and individuals to circulate false information" and "might intercept the rumors and misinformation which follow the 'grapevine' or chains of relationships of would-be 'movers' and 'stayers.'" Loomis also felt that the managers of resettlement communities could use the maps of social networks that he had created to monitor and co-opt them and their leaders, rather than having them turned against the health of the community.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Loomis, *Social Relationships*, 1-2, 15; Loomis and Davidson, "Study of New Rural Communities," 69.

⁵⁹ Loomis, *Social Relationships*, 15, 56-57; Loomis, "Development of Planned Rural Communities," 408.

When Loomis described the problems at Dyess as sociological in their origins, he was not making an assertion that he intended to apply only to that resettlement community. Invoking the catchall term of sociologists for strong, healthy communities, Loomis explained that communities could have “the will to integration” just as easily as that integration could be “impeded by the wills of individuals or of outside groups.” In a properly integrated community, “internal strife is at a minimum, a powerful ‘we’ feeling exists among its members, the morale is high, and all are loyal to common objectives entailing a spirit of self-sacrifice, if necessary, on the part of the individual for the whole.” “Will” could work wonders, then, just as its absence could sabotage a community. The obverse of the agrarian New Dealers’ concern with culture and community was that when things went wrong, they could blame the people that they had sought to help. The reason that the Resettlement Administration had targeted them for “rehabilitation” and sometimes “resettlement” in the first place was the perception that their cultures had either caused or perpetuated their poverty. It was therefore within the logic of this understanding of poverty to conclude that if anti-poverty programs failed, it was because the people were simply too far gone in their poverty cultures. Marion Clawson, whom the USDA had hired to look into the difficulties that its resettlement communities faced, provided abundant testimony to the many problems on the projects that had nothing to do with their clients. But he still rated people as problem number one: “A prolonged period of decline and failure had left deep scars. They were discouraged, often cynical, and sometimes antagonistic toward society.” When the government, in its benevolence, “offered assistance...sometimes these offers of help were misinterpreted to the point where the settler felt the federal government was obligated to take care of him. They were prepared to lay blame for any failure or shortcoming on the federal government, not upon themselves.” Many of them had not, in other words, shed their cultures of poverty. On the other hand, when the projects worked, their architects thought they paid “dividends,” as Carl Taylor had called them, in “remade personalities and lives.” Charles Loomis, despite the close observation he had made of Dyess, did not consider the subsistence homestead

experiment a failure. In most of the communities, he detected a certain bounce in the step of the “clients,” subtle but undeniable signs of people shedding the trappings of their poverty cultures:

The experiment has made the majority of the homesteaders happier people. Thanks to their gardens, they now have better diets; thanks to the plentiful open air and sunshine, they are more healthy; thanks to their group life among people of similar interests, communities are evolving; and thanks to the fact that they are on the road to home and land ownership, they feel more secure, more able to withstand depression or individual misfortune.⁶⁰

The USDA’s programs for the rural poor did not, in fact, place the vast majority of people who had access to them on “the road to home and land ownership.” Putting that aside, Loomis had offered a fairly accurate description of what the USDA thought it could give to poor farmers: a steadying hand; some better habits; fuller lives; and the first steps toward shedding the cultural apathy and lethargy that had kept them poor. They did not need landownership, not right way at least, and they did not need the endless stream of checks that the government issued with few questions asked to farmers in the cultures of commerce; mostly they needed stewardship and a nudge in the right direction. Early in 1937, as he was exiting the Resettlement Administration, Rexford Tugwell perfectly summarized what all this was and was not about: “Farm ownership? Yes, some day for some, under the right conditions, at their own choice and with a clear view of its costs and after they have demonstrated their ability to rise. But now, most importantly for many, treatment of disease, better diet for children, a mule, some seed and fertilizer, clothes to lift the shame of going ragged to town, some hope for the future, a friendly hand to help in every farm and home crisis.”⁶¹

In this chapter, we have seen the overwhelming presumption of social scientists in the 1930s that poverty was either cultural in its origins or its solutions. We have also seen how the USDA’s anti-poverty agencies, the RA and FSA, shared that disposition, which led them to make

⁶⁰ Loomis, *Social Relationships*, 9; Clawson, “Resettlement Experience,” 17; Taylor, “Rural Rehabilitation and Resettlement,” 2-3; Loomis, “Rebuilding American Community Life,” 319.

⁶¹ Tugwell quoted in Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 163.

sociological laboratories out of their famed resettlement communities and further made them reluctant to actually do what they were best known for doing: getting poor farmers onto land that could support them. Most poor farmers who received the attention of the USDA experienced it through rehabilitation loans and not in resettlement communities, however. Chapter Five begins that story. To provide crucial context on the depth of the cultural assumptions of New Dealers, and to set the stage for the program of rural development in Greene County, Georgia, which is the subject of Chapter Six, the chapter opens with a consideration of the career and work of the sociologist Arthur F. Raper. Raper was an activist-sociologist who exposed the evils of white supremacy and the South's plantation system even as he ultimately argued that those things produced a poverty culture in the South that had to be addressed before more meaningful reforms could take place. The cultural pathologies that Raper found in the Plantation South were simply amped up versions of what USDA New Dealers believed they confronted everywhere poverty was widespread. The chapter then examines the nature of the intervention that home economists and farm management specialists attempted to work on the lives of poor farmers through rehabilitation loans. Chapter Six then follows the fight against rural poverty to Greene County, Georgia, where New Dealers brought it specifically to prove that "rehabilitation" could work even in the poorest of the poverty cultures. Arthur Raper had made Greene County a byword for the most horrifying and intractable kind of rural poverty in 1936 when he published his sociology of the plantation, *Preface to Peasantry*. Because the people who ran the USDA cared about these things, they created a "unified" program of rural development in Greene County to remake its soils and its people. In no other place were the efforts of agrarian liberalism toward the poverty cultures more sustained and sincere, the good intent more in evidence, and the inadequacies more obvious.

Chapter 5

Sharecroppers All

Sharecroppers haunted Greene County's plantation houses. They haunted the tumbledown structures with the culture that the plantation system allegedly bred into landless farmers and, by the 1920s and 30s, they haunted them with a more literal presence. Greene County had become so poor that sharecropper families sometimes lived in decaying plantation houses. On the northern edge of Georgia's Black Belt, about half way between Atlanta and Augusta—and worlds away from both—the county had been one of the state's "richest" in antebellum times, boasting some of the South's largest cotton crops. The twinned exploitation of land and labor that had made the area appear wealthy, and that had dotted it with pretentious plantation houses in the Georgian style, had eventually ensnared the county's exploiters nearly as thoroughly as its exploited, however. Here the whole sordid history of the Black Belt seemed to roll out in archetypal form: the rise of a "cotton kingdom" and its plantation aristocracy in the decades before the Civil War; the violence and terror directed at African Americans during and in the wake of Reconstruction as the means of their disfranchisement and dispossession; after Reconstruction, the emergence of sharecropping, the immiseration of both white and black small farmers, and the stubborn and costly persistence of cotton monoculture.¹

The social and environmental consequences of the plantation's historical vice-grip on the area, written onto Greene's land and into the lives of its people, made the county famous in the

¹ The rural sociologist Arthur F. Raper recounted this history of Greene County decades before even academic historians had managed to fully dislodge racist histories of the plantation system and Reconstruction: *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 3-192; see also Jonathan M. Bryant, *How Curious a Land: Conflict and Change in Greene County, Georgia, 1850-1885* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

1930s among the people who cared about those sorts of things. The whole system depended on robbing the soil and the sharecropper to pay the landlord an ever-diminishing return. Cotton crop after cotton crop leached the earth. Farm tenants, who moved every few years on average, had little incentive to improve their farms, their dwellings, or their soil-mining habits. Their landlords lied to themselves and said that this was because tenants were no good and lazy. Because the returns were so meager, however, many landlords did not even bother with trying to “supervise” or “manage” their tenants. Most of them had moved to town in the decades after the Civil War and made only occasional imperious forays to their tenants’ farms to check up on them. A tragic succession on the land fell into place, one that persisted until the county became an object of social scientific and government interest in the 1930s: landlords found themselves lowering the rent on a particular farm, as the soil became increasingly impoverished, until it cost more to have someone farm it than to leave it idle; the farm abandoned, sedges and loblolly and short needled pines grew up; thirty or forty years made the conifers big enough for harvest; once the land had been cleared, it was put back under the plow, even less fertile than before, with the whole cycle to start again. The earth yawned open under all of this mistreatment, with vast gullies giving geologic form to the consequences of the interlocking exploitation of people and soil. Not surprisingly, Greene County became the leading edge of Georgia’s Great Migration, though most of the migrants initially went no further than Atlanta. Those who remained endured some of the most abysmal standards of income, health, and housing that existed anywhere in the country. Some of the scions of the county’s grandee families managed to hang on to and preserve, in some semblance of their original condition, the plantation “big houses” of the antebellum era. Most of them fell into disrepair, however, some crumbling to the point that only a chimney remained. Enough of the houses still stood, though, in various states of collapse, that a strange but logical site emerged in the 1920s and 1930s: sharecropper families, sometimes three or four of them at a time, living in the ruins of these homes that had once symbolized the power, wealth, and permanence of the South’s master class. Sharecroppers

haunted Greene County's plantation houses because nowhere had white supremacy, linked with the South's extractive economy, pushed a local society further into social and environmental decay.²

In 1940, the elderly African American sharecroppers Seab and Kate Johnson occupied one such plantation house in Greene County, which they shared with a bachelor son. The house itself was more than one hundred years old and bore abundant testament to the brutality and impermanence of the culture that built it. All of the window panes were out. The shutters, when closed, did not draw tightly enough to the window frames to keep out the elements. Inside the house, the plaster had worn off the walls. No ceiling separated the living spaces from the roof. The Johnsons occupied only two of the capacious house's rooms. The other five were empty or had been filled with the detritus of Greene's failing cotton economy: empty sacks of fertilizer, cotton that had mildewed, a mule collar. It made no difference in the wintertime whether the Johnsons kept their front door open or shut; the house was cold just the same. That front door was the one remaining point of ingress and egress. The steps at a side entrance had collapsed and the door had been nailed shut. Because the front porch had buckled, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson navigated their way in and out of the house on boards placed on the foundation of the old porch. Years ago, a plantation overseer had ordered the shrubs that ringed the house, boxwoods and mimosas, to be torn out so the cotton could come clear up to the house. There was much less cotton on the place in 1940, but the plant now also exercised its tyranny in what had formerly been a garden and on a hillside near the house—an effort to coax more fiber out of “fresh land.” The large barn that had once housed twenty mules had been torn down and its ruins planted in cotton for the same reason. The rest of the “plantation” had grown up in sedges or pines or was covered in gullies, one of which formed a “driveway” leading up to the house and which Mr. Johnson had to navigate when going out to the fields. Like most southern tenants, the Johnsons mostly subsisted on the trifecta of fat back, molasses, and cornbread. Mr. Johnson tended

² Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 3-192.

patches of corn on the property and Mrs. Johnson sometimes foraged for greens or caught catfish in the Oconee River. Perhaps most remarkably of all, Seab and Kate Johnson were part of what the Farm Security Administration was then busily touting as one of its greatest successes: a program of rural development that it had launched in Greene County in 1939. The FSA had loaned the Johnsons the money for Mrs. Johnson to buy a pressure cooker for her to use in canning fruits and vegetables for home consumption. She did not have much use for the device. She “put up” one hundred jars of food, though the terms of her loan almost certainly required her to can many more, but did so using methods that did not necessitate the use of the pressure cooker. She wished, instead, that the FSA had offered money to repair her crumbling home. Kate and Seab Johnson had lived in and around this plantation house for at least 30 years; they expected to be “put off” the place sometime in the next year or two and had no idea where they would go.³

Strange as it was, families like the Johnsons were not the most incongruous presence in Greene County’s old plantation houses. That honor had to go to the rural sociologist Arthur Raper and his family, who had moved into the old J. B. “Punch” Dolvin plantation house in 1940, living there for two years. In 1936, Raper had published an acclaimed study of Greene and Macon Counties, *Preface to Peasantry*, which still stands as one of the most powerful and subtle indictments of the social and environmental legacy of the Black Belt South’s history of white supremacy and cotton monoculture. The USDA had sent Raper to work in Greene as a “social science analyst” and a “participant-observer,” studying its program of rural development and land use planning. The forty-one year-old sociologist moved his wife Martha, three sons, and daughter (aged 3 to 10) from their home in Atlanta to Greene County in September of 1940. The Dolvin place was an actual plantation in the way that those still existed in the Black Belt: a white

³ “Seab and Kate,” 9/19/1940, Box 6, Folder 111 in the Arthur Franklin Raper Papers #03966, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [Hereafter AFR Papers]; Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 3-17.

family owned the land and the “big house” and numerous African American families sharecropped it, with their cabins scattered across the property.⁴

Despite the \$15 per month rent and the inconveniences of living in a drafty old plantation house on somewhat dilapidated grounds, the Dolvin place was nothing like what Kate and Seab Johnson inhabited, or the cropper cabins that dotted the property. The home had “only” been built in 1890 and subsequently had been modernized: it had a telephone, electricity, and hot, running water. Arthur threw himself into his work and both he and Martha delighted at the chance to immerse themselves in this world that, despite the fact that they were both native southerners, seemed very foreign to them indeed. A well located just yards away from the house made the Raper’s home a center of local activity. At and after sunup, a steady stream of women, children and elderly men from the families that farmed the plantation came to fill their buckets. Arthur and Martha came to know the people who populated and worked the plantation as intimately and affectionately as it was possible for liberal whites to know African Americans, which is to say with much affection and no real intimacy. They saw quickly the general reticence of their neighbors, in conversation, to offer more than friendly platitudes. They learned one of many lessons on the intricate racial codes of the area when numerous of their neighbors offered their services—for washing, milking, cooking, chopping wood, and so forth—and would say only that whatever the Rapers were willing to pay would surely be more than enough. They learned another when they discovered that when whites gave directions and said, “the third house on the right,” the reckoning did not include the intervening African American homes; literally, only white homes counted. Despite the environs, the Rapers extended small courtesies to their neighbors that few other whites in the county would have conceived. They let them use the telephone, for example, when they needed to call the doctor. (The nearest phone besides the Rapers’ was a mile off; for the privilege of making a call, its owners charged a nickel, which had

⁴ Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936).

to be deposited in a dish of water left by the phone, something the people who needed to use it considered more offensive than the five cent fee). The Rapers also roiled local white opinion for paying the people who did work for them—Mary Sue, Annie May, Mattie Lou, Doug and Bill; all residents of the Dolvin plantation—more than the prevailing wage by several multiples.⁵

After setting themselves up in the plantation house, the Raper's bought a cow, a flock of chickens, and began to keep an extensive garden, just like the families that were "on the FSA" were required to do. (Martha was from Atlanta, but Arthur had grown up on a small tobacco farm in North Carolina). From the cow, they got milk and buttermilk and made their own cottage cheese and butter. The chickens were more difficult. Half of the flock of 100 died in the first year. The Rapers acquired another 100 birds, nearly all of which lived, providing dozens of eggs each day and all the broilers and fryers that they could have wanted. The garden was bounteous too. By early spring of their first year in Greene, the plot provided "beans and carrots, onions and turnips, cabbage and beets" and later "squash and okra, cucumbers and eggplant and corn....butter beans, Irish potatoes...and watermelons." The whole family pitched in to can more than 600 jars of fruits and vegetables, as did Old Preacher, a nonagenarian ex-slave who lived on the Dolvin place, was the keeper of its historical memory, and became something of a favorite of the Raper's. But, Arthur and Martha noted disappointedly that their own garden, despite generating an initial wave of interest among the families on the plantation, did not induce them to begin keeping their own plots. One of their neighbors, Mattie Lou, did can 45 quarts of fruit, but otherwise, according to the Rapers, "the rest of them had no jars, no fenced gardens, no tradition of home-grown foods." Quite remarkably—given that Arthur was there to study the most intensive program of rural development that the FSA had launched anywhere—the sociologist had tried and failed to secure FSA loans for the families on the Dolvin Place so that they could acquire chickens, the pressure cookers used for canning fruits and vegetables,

⁵ Arthur F. Raper and Martha J. Raper, *Two Years to Remember and Other Writings*, manuscript published privately (Vienna, Virginia: Jean Moore, 1977), 1-7, 72, 80-81.

perhaps even a cow. Local FSA officials rejected the request. They considered the Raper's neighbors beyond "rehabilitation."⁶

We can know all of these details—not just the history of Greene County and the intricate rules and codes of Jim Crow, but also the very specific living conditions of Seab and Kate Johnson (and many other sharecropper families), and the details of the Rapers' garden and livestock (and many other families in the county as well)—because that is what Arthur Raper was there to observe, record, and interpret in his anthropological capacity as a "participant-observer" in Greene County for the USDA. He went, in 1940, to the plantation house that the Johnsons occupied to observe and study the way that they *lived*. Having inspected the home, the plantation property, the garden, the pantry, the routines of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson as they went about their business—and, of course, after talking with them extensively—he decamped to a neighboring farm, picked a rock to sit on, and began to sketch out his notes. The image, then, of sharecroppers haunting Greene County's plantation houses comes directly from Raper, but in a double sense: he not only observed and recorded these families' existence and circumstances (in both published and unpublished writings), but also made broader arguments about sharecroppers and farm tenants in the Black Belt. As we will see, despite Raper's profound and subversive critiques of white supremacy and the plantation complex, these brought him, again and again, to a narrow conclusion and even narrower solutions. The terrible history of Greene County that Raper studied so extensively and wrote about so eloquently, had burdened its people with a plantation mentality. Greene County had a culture of poverty. Its people, black and white, did not live right. The reconstruction of Greene County would have to begin with its people, in their fields, in their homes, and in their gardens.

⁶ Ibid., 48-49, 53-54.

In the previous chapter, we saw the overwhelming presumption of USDA New Dealers and social scientists that poverty was to some degree a cultural phenomenon. The cultural understanding of poverty helps to explain why the USDA preferred to invest anti-poverty resources in “rehabilitating” poor farmers rather than helping them to achieve landownership. The last chapter focused on the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration’s famed “resettlement” communities as sociological laboratories constructed to achieve that rehabilitation. Those communities, however, only provided space for a comparatively small number of poor farmers. In order to make a dent in rural poverty cultures, New Dealers had to reach far more people than they could through resettlement projects. They did that through rehabilitation loans that they ultimately extended to more than 800,000 farm families. This was a massive social experiment. In exchange for small loans that funded modest improvements to their homes and farms, poor farmers agreed to submit to the direction of the FSA’s army of thousands of farm and home supervisors. This chapter explores what that rehabilitation meant to the lives of poor farmers.

Arthur Raper and Greene, County, Georgia figure prominently in this chapter for several reasons. In 1939, the FSA spearheaded an effort in Greene County that attempted to rehabilitate every single one of its poor citizens. Chapter Six examines that program in some detail. The USDA hired Raper—a leading expert on rural poverty but also, of course, *the* leading expert on Greene County—to study that effort with the hope that similar programs would be rolled out in all of the poverty cultures. Raper appears prominently in these pages to provide crucial context for the subsequent chapter, but also because his thought illuminates an important fact: even when USDA New Dealers understood the *causes* of poverty in structural terms, they still contemplated primarily cultural solutions to that poverty. In fact, no other New Dealer more readily or more profoundly deployed structural explanations for poverty than Arthur Raper. He explained Greene County’s decayed and desperate state as a product of history and political economy. The legacy of the plantation loomed large in his analysis, in fact, but not always in

ways that were fruitful. Raper ultimately argued that the plantation had created a poverty culture in Greene County, that it had warped its residents, black and white, by turning them into directionless plodders, people who could not and would not do for themselves. Culturally speaking, Greene County was full of sharecroppers. Raper believed that the plantation mindset would have to be overthrown before the plantation proper could be buried. Perhaps that was a creditable interpretation, but it was also an understanding that allowed committed reformers like Raper, and the RA and FSA, to settle for treating symptoms of poverty rather than causes. It also set the stage for the fraught nature of the rehabilitation experiment in addressing the problem of poverty. If the culture of the poor was so important, then they *became* the problem. This chapter therefore begins with a close examination of Raper's career and his understanding of the effects of the plantation system, but then moves beyond that to consider rehabilitation techniques as the FSA deployed them across the country. Throughout the chapter, Raper and Greene County provide important context. Examining Greene County closely allows us to see something surprising: everywhere the FSA worked with poor farmers, it treated them as if they had the same set of problems and cultural pathologies that had afflicted the people of Greene County. Rehabilitation clients were sharecroppers all. And perhaps most remarkably, the FSA expected them to find their salvation through better homes and gardens.

Arthur Raper found his intellectual and activist home in the small but vital niche of southern liberalism that began to take root in the 1920s and to flower in the 1930s and 40s. Born in 1899 and reared on a small North Carolina tobacco farm, Raper had the great fortune to have parents who did not instill in him the racism that was near-universal among southern whites. They also fostered an environment where Raper could gravitate toward liberal Christianity. Raper's road to his status as one of the most liberal of southern liberals truly began in Chapel Hill, however. As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina in the early

1920s, Raper especially found himself drawn to the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner and inspired by the history classes taught by UNC's Frank Porter Graham (himself a legendary southern liberal). By the time he finished his degree, Raper had already begun to think deeply about the obstacles that the South had put in the way of democracy and progress and had become active in the YWCA and YMCA, a common stepping stone for southern liberals to more overt forms of activism. After graduating, Raper then earned a master's degree in sociology at Vanderbilt University, which he completed in 1925. While in Nashville, Raper formed connections with African American activists at Fisk University. At Vanderbilt Raper also became aware of the adverse conditions confronting recent black migrants to Nashville who had migrated from the nearby Black Belt. Building on these interests and in a preview of a theme that would continue to be prominent in his work, Raper's master's thesis examined the systematic discrimination—political, economic, and social—that African Americans faced in the South while arguing simultaneously that it had schooled them in a “dependency” that would haunt their efforts to build better lives for themselves.⁷

After finishing his degree at Vanderbilt, Raper headed back to Chapel Hill to earn his doctorate in sociology. He studied under Howard Odum, one of the country's leading sociologists and someone who managed to foster an extraordinary and critical naissance in southern sociology from his perch at the head of UNC's Institute for Research in Social Science. Though he more than earned the southern liberal moniker, Odum existed on the more conservative side of that spectrum. When it came to race, he stood among those who argued that the proverbial rising economic tide would lift all boats while counseling patience on the push for integration and voting rights. By the time he became Odum's student, Raper was already personally committed to full civic and social equality for African Americans. Odum's influence

⁷ Louis Mazzari has provided a first-rate biography of Arthur Raper, though his conclusions about the nature of Raper's work in Greene County differ from my own: Louis Mazzari, *Southern Modernist: Arthur Raper from the New Deal to the Cold War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

on Raper came through most strongly in the young sociologist's conviction that many of the South's economic ills came from its status as a "colonial economy," its poverty largely a result of the extractive industries that northern capital forced upon it in league with an eager and willing southern elite.⁸

While still in graduate school at Chapel Hill, Raper had a fortuitous meeting with Will Alexander, a co-founder of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). Known to all as "Dr. Will," Alexander had helped start the CIC in 1919 after becoming concerned about the violence and conflict that had become so common as African American soldiers returned from war service to their more circumscribed lives in both the North and the South. The CIC brought together white and black academics, ministers, social workers, and activists to foster "understanding" and "cooperation" between the races. The organization worked to moderate the hostile and inflammatory coverage that many southern newspapers gave to African Americans, formed committees to find solutions for certain problems (poor housing conditions for black migrants to southern cities and inequalities in school funding, for example), and worked to publicize the efforts of kindred, though more left-leaning, groups such as the NAACP. When Alexander met Raper in Chapel Hill in 1926, he hired him to work for the CIC in Georgia while Raper continued to pursue his graduate studies. Raper relocated to Atlanta and witnessed the same phenomenon he had seen in Nashville: the poorest and most disadvantaged districts in the city seemed to be populated not just by African Americans but also by those who had migrated to the city recently from rural areas. Raper made contact with Ada Woolfolk, who headed the city's Family Welfare Society, and gathered data from her that showing that a large majority of people who had managed to make it onto the city's stingy welfare rolls had been born in the countryside. (In fact, more of them came from Greene and its neighboring counties than anywhere else). Raper convinced Alexander to allow him to shift some of his time from the speech-making and committee meetings that were the standard fare of the CIC's fulltime

⁸ Raper strikes the "colonial economy" note most clearly in *Sharecroppers All*, 146-150.

activists so that he could study the nature of this problem. He had already visited Greene County once, to see a friend he had met while studying at Vanderbilt, and therefore already had a sense of its extraordinary poverty, environmental devastation, and the rapid outmigration of a large portion of its black population. Raper and Alexander also decided that he would study Macon County, Georgia, as an appropriate contrast to Greene.⁹ The plantation system had arrived in Macon County later than in Greene and had insinuated itself less thoroughly; the poverty there was less pervasive and the exodus of its citizens less pronounced. Raper began making research trips to the counties in 1926—his work as a scholar and an activist now fully merged, as they would remain for the rest of his long career—gathering data from local records, interviewing people, having families fill out schedules of information, and generally immersing himself in the world of both counties. Raper earned his PhD in 1931 with a dissertation entitled “Two Rural Black Belt Counties.”¹⁰

Even as he continued to work on his study of Greene and Macon Counties, Raper began investigating lynchings for the CIC and another organization called the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, an effort that culminated in the publication in 1933 of his book, *The Tragedy of Lynching*. It was dangerous work. When news of a lynching hit southern papers, Raper would decamp Atlanta for the town in question. He learned that there was no point in trying to interview the local sheriff or other city and county officials. They remained tightlipped and hostile toward the interloper’s questions. Because the periodic ritual torture, murder, and dismemberment of African Americans—or word of it from some neighboring town or county—was part of the fabric of life in the Deep South, other whites could not stop themselves from talking about it. Raper honed an investigative technique that capitalized on that fact. A friendly conversation with a waitress at the local diner after the lunch rush had died down; a trip to the

⁹ Greene County is on the northern edge of Georgia’s old Black Belt, about 75 miles east, southeast, of Atlanta; Macon County is in the central portion of the old Black Belt, about 125 miles due south of Atlanta; to be clear, Macon County is *not* home to the city of Macon.

¹⁰ Mazzari, *Southern Modernist*, 52-54, 58-65, 67-70.

barbershop; a stop at the filling station; a cabbie bribed for a ride to the site of the lynching: the sociologist made these rounds once he had figured out that local whites couldn't not talk about the murders, especially to a white man who had a southern accent, listened more than he talked, and was clearly just passing through. In this way, Raper managed to gather a remarkable amount of information on the terroristic executions that he studied: names of ring leaders, the alleged transgression of the executed, and many of the grisly details of the crimes. A bindle-carrying drifter that Raper picked up on the outskirts of one town, on the off chance that he might know something about a recent lynching, produced from a pocket in his overalls the charred toe of the victim. Raper also tried to incorporate the knowledge of local African Americans into his reporting on these crimes. He sometimes worked with Walter Chivers, an African American sociologist who taught at Morehouse College. Chivers would canvass African American residents while Raper worked the whites for information. Raper drew on the reports that Chivers filed when writing *The Tragedy of Lynching*. The book itself is a series of case studies of individual lynchings. For the most part, Raper's concern was simply to describe the facts of each case, so far as he was able to discern them, and to let them stand as their own argument against the society that countenanced these crimes and as an argument in favor of federal intervention in these matters. He also provided, in each case, detailed depictions of each community that had produced these brutalities. W.E.B. Du Bois considered it a landmark book and gave it favorable notices in more than one outlet. In publishing *The Tragedy of Lynching*, Raper became the only white person to publish a systematic and rigorous investigation of that ghastly phenomenon worthy of the work done by the pioneers in that field, the NAACP's Walter White and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.¹¹

After he had published his book, Raper again began to make trips to Greene and Macon Counties to continue to study, observe, and gather data, especially once the Depression had

¹¹ Mazzari, *Southern Modernist*, 70-91; Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); Patricia Ann Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

worsened the misery in both places and the federal government had become a real force in many people's lives through its New Deal programs. With the publication of *Preface to Peasantry* in 1936, Raper had produced his sociological masterpiece. It stands undoubtedly as the best work of sociology on the rural South in the first half of the twentieth century. It also has to be reckoned as one of the great sociological works on any topic in the same period. In some ways, Raper continued the quest to render relatively complete sociological depictions of small, rural communities that, as we have seen, emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. He interviewed hundreds of families in each county, laboriously gathering information from them on their living conditions, whether it was their yearly income or how much they spent on food. He toured churches and schools and plowed through the available records of those institutions. He pored over tax digests. He made frequent trips to each county's courthouse to systematically make his way through the court records going back several years. He updated all of his information to study the activities and expenditures of the New Deal agencies that moved into the counties after 1933. When Raper returned to Greene County in 1940, he produced a second volume that chronicled its "progress" (though not Macon's) under the aegis of Uncle Sam and that also included a mostly superb history of the county. It would be two decades more before academic historians consistently produced histories so creditable on the topics of slavery, Reconstruction, and the Populist revolt. But perhaps the most important thing that Raper did was talk to people. He talked to them, of course, to get them to fill out (or dictate) the information he needed on his schedules. But he also befriended local leaders, went to worship services and community gatherings, and simply got to know the counties' people, black and white, as far as he could. All of this was remarkable (and fully genuine) for a person who was there to shine a searching light onto all that was so profoundly wrong in these places.¹²

A number of things separated Raper's work from the studies that preceded it and those that would continue to come out in a similar vein through the rest of the 30s, 40s, and 50s. He

¹² Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* and *Tenants of the Almighty*.

compiled vast amounts of information: on income, tenure, health, sanitation, housing, diet, education, wages, and on and on. Sociologists and anthropologists had done all of this before in rural towns and communities, but one searches most of these earlier studies in vain for any sense of why any of this information mattered. In many of them, it seems as if the researcher had piled up tea leaves, hoping that peering into them would offer *something* useful to the reader; or it takes on the character of a professional (or degree-earning) ritual: rural sociologists were quite good at counting and there was much to be counted. But Raper always had a point. And *Preface to Peasantry* also lacks the convoluted theorizing about “status” and “caste” that makes better-known sociological and anthropological classics from this period so dated when read today: for example, Paul and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown* series or John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* or even Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*. The force of race and class emerge more clearly in Raper’s pages than in anyone else’s because they are depicted and quantified, not theorized, or worse, watered down and psychologized into concepts such as “status” and “caste.” Lastly, despite the rigorously quantitative aspects of his work, Raper was able to capture the texture and pace of life for white and black southerners in an unsurpassed way.¹³

Preface to Peasantry is full of hard, material findings. Its overarching argument is as straightforward as it is powerful: this was what a culture looked like when its architects pushed the intertwined exploitation of people and the soil to the breaking point of both. Greene and Macon counties, to varying degrees, had reaped the wages of white supremacy and a cotton “culture” that robbed both its people and its soil. Raper rolled out a series of damning facts within this framework: A majority of whites and a supermajority of African Americans in both counties did not own land; whites held the vast majority of land (95 percent of it) and elite

¹³ Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937); John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1949); Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944); Raper actually contributed one of the most important pieces of research that Myrdal used for the writing of *American Dilemma*.

whites possessed the most fertile and productive of it in large holdings; the people of the counties faced almost unimaginably low levels of income (*families* made less a dollar a day on average; per person, it was less than 20 cents); tenants typically lived in cabins that lacked ceilings (as opposed to roofs), windows, screens, privies, clean water, and basic household furnishings; many of them moved almost every single year; they frequently exhibited the diseases and parasites that one would expect: rickets, pellagra, hookworm, diphtheria, malaria, tuberculosis, and so on; farmers cultivated their land with techniques and tools that, as Raper put it elsewhere, “would not seem strange to Moses and Hammurabi”; there were also racial disparities in nearly every single category: health, income, tenancy, education, and so forth.¹⁴

As Raper showed, there was little incentive in either county to husband the soil; wherever one mostly saw cotton in these counties, one saw the soil being leached and eroded. Gullies were “physical facts with social backgrounds and consequences.” Raper’s depiction of the farms shows that many of them were not really farms at all: three-quarters of black families and one-third of white families owned no draft animals; a quarter of blacks and whites did not own a single pig; half of the black families and one quarter of the white families did not own so much as a hoe, much less more expensive or advanced equipment. These were not farms; they were places where laborers lived and had to figure out how to survive while the cotton crop came in. They had to do the same after it had been harvested. Again and again, Raper called attention to the fact that the problem was not simply the disparities by race but frequently the *absence* of pronounced disparities. As Will Alexander put it in his introduction to the book, “No way has ever been found to keep a man in a ditch without some one’s staying down there with him.” It came as a powerful statement of the problem that so many farmers wore burlap and had straw mattresses: people who spent so much of their lives tending and picking cotton could not afford cotton dresses or cotton mattresses. The one word that encapsulated all this was “plantation.” The plantations of yore had disintegrated but the plantation still ruled, over the people and the

¹⁴ The quotes comes from Raper, *Sharecroppers All*, 21.

environment: “The assumptions and sanctions of the plantation system have their price, and Greene and Macon counties have paid with one-crop farming, excessive erosion and depleted soil, low incomes for shifting landless workers, frequent bankruptcies for landowners, emigration, and most devastating of all, human relations built upon the idea that the vast majority of the population—the landless, whether white or Negro—are incapable of self-direction.”¹⁵

No one has surpassed Raper’s explanation of the continuing malign influence of the plantation in the Black Belt, but he made equally unique contributions when it came to the study of race and to chronicling the lives of African Americans. To read *Preface to Peasantry* is to have the strange experience of encountering interests, ideas, and arguments decades before one supposes them to have existed. (Du Bois is the only person whom I have encountered who does this more thoroughly and more often, in his *The Philadelphia Negro* and especially *Black Reconstruction*). Raper was one of the first white scholars to study the phenomenon of the Great Migration. He did not merely note it in passing—everyone knew it was happening—but meticulously quantified it and examined why people left, where they went, how they compared to the people who did not migrate, and the conditions and treatment they faced when they got where they were going. All but alone among white scholars, Raper intensively studied black landownership, not to note it simply as a rare curiosity, but to show how and when it was achieved and the difference it made in levels of living. (He made it plain too that this was not about simply pluck and hard work; a rigid system thwarted landownership for all but those blacks whom elite whites deemed “acceptable” in both Greene and Macon counties). To round out his depiction of African American life in the Black Belt, Raper also provided an extensive accounting of the dozens of organizations beyond the church that comprised black associational life in Greene and Macon Counties. For good measure, he also devoted an entire chapter to

¹⁵ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 59-69, 76-83, 91, 143, 171 and passim; Will Alexander, foreword, *Preface to Peasantry*, ix.

African American schools. (In other words, Raper showed in 1936 what historians have only begun to recover in recent decades: that a thick associational life came into the ostensible civic void that Jim Crow enforced on African Americans). Whereas most white social scientists demonized and pathologized the black family and the role of black women within it, Raper offered an argument that prefigured one that the historian Jacqueline Jones would make 50 years later: black homes were not sites of disorganization but of adaptability and flexibility in the face of hardship, a phenomenon that explained what Raper called “the Negro Mother’s Heavy Load”:

The negro mother or grandmother bears the brunt of the family’s reverses. When her sister or daughter dies she takes the small children and rears them...When the busy season comes she prepares breakfast for the entire family, and, often leaving a small baby at the house with a young child, works until the middle of the day when she returns to the kitchen and prepares a hasty meal for her family. She goes back into the field in early afternoon and works until almost dark, returning to prepare supper and put tired children to bed. When the crop is poor she takes in additional washing...The Negro mother bears all the load that the white mother bears, plus the additional burdens which her race imposes—a less stable family life, a circumscribed economic base, and inferior services from private and public agencies.¹⁶

When it came to race and racism, Raper’s method was usually to present findings that were explosive simply for how baldly he stated them: “In 1928, the white child of school age in Greene had \$36.53 of public money spent upon his education, the Negro child, \$3.11—a ratio of twelve to one. In Macon, the white child received \$58.38 and the Negro \$2.85—a ratio of eighteen to one.” For good measure, the sociologist then added that roughly 90 percent of the school funds in both counties went to white schools despite the fact that 70 percent of the population in Macon County was black, as was roughly 57 percent of Greene’s population. He then described how the local school systems diverted federal dollars earmarked for black schools to white schools. In fact, it still seems remarkable that no one stopped this genial and

¹⁶ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 74-75, 110-142, 183-210, 324-349, 373-386. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

determined man as he walked up the front steps of the courthouse in each county, asked for his boxes, took his seat in the records room, and began to tote up whether there were disparities in arrests, convictions, fines, and jail term terms between blacks and whites. Raper found, among other things, that African Americans received longer sentences to the chain gang. He also discovered how many African Americans ended up on the chain gang through “optional sentences.” (Judges fined black defendants amounts that they would be unable to pay; they therefore “chose” the chain gang rather than being sentenced to it). In that benign-but-charged way of his, Raper added to this discussion: “The judge, the prosecutor, the jury, the clerk, the sheriff, the jailer, the deputies, and the lawyers are all white—there is not a Negro lawyer in Greene or Macon County.” Nor did Raper pull his punches in describing the source of these disparities. He stated flatly, “The majority of white people, assuming that the Negro is actually and potentially less than a normal human being, quite naturally feels that he commands and deserves a different treatment from the white man.” Lastly, as if all his explorations of these issues were not enough, Raper also debunked, point by point, the case that Georgia’s governor Gene Talmadge, a vicious racist and a demagogue, was a friend of the “poor man.” This would help to earn the sociologist, when Raper returned to live in Greene County in 1940, a trip before the local grand jury.¹⁷

All of this—and yet there is still one inadequacy that recurs in Raper’s work. It’s right there in the title: *Preface to Peasantry*. As Raper showed so overwhelmingly, the wages of the plantation were many: monoculture, landlessness, white supremacy, erosion, bankruptcy, and, ultimately, exodus. But they were also, he thought, cultural. He was surely right about that, though critiquing the Plantation South poverty culture and the presumed habits it created in sharecroppers was no substitute for actually attacking the region’s poverty. Still, Raper argued that the plantation system had paved the way “for the emergence of a peasant rather than for the appearance of the traditional independent American farmer.” The American ideal was the

¹⁷ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 165, 225-228, 285-295, 306-309.

“yeoman,” not the peasant. Raper invoked the peasant as shorthand for a population in which dependency and passivity had become a matter of habit and custom. In fact, given the dire conditions that prevailed in both counties, Raper had to place most of their people in an even lower category, the “subpeasant”: people with “no property, no self-direction, no hope of either”; people “schooled in dependency, unaccustomed to responsibility, without experience in community leadership.” The image of the peasant recurs only a few times in Raper’s book, however. He intended its place in his title to serve as a jolt to readers not accustomed to thinking of America as having a peasantry. Raper’s real focus was the sharecropper, transmitted as an image primed to conjure for his readers all the negative connotations of the peasant—passivity, apathy, lethargy—and none of the good ones (sturdiness and durability, for example). Erskine Caldwell had done his part to make the associations even more pronounced: sharecroppers were people whose bad breaks in life had deformed their personalities and made them degenerate. According to Raper, the plantation system *needed* the sharecropper. It needed sharecroppers as people who provided their labor in exchange a portion of a crop, but it also needed them as carriers of the poverty culture that by its very nature the plantation system both instilled and required. It needed sharecropper habits, sharecropper psychologies, and sharecropper beliefs. The problem was that once on the scene, the sharecropper hung around, to haunt any hope of reform for a better future.¹⁸

The plantation system demanded not just laborers but automatons who obeyed the landlord’s every dictate and it got them, Raper thought. Sharecroppers had to accept every awful aspect of the plantation system without questioning. It required them to remain landless; forced them to pay fabricated debts to merchants and landlords; tried to coerce them into appearing grateful for the landlord’s “paternalism,” such as the shacks that they were allowed to live in for “free” or the occasional leftovers from the landlord’s table. They had to live where they were told to live, plant what they were told to plant, and to suppress all powers of calculation at

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.

“settlement time.” As Raper explained, “The very life of the plantation system is threatened when tenants accumulate property, exhibit independence....The plantation system, while raising the level of workers to a certain point, insists that they shall not go beyond it.”¹⁹

To justify their treatment of tenants and to assure themselves of their own benevolence, Black Belt planters built up an entire ideology around the idea that sharecroppers were “childlike,” though by no means innocent. Were it not for landlords, tenants would starve. They had to be told what to plant, when to plant it, and how to tend it once it was in the ground. They abused animals and broke equipment. They called on landlords whenever they needed anything: more food, medicine, a ride to town, or when the latest knife fight (in a common stereotype) had landed them in jail. They could not be made to keep gardens. They refused to take the most basic steps to keep their homes in decent shape or to give them the softer touches that would make the dwellings comfortable. They moved frequently not because they were being driven from pillar to post, or because they were continually seeking better circumstances, but because they were “improvident.” For planters, this chain of accusations always brought them to one conclusion: the only way to keep these people working was to keep them hungry. If they had anything in their pockets, or in their pantries, they would not work.²⁰

Raper held no illusions about the self-interested portrayals of sharecroppers that landlords offered, but he did not dismiss their characterizations out of hand either. In fact, he found more than a little truth in them, arguing that the plantation system had wreaked cultural havoc on lives of farm tenants. It made tenants into sharecroppers, very often literally (as a tenure status), but also culturally. Breaking one’s back, year after year, only to come out with nothing again and again would wear down even the most stubborn and hardworking of people. The tenant therefore adopted the “assumption that the world has ‘nothin’ but a livin’ in it for him.” There was no point in working any harder than one absolutely had to—which was plenty

¹⁹ Ibid., 171.

²⁰ Ibid., 157-159.

hard anyway—because it was not going to get a person anywhere. What good was it to make improvements on a property or to spruce up a cabin when families did not own the land or the house and moved every few years? Tenants also settled for the landlord or merchant’s meager furnish as the source of an even more meager diet rather than keep gardens to feed themselves. Their landlords stole enough time and labor from them that they refused to add to that total by stealing from themselves, either by keeping gardens or by improving property that they did not own. Slack seasons—either the “lay by” time before the cotton harvest or periods in the winter where little work was done—were sacred, as was the “weekend,” which lasted from noon on Saturday until Monday morning. The result, as Raper explained, was that “the tenant, in keeping with his station, makes each year take care of itself—seldom applying the savings of one year to the crop of the next....No substantial surpluses in foods or feeds or money accumulate for either landlord or tenant. The fat years consume themselves and the lean years go hungry.”²¹

This cultural indisposition to saving also explained tenants’ troubled relationship to debt and spending. They were never going to get ahead so they bought what made them feel good, “foolish expenditures” that gave “a short period of ‘high living’”: “A suit[e] of furniture, a piano, a cooking range, a victrola, an automobile will absorb the greater part of any cash surplus the typical landless family receives. Most noticeable of all, once in a very long while a Negro with cold cash in the bottom of his pockets will journey to Augusta, or Atlanta, or Albany and return with a gold tooth or two in the front of his mouth.” In fact, Raper argued, tenants *wanted* to be in debt; they had learned that they needed to be in debt. If they could contract debts with more than one person, all the better. A loan from a merchant or banker, in addition to that which came from the landlord, signaled the “personal integrity” of the lende and, more practically speaking, allowed tenants to play their creditors off one another. Owing money to more than one powerful person offered “some protection against exorbitant claims.” African American tenants

²¹ Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 173; Raper, “Overcoming the Greatest Obstacle,” 10/30/1943, Box 7, Folder 134, AFR Papers.

particularly could not directly question the amount that the landlord or merchant said that they owed, but owing money to both could help the lenders to keep their books straight. (It was nothing for a landlord or merchant to steal from a tenant, but they were not likely to dun them for as much money if it was liable to put them into conflict with another merchant or landlord trying to do the same). A debt contracted with a local white family was one means of assuring that the family continued to send its laundry to the tenant family that owed it money, an important source of income for many black families. Because every dusty southern hamlet had multiple stores, tenants frequently played merchants off one another too. If a sharecropper wanted to purchase a pocket knife—to cite an example that Raper gave— but none of the merchants would sell one on credit, the cropper might find something else that a merchant was willing to sell on credit at one store, pawn that item at a second store, and then purchase the knife with the cash at a third. (The monetary premium that one had to pay to get something in this way was, of course, extraordinary). The result of all of this, Raper implied, was to make low-stakes grifters of most tenant families, always looking for an angle, an advantage. Landlords universally assumed that their tenants stole from them, either from their gardens or storehouses or by pilfering a portion of the cotton crop that they harvested. “Ah, but you’ve got to watch ‘em; they get all they can at every turn,” was a common refrain from landlords. They even whined that “the tenants never have the welfare of the planter in mind, never decide that their wage is too high or that they have received more than their share of the crop.”²²

Raper had no sympathy for the gripes of landlords, and he was always at pains to explain the source of tenant behaviors in structural terms: “Their characteristic improvidence was to no small degree simply their adjustment to the demands of a system of farming which insisted that they be landless, that they be servile, and that they be dependent.” But the other remarkable thing about that statement is that the “characteristic improvidence” of tenants was such a given that it needed no elucidation or qualification. Raper accepted that one of the biggest obstacles

²² Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 157-162.

to lifting the plantation South out of its poverty was the supposed cultural pathologies that the plantation system had—to use an unfortunate but apt term—bred into sharecroppers. Tenants were not only “improvident,” but also “dependent,” “servile,” “pessimistic,” “fatalists of the first order,” and subject to feelings of “helplessness and disillusionment.” The “typical” landless farmer “is the victim of an enforced arrested development, is the product of the plantation, is the fruit of the tree.” Ultimately, “the established relation between landlord and tenant has made a puny dictator of the one and a fatalistic plodder of the other.”²³

To be perfectly fair to Raper, it is difficult to imagine that the plantation system did not have many of the cultural effects that he attributed to it. It certainly made tyrants out of many landlords, people who stood out for their brutality and dishonesty even in a system that required some measure of those things from all landlords. And it hardly seems likely that most croppers decided to work harder than they already had to or to adhere to some scrupulous code of “honesty” in the face of a system designed to steal from them all but those things that had the deepest of their fingernail marks on them. As admirable as it might be, there is not much profit to a life lived as a rejoinder to injustice. Raper understood this and passed his judgments with as much sympathy and context as possible. He flatly rejected the landlords’ arguments that croppers were victims only of their own innate degeneracy. But Raper’s emphasis on the plantation system as a downward spiral that bottomed out in a particular kind of person—sharecroppers—lent itself to the idea that altering their behaviors was the most important step in eventually toppling the social structure that had produced them.

No one who studied poverty or cared about the problems of the rural poor doubted that the Plantation South’s poverty culture had brought it about as low as any tangle of pathology could bring any place. And it was hard to ignore the special depths of misery that its system of

²³ Ibid., 173, 215, 218-219.

white supremacy (and the South's more generally) had enabled. What is most remarkable about Arthur Raper's depiction of these things, however, is how well it traveled: in its assumptions, in the solutions it lent itself to, and in its errors. Wherever New Dealers found widespread and deep-seated poverty, they also found the same cultural characteristics that Raper discovered in Greene and Macon Counties. To borrow and adapt a phrase that Raper and a co-author coined: culturally speaking, poor farmers were sharecroppers all. However much USDA New Dealers like Raper might emphasize the role of political economy in creating poverty, they always found the supposed stupefaction that poverty visited upon the poor as its most remarkable and actionable aspect. They presented poverty as a cultural malaise, particularly emphasizing the attitudes and habits that it created in the poor and especially zeroing in on the home as an incubator that either bred the worst aspects of poverty culture or, conversely, could become the most important site for beating those back. This approach inherently pathologized culture in that it portrayed it either as the cause of poverty, the solution to it, or both. Above all, the cultural understanding of poverty put the onus for removing (or more properly, *alleviating*) poverty on the poor themselves. If poverty could grind people down, then they could be built back up, apparently without drastic changes in American political economy. The cultural understanding of poverty, implicitly and explicitly, posited an omni-equivalency as to the causes and cures of poverty. This idea of poverty lends itself to a number of common conceptualizations of it: poverty as an entangling web, a downward spiral, a vicious circle, a vicious cycle, or something that becomes "self-perpetuating." Each implies that poverty is part of larger cultural complex and therefore holds out the hope that an anti-poverty program need only take hold of one part of the whole—no matter how small—to start a process of meaningful change. If poverty is a circle or a cycle, then it can be broken. If it is a downward spiral, then it can be arrested and reversed. If it is a web or a tangle, then giving one part of it a shake might be enough to the start the work of freeing poor people from its grip. Small victories against the manifestations of poverty could build on themselves. If helped a little, poor people might finally start to do for

themselves. This made seemingly inconsequential things into potent weapons in the New Deal war on poverty: gardens, pantries, better health, and better attitudes. It also made those things the stuff of rehabilitation.

New Dealers viewed bad health as a potent part of the poverty culture. Rural reformers had painted a dissonant portrait of rural health throughout the early decades of the twentieth century: farm work and country living made for hale bodies, hearty constitutions, and invigorated personalities—except when they did not, which was most of the time. This was ideology colliding with reality. Grueling physical labor frequently visited injuries and physical deformities on farmers’ bodies. Childbirth often left women with lingering health problems. Despite all assumptions to the contrary, there is little evidence that farm people had better or more nourishing diets than their urban counterparts. Despite the fact that rural areas lacked the population concentrations that fueled disease epidemics, the absence of “sanitary privies” on many farms contaminated water supplies and led to a host of illnesses. And all of this potentially afflicted farmers who were not poor. Given their bad diets, unclean water, and difficult working conditions, it is not surprising, then, that the farmers admitted into rehabilitation programs—farmers who *were* poor—presented an array of health problems: pellagra, rickets, malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, paratyphoid, hookworm, diphtheria, bad eye sight, bad hearing, abscessed teeth, rotted teeth, tonsils and appendices in need of removing, frequent headaches, dizzy spells, “nervous” conditions, hernias, childbirth injuries to women—all were common, all could be debilitating, and all frequently went untreated.²⁴

²⁴ David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban American and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), 8-10; Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 302-303; “Medical and Nursing Services,” 10/29/1940, Box 6, Folder 112, AFR Papers. A list of health ailments of FSA clients in North Carolina can be found in: Records Relating to Regional Medical Program, Box 1, Records of the Farmers Home Administration, National Archives and Records Administration Southeast Region, Atlanta, Georgia. [Hereafter RG 96, ATL NARA].

Treating these conditions was more than a humanitarian concern. These ailments constituted an essential element in breeding the poverty culture. At a practical level, it was simply impossible for people afflicted with these conditions to meet the demands that farming placed on them. They were poor and their houses were run down, New Dealers thought, because they could not run their farms and their homes properly. As Erma Proctor, a high-ranking FSA home economist explained, "It is impossible for a sick farmer to do a good job of production; it is impossible that a woman with old lacerations, with a mouthful of decayed teeth and diseased gums will be able to be an efficient homemaker for her husband and children and to carry on the jobs essential to the production of a satisfactory home life." Additionally, all of the dietary diseases and those that came from parasites were associated with enervation. But the problem went beyond simply robbing people of the physical ability to run productive and efficient farms and homes. These ailments and diseases infected, as it were, people's personalities. They made them not care anymore. As Erma Proctor again explained, "Malnourished, malarial or hook worm-ridden men, women, and children are lifeless, indolent, and often negativistic." Indeed, when New Dealers saw ill-tended farms and home conditions and practices that disturbed them, they did not see the brutal choices that farm men and women often confronted on how to allocate their labor, they saw people who could no longer be bothered, people who no longer had the self-respect to do the "small" things that would improve their lives. (We will see shortly the "big" labor demands these small things placed on farm men and women).²⁵

Diet came in as a special interest in discourses on the rural poverty culture. Just like the concern for health ailments (and obviously the two are closely connected), its significance was not confined to its physical effects. Poor diets enervated people because they failed to nourish them, but also contributed to the apathy and "improvidence" of their personalities. Experts described the diets of poor farmers as "monotonous" and lacking in "variety;" the food ground

²⁵ Erma E. Proctor, "Address at the Biennial Convention of National Organization for Public Health Nursing," p. 7, 5/21/1942, Records Relating to Rural Rehabilitation, Nat'l Organization for Public Health Nursing, 1935-1942, Box 1, RG 96, NARA II.

down personalities as readily as it did bodies. Experts also assumed that all poor farmers more or less had the means to overcome this problem by keeping bountiful gardens and preparing nourishing food. It was a perfect example of their vicious circle view of poverty: poor farmers did not keep gardens and failed to prepare proper meals because they were apathetic, lazy, and “ignorant” of nutrition; they were apathetic, lazy, and “ignorant” of nutrition because they did not keep gardens and prepare proper meals. The logic of vicious circle made this an educational problem. Poor farmers no longer cared about eating well so they must be taught to care again and taught the importance of nutrition. Experts applied the same logic to issues of medical care, health, and sanitation. And they blurred the same lines: did poor farmers not have the right things—were they, in fact, impossible for them to have—or did they not *want* the right things? Erma Proctor again hammered away at this point with her usual directness. The problem with poor farmers was that they were “underprivileged as to education and experience”: “They have little appreciation for abounding good health. Never having had it, they know not how it feels and therefore they lack an impelling desire to have it. They have had little or no experience with adequate diets, with clinics, with doctors, nurses, dentists, and what these may mean to them.”²⁶

Anti-poverty workers and experts were always especially quick to emphasize these “educational” problems in the South. In the Plantation South, many farmers subsisted completely on the trifecta of fatback, molasses, and corn meal and had all of the nutritional diseases and personality defects to show for it. Arthur Raper convened a conference of some of the technicians involved in Greene’s program of rural development to talk about these problems in 1941: home supervisors, farm supervisors, social workers, and nurses. It quickly became a round-robin of complaints about everything that Greene County’s rehabilitation clients did not know how to do. The experts told of people who did not know how to cook grits, who did not know how to cook cabbage “right,” who did not know how to enhance dishes with eggs and milk to make them “tasty,” whose only use for a potato was to boil it, who did not know the

²⁶ Proctor, “Address,” 6.

advantages of whole wheat flour, and who completely lacked any familiarity with or habit of cooking a whole range of wholesome foods. Their cooking lacked even the basic pretenses of variety. The gathered experts also expressed an especial revulsion at the supposed prevalence of clay eating in the county. Just like elsewhere, the solutions here would have to be educational: not only teaching rehabilitation clients the importance of health, nutrition, and sanitation, but also how to achieve those things.²⁷

The most important aspect of the poverty culture was the supposed psychological scars that it inflicted on the rural poor. In 1938, the FSA launched an ambitious program to “rehabilitate” farmers who did not normally qualify for its rehabilitation loans in counties in each of the country’s most well-known poverty cultures. The comments of the farm and home supervisors who worked on this effort illustrate this fixation on the importance of the emotional and psychological dimensions of poverty. One supervisor said, “The low level at which these families have been living for so long, their environment and lack of opportunities, have taken their toll, both from the standpoint of sapping their energies and ambitions and from the standpoint of retarding them mentally.” These characteristics not only required rehabilitation but made a particularly difficult job of doing it. One supervisor observed, “It takes time to win the confidence of some families and to convince them you are sincere in your desire to help – they’ve been exploited and gypped by so many people, it’s no wonder they are suspicious. It’s usually some little thing that wins their confidence and makes for cooperation.” Two social scientists who studied the FSA’s effort at rehabilitating the hardest cases offered the same sentiment: “Isolation, poverty, and exploitation had made many of these families cautious in dealing with strangers. Their fear of unpleasantness, of personal inadequacy, of meeting new situations, and other emotional difficulties made the task of winning their confidence and leading them to believe that the supervisors could understand their problems a hard one.” The same concepts emerge again and again as central to the continued poverty of poor farmers:

²⁷ “Conference in Office of Arthur Raper,” 5/20/1941, Box 5, Folder 96, AFR Papers.

isolation, fear, apathy, ignorance; the loss of desire, self-respect, and dignity. If any of these psychological problems could be removed—and bodies better cared for and nourished—then poverty itself would disappear, not overnight, but eventually.²⁸

The cultural understanding of poverty placed the home at the center of the problem. In the eyes of anti-poverty experts and workers, the state of the home did not just express a family's poverty; it concentrated and bred all of the elements of the poverty culture. The home itself was a problem rather than simply a manifestation of one. The interest in the homes and home lives of poor farmers was such that it is possible to offer a composite portrait of what rehabilitation experts saw in the worst of them. These houses lacked electricity, running water, and indoor toilets—no tragedy in rural places in those days—but they also lacked access to clean water and properly built privies. If there was a privy at all, it was not fly-proof or “sanitary” (i.e. built to prevent the contamination of groundwater). If there was a well, it was not protected from groundwater runoff. The homes, poorly built to begin with in most cases, easily fell into dilapidation: they lacked ceilings, doors, and window sashes and screens; the walls were unfinished, roughhewn; the roofs leaked and had holes in them; the boards that made the floors and walls had gaps between them through which a person could see. These homes were hot in the summer and cold in the winter. In the kitchen, there was not a “modern convenience” in sight: no washing machines, pressure cookers, ice boxes, or modern cooking ranges. An absence of storage space made the houses cluttered. (One point of relief from the clutter: an absence of furnishings). There were no soft touches: family photographs, window dressings, throw rugs, or decorations. Even the poor quality of the mattresses (stuffed with straw or corn shucks, not cotton) was portentous, suggesting the sleeplessness of the residents. (After noting the “lumps and depressions” that characterized the mattresses of poor farmers in Greene County, Georgia, one observer wondered, “Could good mattresses be almost as necessary as adequate diets in

²⁸ Rachel Rowe Swiger and Olaf F. Larson, *Climbing Toward Security* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1944), 4, 7, 17.

building people who will *feel* like working?” Farmers did not sleep well because they were poor; they were poor because they did not sleep well).²⁹

The outside of these homes and the environs of the farm reflected the same absence of care and caring. Fields were ill-tended. The soil was not conserved. Barns, outbuildings, and machinery needed repairing. These farms did not have livestock, except maybe for a few chickens, which routinely came into the house through open or absent doors and windows when no one was there to shoo them away or just could not be bothered to do so. Needless to say, these homes did not have gardens. They sported hardpan yards, which the residents failed to sweep clean of debris. The yards nurtured no shrubs or flowers or anything that might provide some beauty. The porches that ringed the houses were cluttered and themselves often dilapidated, either crumbling or having buckled completely.

Naturally, anti-poverty experts worried about the effects of these homes on children. They thought that the home itself played a major role in “retarding” their physical and intellectual development. The children in these homes did not get enough nourishment to make their bodies grow properly, their beds did not leave them rested, and the heating in the houses was not enough to keep them warm. The youngest children in them went barefoot and half naked. Babies wore diapers made from flour sacks. When they were sick, their mothers “doped” them with patent medicines or paregoric. Older children were often kept out of school, either because they had to work or from neglect. Perhaps most troubling of all to observers was the fact that mothers were often absent from these homes, having to work in the fields. This added to the

²⁹ “Remond Ashe: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 994, AFR Papers. The emphasis is in the original.

This composite of what rehabilitators saw in the homes of poor farmers is especially informed by the observations that social scientists made about homes in Greene County, which they recorded in field notes that Arthur Raper was using to right his book, *Tenants of the Almighty*. That the applicability of these impressions and observations goes beyond the Plantation South is illustrated by the fact that programs of rehabilitation always sought to fix the same problems discussed here. For sets of field notes from Greene County that are especially illustrative of what observers saw in “bad” homes, “Janie Wright: Negro Domestic,” August 1941 and “Will Alexander: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941 both in Box 50, Folder 993, AFR Papers.

sense that the homes were dangerous to children. They frequently featured the unsettling sight of children taking care of children. Seemingly compounding all of these fears was the fact that children were “born into” this environment: the children of poor farmers were far more likely to be born at home, delivered by midwives rather than doctors.³⁰

Observers also worried about what these home environments did to adults. Befitting their surroundings, people in these homes wore ragged clothes. They ate food that lacked variety and failed to nourish their bodies. Despite the prevalence of health problems, the residents of such homes mostly relied on patent medicines to treat their ailments. They did not usually go to church or participate in community organizations, often simply out of the embarrassment of not having the appropriate clothes to do so. Moving constantly disrupted poor families’ ability to participate in the institutional life of their communities, to send their children to school regularly, to form meaningful connections with their neighbors, and removed the primary incentive for investing time and resources in the home’s upkeep. The people in these homes quarreled often. Their women “nagged” at husbands and the men seethed, until they went on benders. How could these homes do anything but breed feelings of “inferiority” into the people who lived in them and leave them lacking the “desire” for better things? Compounding all of this was the fact that these homes were isolated. Every farm home was an island, but these were more cut off from outside influences than most, lacking radios and members who regularly read newspapers or magazines, which would carry news of better places and better ways. These homes did not only bespeak poverty, they bred it.³¹

A high-ranking home supervisor in Tennessee offered this portrait to her fellow social workers of that state’s rehabilitation clients, one that managed to touch on many aspects common to cultural understandings of poverty [multiple sics throughout]:

³⁰ On “doping” children: “Conference in Office of Arthur Raper,” 5.

³¹ For the stereotype of “nagging” poor wives and drunken husbands: Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 21.

May I picture to you a group of clients with which I am working. We have the family of fourteen—for generations they have been professional beggars; families with problems caused by broken homes, delinquency and such physical handicaps as deafness and deformities. People suffering from mental handicaps as insanity, feeble-mindedness, morons and the sub-normal. The thirteen and fourteen year old married and having large families while they are still only children. Families with illegitimate children, families where a child is born every year and the mother is too worn out and haggard to take any interest in seeing what the individual youths aptitudes are and how they may be developed. Families who move to another farm every year and have no incentive for beautifying the home or trying to improve the surroundings.³²

This culture of poverty was what the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration primarily fought when they fought poverty. They did so with the “rehabilitation loan.” Roughly 800,000 farm families received these loans, which was one family out of nine in the farm population. In 1937, the average loan amounted to \$240; by 1940 that amount had surged to \$600. As significant as these sums were—significant mostly in terms of how hard they would be to pay back—these rehabilitation loans, grew out of the cultural understanding of poverty and therefore adopted a small-stakes approach to it. If the source of poverty resided on farms and with their residents, then a small investment was all that was required to strike at the causes of poverty. These loans (or programs that complimented them) would remove the supposed handicaps that kept so many farmers poor. The money sometimes went to improving the physical plant of the farm, paying for repairs to buildings, for example, or to make improvements to eroded land. In this way, the loans did offer some small hope of bolstering the productivity of these farms and raising the incomes of the families that lived on them. More frequently, though, the loans aimed at securing higher income less directly: by trying to make better people and better workers of poor farmers. The loans could go to fix a leaking roof, to dig a new well or privy, to add screens to windows, to apply a coat of paint to a house, to purchase equipment for gardening and home canning, to buying new mattresses or livestock—this was the stuff of rehabilitation and the weapons in the fight against the poverty culture. All of these

³² “How Shall We Provide Security for the Boys and Girls of R.R. [Rural Rehabilitation] Families,” Entry 76, Box 1, RG 96, ATL NARA.

things could make people healthier, physically and emotionally, so that they could pull *themselves* out of poverty. But above all, the loans brought into the lives of poor farmers what they were thought to need most desperately: supervision. In accepting a loan, families agreed to submit to the direction of both a “farm” and a “home” supervisor and to abide a “Farm and Home Plan” that they had worked out with their rehabilitators. Each small step that families made in improving their lives and toward feeding themselves from home production—spurred on by the interest and sympathy of their supervisors as much as by the small amounts of money they had been lent—would make them want to take more small steps until they could do everything for themselves, until they had cast off their culture of poverty.³³

Each component of the rehabilitation program served a dual purpose: to improve people’s lives on basically humanitarian grounds but also so that they could work harder and better. The most unproblematic component of the FSA’s rehabilitation approach was actually its most intimate: medicine. The FSA had an ambitious and innovative health program, one that was founded not long before the agency absorbed the old Resettlement Administration in 1937. It ultimately established 787 cooperatives to provide medical services and another 221 to provide dental care. FSA clients who joined paid dues to their association and had access to a physician who had contracted with the cooperative. The best of the medical associations covered not just routine visits but medicine and surgery as well. If the reactions of farmers in Greene County to their health cooperative is any indication, this was the only part of the rehabilitation package that was overwhelmingly popular. The only controversy that the associations seem to have generated was from FSA workers who thought that poor farmers were too quick to send for the doctor. But there is no question that it was a definite improvement for poor farmers to have access to routine medical care for, in all likelihood, the first time in their lives. FSA rehabilitators

³³ For the numbers: Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 200, 250.

expected this to make them happier and healthier people and therefore better farmers and workers.³⁴

The terms of rehabilitation loans always required poor families to keep gardens and to do as much as possible to feed themselves, to “live at home.” Even gardens became more than just gardens under rehabilitation, however. Arthur Raper, for example, called the garden “the most valuable piece of land on the farm”: “On this patch of earth a farmer and his wife perform nobly. Here they stir the land most hopefully, for here they conserve and replenish the soil gladly. Here they deal justly with the Almighty, and here they reap abundantly.” Perhaps Raper waxed more rhapsodic than most about the virtues of gardens, but not by much. Rehabilitation experts fixated on them, of course, because they provided income, food, and nourishment. Better nourished farmers were better and harder working people. But as much as anything else, rehabilitators valued gardens because they taught discipline, routine, and even forethought, to people supposedly in need of understanding and practicing those things.³⁵

The work of gardening almost always fell to women. A gardener might start by planting perennial crops, like asparagus and certain fruits, in one part of her plot, which if it was sizable, could be from one to three acres. Then, throughout the season, she could establish several more sections of annual crops depending on the amount of time they would be in the ground: one section for crops that would mature rapidly, maybe some spinach, peas, green onions, and lettuce; another section for crops that would come in somewhat later, maybe carrots, onions that had been planted from seed, and fruits and vegetables intended to come in early: early corn, early tomatoes, early potatoes, and so forth; and then there would be the main section where

³⁴ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 208-209; Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 249-251.

³⁵ Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, Plate 18, 233.

food would come in throughout the summer: okra, eggplant, squash, snap beans, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, corn, and on and on.³⁶

Once one section of the garden had been harvested, the diligent gardener plowed it up and then readied it for later plantings. All of this required work, discipline, forethought, and a lot of small decisions. It required a big investment of labor up front, but just as importantly, it required smaller, but steady investments of labor thereafter, the kind of maintenance work that rehabilitators thought could come from moments stolen between other heavier tasks: dipping into the garden for a few minutes to pull some weeds, prune leaves, or look for insects. In the South, the disciplinary function of gardens could introduce poor families for the first time to year-round work routines. Indeed, the FSA encouraged southern farmers to keep “year-round gardens.” But the garden went beyond teaching people to work steadily and often. It also forced them to think ahead and to make a variety of small decisions. Not only did the gardener have to think her way through the various sections she would plant so as to maximize the productivity of her garden throughout the seasons, she had to make a host of other decisions as well. She had to decide how big to make her garden. She had to estimate how many seeds she would need to buy and then to plant and how much that was likely to yield. She had to know how much of a particular fruit or vegetable it took to feed a person for an entire year. She had to know which variety of a fruit or vegetable best suited her needs and the needs of her family because a tomato is never just a tomato. And she had to know the regime and requirements of every single thing she planted in her garden: when it went into the ground, how far to space the seeds and rows, when or if to cage or stake something, when or if to prune, and, of course, when to harvest. No wonder then that a garden also served to “tie the family to the land.” The more labor and thought and pride that a family put into the garden and the more they expected to harvest from it in the future, the more likely they were to want to stay on that farm, which would lead them to

³⁶ I have based this discussion of gardening on Extension materials available to gardeners in North Carolina: *Planning the Home Garden in North Carolina*, “Garden Suggestions,” and “Gardens and Orchards,” all in Entry 76, Box 1, RG 96, ATL NARA.

take better care of the rest of it. A garden provided a rootedness that could build on itself. Gardens were vital not just for feeding poor farmers but also for rehabilitating them.³⁷

Livestock provided the same dual function in programs of rehabilitation. They could give people nourishment in the form of meat, eggs, and dairy, but they also taught them discipline, forethought, and tied them to their farms. Poor farmers trying to “live at home” needed to be able to estimate how many eggs, how many gallons of milk, and how many pounds of meat each family member was likely to consume in a year and how and whether their livestock would provide them with that sustenance. They also had to understand how each animal had to be cared for: how it had to be housed and fed. This introduced routines into the lives of poor families, which rehabilitators thought that they lacked. Milk cows had to be milked every single day. Chickens, if they were going to provide a year-round source of eggs and meat, had to be fed every day and kept in coops. Chicken coops had to be cleaned routinely and the conditions in them closely monitored, lest a flock of chickens be wiped out by disease. This was a lot of work, which was the point as much as the food that animals provided.³⁸

The dual function—better health and better discipline—was true of the operation of a farm’s kitchen as well. FSA rehabilitators expected farm women to use their gardens to feed their families nourishing meals year round. This required an enormous amount of labor, but it also required a lot of knowledge and forethought. We have already seen how farm women had to think their way through their year-round gardens in advance. The same was true of their efforts to get that sustenance onto the table to nourish their families. They had to have an understanding of nutrition and recipes that could make for healthy meals. They had to know how many pounds of butter, gallons of milk, dozens of eggs, and pounds (or bushels) of fruit, meat, and vegetables would be needed to sustain each member of the family for the whole year.

³⁷ *Planning the Home Garden*; “Garden Suggestions”; “Garden Orchards”; Arthur F. Raper and Pearl Wheeler Tappan, “Never Too Old to Learn New Tricks: The Canning Program in Greene County, Georgia,” *Applied Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (Jun. 1943), 6.

³⁸ “The Farm Poultry Flock,” Entry 76, Box 1, RG 96, ATL NARA.

They had to know how to store and dry fruits, vegetables, and meats in need of storing and drying. And—an area the FSA probably emphasized more than any other—they had to be able to can fruits and vegetables (and even meats) so that the family could continue to consume them out of season. This was why so many rehabilitation loans provided for pressure cookers, which were used in the canning process. Canning required the knowledge not only of how to can each particular item, but also that the homemaker keep a canning “budget,” whether it was in her head or actually written down somewhere. A canning budget helped the homemaker to map out the food requirements of her family, the likely number of quarts of canned goods that her garden was likely to yield, and to keep track of whether she was achieving her goals or not.³⁹

Of course, the Farm Security Administration did not expect poor farmers to improve their farms and the operation of their homes and gardens just by virtue of their having been given a little money to do so. The cost of the loan for rehabilitation families—other than the principal that they had to repay—was the two supervisors that they now found themselves answerable to: a “farm supervisor” and a “home supervisor.”⁴⁰ These experts were responsible for assessing the needs of each farm family on the FSA’s rehabilitation program and the particular nature of the cultural intervention that each family required. They would then offer the guidance and “supervision” that the family needed in order to successfully be “rehabilitated.” The farm supervisor was effectively an extension agent, but one charged with working with poor farmers. Just like any extension agent, farm supervisors focused their efforts on improving the productivity and efficiency of the farm. The work of the farm supervisor therefore was the part of the rehabilitation process aimed at boosting families’ cash income most directly. It began with a visit to the farm in which the supervisor inspected the conditions of the farm and the abilities and practices of the people operating it. Farm supervisors wanted to know what kind of

³⁹ An FSA form that some families were asked to keep suggests the scope of what all of this required of homemakers: “Foods We Need for Best Health,” Farm Ownership Division, Plans - General, General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II.

⁴⁰ Farm supervisors were also technically called “Rural Rehabilitation Supervisors,” but I will refer to them as “farm supervisors” throughout.

equipment a farm family owned or had access to and whether they made the most efficient use of each family member's labor. They looked for any basic improvements that could be made to the farm and its soil: places on the farm that could be built up, terraced, drained, cleared of stumps, or anything else that might better conserve and use the soil and lead to higher income. Farm supervisors also assessed whether the land was being used in the best way possible. Was there any part of the farm that might be more profitably used for some other purpose: cropland that should be converted to pasture or woodlot or, alternately, land presently not under the plow that might usefully be brought into cultivation? The farm supervisor also kept in mind local market conditions: was there any crop for which there was a local market that the farmer did not presently grow? In consultation with the farmer, the farm supervisor worked out a "farm plan" that embodied some usually small set of measures to improve the farm's efficiency and productivity. In those cases where farmers did not own the farm that they lived and worked on, the farm supervisor would also investigate the nature of the family's lease. In the cases in which there was only a verbal agreement with the landlord—which were legion in the South—the farm supervisor would arrange for a written lease. If the lease was short term, the supervisor encouraged the landlord and tenant to adopt a longer lease, one that ran three or five years, and would encourage the tenant to want to improve the farm and the landlord to be willing to compensate the tenant for the improvements.⁴¹

If anything, the work of the home supervisor was even more important to the rehabilitation process than that of the farm supervisor. Home supervisors typically had their training and expertise in home economics. Their job was to arrest and reverse so many of the elements of the poverty culture that we have already examined. Because the home formed such a vital part of the poverty culture, home supervisors had to consider easy and inexpensive ways that homes could be improved. Because health formed such an important part of the poverty

⁴¹ "An Outline of Procedure in the Supervision of Rural Rehabilitation Clients," 3-9, 6/4/1936, Kentucky, Rural Rehabilitation Division, General Correspondence, 1935-1938, Box 27, RG 96, NARA II.

culture, home supervisors had to be expert on—and have practical suggestions about—gardening, cooking, canning, nutrition, medicine, cleanliness, and sanitation. Rehabilitation was an educational endeavor and the primary job of the home supervisor was to teach poor farmers to do the things that they supposedly did not know how (or perhaps care) to do: to grow their own food, prepare proper meals, take care of their health, and keep safe and sanitary homes. Given the deep psychological and emotional wounds considered to be part of the poverty culture, home supervisors also had the job of making poor families feel better about themselves.

The best and most dedicated home supervisors had a number of potent weapons in their arsenals. One of those was the sympathetic and deft touch with which they were expected to perform their work. Because they dealt with people they presumed to be fragile or sick or even broken, home supervisors were expected to be expert in “human relationships” as much as anything. The wrong word spoken to the family or the wrong approach to its rehabilitation could cause a family to succumb to its apathy again. Home supervisors were expected to treat poor families in a way that they may have never been treated before: they were expected to “sympathize” with them, to make an effort to “understand” them, to have “faith” in them, to “praise” them when they succeeded, and to exercise “patience and tact” if they continued to teeter on the verge of failure. As two rehabilitation experts explained, “Imagination, vision, sympathetic understanding, and a knowledge of personality adjustments are needed to carry out successfully a rehabilitation program for [poor] families.” These two experts also believed that “each family must be made to feel that they and their problems are understood by the supervisors.” When Arthur Raper studied the program of rehabilitation in Greene County, he thought he detected definite progress in the way that supervisors of both the farm and home approached these “human relationships”:

The FSA Supervisors are coming to understand more of the clients’ feelings. The more dependent a client was before he came on the program, the greater his need for a supervisor who has faith in his power to develop, and who takes pride in his every achievement. The supervisors are more willing than ever before to stop their routine

tasks and take time to help a family understand their debt situation. They see, too, something of the importance of helping their clients become better performers by reason of the faith they have in them as people, people who are capable of paying their own way while they go forward.

Home supervisors had to be quite cautious too that they did not try to rehabilitate families too quickly—that they did not overload them with instructions and ideas—because, all supervisors agreed, that would only frustrate the family and would give them an excuse to collapse back into their apathy.⁴²

In fact, home supervisors were trained to approach many of the problems they had to address indirectly precisely because those problems belonged to the people with whom they worked; they were bound to be defensive about them. Each family had a unique dynamic and each family had a unique set of pathologies that had made or kept it poor. The home supervisor had to study each family and chart for it its own path to rehabilitation. The best supervisors worked at getting poor families to *want* to listen to them by making themselves relatable, by dressing plainly, for example—not like “dressed-up city dudes”— and showing that they were not afraid to get their hands dirty when they visited farms. Praise was also part of the process of indirection: a kind word at the right moment could work wonders at conditioning a family to see that it had finally performed a job well and leave its members wanting to repeat their success. One supervisor earned high marks from her superiors for her ability to “make it appear that whatever had been accomplished by the family had been a result of their own idea.” If a family rejected an idea at first, this supervisor “waited for an opportune moment when the idea could be introduced again in such a way that it had the appeal of something new, thus avoiding the impression of nagging or placing the family on the defensive.”⁴³

⁴² Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 4, 13-14, 26; Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 292.

⁴³ Swiger and Larson, *Climbing Toward Security*, 18-19.

The best supervisors worked assiduously to make families a party to their own rehabilitation. They encouraged children to become active in all aspects of the family's rehabilitation, for example. A rehabilitation effort in which either a farm or home supervisor dominated the process of making a rehabilitation plan or ignored the ideas and desires of the family was doomed to fail. Supervisors encouraged family members to think their way through their own problems and to arrive at their own solutions. When those solutions did not seem practical or useful, supervisors could gently offer another suggestion to see whether the family might adopt it as its own. It was a slow process, but one that could work wonders once it had taken root. Two social scientists who closely studied the process of supervision offered the anonymized example of Mr. A and his family as proof of what the right kind supervision could accomplish. The A family lived on a farm that clearly had the potential to support it. Mr. A had never had much interest in farming, however. His passion was for entrepreneurship, for "buying, selling, or trading." Because his farm did not engage his business interests, Mr. A had neglected it. He had also managed, apparently, to squander a good deal of money on his investments. But the A family's supervisors did not think that Mr. A was the only problem. They found Mrs. A wanting too. Because she was "very young," she "lacked skill and experience in home management." She had raised a child that was "undernourished, pale, and fretful." The supervisors ultimately came up with a rehabilitation plan that catered to Mr. A's entrepreneurial streak: it called for the family to raise chickens, fruits, and vegetables that Mr. A could sell on the local market. He converted a car that he owned into a truck in order to haul his and other family's produce to market. The whole process had enough wheeling and dealing in it to finally get Mr. A interested in his farm. The home supervisor also worked out a plan for Mrs. A to begin improving her management of the home. The supervisors found the results to be almost immediate. Once Mr. and Mrs. A had been exposed to progress, "it became easy to secure their cooperation in carrying out farm and home activities and making the adjustments necessary to

their rehabilitation. It did not take long for them to understand the relationship of one activity to another in the attainment of goals which they had set for themselves.”⁴⁴

This was rehabilitation in action. The lesson from Mr. A and his family was obvious: all it took was patience and a rehabilitation strategy that catered to the individual needs and shortcomings of a particular family; any farm could become a success provided that its people had been rehabilitated. And there was apparently nothing that these techniques could not overcome. The same social scientists who relayed the story of the A family told of how the right kind of supervision could even curb alcoholism. “Drunken sprees” were common among male heads of poor families, they thought, because of the shame their failures had put on them. The best supervisors, “recognizing the father’s need of approval, supplied a word of praise here and there, noticed some skill he had shown, brought him new hope and the feeling that he was not a complete failure, but someone in whom the supervisor had faith.” Over time, “through the results of the patience and understanding and guidance of the supervisors, such families became well-adjusted and respected by the community for what they had accomplished in improving their ways of living.”⁴⁵

The process of rehabilitating home lives—which included not just adjusting their personalities, of course, but also their health and eating habits—depended on close study of the home environment. Just like with farm supervisors, the process of home supervision began with a visit to the family being rehabilitated. Home supervisors were trained to understand that “an effective farm and home visit is supervision at its best. Nothing can take the place of personal contact with the borrower and his wife and children, in their own home, on their own farm, where they feel free to discuss their hopes and plans, their disappointments, and their successes.” The home was the best place for supervisors to exercise their deft touches and the only place where they might have the chance to get to properly know the families with whom

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11-12.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

they worked. The home visit also served to head off the confusion and misunderstanding that were a routine part of the rehabilitation experience, phenomena nurtured by the long distances between FSA clients and the FSA office, distances which all too often bred frustration and resentment on the part of both clients and their rehabilitators. As both farm and home supervisors were taught, “Only on a farm and home visit can you see what’s going on. For example, if you find pigs that are wormy, you will see why a loan payment may be behind schedule. If you see the homemaker canning corn that is too old, you will understand why some of her canned food spoiled. Other methods of supervision will supplement the farm and home visits but cannot replace them.” Most importantly, though, the home visit took home supervisors to the heart of the poverty culture, which gave them, as they were trained to know, “a chance to see the family in their surroundings, the relation of human resources to land resources. There on the farm and in the home you will see how one problem is related to another, and how all of them affect the level of living.” The home visit, above all else, was the chance for the supervisor to see what was wrong with a given family and how its problems might be fixed.⁴⁶

Indeed, the primary point of the home supervisor’s visit was to inspect the living conditions, the character, and the ability of the family whose home life she had to rehabilitate. There was not much that did not come in for scrutiny when the home supervisor came around. The process began as soon as her car rolled into the driveway because the state of the yard and the exterior condition of the home had much to tell her about whether this family had the energy and ambition to keep a home that *looked* as nice as was possible. Before she had even entered the family’s house, the supervisor could also gather clues about the state of its health based on the condition of its well and its privy (if the family had either of those). She greeted family members wherever she found them, whether they were working outside or waiting for her arrival in the house. In simply talking to and interacting with them, the supervisor could begin

⁴⁶ Farm Security Administration, *Supervisors’ Guidebook to aid in Planning, Organizing and Directing the County FSA Program*, (Washington, D.C.: Farm Security Administration, 1942), 17, 50.

to judge the state of their personalities and other attributes such as “personal cleanliness.” She sized up the condition of their clothes and the carefulness with which they might have been mended. If she was lucky enough to catch them at their work, she could take in impressions as to whether these people labored carefully or haphazardly at their tasks.⁴⁷

Once she had been invited inside the house, she assessed the state the of home: whether it was clean and well lit; whether its windows had screens; whether it had adequate storage space; whether its walls had been whitewashed; whether it was adequately furnished; and whether it carried the small but meaningful signs that its homemaker made the effort to make the house comfortable and inviting. She paid especially close attention to how the family fed itself. She looked in cupboards and safes if need be—and if the family had any—to find out what the family owned in terms of utensils and cookware as well as whether they canned any of their own food. If there was a storehouse, she wanted to know what and how much was in it. Home supervisors were especially interested in assessing whether the mother (or older daughters) understood the rudiments of good nutrition and prepared nourishing and well-balanced meals.

For good measure, home supervisors on their first visit to a family’s house looked for any evidence that its members were literate and engaged with the world: were there any magazines, books, or newspapers lying around? Under the guise of small talk, she plied the family members with questions too: did the family belong to a church? Had they been to any meetings or activities recently: an extension demonstration, PTA meeting, 4-H gathering, picnic, parade, or anything else? How had everyone’s health been? When was the last time anyone had seen a doctor? And she paid close attention to the children, whether in her estimation they seemed well-nourished and whether their personalities and general development seemed “normal” or

⁴⁷ “An Outline of Procedure in the Supervision of Rural Rehabilitation Clients,” 5-7, 9-12, RG 96, NARA II; *Supervisors’ Guidebook*, 17-21. In addition to these instructions that the FSA provided its home supervisors, I have constructed this composite of what supervisors looked for in homes based on completed farm and home plans as well as on “field notes” based on home visits that were conducted in Greene County. Each of those sources comes in for more scrutiny below.

“retarded.” She asked how often they made it to school. She hoped to find signs that they engaged in recreational play with siblings or with children from neighboring farms. On her way out, if she had not done it on the way in, she took a walk around the garden—if there was one—to see whether the family supplied itself with fresh fruits and vegetables, and if so, what kind. She noted whether the family owned any livestock, and if she saw them she tried to assess whether they were being cared for properly. As she climbed into her car, probably off to perform numerous other home visits that day, she already had distinct impressions about the family: its character, its ability, its problems. And she probably had some sense too of some of the small, first steps that were in order for it to turn its life and prospects around.

After both the farm supervisor and the home supervisor had inspected a rehabilitation family, they sat down with the family to work out a combined Farm and Home Plan (FHP). Supervisors expected the husband, the wife, and the children who were old enough to help make the FHP. The “Farm” portion of the FHP comported with the observations that the farm supervisor had made about a particular farm. Depending on the farm and the ability and resources of a given farm family, it could provide a livestock program, a conservation program, and a program for the farm’s cash crops. The livestock program would set a goal for the number and kind of livestock to be raised on the farm as well as establish how the family was going to feed, house, and care for its livestock. The conservation program mapped out any improvements to a farm’s soil—through soil amendments, terraces, removal of stumps, or anything else—that a family had agreed to. In its provisions for cash crops, the “farm” portion of the FHP budgeted the amount of seed and fertilizer that the family would need for its crop. It also plotted (physically mapped, in fact) what fields the family would plant in which crops and what would be rotated behind those crops after they had been harvested in order to conserve and build the soil. The plan accounted for all of this in order to guide how the family farmed, but also to provide it a sense of how much income it was likely to earn in the coming year. Like everything else in the rehabilitation process, the “farm” plan had a dual purpose: helping people improve

their livelihoods and standard of living, but also teaching them how to live and farm properly. The plans reflected the assumption that farmers were poor because they had not managed their affairs properly, whether from ignorance, apathy, or anything else.⁴⁸

The “Home” portion of the FHP was similar. It accounted for all the contributions that the home and the homemaker were expected to make to the livelihood of the farm. It mapped out the year-round supply of fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs, and milk that the homemaker was expected to produce. It provided a clothing plan as well: how was the homemaker going to make sure that she and every member of her family had adequate clothes, not just for working in but also so that the family could participate in church and other community activities? (Many poor families freely admitted that they did not go to church or participate in other activities for the sole reason that they did not have the clothes for which to do so). The “Home” portion of the FHP also provided a plan for household equipment, large and small: What did the homemaker expect to acquire in the way of stoves, utensils, jars, tubs, washboards, sewing machines, scissors, sheets, beds, mattresses, or anything else during the course of the year, whether through money from the rehabilitation loan or through the income that the farm and home generated? In this way, the “Home” portion of the FHP was meant not only to help the homemaker feed and clothe her family but also to keep track of the homemakers’ household assets, to spur her desire to acquire new ones, and to show her how all of them contributed in some way to the health, well-being, and financial security of the household. The FHP also provided space for planning how the family would deal with medical expenses; plans for improvements that the family would make to the home: screens to be added or wells and privies to be dug, for example; plans to cover any expenses the family would have

⁴⁸ There are countless completed Farm and Home Plans in the archival records of the FSA. For sample completed plans, see, for example, the Farm and Home Plan in the rehabilitation case files of Callaway Boleman, Box 214; David H. McLemore, Box 225; E.O. Fleeman, Box 219; Eddie Parten, Box 223; and Oscar Seymour, Box 226. All in Rehabilitation Loan Cases 1934-1944, RG 96, ATL NARA. See also, “Farm Management Plan,” “Home Management Plan,” “Financial Plan,” and “Information to be Used as a Guide in Making Part I of ‘Farm Family Plan (Work Sheets),” all in Records Relating to Rural Rehabilitation, 1935-1942, Preference & Discrimination - Region V, Box 73, RG 96, NARA II.

for burial and life insurance; even plans to make sure that the kids got to school, that the family was able to participate in any community groups that it cared to, and could subscribe to any newspapers or magazines that family members might take an interest in. Again, all of this implicitly assumed that planning and hard work were the only real reasons why any of these things had been absent in the first place.⁴⁹

For the most part, the farm and home supervisors made and filled out the Farm and Home Plans. (The terms of the loans, it should be noted, made the plans from “plans” into “covenants” that rehabilitation families were legally obligated to abide by). The RA and FSA expected the family itself to keep a Farm Family Record Book to help it adhere to its Farm and Home Plan. The Record Book asked the family to track its net worth by recording all of its assets and liabilities both at the beginning and the end of the year. Throughout the course of the year, supervisors expected rehabilitation families to track every single expense the family had as well as all the income that it generated. In terms of expenses, supervisors really did expect everything to be recorded: if a family member went to a barber, the cost of the haircut had to be recorded; if someone made a trip to the movies, the price of the ticket or tickets was supposed to be noted down; every bar of soap, ounce of tobacco, yard of cloth, gallon of kerosene, or pencil for a child in school that the family went out of pocket for was expected to be recorded. Of course, families were expected to track their income as well: whether it came from the sale of cash crops, from the consumption of goods produced on the farm, or from any off-farm source, whether that might be from wage labor that a family member performed or wages remitted from a child

⁴⁹ In addition to the rehabilitation case files cited in FN 48, see “Foods We Need for Best Health,” “Our Food Plan,” “Our Clothing Plan,” “Our Plan for Other Family Expenses,” in Farm Ownership Division, Plans - General, General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II; and “Material for Supervisors to Use as Guide in Filling out Part II – Home Management Plan,” all in Records Relating to Rural Rehabilitation, 1935-1942, Preference & Discrimination - Region V, Box 73, RG 96, NARA II.

enrolled in the CCC. All of this had to be tracked through dozens of pages of tables and schedules.⁵⁰

The rehabilitation process, the supervision that it entailed, and the plans that the RA and FSA expected these families to adhere to and the records that they expected them to keep—all of this did have commendable aspects. Implicitly at least, the rehabilitation process was predicated on the idea that even poor farmers could run their farms as well and as efficiently as any other farm family. Perhaps most notably, rehabilitation accorded great import to the productive contributions of women to the farm family's income. The greatest portion of the Farm Family Record Book went to tracking "what the farm contributes in the form of food and fuel to family living." Every egg gathered, every pound of meat slaughtered, every vegetable consumed from the garden (whether fresh, dried, or canned) was supposed to be converted into its cash value and recorded as part of the farm family's income in the Record Book. The FSA actually discouraged farm family's from calculating the value of these contributions based on what they would have *paid* for them had they purchased them. Instead, the agency recommended calculating the value based on what families would receive for these things had they sold them on local markets. Women, of course, performed most of the work in tending livestock and milking cows. They performed all of the work of keeping gardens and drying, storing, and canning the produce from them. The Farm and Home Plans and the Farm Family Record Books would theoretically quantify some of the productive contributions that women made to the farm income. They also could record those things as what they actually were: *production* and not simply "savings."⁵¹

⁵⁰ For a sample record book see, *Farm Family Record Book* (Washington, D.C.: Resettlement Administration, 1936) contained IN Entry 77, Box 1, RG 96, ATL NARA. On the "covenants" see Paul Maris to J. M. Hadley and the attached "Farm and Home Plans," 8/20/1942, Farm Ownership Division, Farm Plans, General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II.

⁵¹ *Farm Family Record Book*, 22-24.

The potential impact of rehabilitation on farm women was still ambivalent. A number of historians studying the lives of rural women have emphasized the mixed impact on farm women of the technological and social transformations that came to the countryside in the first half of the twentieth century. As farming became more commercial and technologically advanced, rural women took up new opportunities to continue contributing to the farm income even as the increasing importance of cash income ultimately circumscribed their roles and even their status. An increasingly commercial agriculture tended to reduce the status of farm women to that of consumers and savers—farm homemakers—rather than the producers that they had heretofore been and, in truth, would continue to be. Historians of home economics have also captured the double-edged nature of the efforts that home economists brought into American households in the first half of the twentieth century. Even as they worked to professionalize and bring status to the work of women, home economists shored up the distinction that production happened in the workplace and savings happened in the home. The rehabilitation of poor farm women offers an interesting contrast. It treated the productive contributions of women to farm income as just that, production rather than “savings.” But rehabilitation also placed much heavier labor burdens on farm women than men, required that poor women accept frequent intrusions into their household management, and often treated poor farm women as if they neglected their homemaking responsibilities because of ignorance and apathy rather than out of hard choices that they had to make in allocating their labor.⁵²

Unfortunately, the FHP’s and the Farm Family Record Books posed problems that largely outweighed their advantages. Perhaps the most basic problem with the plans and record

⁵² Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

books was that they did not serve their purpose. It turned out that farm and home supervisors were quite bad at calculating the likely income that a farm could expect based on its likely crop yield, the produce of its gardens, and the increase of its livestock. Even small errors in estimating those things could make Farm and Home Plans more or less useless. Rehabilitation families also had an almost universal aversion to keeping the Record Books. If there was one thing that united nearly every single rehabilitation family, it was their refusal to keep these records. Many families, of course, did not have the wherewithal to do all of the figuring that the plans and books demanded. They required that they know math, but also that they perform a lot of arcane estimations: of the value of all the family's furniture, of the market value of every egg and vegetable, of estimating both the live and dressed weights of animals, and so forth. But the disregard with which most families treated the books suggests that they did not see them as worth the effort. The plans also suggested that poor families could not manage their own affairs and that the road to salvation for deeply impoverished people actually lay at what might be termed the margins at the margins: in counting every egg, every jar of food, every piece of linen, and all the rest. There was no inherent tragedy in having to work hard, of course, or in making count every single bit of sustenance that came from a farm. Farm men and women (and children) had always done these things. They were a source of pride. But that style of living was already becoming obsolete, even on many farms. And it was becoming obsolete at a time when the New Deal was rewarding commercial farmers for their failures with cash money—no loans, supervision, or subsistence required. There was something inequitable in asking poor families to plan how they were going to clothe their families or to plan how they were going to afford routine medical care or to plan how they were going to pay for a child's school supplies.⁵³

⁵³ Farm and home supervisors and FSA officials disliked the Farm and Home Plans as much as clients did. They recognized that the plans did not serve their purpose, but this did not stop supervisors from spending most of their time working on them or high-ranking FSA officials from expending a lot of time, energy, and resources trying to figure out how to make the plans (as a tool) work, something that they never managed. Will Alexander to Phillip E. Henderson and all Regional Directors, 4/5/1940, Farm Ownership Division, Plans - General, General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II; and

This made for a very long road to salvation and one that put enormous labor burdens on already overworked people. Producing the food to feed a single person for a year required an inordinate amount of labor; there was good reason why tenants in the South overwhelming preferred *not* to produce their own food. The prevailing estimates had it that over the course of the year, an adult person needed 90 gallons of milk, 25 pounds of butter (which required another 60 to 70 gallons of milk to furnish the cream for the butter), 100 to 125 pounds of meat, 30 pounds of fat, 20 to 25 dozen eggs, 7 to 15 pounds of dried beans and peas, and dozens of quarts of canned fruits and vegetables. Farm women on rehabilitation had to find the time to produce, store, and can that bounty in addition to all the work they performed raising their children, cooking, keeping their homes, and, in the South, working in the fields and, if they were African American, working as domestics and washerwomen. But when the farm and home supervisors came around on follow-up and year-end visits, they brought with them a well-intentioned but incredibly demanding list of questions. The farm supervisor wanted to know what repairs if any had been made to the home and what improvements had been made to the physical plant of the farm. The home supervisor wanted to know how much money the family had spent on purchasing food that the homemaker might have produced herself. Had she wasted food by preparing too much? Could meals be planned even more carefully to “save” money? How much money had been spent on things like tobacco, soft drinks, and candy? Was that money that would have been better saved and eventually spent on something to increase the comfort or productiveness of the home? What had the homemaker done to “make the home more comfortable, convenient, and beautiful in the last year?” How many articles of clothing had she mended? How many articles of clothing had she *made*? Had she or her husband made any furniture or any other items of usefulness or even decoration for the home? What was the

“Instruction in Farm and Home Record Keeping for Low-Income Farm Families in the United States,” 7/21/1941, Farm Ownership Division, Farm & Home Accounts (Divisional), General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II.

family planning to do in the coming year to improve its circumstances? The margins at the margins were labor intensive, if nothing else.⁵⁴

Farm and home supervisors did not doubt, however, that if poor farmers followed their advice that they would soon be able to lift themselves out of poverty. They would be able to do so because they had more income but also healthier bodies and better homes, which would remake the personalities of rehabilitation clients. Carl Taylor had insisted that it was narrow-minded to judge rehabilitation programs on whether or not clients managed to repay their loans; rehabilitation paid in “remade personalities and lives” and not just in the government’s balanced books. Indeed, rehabilitators always spoke in such terms about what they viewed as their successes. Rehabilitated people were “more adequate human beings.” They had the “confidence in themselves and the courage to try new things.” They “had” a lot of other things as well: “self-direction,” “hope,” “higher morale,” and a “feeling of belonging.” They no longer had poverty cultures. Entire families developed new personalities during the rehabilitation process. They displayed “less nagging, more companionship, and better family cooperation.” A rehabilitated family was “free to work out its own salvation.” As supervisors were constantly told, there was more to their work than the material side of things: “You can loan people money, you can help them fill out the blank spaces on a Farm and Home Plan, help them put down figures in a record book. You can help them to improve their living conditions. You can help them to get medical services and better health. You can do all these things and many others.” But those things were not enough: “To be an effective, lasting thing, rehabilitation must come from an inner desire for something better and a determination to get it.” Rehabilitation was supposed to give poor farmers that “inner desire.” In the next chapter, we return to Greene County and its special program of rehabilitation to see just how hard these “inner desires” were to stoke and just how

⁵⁴ “Foods We Need for Best Health” and “Material for Supervisors,” RG 96, NARA II.

inadequate a proposition it was to place the burden of uplift so squarely on the shoulders of the poor.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Carl C. Taylor, "Rural Rehabilitation and Resettlement," 2-3, 8/27/1938, National Agricultural Library Special Collection, USDA Division of Farm Population and Rural Life Records, Box 1, Folder 107; Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*; Raper, *Sharecroppers All*, 58; John Edgar Tidwell and Mark Sanders, eds., *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83; Rowe and Swiger, *Climbing Toward Security*, 4, 21; Edith Woods, "Our Policies," in "Report Compiled from Annual Reports of the Home Supervisors," Entry 76, Box 1, RG 96, ATL NARA; *Supervisor's Guidebook*, 2.

Chapter 6

Naked With a Full Stomach

Greene is going great. Greene County's newspaper, the Greensboro *Herald-Journal*, proclaimed that fact nearly every day throughout much of 1941 and 1942. The Farm Security Administration had hatched its most ambitious program of rural rehabilitation in this county that Arthur Raper had made famous for its poverty. Since rehabilitation was about hope and achieving an "inner desire" for better things, the local newspaper had serialized, in more than 60 remarkable installments, the book that Raper was writing on Greene County's resurrection. *Tenants of the Almighty*, which ran in the paper under the "Greene's Going Great" heading, told the sordid history of the county's collapse under the weight of the plantation system, but also insisted that the good works of the USDA were helping the county's people to heal themselves and their soil. Publicizing the good news was a crucial part of the county's rehabilitation. The people had to know what there was to be hopeful about.¹

For the same reason, throughout 1941 the *Herald-Journal* carried stories that highlighted the successes of local farm families, both black and white, who had found their footing thanks to the FSA. The articles spotlighted families like that of Robert and Mary McWhorter. This African American family with six children still at home had sharecropped in the recent past. Hard work and a bit of luck during their sharecropping days had allowed the McWhorters to acquire workstock and therefore to progress from the status of sharecroppers to that of renters. Unlike sharecroppers, renters actually owned the crop that they produced, even

¹ Arthur F. Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943); Arthur F. Raper and Martha J. Raper, *Two Years to Remember and Other Writings*, manuscript published privately (Vienna, Virginia: Jean Moore, 1977), 68.

if they had to hand a certain portion of it over to their landlords as rent at the end of the season. In 1939, Robert and Mary had accepted a \$600 rehabilitation loan from the FSA. They hoped that some modest investments in their farm and home operations could further advance their status and income as renters. FSA supervisors in Greene County regarded the McWhorters so highly that the agency also almost immediately granted them one of only twelve Tenant Purchase loans that it made in Greene County. Tenant Purchase loans, very rare compared to rehabilitation loans, became available after 1937 when the Bankhead-Jones Act finally got the USDA in the business of helping farm tenants to buy land. The McWhorters' \$2,460.00 loan bought the family a 143 acre spread and also covered the construction of a three-room home, barn, smoke house, and hen house on their property. By 1941, Robert had already acquired the lumber to add some living space to the family's well-built, though small home.²

The McWhorters, according to the notice that appeared about them in the *Herald-Journal*, thrived on their new farm. The land that the family purchased was rundown when they moved into their new home, but Robert and Mary and their children set to work. Following a diversified farm plan that Robert had worked out with FSA farm supervisors, the McWhorters soon had twenty-one of the farm's acres in cotton, twenty-three in corn, three in peas, eight in peanuts, three in velvet beans, two in cane, seven in oats, and ten in wheat. The cotton did not come in very well for the McWhorters in 1941, but that was less worrying than it would have been in the past because they were producing more than the fiber now. They had raised 200 bushels of corn, 100 bushels of wheat, and thirteen tons of hay. The family had also milled 135 gallons of syrup from its cane. And the McWhorters ate well too. They grew patches of watermelons and sweet potatoes and tended a half-acre garden by the house. The family's original rehabilitation loan had helped Mary to increase her flock of chickens from thirty hens to two hundred. It had also paid for a pressure cooker, which her home supervisor taught her to use to preserve food at home. Mrs. McWhorter canned hundreds of quarts of vegetables, fruits,

² "The Family Size Farm," 10/31/1941, Greensboro *Herald-Journal* in Box, 5, Folder 97, AFR Papers.

and even meat in 1941. She was “tickled to death” with the new house and farm. Mr. McWhorter had just bought a truck and was also expanding the into the cattle business. He had acquired three milk cows and six heifers and planned for the future increase of his herd to pay off a fair portion of the family’s loan. He expected for them to be free and clear of their mortgage within ten years.³

Here is the FSA as it should have been and as most historians have known it. This is the plucky and subversive FSA, the agency that gave poor-but-hardworking families the chance to rise. It was also the agency outlandish enough to come to heart of the Plantation South, to Greene County, and give four of its twelve Tenant Purchase loans to black families, and that would then dare, at Arthur Raper’s urging, to brag on the successes of some of those families in the local paper. This is an important part of the FSA’s history, but for every McWhorter family in Greene County there were 50 families who received the agency’s rehabilitation loans. This chapter goes inside the program of rural rehabilitation that the FSA created in Greene County in 1939, its Unified Farm Program (UFP). The agency directed its efforts toward healing the county’s soils as well as its people. The rehabilitation program aimed to make Greene’s residents healthier and better fed and to attack the culture of poverty that was allegedly the primary factor perpetuating their poverty. Raper came back to Greene in 1940 to live there with his family for two years and to study the UFP as a “participant-observer” for the USDA. The sociologist cast a critical eye over the program but ultimately saw it offering Greene’s landless farmers exactly the helping hand that they needed to pull themselves out of poverty. In coming to this judgment, Raper had the occasional help of assistants whom he sent around the county primarily to interview rehabilitation clients. We follow these interviewers into sharecropper shacks. In doing so, we see the depths of the poverty that pervaded Greene County and also how even the most sympathetic observers could make unkind, and at times unwarranted, judgments about the lives and habits of poor farmers. More than that, looking over the shoulders of these interviewers, we

³ Ibid.

see just how thoroughly the FSA had implicated itself in Greene County's social structure, in its racism and its tendency to strip from landless farmers their control over their own affairs. The FSA became the largest landlord in Greene County. It was surely more benevolent than the old landlord, but not completely different. Tenants chafed at the new restrictions that the agency placed on them. The FSA insisted that rehabilitation clients work very hard but without the right to control where the fruits of their labor went. This was a recipe for frustration on both sides, especially on the part of clients who ultimately had to perform their labor on farms and within constraints that were never going to let them rise, even as the FSA insisted that they were, in fact, being allowed to do just that. The UFP improved (many) client families' houses and their diets but still left them mired in poverty and having to plead that they be allowed to do things like purchase clothes for their families. As the sharecropper Rosa Lee Williams explained about the FSA, "The government's way is to let you go naked, but with a full stomach."⁴

Rehabilitation advocates insisted that the anti-poverty method could work its wonders on individuals as well as entire families. Its proponents intended it as a kind of jolt to startle people out of the torpor that either made or kept them poor. What was good for the individual or the family could be good for an entire culture or society. Starting in 1939, the USDA began a concerted effort to shock an entire poverty culture out of its stupor. That poverty culture was Greene County, Georgia. It lingered in the minds of people who had expertise on or an interest in rural poverty because Raper had made it famous among them in 1936 with his publication of *Preface to Peasantry*. (Although Raper also wrote about Macon County, Georgia, in that book, it drew less attention because its circumstances were less dire than Greene's). As we have seen, Raper had worked as an activist (and social scientific investigator) for the Commission on Interracial Cooperation while he was still in graduate school in the late 1920s, having been hired

⁴ "The Third Way: Negro FSA Renter," July 22, [no year], Box 50, Folder 998, AFR Papers.

to do so by Will Alexander. In subsequent years, Raper had continued his career as a crusading southern liberal, working with a variety of organizations, and he had also taken a teaching position at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Will Alexander had become the head of the Farm Security Administration when Congress created the agency out of the ashes of the old Resettlement Administration in 1937. Alexander was intimately familiar with Greene County, having helped Raper select it as one of the counties he studied for his dissertation and having written the introduction to *Preface to Peasantry*. Greene County would soon become an experimental laboratory in the USDA's fight against rural poverty, and Arthur Raper would soon take up a position in the USDA as a social science analyst to help study that effort.

Once ensconced at the head of the FSA, Will Alexander quickly became aware of some of the agency's shortcomings. He was especially frustrated at its tendency to take on only the best of the bad cases. Its programs usually helped only the better off among the rural poor, largely out of concerns over character and creditworthiness, which were synonyms anyway. By early in 1938, Alexander and other higher-ups in the FSA had begun to kick around the idea of taking on a poverty culture in an overwhelming fashion. The FSA was already experimenting with "rehabilitating" people too poor to qualify for its "standard rehabilitation loans," but that effort never reached more than a few hundred widely scattered families. The point of the new initiative would be to concentrate more anti-poverty resources in a single place than had ever been tried before to see if a tipping point could be reached in an entire county's culture of poverty. Greene County suggested itself readily, and ultimately the FSA picked it to prove a point. It both represented other Black Belt Counties suffering from the same or similar problems and constituted the worst possible case. If an effort to rehabilitate the entire county worked, then similar efforts could work in any of the cultures of poverty. R.W. Hudgens, the head of one of the FSA's administrative region that covered some of the southern states, had this to say in 1938 when the idea of a special program for Greene County was still in its infancy: "There are quite a few counties in this Region in which similar conditions exist, and I am eager to go after one of

them in a more intensive fashion, and to determine not only what can be done, but how much it is going to cost to do it....Whatever we try, I would like to go after it with more vigor than we have attacked any other county in the Region.” Will Alexander, of course, agreed. He admitted that he had “for a number of years been particularly interested in Greene County, Georgia.” He added, “Since I have been working for low-income farmers with the Government, it has seemed to me that we need certain demonstrations where intensive effort is made to rehabilitate the land and the people as an example of what can be done. It has been my hope that something like this might be undertaken in Greene County.” Once the program in Greene County was up and running, another FSA employee described the effort as “a sort of ‘test-tube’ demonstration of what can be done with the very bottom income groups in the way of permanent rehabilitation....Greene County is a picture in microcosm of what a unified social and economic program can do for destitute farm people.”⁵

And so it was that the USDA decided to try to rehabilitate an entire county. Indeed, what the USDA ultimately launched in Greene County was nothing less than a full frontal assault on its poverty culture, an effort that began in 1939 and came to be known as its Unified Farm Program (UFP). The FSA would be responsible for the biggest share of the work, but the UFP went far beyond the FSA. Because the program was predicated on a multi-front attack on poverty, the UFP had to successfully coordinate the work of many different agencies. Indeed, this was a “unified” program at least partly because it sought to coordinate the work of numerous bureaucracies: the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Extension Service, the Farm Credit Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the Federal Land Bank, the Forest Service, the National Youth Administration, the Public Works Administration, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the Works Progress Administration—all of these agencies played some

⁵ R.W. Hudgens to Will Alexander, 2/8/1938; Will Alexander to Paul Brown, 4/18/1938; and Harlan Cleveland, “Greene County,” 20-21. All in Land Use Planning (Co-Ord) - Unified Agr. Prog. - Greene Co. GA., General Correspondence Maintained in the Cincinnati Office, 1935 - 1942, Box 178, RG 96, NARA II.

part in Greene County's UFP. The BAE also established a County Land Use Planning Committee, as it did in every county in the country, to help coordinate the efforts of this welter of agencies and, ostensibly, to allow ordinary farmers to dominate the planning process and to come up with their own program of development.⁶

Because this was an effort to provide shock treatment to a people and a culture, it required a comparatively massive investment of resources in order to attack each of the elements that contributed to a culture of poverty. The most important ingredient of all, of course, was the rehabilitation of people (and the one element to which all the others contributed). The FSA increased its rural rehabilitation caseload in Greene County from fewer than 100 families to more than 500, roughly 30 percent of the families there. (Approximately three-fourths of the families enrolled in the program were African American; the remaining families were white). The FSA also hired additional personnel. It did this not simply because of the increased number of rehabilitation clients, but because the architects of the program believed that the "supervision" of Greene County's poor farmers would have to be especially intense, given the depth of their poverty culture. The FSA added several farm supervisors and several home supervisors as well as a nurse and a social worker to its payroll. It employed both an African American farm supervisor and home supervisor, though most of the county's black "clients" had white supervisors.⁷

The pride of the UFP was the "live at home" program that the home supervisors sponsored, an initiative that sought to get Greene's farmers to feed themselves. Rehabilitation loans required FSA clients to keep gardens. Supervisors provided extensive instruction and demonstrations on gardening and home canning. The canning technique that the FSA favored required the use of pressure cookers so rehabilitation loans provided for those (as well as for

⁶ Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 211.

⁷ "Greene County, Georgia: General Information," 8/1/1938, Land Use Planning (Co-Ord) - Unified Agr. Prog. - Greene Co. GA., General Correspondence Maintained in the Cincinnati Office, 1935 - 1942, Box 178, RG 96, NARA II; Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 234.

many thousands of glass jars and “rubbers” to seal them with), and home supervisors taught families how to use the pressure cookers and to do the work of canning generally. As always, women overwhelmingly preformed the work of gardening and canning. They canned not only fruits and vegetables but also sometimes meats. (The FSA, in fact, arranged demonstrations on how to butcher and can a whole calf.) After three years of the Unified Farm Program, FSA families had canned, according to official statistics, more than a half million quarts of fruits and vegetables from the gardens that their rehabilitation loans required them to keep. In the first year of the program, families canned an average of more than 225 quarts. The following year that average surged to 350 and crept to 386 the year after; it was 499 by 1942. Loans also went to provide some families with cows and many more of them with chickens. UFP client families acquired 35,000 chicks in 1941 and another 40,000 in 1942. Money from rehabilitation loans also sometimes went to pay for livestock and wagons.⁸

People who were better fed (and stronger because of their work in gardens and kitchens) would not only begin to want other better things, like schools and houses, they would also be better able to take advantage and care of those things. Therefore, on the educational front, the FSA had new schools built in Greene County, started a hot lunch program in them, provided additional training to the county’s teachers, and began transporting some the county’s black children to school, a service that southern counties rarely, if ever, provided to black pupils. Because poor houses made for poor people, and vice versa, the FSA also loaned money to make seemingly dramatic improvements to the homes of many of its rehabilitation clients. It arranged some kind of repair on more than 100 tenant cabins; it creosoted more than 200 of them as well. The FSA also repaired 15 barns and built 90 more. It constructed 600 fly-proof privies, screened 235 tenant cabins, and added 220 pumps to wells. (Perhaps as many as one-fourth to one-third of the families in Greene County had no privies at all, let alone sanitary ones). Landlords agreed

⁸ Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, Plate 41, 234-237, 258-259; “Practical Demonstration,” 11/27/1940, Box 6, Folder 115, AFR Papers.

to sign over a portion of their future rent to the FSA in order to secure these improvements to their property.⁹

Because sick people made for poor people and even worse farmers and homemakers, the FSA also coordinated a health program for Greene County as part of the UFP. It worked with the county and state health boards to launch a public health campaign. A doctor, two nurses, and a sanitary engineer taught families how to care for people with tuberculosis, sponsored monthly “VD” clinics where anyone could be tested and treated for syphilis, and hosted well-baby clinics where new or expectant mothers could learn to prepare bottles and baby food and have their children vaccinated against diphtheria and small pox. As it did in so many counties, the FSA also organized a Health Association. Families paid an annual fee to belong and every doctor in the county save one agreed to provide medical services to the members. Virtually all of the families in the FSA’s rehabilitation program joined the Health Association. The one complaint about the Health Association came from doctors and FSA administrators: they felt that rehabilitation families, most of whom had never had reliable access to professional medical care in their lives, were too quick to send for the doctor. Services that the Health Association covered included doctor’s visits, medicine, hospitalizations, ambulance trips, surgeries, and the delivery of babies.¹⁰

Because the connection between rehabilitated people and rehabilitated soil was so fundamental, the USDA also brought an extensive conservation program to Greene County as part of the UFP. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Soil Conservations Service coordinated the purchase of nearly 30,000 acres of land to set aside as a national forest. (It is still there today as the Oconee National Forest). CCC boys provided the muscle-power, and the SCS the plans and coordination, to terrace 7,500 acres of land, to plant kudzu on 1,700 acres, to make improvements on another 2000 acres, and to build enough fencing in the county to

⁹ Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, Plates 34, 47-49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 248-251.

consume 30,000 “rods” of material. CCC boys also put out forest fires, planted more than 400 acres in pine saplings, and helped clean up the aftermath of a tornado that tore through the county in 1941. The SCS aided in implementing conservation programs on 8,000 acres of farm land.¹¹

By the end of 1940, before the UFP had even fully run its course, the FSA had made nearly \$600,000 worth of rehabilitation loans in Greene County. It had also doled out nearly \$100,000 worth of grants to FSA clients and had extended \$30,000 in loans to tenants purchasing their own farms. True to form, even though the FSA expended and loaned relatively enormous sums of money because of the UFP, it had only twelve farmers in its Tenant-Purchase program (where that \$30,000 dollars was going), enough to help twelve tenant families purchase their own farms, eight white families and four black. By the logic of rehabilitation, Greene County’s people were simply not ready to own their own farms in most cases. The large sums of money that went to the UFP, striking at the poverty culture as they did, might one day make many more people worthy of landownership as far as the FSA was concerned. But here is another useful piece of perspective: between 1933 and 1940, the AAA disbursed \$700,000 worth of subsidies to Greene County’s commercial operators, money that went disproportionately to the better-off and which did not, of course, require “supervision” over the most intimate details of the recipients’ lives. The AAA payments were also subventions and not loans. Even the most overwhelming anti-poverty program that the USDA attempted in the 1930s barely equaled what was being given to commercial operators in Greene County, people who were not exactly running bonanza farms.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 219-231.

¹² “Greene County, Georgia: (Special Area),” 4/4/1941, Land Use Planning (Co-Ord) - Unified Agr. Prog. - Greene Co. GA., General Correspondence Maintained in the Cincinnati Office, 1935 - 1942, Box 178, RG 96 NARA II; T.P. Clients Report, 2/23/1942, Rural Rehabilitation Division Region V, Farm Ownership Case Files 1938-1946, Spreg Smith, Box 164, RG 96, ATL NARA.

The FSA wanted to make the money and energy it expended in Greene County affect more than just the hundreds of families on its rehabilitation rolls or the hundreds more whose land had been improved. The UFP treated Greene County not just as an anti-poverty laboratory but also as a crucible: if the problem of poverty was one of people and their cultures then the FSA searched for ways to concentrate and spread the forces of rehabilitation among the county's people, even those not directly enrolled in its programs. If the culture of poverty was contagious, then its cures could be spread just as readily and as widely. The architects of the UFP used publicity, competition, and even jealousy to compound and spread the effects of their program, approaches that took for granted that the main problem with Greene County was its people and how they lived. The FSA, for example, arranged for regular features to run in the local paper, the *Herald-Journal*, touting the successes of rehabilitation clients. Each story, some of which featured African American clients, profiled a family and its now-thriving farm, always with the same point: there was nothing that hard work and careful farm and home practices could not bring, including, ultimately, farm ownership. People simply had to want the right things, to know to want those things, and how to work toward them.¹³

Even more remarkable than the rehabilitation success stories in the *Herald-Journal* was its serialization of Raper's book, *Tenants of the Almighty*, in more than 60 installments, under the title of "Greene's Going Great." *Tenants of the Almighty* gave a careful account of Greene County's history, including the misery inflicted by the plantation complex, as well as the supposed early stirrings of its resurrection through the Unified Farm Program. The FSA saw to it that rehabilitation clients could get a discounted subscription to the paper; more than 300 of them availed themselves of this opportunity. Presumably, they would be spurred on to greater heights in their rehabilitation through seeing their successes touted. As Raper explained, "These families are the very ones which we want to reach." Along with dangling lessons of success in

¹³ "The Family Size Farm," Greensboro *Herald-Journal*, 8/15/1941, 9/1/1941, 9/19/1941, 10/17/1941, 10/31/1941, 12/12/1941 in Box 5, Folder 97, AFR Papers.

front of Greene County's people, the *Herald-Journal* also carried some practical advice on how to achieve it: the paper featured recipes, articles about good farming practices, and announcements of group meetings and activities associated with the UFP. Raper found it heartening too that local FSA officials had asked for 500 copies of *Tenants of the Almighty* to give to every family on the UFP. Local extension agents and educators had asked for hundreds more copies to use in their demonstrations and teaching.¹⁴

Success would breed success through all of this publicity. Jealousy and competition would, by design, play a role too. As the FSA creosoted hundreds of tenant cabins in the county, for example, the parishioners at Moses Chapel supposedly felt pangs of embarrassment that their house of worship had not received a coat of paint since the relatively flush times of 1919. They painted the structure. Then other churches followed suit. Then tenant families not enrolled in the rehabilitation portion of the UFP began to ask whether they could have their homes creosoted, which the FSA was happy to do at cost. It was as if it had never occurred to them to want to make their homes and churches look nice, but now their poverty culture was lifting and they had begun to see the virtues of small steps. And the effects "spilled over," as Raper put it, in other ways too. Farm families not on the rehabilitation rolls decided to white-wash the interior of their cabins once they had seen the effect of this practice on the homes of families "on the FSA." They made their gardens bigger too, if they had them, after they saw the bounties that hardworking women on rehabilitation could coax out of their plots. Non-rehabilitation families began to express more interest in canning and learning how to use pressure cookers too; some of them also built chicken coops and brooders like those constructed for those enrolled in the UFP. Raper claimed, "There has been imitation, too, of FSA terracing, improved pastures, hot beds. Last year when 350 packages of fruit trees—seven peach, two apple and one pear—were

¹⁴ Raper and Raper, *Two Years to Remember*, 68; Arthur Raper to Carl Taylor, 11/10/1942, Box 37, Folder 733, AFR Papers.

delivered to clients at \$1 a package, thirty extra orders were taken upon request of neighboring farm families.”¹⁵

Competition and jealousy were key ingredients in the UFP’s “live at home” program as well, driving up the canning totals that the initiative’s publicists loved to brag about. Pearl Wheeler Tappan, Greene County’s chief home supervisor, encouraged rivalry among both home supervisors and rehabilitation clients. Supervisors wanted their clients to can more than any other supervisors’ as a reflection of their own abilities as teachers and managers. Rehabilitation families took pride in canning more than their neighbors did too. As Raper and Tappan explained, “The supervisors kept the canning interest at high pitch at first by talking with one family after another up and down the roads, and by ‘pep talks’ at the occasional group meetings.” Raper and Tappan also claimed that “many a farm mother was reluctant to state the number of quarts she had canned, lest her neighbor try to beat her record. One woman hid half of her canned goods in the barn until ‘counting time’ in the fall.” Some families apparently took to displaying their canned goods in their homes. Neighbors who saw this re-doubled their own canning efforts. Occasionally, even farm men began to can and this extended the rivalry to that between husbands and wives. Men would line their bounty up on one side of room, women the other.¹⁶

This emphasis on competition and jealousy treated poverty as if it was primarily a problem of individual initiative and as if the most important ingredient in fighting it was creating people awakened to what they could do for themselves. Indeed, rehabilitation “success” stories were always told along those lines. Raper and the home supervisor Pearl Tappan relayed the experience of Lula McCommons, an African American farmer of 70. She had never canned more than 10 quarts in a year and only warily agreed to try for 75. Her supervisors enlisted the

¹⁵ Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty*, 271-272.

¹⁶ Arthur F. Raper and Pearl Wheeler Tappan, “Never Too Old to Learn New Tricks: The Canning Program in Greene County, Georgia,” *Applied Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (Jun. 1943), 6-8.

help of her husband and a daughter to interest her in canning, but seemingly to no avail. Her supervisors then tried a different tack: they took her to visit the home of one of the county's most prolific canners. Mrs. McCommons began to can. The next time she went to church, she heard other women bragging about how much they had put up, and her transformation was complete: "I just told myself that if old Mary Rooth and all them others could can all them quarts I could too. So I just told Satan to git behind me, for I was a goin' to can everything I could git my hands on." That turned out to be true. McCommons canned 675 quarts that year and nearly 800 the next. And for every Lula McCommons that the UFP could awaken, the effects would be multiplied. As Raper and Tappan explained, "The food production has been contagious. Many non-FSA farmers, seeing the good gardens and canned food of the borrowers, have planned larger gardens of their own, bought pressure cookers, and increased their canning." (These ideas were not unique to Greene County. They were integral to what the FSA did everywhere it worked. The home supervisor who oversaw rehabilitation work in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi referred to the FSA's Tenant Purchase Program as "somewhat like an infectious disease." The FSA could only make owners of an impossibly tiny number of farmers, but its agents apparently thought that seeing those people have that chance would "spread" the desire and resolve for not-so-lucky farmers to obtain their own farms for themselves one day by whatever means).¹⁷

Because Greene County was being treated as a rehabilitation laboratory and crucible, a steady stream of experts and notables came to witness what was happening there. Along with numerous lesser-known people, Raper hosted an esteemed set of guests, giving them tours of the county and putting them up at his plantation house. High-ranking USDA officials came: M.L. Wilson, Carl Taylor, Howard Tolley, and Will Alexander all made appearances; when M.L. Wilson visited, he traveled with the anthropologist Margaret Meade; the photographers Dorthea

¹⁷ Raper and Tappan, "Never Too Old," 7-8, 10; Unnamed supervisor quoted in Paul V. Maris to Will Alexander, 3/14/1940, Farm Ownership Division, Plans - General, General Correspondence, 1937-1942, Box 43, RG 96, NARA II.

Lange, Jack Delano, and Roy Stryker came to document and observe the county's progress; so did Lange's husband, the economist Paul Taylor, who was then the leading authority on farm labor in the country; the economist John Black, probably the most important agricultural economist of the time, passed through as well. It was not just social scientists, though, who came to see the county's people being taught to live right. The poet Sterling Brown, of Harlem Renaissance fame, spent time in Greene County as well, ultimately recording his impressions of what was happening there. Reporters from *Time* and *Life* magazines came through and did the same.¹⁸

Nothing revealed the nature of the FSA's experiment in Greene County, however, more than the presence of Raper (as well as that of his whole family). Carl Taylor, the head of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics' Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, had hired Raper in 1940 to send him to study Greene County's rehabilitation in the capacity of a "participant-observer" and a "social science analyst." Raper and his family lived in Greene County for two years. As we saw in a previous chapter, Taylor had dispatched social scientists to rural communities around the county to work in similar capacities, though none of them stayed as long or immersed themselves as fully as Raper did in Greene. To give credit where it is due, it is quite remarkable that the DFPRL sent Raper there at all. He was, as we have seen, a committed anti-racist and had gone on record abundantly against white supremacy and the South's plantation system. Carl Taylor hired not just a potential trouble-maker but a known trouble-maker. It could have easily sent someone less likely to provoke the ire of local landlords but for the fact that the people behind this program wanted to fight poverty in Greene and Raper had literally written the book on that. They cared enough to try do this right, within the confines of the rehabilitation concept.

¹⁸ Raper and Raper, *Two Years to Remember*, 47-49, 56-57, 96.

Once he had established himself and his family in Greene County, Raper continued to do those quietly and defiantly provocative things that we have already seen from him and that his conscience and exquisite decency demanded of him. When the African American poet Sterling Brown came to visit Greene County, Raper conducted him on a personal tour through the area to show the work being done in connection with the UFP. This was exactly the gesture one would expect from Raper, but also one liable to scandalize the county's whites. Raper also referred to local African Americans as "Mr." and "Mrs.," a practice so outrageous to the sensibilities of local whites that it earned him a subpoena and trip before the county's grand jury and, ultimately, an official admonishment to stop the practice. (Raper thought that Gene Talmadge's courthouse clique had contrived this affair because of the critical things the sociologist had written about the governor in *Preface to Peasantry*. He freely admitted, however, that it was indeed his practice to address everyone with proper titles). Raper was the subject of seemingly endless rumors while he and his family lived in Greene. Every white person seemed to have heard of some outrageous racial transgression that he had committed though none of them had, of course, seen anything first hand. Predictably, some of these rumors depicted Raper as a "communist" and an advocate of "social equality." Less predictably, one rumor had it that a black landowner had gifted Raper a pig and Raper had then begun carrying a photo of the man in his pocket "in appreciation of the gift." Even whites who liked Raper sometimes worried openly that he was "a little too friendly" with African Americans. He was subject to stage whispers in public places too. Wasn't that the man who was in the county to write a book advocating "social equality"?¹⁹

¹⁹ John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders, eds., *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85; "Grand Jury Hearing," 7/29/1941, Box 5, Folder 96; "Communists and Sawmillers," October 1940, Box 6, Folder 112; "About Domestic," 9/18/1940, Box 6, Folder 111; "A Pig and Race Relations," 10/8/1940, Box 6, Folder 111; "Race Relations," 10/31/1940, Box 6, Folder 112; "Racing Along," May 1941, Box 6, Folder 114; Carolyn Blue Notes, "Where There's Fire There Must Be Smoke," 1/30/1941. All but first cite in AFR Papers.

Despite this being the local environs, there Raper was nonetheless, genial and persistent in his efforts, trying to learn where this program was succeeding and failing, trying to make sure that the FSA's black clients—roughly three-quarters of the people on its rehabilitation rolls in the county—got a fair shake, and somehow managing to do all this while also winning the affection and esteem of many of Greene's leading officials and landlords. Unfortunately, however, the emphasis in Raper's job description—"participant-observer"—belongs on the second word. As much as he tried to cajole and guide local FSA officials in productive directions, he was primarily an observer, a man working on a book. There was a lot of liberalism in the upper echelons of the USDA and the FSA, but the people who ran the show in Greene County were white locals. The FSA had hired an African American farm supervisor (Gordon Gay) and an African American home supervisor (Louise Allen), but the administrators and the people who handled the paperwork at the FSA office in Greensboro as well as the rest of the farm and home supervisors were southern whites. Every aspect of the UFP was mediated through this fact.

Racism affected how white FSA administrators and supervisors treated African American clients, how they treated black FSA workers, and even impacted how black rehabilitation clients had to try to maneuver within the rehabilitation program to gain the best advantages from it. At least some African American FSA clients in Greene County apparently preferred to have white farm and home supervisors. They did not trust that their black farm and home supervisors had any pull down at the FSA office. (Most black rehabilitation clients did, in fact, have white supervisors). Gordon Gay was the county's African American FSA farm supervisor, responsible for overseeing the farming operations of 90 to 120 black rehabilitation families. Whenever Gay authorized one of his client families to draw on their loan to purchase something, the order had to be countersigned by a white FSA official in the Greensboro office, something that was not required of any of the white supervisors. Gay was also not allowed to sell his clients cotton on their behalf at the end of the crop season, which was something that white supervisors did on behalf of their clients. Unlike white supervisors, Gay also had to refrain from

insisting to Greene County store proprietors that rehabilitation loan repayments took precedence over any debts that FSA clients had contracted at local stores before getting on the FSA.²⁰

Lucille Stone was Greene County's African American "school supervisor." She worked for the Rosenwald Fund, which was in Greene County as part of its initiative building schools for African Americans. Stone faced continual indignities when she interacted with the county's white FSA supervisors and officials. Ed Downs was the white man in charge of the FSA's operation in Greene County and a native of the area. He laughed when another Rosenwald worker referred to Stone as "Miss Lucille." Downs also warned Raper to stop using proper titles when he spoke to African Americans. When Stone came into Downs's office for meetings, he would decline to offer her a chair, though apparently did not object if a white female office assistant made the gesture instead. When Stone took her meetings with Downs, she had to stop speaking and depart without any further words if another white person entered the office on some kind of business. Raper recorded that Downs treated black FSA clients with the sort of back-slapping and patronizing affection that African American males were expected to at least pretend to enjoy. He also noted that Downs was not even the worst kind of southern racist by recording in his field notes, wryly, that the FSA administrator was the kind to refer to African Americans as "niggers" rather than "nigras." (He was not, in other words, what Raper considered to be the lower sort of white).²¹

White FSA supervisors in Greene County refused to extend basic courtesies to their black colleagues. Much to Raper's mortification, he witnessed how shabbily the FSA's white farm and home supervisors treated the lone African American home supervisor, Louise Allen, who worked for the FSA in the county. Allen apparently had to walk behind them at a distance if they all went

²⁰ "Gordon Gay---Negro FSA Supervisor," October 1940, Box 6, Folder 112, AFR Papers.

²¹ "Eighty-five Mile Observation Trip with Ed Downs to Visit Farms of FSA Clients," 9/14/1940, Box 6, Folder 111; "Race Relations," November 1940, Box 6, Folder 113. Both in AFR Papers.

anywhere as a group. When Raper met each of the FSA supervisors for the first time, he had to introduce himself to Allen directly because the whites had failed to acknowledge her presence at the meeting and therefore to introduce her to him themselves. Unfortunately, we have no direct record from Allen of how she experienced this treatment or any first-hand accounts of the work that she did trying to make the lives of poor women and their families better despite her mistreatment at the hands of her colleagues.²²

The white FSA workers in Greene County responsible for the most intimate aspects of the rehabilitation process—the home supervisors, social workers, and nurses—routinely displayed casual racism. A white FSA nurse who was a part of the health program in the county and who conducted well-baby clinics enthused after one of them in 1941 that “those little nigger babies were the cutest things, all wrapped up in shawls with booties on. You know, you surely do get attached to them when you work with them every week. The mamas enjoy coming and tell me everything.” One white FSA home supervisor who conducted group demonstrations on canning for her black clients mused, “You can watch it every time: the ones (in the Negro group) who do the best work have white blood in them.” One FSA home supervisor told a story about why she no longer addressed people with courtesy titles on the telephone. She had once called a “cleaning establishment,” had spoken cordially with its proprietor, and called him “sir.” When she subsequently realized that she had been speaking to a black man, she decided not to use “ma’am” or “sir” on the phone because she was “not taking any chances anymore.” One Greene County home supervisor had this to say about the southern white naysayers who criticized the New Deal for being too solicitous of African Americans: “You know, some people cuss and fuss because we are working with the niggers and they don’t have sense enough to see that they are

²² “Race Relations,” November 1940, Box 6, Folder 113; “Conference in office of Arthur Raper, May 20, 1941, Box 5, Folder 96. Both in AFR Papers.

the ones who will be benefitted in the long run.” An FSA social worker who was originally from Mississippi had a habit of referring to the “filthy nigger houses” that she had to visit in Greene.²³

As an anti-poverty measure, even at its best rehabilitation was more or less primed to elicit troubling judgments from rehabilitators about the habits and lives of the poor. That tendency would be compounded immeasurably, of course, when the rehabilitators were racists supervising black clients. Unfortunately, the case files that Greene County FSA workers kept were not preserved so we have very little information on their interactions with clients. We do, however, have an interesting alternative source. In the summers of 1940 and 1941, the Rosenwald Fund paid for Raper to have a number of research assistants to help him in his work. The sociologist sent these researchers around the county to visit the homes of Greene residents, mostly rehabilitation clients, though not in all cases. The researchers were not simply there to interview people, however. They were also there to inspect the living conditions of the people whom they visited and to make judgments about whether their personalities and habits were being rehabilitated. The process was similar to the visits that the FSA’s farm and home supervisors made to poor farmers. After each visit, the researchers then wrote up field notes. At least four people worked for Raper in this capacity. Unfortunately, the field notes are not signed by the individual researchers so they cannot be attributed definitively to a particular assistant. It is also difficult to know much about the researchers themselves. At least two of Raper’s assistants were women. It is almost certain that each was white. The researchers mostly visited African American homes and families. African Americans made for a majority of Greene County’s residents and a super-majority of its FSA clients. Ultimately, these field notes allow us to do two things: to see how FSA clients responded to their rehabilitation and also to have a sense of the sometimes fraught judgments that even the most sympathetic anti-poverty workers were willing to make about the lives of the poor.

²³ “Repercussion,” January 21, 1947, Box 6, Folder 115; “Early October 1940,” Box 6, Folder 115; “The Colonial Terrace,” October 1940, Box 6, Folder 115; “Colonial Terrace,” November 5, 1940, Box 6, Folder 115; Untitled Field Note, October 26, 1940, Box 6, Folder 115. All in AFR Papers.

Raper's researchers did something with the people whom that visited that many others would not have thought worth bothering with: they listened to them. (In fact, they sometimes *sat down* with them on their porches and listened to them). They asked poor farmers what they thought about the Unified Farm Program. They asked them about their health and their aches and pains and how regularly they had access to professional medical care. They asked about their landlords and whether they thought that their FSA supervisors were doing their jobs well. They wanted to know whether clients' lives had improved because of "rehabilitation." The interviewers also showed sympathy. They sometimes spent a fair bit of time getting their subjects to talk. They cared that their roofs leaked and that even families that worked hard had to live in run-down houses. The researchers sympathized with their subjects for the fact that even modestly successful families (by Greene standards) could not afford new clothes as often as they liked. They noticed the improvements that rehabilitation clients had made to their homes with the scant means available to them: pots of flowers, white-washed walls, crocheted bedcovers, gardens carefully tended, walks and yards swept. And they took the care to record these families' stories because they thought they were worth recording. Never did an interviewer find a family hopeless, even if he or she often found them as not having much hope.²⁴

But there was a flip side to all of this. When these interviewers crossed the threshold of a poor farmers' house, they really had crossed a threshold. They entered an environment that they conceived of as fundamentally different from that of the homes of people of their own status and station. Everything came open to scrutiny as potentially reflective of whether the family and its members had fought or succumbed to the poverty culture. Small things that would have gone unnoticed by the interviewers had they been in the home of someone of a comparable status and class (or maybe even race)—for example, a gesture of affection from a mother toward a young child—became deeply meaningful. Sympathy and gawking intertwined. Pity could shade into

²⁴ See for example, "Emaline Smith: Negro FSA Renter," July 1941, Box 50, Folder 994; "Ellis Smith: Negro FSA Owner," July 24, 1941, Box 50, Folder 995; and "Otis Durham: Negro owner," 7/24/1941, Box 50, Folder 995. All in AFR Papers.

scorn as the eyes of the interviewers pried into things that might (or might not) have reflected a family's poverty but that in all likelihood had not caused them to be poor.

Take the case of the Lankford family. The Lankfords' interviewer recorded details of their existence in 1941 that were surely important for judging the success (or failure) of Greene County's UFP. Mr. and Mrs. Lankford were raising eight children on a farm that they rented and having a difficult go of it. The FSA had given the family a \$575 rehabilitation loan and a \$60 grant subsequently. The family already owned two cows when it "got on" the FSA. The rehabilitation process had not done much of anything to improve their farm or their living conditions, however. They still had no well, drawing their water from a spring. Their cabin had no screens and "scant furnishings." The family struggled to provide clothes for all of its members. Mrs. Lankford mentioned that money that the family had planned to spend on clothes had gone to pay for the hospitalization of one of their sons the year before. This was a difficult life and one that wore the family down. As the interviewer noted, "Mrs. Lankford would like: a better house, convenient water, and some house furnishings, and—probably most of all—some clothes." The Lankford children did not go to school regularly and all but the youngest (a six year old) did field work. Quite remarkably, given that she too worked in the fields, Mrs. Lankford had canned 375 jars of food the previous year. When the interviewer asked Lankford how she managed to maintain her home and do farm work, she replied, "Well, I say it's a po' make out." She did what she had to do, in other words, but felt that her home showed the evidence of the corners she had to cut.²⁵

The interviewer sympathetically documented all of this in just three tightly packed pages of field notes. But that also left room for more problematic judgments. The interviewer's depiction of Mr. Lankford comes just shy of calling him a blowhard. He was "an extrovert: facetious with strangers, overflowing with excuses for his failures and emphasizing them with

²⁵ "Carol Lankford: White FSA Renter," 7/16/1941, Box 50, Folder 994, AFR Papers.

gestures.” Virtually unprompted, apparently, Mr. Lankford began to complain about the FSA. It is clear that Lankford seemed to the interviewer both ungrateful and at least in some measure responsible for the family’s straits. But there were other, even stranger judgments as well. The Lankford’s cabin was stained “burgundy red” and the interviewer found its every deformity portentous: “Just another unceiled cabin made of slabs of wood nailed together. Weary slabs of wood. Weary as the people who move across the sagging floors, or the children who peak at strangers from behind knotty shutters.” The weary wood of the cabin did not say half as much, apparently, as Mrs. Lankford’s visage and her bearing, which also came in for close scrutiny: “Her slow smile and steady gaze made me feel I was standing face to face with the Past. She was a striking woman. In the geometrical bone structure of her face there was no definite period of time. Her large hazel eyes were as calm as a very deep pool. Indeed, she seemed not just another sharecropper’s wife weary with working hard against tremendous odds. Here was a woman who transcended time and sex. She was the human race: yesterday, today, tomorrow.” We have no way of knowing what Mrs. Lankford made of this stranger who had come into her home to pass these judgments. The attention was probably not any worse, however, than what Lankford had received from her FSA home supervisor. When Raper’s research assistant who found Lankford’s face so full of meaning and timelessness shared his or her impression of Lankford with the home supervisor, the supervisor snorted, “You’re right. She doesn’t care a thing about tomorrow.”²⁶

The judgments about Mrs. Lankford and her home were especially overwrought, but fully consistent with what Raper’s assistants looked for when then entered poor homes. They carefully noted the condition of the houses and home environment. Sometimes an interviewer’s attention fell on these things because he or she deemed them good or as good as could have been expected. For example, Edna Lawrence, who lived on a farm that she rented with her husband, George, was a “very industrious person, and systematic house-keeper.” Her home featured “linoleum rugs, clean spreads and well-made beds” as well as a “crocheted bedspread.” More

²⁶ Ibid.

frequently, though, the condition of the homes came in for attention because it was in a sorry state. Janie Wright, for example, had to support her seven children on her own, working as a domestic for the Taylor family, which paid her a monthly wage of \$6. The Taylor family also provided Janie Wright the shack that her and her family occupied, in all likelihood, “rent free”: “The family is on the bottom rung of every item used to measure standards of living. The three-room house was a sham when new; totally uninhabitable. Never saw a stable in as bad condition. Half of the 13 chickens were in the house: sitting on the flour sack, nesting in the shucks which spilled from mattresses on the beds.” In the home of Will and Mary Lou Alexander and the seven children they were raising, the “walls smeared with white-wash emphasize the poverty.” Alec Armour, who rented a farm with his family, had a house that was bad, though not as bad as it was possible for tenant homes to be: “House has a good tin roof; otherwise poor: no window sash, steps down, etc.” Rosa and Will Hall, elderly African American sharecroppers, were lucky enough to have electricity in their home, though their interviewer felt that “the long electric-light cord hanging from the high rafter was as gruesome as it was incongruous.” It was “incongruous” presumably because of the state of the rest of the home. Mr. Hall described the holes in the roof as big enough for a “turkiy”²⁷ to fly through.” Mr. and Mrs. Hall used cardboard to try to shelter their dining table from the rain that came through the roof. As Mr. Hall put it, “Rains in here like out of doors.”²⁸

The interviewers liked it when they saw evidence that homemakers struggled to beat back the countless manifestations of clutter and decay that the poverty culture visited on homes,

²⁷ The dialect in which the interviewers recorded speech only emphasizes the anthropological role in Greene County of Arthur Raper and his assistants. Speech (and language) was part of what they were in Greene County and in the homes of its residents to document. Of course, much of the dialect is rendered pointlessly, reflecting the interviewers’ perceptions of the difference of his or her subjects more than the subjects’ actual speech. No one pronounces “turkey” in a way that it should be rendered “turkiy” just as no one says “was” in a way that it should ever be rendered “wuz.” For the most part, however, the dialect is not as demeaning as it was in the hands of less sympathetic observers/writers and was used as part of a sincere effort to capture the way that people talked.

²⁸ “George Lawrence: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 993; “Janie Wright: Negro Domestic,” August 1941, Box 50, Folder 993; “Will Alexander: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50 Folder 993; “Alec Armour: Negro FSA Renter,” 7/21/1941, Box 50, Folder 995; “Rosa and Will Hall: Negro Sharecroppers on Forest Taylor’s Place,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 994. All in AFR Papers.

even if the investigators never shook the conviction that these efforts were pathetic. Annie Ash and her family lived in a house that was “uninhabitable except for one bedroom.” It had no ceiling; walls and floors sagged; “light and air come in an out with ease.” Still, Mrs. Ash had made efforts to beautify her home. She had papered the walls, though the job “shriveled and sagged on the rough boards it had been pasted on.” Mrs. Ash took especial care of a room that was apparently meant for visitors (and presumably the one room that the interviewer found “habitable”): “The ‘company’ room was distinguished by a linoleum rug, clean sheet on a smooth, thick mattress, a radio by a substantial double bed, one chair, and several bunches of artificial flowers. The brilliant paper flowers emphasized their drab background. But Annie Ashe had reached for beauty.”²⁹

The interviewers apparently expected to find neglected children and bad parenting because it became noteworthy when they did not see those things in the homes that they entered and inspected. Two of Annie Ash’s young sons got into a fight over their stamps while the interviewer was there. It was apparently noteworthy that she “very patiently settled the quarrel by dividing the stamps between them.” Mrs. A.T. Wilkes’s interviewers³⁰ rated her abilities highly. Even before she “got on” the FSA she had been a prolific gardener and canner. She had doubled down on those efforts since becoming a rehabilitation client. In July of 1941, she had already canned 350 quarts and now had 12 hogs (up from perhaps just one) and a flock of 400 chickens. The interviewers thought that they witnessed firsthand the kind of character that made Mrs. Wilkes relatively successful both before and after she became a rehabilitation client: “One small incident that happened while we were there gave me an inkling of what had been going on for twenty years. We gave Mrs. Wilkes a cookie from our lunch. She munched it a little.

²⁹ “Remon Ash: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 994, AFR Papers.

³⁰ In this case, it seems that she was being interviewed by more than one person. The field notes do not make it appear as if this was the normal practice.

As soon as we had gotten around the house, the four-year-old daughter reached up with moist hands, and she gave it to her without a word.”³¹

The interviewers paid close attention to the children that they saw. Health was, of course, a major point of interest. Mary Lou Alexander had a young child that the investigator described as “languid,” for example. Alexander herself had this to say: “De baby been sick all his life. Dr. Gheesling said he had soft bones. And he stomick been upset all summer.” Dr. Gheesling had visited to see the baby and also to treat Alexander for a stomach ailment. The nurse from the health association had prescribed a special diet and doses of cod liver oil for the baby, but the family could not afford the medicine. Another infant in this family had died the year before. The interviewer found the other Alexander children to be “quite retarded” and also noted that “everything—furnishings and people—[is] covered in flies. Children in dirty rags.” The interviewer felt that the FSA’s health cooperative had failed this family but also that Mrs. Alexander was not taking proper care of her baby: “Just as I was leaving, the sick baby vomited its breakfast eaten 3 hours before. The child needs careful and intelligent nursing. What good is a medical coop if sick people are filled with powders or ‘soothing’ syrups, and babies are left to die even though their illness is diagnosed??”³²

The interviewers looked at more than the physical health of the children, however. They also made judgments about their personalities, appearance, and intellectual abilities and also the kind of care that they received. An interviewer found that Jerry and Savannah Barrow’s children “all had perfectly shaped little bodies, soft hair and skin. The black little girl was especially beautiful, smiling and perfect.” The interviewer also thought it was noteworthy that Mrs. Barrow had the habit of spitting in a washtub inside her home and that her three young children all went “completely naked except for asphidity knots and strings around their necks.” (Asphidity bags were a folk medical treatment). The interviewer asked Mrs. Barrow about

³¹ “Remon Ash,” and “White FSA Renter,” July 27 [no year], Box 50, Folder 1000. Both in AFR Papers.

³² “Will Alexander” in AFR Papers.

clothes for her children and she explained, “I let ‘em go naked and then when I want to go [somewhere] I has clothes for them.” Janie Wright had a son whom the interviewer described as a “bright, dignified boy of 13.” The Wrights had a home that the interviewer found to be one of the worst he or she had ever seen, but the 13 year-old, “with all the poverty [around him], mothered the smaller children and talked to me with dignity. The baby slept in his lap. The next oldest ran around the room naked, playing with a hammer.” Sarah Lee Robbins had taken some of the childcare steps that rehabilitators liked to see. She had gone to a prenatal clinic when she was pregnant with her last child and tried to take her youngest children to well-baby clinics every month. But the environment of her and her husband’s home still threatened the children’s development. The home itself was a “veritable wilderness. Bushes grow up to the edge of the house, except for a cleared patch in the front.” Robbins’s youngest baby had been delivered by a “Granny” (midwife) for a \$5 fee. The midwife had come only twice, once at the birth of the child and then once subsequently to “see if the navel was all right.” Robbins was also a “clay eater,” a habit that she had introduced to her two oldest children (5 and 3). When the interviewer arrived, all “were hard at eating. The children, with very dark faces, had clay all about their lips and hands.” Mrs. Robbins expressed concern about the effect of the clay eating on herself and her children. The interviewer agreed to leave with some samples of the clay to take to an upcoming nutrition conference for analysis. The interviewer also thought it was noteworthy to record that during the visit, Robbins’s oldest child, a five year old boy, sat on a small sawed-off log. The boy dragged it from place to place in the house in order to sit on it. “The child has been carrying this block around since he was a year and a half old.”³³

Raper’s assistants made judgments about the personalities, character, and ability of the adults they spoke to just as readily as they did about their children. Savannah Barrow’s interviewer found the African American renter to be “an odd combination of practical

³³ “Jerry C. Barrow and Savannah Barrow,” July 18 [no year], Box 50, Folder 998; “Janie Wright”; “Wilkie Robbins: Negro Sawmill Worker,” 7/25/1941, Box 50, Folder 994. All in AFR Papers.

enlightenment and ignorance, according to white folks standards.” Barrow kept a clean house and had taken the care to paste “bright magazine pictures” on her white-washed walls but she also, as we just saw, “spat in her washtub,” ate clay, and raised children with habits that the interviewer clearly found disturbing. Will and Mary Lou Alexander’s interviewer thought that they “have difficulty in carrying out instruction,” which was perhaps why they had “only” canned 125 jars of beans and vegetables. (“Canning quota is 600!”). Annie Ash, her interviewer thought, had a “surprising sharpness” in her tone when she answered the questions put to her, concluding that “deferred hope has sickened Annie Ash.” One interviewer found Julius Parrot, an African American who rented the farm that he and his family lived on, to be “independent but not original” and someone who “nurses a deep dislike for supervision.” George Lawrence, another African American renter, was 70 and his wife, Edna, was 58, and, “they both looked their years”: “Edna is a wirey [sic], grey-haired woman with glasses on. More alert than her husband who was slumped all over.” The interviewer somehow found the Lawrences to have a “vague and patronizing air” as he or she spoke with them. That contrasted with the interviewer’s assessment of Mary, the Lawrence’s daughter-in-law. She was “very bright and pretty” and had a “direct and enlightened manner.” What was the source of the contrast between the Lawrence’s and Mary? “She had been exposed to a new order of things, [but] they had never left the plantation.” For good measure, the interviewer added that Edna Lawrence moved around the house in “bare feet” (which supposedly matched the color of the floor) and peered out at the world through “smeared glasses,” though she still rated as a “very industrious person, and systematic house-keeper.” Bertha Edwards’s interviewer found her to be “intelligent and keen.” Mrs. Wilkes was “shy...but her eyes are very bright.”³⁴

Raper’s assistants were sympathetically documenting the circumstances of Greene County’s FSA clients, but they were also judging the extent to which they did or did not display

³⁴ “Jerry C. Barrow and Savannah Barrow”; “Will Alexander”; “Remon Ash”; “Julius Parrott: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 993; “George Lawrence”; “Bertha and Jock Edwards: Negro Day Laborer on Ferret Taylor Place,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 993; “White FSA Renter.” All in AFR Papers.

cultures of poverty. This was fitting since the architects of the UFP intended it not only to alleviate poverty but also to strike at the poverty culture itself. We have already seen Raper arguing that sharecroppers in the Plantation South had a culture of poverty. Here he is again, describing what had happened in Greene County in the 1920s and 1930s, as the plantation system entered its fully decadent stage and many of the more capable farm tenants decamped for Atlanta or elsewhere:

Landless families who remained behind paid little or no rent, and did about what they pleased. During sharecropper times, as in slavery, they had listened to a rising bell in the morning, a bell to stop work by at noon, another in the afternoon to go back to the fields, and so on. As the sharecropper system waned, one after another of these plantation bells stopped ringing. And then, if they wanted to, ex-sharecroppers stayed in bed until noon. They were, as they saw it, nearer their coveted freedom than ever before, because now they could determine their own activities. Their shiftlessness was pointed to by the planters as proof that they had been right in making sharecroppers work a given number of hours every day.³⁵

This was the poverty culture that Greene County's rehabilitation was intended to correct with FSA supervisors presiding over the lives and work routines of their clients. Raper argued that the supervision, coupled with the real material improvements in the lives of clients, had made the UFP in Greene County a marked success. In 1943, not long after he had moved from Greene, Raper explained the depth and nature of what rehabilitators had been up against:

Naturally enough, some families were slow to accept the new work, particularly the part which came in the long slack work periods of the old cotton year, and sometimes even more that which came on their traditional weekend holiday. Cows have to be milked, and chickens fed on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. For generations, their one escape from the scheduled work of the old plantations had been the workless weekend from Saturday noon to Monday morning. And here they were faced with a program, supposedly for their benefit, which even interfered with the weekend holiday.³⁶

Raper admitted that a certain amount of "coercion" had been necessary at least in the first and second years of the UFP (1939-1940). By "coercion," he simply meant the techniques of

³⁵ Arthur F. Raper, "Overcoming the Greatest Obstacle," 10/30/1943, p. 1-2, Box 7, Folder 134, AFR Papers.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

good farm and home supervision that were necessary to overcome the apathy and inertia of the culture of poverty. As he explained, “The supervisors had to keep showing the borrowers how their continuous work would be to their own advantage in terms of things they themselves valued. The milk and eggs and vegetables were for their own tables, and if they earned more money than before they could buy some furniture for their own homes, dress better, pay the preacher more, and so on.” At first, the clients tended their gardens haphazardly and canned vegetables grudgingly and only because the terms of their loan required it of them. “Some of them ate new vegetables out of the garden and prepared new dishes from their canned goods just to please their supervisors. Since malnourished people usually are not hungry for the food they need, the supervisors had to insist that they eat the foods they had produced.”³⁷

Gradually, however, rehabilitation began to work its changes. The rivalry that rehabilitators incorporated into the program began to take over. No one wanted to be bested by their neighbors in their canning totals. People began to exhibit the tell-tale “pride” that the culture of poverty normally throttled; pride about their spruced up houses and their well-tended gardens and the beautiful color and symmetry of hundreds of jars of food filling the corner of a kitchen. Rehabilitation was taking root and people were learning and to do for themselves for the first time in many years:

And once they had eaten their fruit and vegetables, their eggs and butter and milk, they were physically stronger and felt more like keeping up the additional work expected of them – in the dead of winter, stove wood cut to last out the summer, terrace mouths to be kept open, livestock to be fed and sheltered, and some breaking of land if the weather permitted; in spring, the garden and home truck patch to plant, manure to haul, and the usual preparations for planting field crops; in summer, garden to care for, canning of fruits and vegetables, and regular cultivation of their row-crops; in the fall, completion of canning, storing of potatoes, making of sorghum syrup, and the harvesting of their corn and cotton; and on every day throughout the years, the care of chickens, hogs, and cows.

Greene County’s people were responding to their rehabilitation because they had finally been “afforded an opportunity to help themselves.” The old “bells” of the plantation system were

³⁷ Ibid., 3.

gone, but Greene's people had learned to work again because they could now actually reap the benefits of that work. The UFP showed that "when intelligent resourceful programming can be carried out in proper relation to the things that have gone before, even the bells and work schedules of yesterday's slavery and sharecropping can become symbols of hope and self-direction."³⁸

Raper's assessment was sanguine. Many Greene County rehabilitation clients did not share his views. In fact, they became frustrated with the FSA precisely because it did not allow them "self-direction" and because they frequently did not feel that the fruits of their labor were accruing to them under rehabilitation. When the UFP came to Greene County, the FSA effectively became the area's largest landlord, taking on responsibility for more than 500 mostly landless families. Previously, tenants survived on the landlord's "furnish." Because sharecroppers did not own tools or workstock, the furnish provided them with equipment, seeds, and work animals as well as the credit to purchase the food that they subsisted on. Cropper debts for the furnish frequently ate up most or even their entire share of the cotton that they produced, which was part of what made the sharecropping system so insidious. Tenants frequently ended the year with literally nothing to show for it. Landlords no longer had to furnish their tenants when they became rehabilitation clients. The FSA effectively became the new landlord and this ultimately compromised its ability to effectively "rehabilitate" its clients.

Once a family was "on the FSA," the agency would equip and teach it to feed itself. If supervisors deemed a family worthy of enough credit, in certain cases its loan would even allow the family to purchase its own livestock and equipment. To secure the loan, the FSA now controlled the portion of the client family's crop that the landlord did not claim as rent. The agency marketed the crop on the clients' behalf and decided what to do with the cash that came from the sale. Some clients continued to never see cash, just like under sharecropping, because

³⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

the FSA would decide that all of the proceeds from a family's cotton had to go to servicing its loan. Additionally, when the FSA disbursed its loan checks, they were itemized. A family could spend the money only on what the FSA had decided the family needed and had earmarked it for. Good farming requires flexibility in how a family allocates its resources, but rehabilitation loans denied families that flexibility. In terms of other kinds of expenditures, rehabilitation families especially disliked when they did not have the money to buy clothes. Clients easily became frustrated at these restrictions and the continual trips to the FSA office that spending their rehabilitation dollars required. When they went to the Greensboro FSA office, they routinely faced administrators who were either too busy or could not be bothered to explain the nature or extent of a family's debts. Furthermore, the new FSA landlord sometimes looked just as capricious in how it made decisions as the old landlord. It may well have been even more controlling than the old landlord. Worst of all, families were being asked to do a lot of work and to cede control over important areas of their lives without—in many of their eyes—much benefit to show for it. Raper himself admitted that rehabilitation clients routinely felt like the UFP gave them nothing that was *theirs*, just some food, a lot of hard work, and perhaps some property improvements that, however much they might make life easier, still accrued mostly to the benefit of the landlord. Rehabilitation families continued to struggle so much on their farms that the FSA sometimes had to make additional cash “grants” to get them through the year. Those grants themselves then became a point of contention when clients chose to spend the money settling debts or purchasing clothes rather than on food. And despite its considerable efforts to improve client housing, the FSA did nothing to improve the homes of forty percent of its clients. FSA families routinely lived in cabins that were collapsing around them and that lacked screens, privies, and wells. The FSA offered its clients quite a lot without ever offering them enough to give them the hope and sense of possibility that it insisted were the basis of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation foundered because, at the end of the crop season, clients still lived on farms that

they did not own and that assured that even the hardest workers were not going to do much more than get by.³⁹

John Armour, an African American renter, touched on a number of the frustrations that came with being an FSA rehabilitation client in Greene County. (He also, like other rehabilitation clients, insisted that he liked the program even as he explained to his interviewer that he did not). “I like it very well. There is some things don’t seem right to me: We borrowed the money and then we can’t exercise our money like we want to to our advantage.” In other words, Armour was on the hook for the money so he felt like he should be able to use it however he wanted, whereas the FSA insisted on the right to dictate where the money went: earmarked for chickens, gardening implements, pressure cookers, and so forth. Armour disliked not being able to decide what he needed most, but he also disliked the treatment that he received at the FSA office in Greensboro. “Sometime when you go up there (FSA office) to see them—you may want a plow or a hoe—you lose a whole day from the farm and you stand in that hall and they walk by you a hundred times and don’t even ask you what you want.”⁴⁰

John Armour was glad when his interviewer asked whether he knew how much he owed on his loan. “No. We have *never* been able to understand those statements.” Armour’s farm and home supervisors had apparently never bothered to explain his debts to him properly. He insisted that they “come with one and then another [loan statement] and don’t take no time to tell you what it’s all about. And most of the other folks (FSA clients) will say the same thing. They don’t understand those statements.” Armour then produced a sheet of paper. It was a “Chattel Bill of Sale” and Armour explained that someone at the FSA office had insisted that he sign it without explaining what it was: “Ain’t *nobody* ever told me yet what I signed.” Armour also claimed that the paper had been blank when he signed it and that the writing on it had been

³⁹ I elaborate on all of these points below. Raper even acknowledged the poor housing of many rehabilitation clients and their frustrations over finances and FSA management: *Tenants of the Almighty*, 247-248, 261-264.

⁴⁰ “John Armour: Negro FSA Renter,” 7/24/1941, Box 50, Folder 993, AFR Papers.

inserted later. On another occasion, his farm supervisor had done something similar: “I wuz out in the field working. He come out there and stuck a paper in my face and said, ‘This is a defense loan, sign right here.’ He never did tell me anymore than that.” (During World War II, the FSA redubbed rehabilitation loans as “defense loans” for food production). When asked whether he understood the various phases of his family’s rehabilitation plan, Armour offered flatly, “No, I don’t.”⁴¹

Julius Parrott, an African American renter, had got on the FSA because “they all said it was the very thing for all the farmers to do. And I got on o.k.” He was glad when his interviewer asked him what he thought of the FSA’s rehabilitation program: “I cain’t find out how much I owe. When I go to the office in Greensboro, they say ‘I’ll tell you sometime, we ain’t got time right now.’” Not only did Parrott not know how much he owed on his loan, he also did not know how much the FSA expected him to pay back each year. As Parrott and his interviewer chatted, Parrott eventually steered the conversation back to the FSA: “Have too many bosses. I don’t know who to mind. One come tell me one thing, another come tell me different. A fellow do not know who to please. Without so much bosses I could work with more ease.” Parrott’s interviewer described him as someone who “does not work cooperatively.” He had apparently refused to plant kudzu like his farm supervisor wanted him to: “When they told me to work that kudzu I just told ‘em I wuzn’t goin’ to do it, ‘cause I wuzn’t workin’ nothin’ I couldn’t get no money out of.” The interviewer observed laconically, “This contrariness must make a trial to the supervisors.”⁴²

Sam and Lizzie Bishop lived with nine of their eleven children on a farm that they rented. The FSA had loaned their landlord money to build a new cabin on the place, which they lived in. Sam Bishop articulated a set of concerns about the FSA that illustrate how FSA rehabilitation changed the debt relationships that tenant families were used to in Greene County. As stingy as

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Julius Parrott,” AFR Papers.

the “furnish” system was, tenants had some leeway within it to allocate the credit available to them as they saw fit. The FSA changed that. Farm and Home Plans required families to direct their cash income toward repaying their loans and left them little or no room to determine their most important needs and to allocate their resources accordingly. Mr. Bishop did not need much prompting to talk about this: “Now I’m going to tell you just how it is. I like the FSA set up just fine, but the way I been treated on FSA I’d rather be off of it if I didn’t have a thing but salt and water. I been worried more since I been on it than ever before in my life.” Bishop continued, referring to the old furnish system, “Before I got on FSA I could make a debt and get some clothes for my family, but since I been on FSA I plant cotton, pick it and gin and don’t never see no money. They won’t let me have any for the things I need most. I ain’t wanting to be dependent, but they haven’t furnished me this year a pound of soda to go round my cotton. I haven’t got a dime for clothes this year.”⁴³

In Mr. Bishop’s case, his interviewer offered what was probably a sage assessment. Bishop readily admitted that in certain ways his family’s circumstances had improved because of rehabilitation. The family already owned livestock and kept a substantial garden before it got on the FSA. But its rehabilitation loan had added to family’s livestock and Mrs. Bishop’s canning had increased dramatically. Before he got on the FSA, Bishop had “managed” the other tenants for his landlord on the plantation on which his farm resided. That Bishop’s landlord had placed all of his tenants on the FSA had probably cost the farmer his old authority on the plantation. The interviewer was understanding on that point: “Sam Bishop’s dissatisfaction is due in part to the fact that he doesn’t now have the same opportunities to use his leadership talents as he did before the FSA came and placed everybody on the Jones farm under the same regulations and supervision. Through astute understanding and handling, Sam Bishop would most likely be much happier and more effective.” There was more to it than that, however. The FSA had placed Bishop under a new supervisor recently. He had apparently got along much better with the

⁴³ “Sam and Lizzie Bishop,” 7/11/1941, Box 50, Folder 994, AFR Papers.

previous one. Bishop also suggested that his present supervisor had somehow scammed one of Bishop's adult sons out of a bale of cotton. Bishop retaliated by refusing to hand over his last check from the AAA, which FSA clients were required to do. Instead, he spent the money to buy clothes for his family and to pay his son for the bale of cotton that he said his supervisor had stolen from the younger Bishop.⁴⁴

Mrs. Bishop apparently did not agree with her husband's assessment of the benefits of the FSA program. Mr. Bishop's exchange with the interviewer had unsettled her: "She squirmed all the time her husband was abusing the farm supervisor, and pleading in almost a whisper she repeated every now and then, 'I tell Sam it (FSA) has helped us a lot. He knows we got more to eat.'"⁴⁵

For most families, the frustrations with rehabilitation were less intense than those Mr. Bishop experienced, but they revolved around the same issues of their right to manage their own farms and expenditures. Alec Armour was a black renter who had been on the FSA for four years. The agency had added a barn and a well to the property that he and his family lived on. The house had a good roof but the interviewer otherwise rated it in bad condition. Armour did not know how much he had borrowed from the FSA and did not know how much he still owed. He too was frustrated to see his cash income go to the FSA. Armour explained his belief that "regardless of how much you make they just put it in the bank...When we gin our cotton we give our receipts to the supervisor and never get a statement." Armour liked that his family now had tools and stock that it did not have before, but, like other clients, was upset that the FSA failed to prioritize clothing as something either his money or his rehabilitation loan could go toward. "Let us have it [the money] and make us responsible for it." It was a cumbersome process to get a purchase approved: "As it is now we go to town on Thursday for a little of our own money. We sign and leave it [the paperwork] there. Then we get the check in a few days and have to go the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

whole way back to Greensboro to get it cashed.” An earlier farm supervisor had apparently allowed Armour more control over his own affairs, but “now, we have to say what we want with every cent we get.” Armour’s interviewer recorded this list of problems, some of which are direct quotes from Armour, though not marked off as such: “He grumbled about not knowing what the [farm] plan is or how much he owes. He sometimes feels like he is just a baby. Says the folder with the detail on his farm plans is in [the farm supervisor’s] hands and not his. Somehow or another we [Armour and the farm supervisor] just don’t seem to understand each other. Two-thirds of the clients around here are dissatisfied.” Armour summed up the rehabilitation experience this way, “I’m like a blind dog in a meat-house about this program. Good things in it, I know, but I don’t know how to turn to them.”⁴⁶

Gad Peak found himself in an even tighter spot with the FSA. He had appealed to the agency that part of his rehabilitation loan go to pay for feed for his mules. An administrator at the FSA office refused, and Peak felt that he was in a bind. “I didn’t have nothing to feed the stock on and I figured nobody would think I wuz a good farmer if I let the stock starve.” Peak apparently was able to get credit at a local supply store because, despite being told not to, “I went and got me 12 bales of hay and then a half ton.” Peak then went back to the FSA office and asked if the agency would cover the cost of his hay. The answer came back, “NO.” The FSA subsequently issued Peak a grant check to cover the cost of some food and clothes. It was not earmarked for hay, which was what Peak used it for—to settle his debt for what he had purchased to feed his livestock. A local FSA administrator then tried to have Peak evicted for the transgression, something that his landlord refused to do. This was probably because the landlord now saw an angle. The FSA, pursuing its grievance against Peak, eventually granted title to Peak’s portion of the cotton crop that he was raising to his landlord along with his mule, cow, and wagon. Peak’s landlord, never having evicted him, then turned around and paid him forty cents per hundred pounds to pick the cotton that Peak had once had a partial claim on. It is

⁴⁶ “Alec Armour: Negro FSA Renter,” 7/21/1941, Box 50, Folder 995, AFR Papers.

not clear why the FSA did not consider hay as a legitimate rehabilitation cost in Peak's case. (Perhaps he was supposed to raise his own and had declined to do it). What is clear is that as the person running that farm that he lived on, Peak judged the purchase of hay as his most pressing need. His status as a farmer who had to make management decisions ran up against his status as a rehabilitation client. The FSA insisted that these were not his decisions to make. The agency dictated where its money went. Peak did not know how he was going to get by, saying, "my family too much [i.e. too big] to make a living by the day [picking cotton]." ⁴⁷

Some rehabilitation families lived on farms so poor that they did not seem to notice or to care about the changes that the UFP introduced into their lives. A dead-end farm was a dead-end farm all the same. Erwin and Julia Bramlett were white renters who lived on a place with their three daughters. They had been on the FSA for three years. Mrs. Bramlet had been one of the most successful women in the county at raising chickens paid for with rehabilitation money. The family always had two or three cows before they became rehabilitation clients and now they still had three, but that was after selling several yearlings. Mrs. Bramlet explained that her family had got on the FSA because the family's mules were old. Their loan had bought them two new ones, but she did not see that as making a difference in her family's fortunes: "They ain't paid for yet, and we don't need two mules for our small plant – just ten acres of cotton." Mrs. Bramlet apparently did not care to do much canning. She had put up "only" 100 jars the year before her interviewer came to see her, but that was enough for her. She explained somewhat cryptically, "Ain't no use canning any more. My crowd don't care about such as that." Mrs. Bramlett had this to offer about the rehabilitation experience: "We've been renting all our lives. FSA doesn't seem to make much difference." Another white renter, Carol Lankford (male) had

⁴⁷ "Gad Peak," [no date], Box 6, Folder 112, AFR Papers.

the same impression. “I ain’t a bit better off now than I wuz before. If I am, I can’t see it. Got the same stuff I had before—a cow and some chickens.”⁴⁸

Stories like that of the Brown family were common. Rehabilitation had changed their fortunes somewhat, but they still languished in very difficult circumstances. The family of eight rented their farm, a step up from the sharecropping and day labor that the family had done in previous years. Mrs. Brown was adept and hard working. She kept a good garden and estimated that she had already canned nearly 700 quarts of fruits and vegetables when her interviewer came around in the summer of 1941. The family took advantage of the medical services to which it now had access. A dentist had pulled one of Brown’s teeth and she said too that the doctor had come by to give her shots to treat what she called rheumatism. (The interviewer suggested parenthetically that Mrs. Brown was being treated for syphilis).⁴⁹

But three years on the FSA’s rehabilitation program had left the Browns only marginally better off than before. Their original loan had been for \$470, money that they used to buy a mule, a wagon, a cow, 2 hogs, a plow, a harrow, and perhaps some other tools. The Browns already owned a cow and 35 chickens before their “rehabilitation” began. But even after three years of the FSA treatment, their house was “uninhabitable.” It had no screens, no well, and no privy. Nor did the family expect things to improve much more. As Mrs. Brown explained, “Every year they come here talking about puttin’ in a sanitory [i.e. sanitary privy], but ain’t got it yet.” Mrs. Brown continued to do the washing and ironing for a local family, earning 50 cents a week for her efforts. The family generally had good things to say about the FSA, though Mrs. Brown did offer one common criticism: “I don’t get no clothes. Been on this de third year and we ain’t had \$10 for clothes and they’s 8 in the family.” If any of the family’s rehabilitation loan

⁴⁸ “White FSA Renter [no date]” Box 50, Folder 1000; “Carol Lankford.” Both in AFR Papers.

⁴⁹ “Hollie Brown: Negro FSA Renter,” 7/28/1941, Box 50, Folder 993, AFR Papers.

could have gone to clothes, it would have saved the family members the extra day labor that they had performed in the past in order to buy them.⁵⁰

The case of Janie Banks shows how the UFP could leave clients nonplussed about rehabilitation's benefits, especially for those people who had worked very hard to find (by Greene County standards) a modicum of comfort. Banks, an African American renter, was proud of the "heap of living" she had done in her 47 years. She had spent most of her life toiling as a sharecropper and her hard work had brought her more than it did for most farmers of that class in the South. She had been on the FSA since 1936 when she was interviewed in 1941. She was raising three children who belonged to her daughter. Her cabin had a ceiling, level floors, and screens—all rare commodities for sharecroppers. Her only complaint about the property she lived on was that there was not "a livin' stream of water" on it. She had to catch rainwater to wash her clothes. Banks's FSA supervisor had given her a chair and a mirror for her house. She had no use for them, though, wishing that the supervisor had offered her a couple of bed springs instead. She already had her own mirror and chairs. Banks also had cupboards and benches that she had made herself and linoleum on her table. She had made window shades from brown wrapping paper. She explained to her interviewer that she had bought some of her furnishings—like a lamp and a slop jar—with money she earned selling chickens. She had brought in additional income selling candy which had helped her acquire an impressive set of kitchen utensils. The one thing of substance in her home that the FSA had helped her acquire was a cooking range. Banks's interviewer admired how she cared for everything and filled her home with soft touches. The farmer had whitewashed her walls and the "entire house was one of cleanliness and order, with enough necessities and comforts to make it a home." The interviewer thought that Banks kept the rooms of her house "neat as a turnip row." When the interviewer said as much, Banks offered, "I wuz always mighty particular and didn't let nobody fool with my junk, 'cause I know I wouldn't get no more." Janie Banks seemed right about where she had

⁵⁰ Ibid.

been before she had got on the FSA, working hard for all of her modest comforts. Except for her stove, everything of substance that she owned she had acquired years earlier. As she explained to her interviewer, with some apparent exaggeration, “Ain’t bought nothin’ since the boll weevil. Just work, work all the time, and get nothin’.”⁵¹

The FSA did not offer rehabilitation clients the one thing that surely most of them wanted above all else: land. Homer and Savannah Slaughter were elderly African American renters. Homer was 67 and Savannah 60 years old. They had raised nine children, all but one of whom had moved out and on to their own lives. The Slaughters had been renting the same farm, the W.R. Jackson place, for the last seven years and had become FSA clients because their landlord “thought it would be better.” The FSA loan had let them fix up their house: it was painted and had screens. Their loan had also got them 30 chickens, two hogs, a cow, and a mule. Mrs. Slaughter’s health was not good, however. She suffered from recurring, severe headaches, which she treated by wearing a scarf doused with vinegar and soda. Sometimes two of the Slaughter’s grandchildren, whom they had raised (aged 19 and 21), helped them with the farm work. Mrs. Slaughter’s garden had come close to failing so she had only put up 37 jars so far in summer of 1941. (The home supervisor came around a couple of times a month, which Mrs. Slaughter found to be “enough”). The Slaughters were struggling—as all rehabilitation clients did—to repay their loan, a fact not helped by the limit the FSA placed on the amount of cotton that they could grow. As Mrs. Slaughter explained, “They won’t let us plant but 4 acres in cotton. \$30 come out (for rent) and we have to have fertilizers. That is slow paying.” Rather than working so hard to pay off their \$620 rehabilitation loan, what the Slaughters wanted “most in the world” was to buy their own farm. They knew they would be too old to work it, though, and that it would never happen anyway.⁵²

⁵¹ “Pat Banks: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 993, AFR Papers.

⁵² “Homer Slaughter: Negro FSA Renter,” July 1941, Box 50, Folder 993, AFR Papers.

Perhaps Rosa Lee Williams had the best take on what it meant to be rehabilitated. She and her husband—and the thirteen children and two grandchildren they were raising in their four room house—had been on the FSA for four years. They rented their farm. They had a cow that gave enough milk for their smaller children to drink it twice a day. They also owned 5 hogs and more than 100 chickens, most of which they had acquired after getting on the FSA. Their rehabilitation loan had also allowed them to acquire two mattresses, a wagon, the cow, and a pressure cooker, while their landlord got—and they got to use—a stove and a pump for their well. These things made a difference. Mrs. Williams had canned 500 quarts the previous year and hoped to do the same this year. It had been difficult, though, because she had given birth in the middle of the canning season. But the Williamses still struggled more than they should have give how Raper and the FSA touted the UFP. Mrs. Williams still did the washing for four local white families. When she had been pregnant with her last child she had kept that work up until the day before her baby was born. When it rained, she had to put “every pan and rag on the place” on her beds to catch the water that came through the roof. Her garden had not “been worth a thank-you” so far in 1941. Even the cotton was bad: “The cotton is a pretty weed, but it’s not fruiting worth a thank you.” She was frustrated too about her inability to get clothes from her rehabilitation loan. As she put it, “The government’s way is to let you go naked, but with a full stomach.” But “the government,” and the intrusions that came with it, seemed to her better than nothing: “I put up with it because it’s better than for me to be on the road a-begging.” But, she added, “They didn’t let me have nothing this year worth nothing...I haven’t had a cash dollar.” Perhaps most aptly of all, Mrs. Williams described this as her family’s “third way” of living. They had sharecropped and they had rented and now they had done rehabilitation. The differences among them all were marginal, in her view.⁵³

FSA management was not necessarily any less fraught for the twelve families in Greene County lucky enough to receive Tenant Purchase loans from the FSA. The Malcolms were one

⁵³ “The Third Way: Negro FSA Renter,” July 22, [no year], Box 50, Folder 998, AFR Papers.

such family. Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm were in their late twenties when they received their loan in 1939 and were raising two children, a seven year-old son and a nine year-old daughter. The FSA helped these white farmers purchase a hundred acre place that already had a home on it for them to live in. Caseworkers always investigated Tenant Purchase families thoroughly, and they had rated the Malcolms highly. The Malcolms had no debts, were healthy, appeared to be a “good farming family,” took good care of the chickens that they raised, and had the personality characteristics that the FSA looked for in all its clients. Caseworkers rated Mr. Malcolm as “an honest, ambitious, hard-working young man” and noted his “friendly manner” and “refreshing sense of humor.” Mrs. Malcolm was the kind who “takes pride in her home,” keeping her yard swept and flowers around to spruce things up. The children were “bright, healthy youngsters...well-mannered and friendly.” The whole family “appears to live together in [a] congenial relationship.” Mrs. Malcolm had urged her husband to apply for the loan, which he had hesitated to do because “he does not like the idea of indebtedness.” As a caseworker who investigated the family reported about Mrs. Malcolm, “She sees in F.S.A. an opportunity to have a farm of their own.”⁵⁴

The Malcolm’s new home was a dream. It sat on a hundred acres not five miles from the last farm that the family had rented. The place had five rooms and a screened back porch. The family’s loan also covered the cost of having the house painted, a cabinet added in the kitchen, and of building a new barn, smoke house, chicken coop, well, and sanitary privy on the property. The Malcolm’s relationship with the FSA eventually soured, however. By 1943, Mr. Malcolm was refusing to turn over the yearly statement of the family’s income and expenses. Doing so would have allowed them to make variable rather than fixed payments on the family’s loan. Malcolm also rejected the management of his FSA farm supervisors and refused to carry out the farm

⁵⁴ “John D. Malcolm,” [by Paul Marshal, Farm Supervisor], “Social History,” [by Sadie Lunsford, Social Worker] and “John Malcolm,” [by Pearl B. Wheeler, Home Supervisor] each in Rural Rehabilitation Division Region V, Farm Ownership Case Files 1938-1946, John D. Malcom - 1 of 2, Box 122, RG 96, ATL NARA.

plans that they had designed for him. He was not simply being stubborn. Malcolm considered his supervisors incompetent. Malcolm insisted, "I have co-operated with the Supervisors all I could," but found that they had "not been worth a Damn to me." He accused his supervisors of "Hitlerism Dictatorism" and of not knowing the basics of farming. Malcolm believed that "if I had taken the Supervision of these gentlemen I would have owed the government at least ten thousand dollars." He insisted that he was "glad to co-operate with the Supervisors in any way within the bounds of reason," but he had yet to see much of that reason forthcoming from them. He still appreciated, however, "the F S A for what they have done for me."⁵⁵

Indeed, it is likely that Malcolm considered the hassles that he experienced in his dealings with the FSA as more than worth it. He was well on his way to owning his own farm, after all. And it was always in its small ownership program that the FSA had the potential to dramatically impact the fortunes of the landless. Nothing rehabilitated like land. If only the FSA had done more in Greene County of what it did for the family of Luther and Louada Goss. The Gosses were an African American family lucky enough to receive one of the twelve Tenant Purchase loans that the FSA granted in Greene County, and one of four that it granted to black farmers. The Gosses had been renters early in their life together, had become sharecroppers when Mr. Goss was 26, and renters again by the time he was 36. They had been renting the same farm for 20 years when the family received a Tenant Purchase Loan in 1938. (Luther was 56 when the family received its loan). The Gosses had eleven living children, 6 of whom (aged 10 to 19) lived with them. Luther and Louada were proud that they had never hired their children out to work for anyone else. None of the boys had gone further than the second grade in school, however, because they were needed for farm work. The girls had completed from the fourth through the sixth grades. The Gosses, like just about everyone else in Greene County, had, of

⁵⁵ Joe G. Woodruff to John D. Malcolm, 3/4/1943; John D. Malcolm to Joe G. Woodruff; Joe G. Woodruff to John D. Malcolm, 3/18/1943; Oren H. Harden to Joe G. Woodruff, 4/13/1943. All in Rural Rehabilitation Division Region V, Farm Ownership Case Files 1938-1946, John D. Malcom - 2 of 2, Box 122, RG 96, ATL NARA.

necessity, had to earn their living from cotton. Because of that, they had experienced bad years mixed in with the good ones. Unlike most in Greene County, the Gosses had never gone deeply into debt, however.⁵⁶

Indeed, the Gosses lived at home in the best way and had managed to accumulate more property and security than most white families enjoyed in Greene County. Mrs. Goss was a prolific quilter. In 1938, the year the family accepted its FSA loan, she had 70 quilts on hand. The family owned “adequate” furniture but also a good stove, a sewing machine, and an organ. In 1937, the Goss’s cows had produced about 1400 gallons of milk. They had chickens and hogs too and owned a considerable amount of farm equipment. The family was proud that it had always kept a good garden.⁵⁷

All the Gosses lacked was land, which was what the FSA helped them to get. Their loan was for \$1530. They bought a 133 acre farm with 53 acres of crop land and moved into the house that already sat on the property in 1938. The loan had paid to make some renovations to the house and to add a garage, privy, henhouse, smokehouse, and barn. (A photo in the Gosses’ FSA file shows the couple standing in front of a handsome house, in an immaculately swept yard). Mrs. Goss planted shrubs and flowers around her family’s new home. She had never had much luck with canning in the past, so her home supervisor was pleased to make plans to give her canning and food preservation lessons. The family’s farm supervisor made a plan that called for Mr. Goss and his sons to grow cotton on fewer acres, but more intensively, freeing up additional acres to plant in soil conserving crops and to produce feed for livestock and additional food for the family. The supervisors hoped that the Gosses would be able to generate surpluses of food and livestock to sell for the first time on local markets. FSA supervisors did have one complaint

⁵⁶ “History of Luther Goss and Family,” 4/18/1938; “Narrative for TP-2: Luther Goss (Colored),” 4/18/1938. Both in Rural Rehabilitation Division Region V, Farm Ownership Case Files 1938-1946, Luther Goss, Box 75, RG 96, ATL NARA.

⁵⁷ “Home Management Plan on the Luther Goss Family,” 4/18/1938; Untitled Narrative Statement by Alma H. Jackson (Home Supervisor), [no date]. Both in Rural Rehabilitation Division Region V, Farm Ownership Case Files 1938-1946, Luther Goss, Box 75, RG 96, ATL NARA.

about the Gosses. The family refused to keep its Farm and Home Record Book despite the repeated insistence of their supervisors on that point. One of those supervisors surmised that the Gosses declined to keep the book not because they did not know how but because they “resent our knowing their incomes and expenditures.” It made no difference though. The Gosses knew how to farm. They had finally been allowed to rise. Incredibly, the Gosses had paid off their entire loan by January of 1944. The land was theirs.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, the FSA offered the vast majority of its “clients” in Greene County rehabilitation rather than landownership. Rehabilitation was not enough. There were too many families like the Turners. Mr. and Mrs. Turner were doing better than most of Greene County’s African American farmers in at least one respect. They rented their farm, rather than working as sharecroppers, and had been on the same place for thirteen years. The family tended a modest—though by Greene County standards, impressive—amount of livestock: twenty-five laying hens, one hundred chicks, seven swine, three cows, and a calf. This was not an easy farm to make a living from, however. Only eight of its 190 acres were planted in cotton, and the Turners had eight children to support on that eight acres and their garden. The challenges were greater than that, however. The farm itself was rundown. There was no pasture for the cows. There was no barn or outbuildings for storage so the corn was rotting. The landlord refused to make any improvements to the place. There was “nothing to [the] house” that they lived in. Mrs. Turner herself was not well enough to get out of bed when her interviewer arrived. She was incapacitated by what she described as a “slow headache.” She lay, according to her observer, “on [a] hot bed of rags,” nursing a newborn. Not long after the interviewer’s visit, the baby’s body reportedly broke out in blisters. (The interviewer thought that Mrs. Turner and several of her children had syphilis). One of Mrs. Turner’s nieces, whom she had raised, had died recently from “heart trouble.” These were the deep troubles that impoverished Greene County farmers

⁵⁸ “Cost Estimate for Repairs and Improvement,” 3/28/1938; “Narrative Statement by Supervisor,” 2/13/1941; E.S. Morgan to Julian Brown, 1/4/1944. All in Rural Rehabilitation Division Region V, Farm Ownership Case Files 1938-1946, Luther Goss, Box 75, RG 96, ATL NARA.

faced everyday—bad health and farms that mocked their hard work—not a deficit of “hope” or “self-direction.”⁵⁹

The Turner’s eighteen year-old son was the kind of young person that the interviewers tended to describe as “bright.” This interviewer spoke mainly to him since Mrs. Turner was not well enough to get out of bed. The eighteen year-old (not named unfortunately) had been picking up the slack in the canning duties since his mother had fallen ill. He had also gone to a vocational school long enough to learn to make tables, chairs, and chicken coops. He had eventually stopped attending because it was too far of a walk and he did not have the money to buy the lumber to practice his trade anyway. He worked several days a week at the local sawmill, making \$2.40 for a ten hour shift. The owner of the sawmill did not abide the wages and hours laws that had been in place for years. The interviewer described the eighteen year-old Turner as “intelligent enough to be bitter”: bitter that his boss cheated him out of money with impunity and bitter that he lived on a dead-end farm.⁶⁰

One thing that did separate the Turners from so many others in similar circumstances: Mrs. Turner was being called a rehabilitation success story. The year before her interviewer had come to visit, in 1941, Mrs. Turner had canned more fruits and vegetables than anyone in the county: 300 half gallons or 600 quarts. The Turners had, in fact, been rehabilitation clients for three years. Indeed, this was what rehabilitation in Greene County frequently looked like: hard work to not go very far.⁶¹

It is possible, though we cannot know for sure, that the eighteen year old Turner soon found some outlet for his talents and ambition. When his interviewer came to visit in the summer of 1941, World War II was in the process of revolutionizing America’s society and economy. It may well have provided Turner with the job that he needed to escape the farm,

⁵⁹ “General Lee Turner. Negro. FSA,” 7/17/1941, Box 50, Folder 999, AFR Papers.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

something he had told his interviewer that he would be all too happy to do. Or perhaps he was inducted into the armed forces after America entered the war later that year. What is certain is that the war allowed the FSA to largely abandon its failing rehabilitation experiment in Greene County and everywhere else. It also radically altered the nature of New Deal liberalism. Agrarian liberals made bold plans because the war offered dramatic new opportunities. They began to think in much bigger terms: full employment, health care, an unparalleled and unprecedented program of rural works, programs to improve the status of farm laborers, and conservation everywhere; an actual New Deal for the entire countryside. The war itself would have to be won first, however, and that posed as many challenges to the liberals' ideals as it presented opportunities for their fulfillment.

Chapter 7

Manning the Farm for War

Like just about everywhere else, the change that World War II brought to Pittsylvania County, Virginia, by 1943 was nothing so much as mixed. Located in the southernmost portion of Virginia's Piedmont, bordering North Carolina, Pittsylvania County had a varied war experience because it had a mixed society and economy. Farmers in the area cultivated one of the state's most substantial tobacco crops but the county also abutted the city of Danville, which had a substantial textile industry. On the positive side of the ledger, wartime prosperity had pumped money into the economy, and the tobacco crop looked better than it had in years. New cabinets and linoleum appeared in farm kitchens. Houses got painted. Sales in one of local the dry-goods stores were up by more than 30 percent over 1942's receipts. Rationing had made new automobiles hard to come by so there had been a boomlet in the sale of fur coats as the most prosperous sought other outlets for their cash. The new (and still quite relative) prosperity brought its own problems, however. Farmers worried about a speculative bubble in land prices. There had been "runs" on certain "scarce" goods at the local stores. The owners of small farms in the county, looking to expand their enterprises, scrambled to raise new buildings on their property but found supplies of the necessary materials hard to come by. There were not enough tractors for all the farmers who wanted to buy them. Tenant farmers approved for FSA Tenant-Purchase loans had been priced out of the local land market. And feed was in such short supply

that some farmers had not been able to expand their livestock production as much as they would have liked.¹

Just as it had in many areas, the market for farm labor had tightened considerably in Pittsylvania County by 1943. The biggest complaint from farmers who regularly employed laborers was simply not being able to hire them on the old terms. With 3,000 men having gone into the armed forces (and an additional number having migrated elsewhere for employment) there were about 40 percent fewer workers available in the county. Landowning farmers had the help of an Extension Service “Farm Labor Assistant” in finding the workers that they needed. The Farm Labor Assistant had mostly focused on “recruiting” nonfarm boys aged twelve to sixteen from mill families in Danville and “placing” them on farms to work. About 100 local farmers had asked the sheriff in the Pittsylvania town of Chatham whether any of his wards had both experience as tobacco hands and fines in need of paying. Like just about everywhere else in the South, white Pittsylvania residents now found it harder to find black women willing to work as domestics and laundresses (for the wages offered) because their husbands and sons had better wages in home front jobs or money to remit from military service.²

For most of the county’s farmers, when it came to labor, the wartime was a period of grumbling and grudging adaptation. There was no crisis, but things were hardly as they had been before. One of the most common adaptations came from the landowners who had to allow the laborers who normally worked on their tobacco crops as “hired hands” to advance to the status of tenants. Wage laborers were also less willing to contract with employers for a whole month or season, preferring now to work and get paid by the day. Some of them had even managed to get their employers to let them use a couple of acres of land to cultivate their own tobacco as a supplement to their cash wages. Farm women, boys, and girls had all taken to doing

¹ “Rural Life Trends Report No. 5: Pittsylvania County, Virginia,” 9/22/1943, p. 1-4, Box 1, Folder 51, National Agricultural Library Special Collections, USDA Division of Farm Population and Rural Life Records. [Hereafter DFPRL Records].

² Ibid., 8-12.

more fieldwork than before too. In a way, this constituted an extension of ordinary tobacco culture, which required frenzied periods of intense labor and therefore demanded flexibility as to who went into the fields to do work. Women and children had always done tobacco work and families had always “swapped” work during the harvest. Now they did even more of those things. Some large landowners and farm managers had even had to rediscover what it was like to get their hands dirty. The county draft board had helped the labor situation by deferring more than 800 men for farm work, but wages had still gone up. Still, rarely did anyone end up completely at a loss to find the workers that they needed; mostly these were just obstacles to be overcome.³

The issue of race crystalized and magnified all of the apprehensions of Pittsylvania County’s white farmers during the war. The county’s leaders liked to boast that the area had some of the most amicable race relations in the South. But the rising income of African Americans had set the tongues of local whites wagging about any number of perceived transgressions and conspiracies. Some white farmers believed that African American men were being disqualified from the draft at higher rates than whites; others thought that black Pittsylvania residents were stealing gas to circumvent rationing rules or that local black churches were promoting parishioners to the status of deacon and elder so that those church members could plausibly skirt the “pleasure-ban” on driving, which ordinarily included non-Sunday church trips. Employers of farm labor complained that the Negro Baptist Association continued to meet while the tobacco harvest came in, which threatened to siphon off some of “their” labor. In 1942, Danville had seemed on the verge of an outbreak of violence when a mill owner had tried to hire black workers for jobs formerly held by whites. Rumors swirled about the white headmaster of a local private school. He had traveled extensively abroad, done work with a local Interracial Committee, and paid the custodial staff of his school more than the

³ Ibid., 8-16.

prevailing wage. That was enough to convince some locals that the headmaster was sponsoring an “under-ground movement” of African Americans.⁴

In 1943, Pittsylvania County presented a pretty good microcosm of the issues that the war had raised all over America. Northern and western cities experienced their fair share of rising racial tensions and conflict during the war, just as Pittsylvania County had, even if the issues in Virginia came filtered through the South’s especially tortured history of racism. The wartime induction of men into the armed forces and the explosion of American industry had brought about the same mixture of opportunity, trepidation, and adaptation in urban areas as it had in Pittsylvania County, with its mixed, though still heavily agricultural, economy. The need to keep the textile mills humming and to bring in the tobacco crop and to raise more food crops than the county had managed historically, all under tightened labor conditions, meant that resources and what social scientists were now calling “manpower” had to be mobilized to the fullest. Those needs also meant that few people could afford to adhere fully to the old status quo. We can know these things in detail about Pittsylvania County because a researcher from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics’ Division of Farm Population and Rural Life (DFPRL) had conducted a “cultural reconnaissance” of the area in 1942 and 1943 as part of the DFPRL’s effort to monitor the social, economic, and cultural changes that the war was bringing to the countryside. USDA agencies had to adapt to wartime imperatives just as fully as ordinary Americans did.⁵

Above all, the war presented new opportunities to think big. The Farm Security Administration expanded its anti-poverty efforts to include farm laborers for the first time as it also embraced—for the first time too—a new and long term solution for rural poverty. The agency began moving people out of areas of concentrated poverty to places where they could

⁴ Ibid., 18-21.

⁵ On the American home front during World War II: David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 746-797.

find jobs. Planners in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics' Division of State and Local Planning saw the democratic pretensions of their County Land Use Planning experiment evaporate even as the USDA re-directed that infrastructure to conceiving the most massive program of rural development ever contemplated in the US, one that had the potential to remove the structural problems that created rural-urban and intra-rural disparities in wealth. The sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists of the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life blanketed the countryside gathering information for the war effort but also establishing dozens of rural communities as interpretive cultural laboratories so that the USDA could head into the postwar world with a truly comprehensive social scientific understanding of rural American. The need to mobilize America's agricultural productive capacity and the "manpower" necessary to harvest that bounty united all these disparate efforts. "Manpower" itself would prove a vital concept to the wartime mobilization, allowing the FSA particularly to propose bold new plans while papering over the fact that farmpower was not just manpower but womanpower and childpower too.

The Farm Security Administration began debating the likely impact of the war as soon as the fighting formally commenced in Europe in September of 1939. Like most observers at the time, FSA officials assumed that the war would be short and therefore have little impact on the FSA and its clients. When it came to speculating about the impact of a potentially longer war, high-ranking FSA officials worried both that the war would suggest to the public and Congress that there was no longer a need for the "rehabilitation" of poor farmers and, just as menacingly to the FSA's mission, that a "war psychology" or a "speculative psychology" would break out among the agency's clients or, in many cases, their landlords. For commercial farmers, a "war psychology" meant a rapid increase in the nation's cash crops and a speculative boom in land prices—a replay of the World War I frenzy that would surely be followed by the same bust. When

it came to poor farmers, however, the “war psychology” might mean at least some effort to generate more cash income by planting cash crops. No amount of that was acceptable, as far as the FSA was concerned. As the war broke out in Europe, the FSA assumed it would use its Farm and Home Plans to do what, in part, it had always done with them: to require its clients to practice a diversified agriculture that emphasized food production for home consumption over the production of cash crops for market.⁶

When the war broke out, Will Alexander’s first step was to remind all of the FSA’s regional directors that nothing had changed. The agency was still in the rehabilitation business and would do everything in its considerable powers over the lives of its clients “discourage” the “speculative expansion of cash crop enterprises.” When the FSA canvassed its personnel around the country in 1939 as to whether a “war psychology” had gripped the agency’s clients (or their landlords), the overwhelming response was “no.” One southeastern regional FSA director had his subordinates investigate the “black land cotton region of Texas” and the “wheat area of Oklahoma” for signs of speculative fever. They reported no noticeable increase in cash crops planted in those areas among FSA clients. The regional director thought that “most of the farmers had apparently learned a lesson in the past from speculation on one-crop farming.” He did not think that they had learned the lesson *that* well, apparently, because he added that if higher prices persisted for very long, there would surely be a move toward more cotton and wheat among FSA clients in his region.⁷

By 1941 there was no longer any question of there being a short war and many Americans believed that eventual US involvement was inevitable. Before the US even entered the conflict,

⁶ Will Alexander to Henry Wallace, 9/18/1939 and “Some Tentative Comments on the Effect of the Present War on the Rural Rehabilitation Program,” 9/14/1939. War Policies - General 1939, General Correspondence Maintained in the Cincinnati Office, 1935 - 1942, Box 186, RG 96, NARA II.

⁷ C.M. Evans to Will Alexander, 9/14/1939; Will Alexander telegram to C.M. Evans, [September 1939]; and “District Supervisors’ Comments on Speculative Psychology in Their Respective Areas,” 9/12/1939. All in War Policies - General 1939, General Correspondence Maintained in the Cincinnati Office, 1935 - 1942, Box 186, RG 96, NARA II.

the shifting political winds were obvious and all federal agencies understood the need to make themselves useful and relevant to an Allied victory. The FSA was no different. The scope of the war, and the disruption it had caused European agriculture, had also made it clear that the decades-long concern of farmers and agricultural experts with “overproduction” had to fall by the wayside. The enormous state capacity that USDA had built up to *limit* what farmers grew was busily being repurposed to *stimulate* production of crops essential to the war effort. The relevance of agencies like the AAA, BAE, SCS, and Farm Credit Administration in bolstering commercial production were all readily apparent. But the FSA had to make a case for itself on grounds other than its clients’ ability to produce crucial cash crops (meaning crops produced primarily or exclusively for sale on the market). When the FSA repositioned itself during the war, therefore, it staked its claim on what had always been its primary mission: rehabilitation. Rehabilitation mattered, and was vital to the war effort, not just because of what the FSA could now get its clients *to do* but what it could *keep them from doing* as well. Rehabilitation in the wartime context, as it always had, meant food more than anything. FSA clients would continue to feed themselves, but they would also produce enough food to feed others, therefore freeing up much-needed acres for commercially-oriented farmers to grow more cash crops. The case for rehabilitation was both positive and negative. Rehabilitated poor farmers were important because they would no longer be a drag on the nation’s resources. They would not consume precious and rationed food (and other supplies) because they now had the initiative to produce enough of those things to cover their own needs as well as those of others. Their poor health and low morale would no longer be an issue either. Rehabilitated farms could send healthy, young bodies into the armed forces and would not drag down home front morale either. Apathy was one of the main pathologies that rehabilitation had been meant to banish, in the first place. And in at least one respect, the FSA viewed its clients as better prepared for the war than any other citizens. As everyone understood, winning the war would have to involve doing battle with waste on the home front. Few Americans were better prepared to make everything count than FSA

clients: every egg, every ounce of fat, every scrap of fabric or wood or metal that could be repurposed into something else—FSA clients had long been expected to make the most of all of it. The FSA would make the case that its rehabilitation program was essential to the war effort on all of these fronts. It did, after all, carry hundreds of thousands of families on its rehabilitation rolls every single year. It had its own army, and it proudly proclaimed that its army had been rehabilitated.⁸

In 1941, before the US had entered the war, client-produced food from FSA farmers had already become “food for defense.” “Rehabilitation” loans became “food production loans,” “war food production loans,” or “defense loans.” In 1943, the FSA estimated that “low income farmers” could produce the following percentages of the increases in production that the USDA had declared essential: 16 percent of the necessary milk increase, 35 percent of the pork fat, 40 percent of the eggs, 46 percent of the canning tomatoes, and 97 percent of the increased number of gardens that were required to meet production goals. Wartime loans from the FSA worked as they had before: clients received comparatively modest sums to help them produce food crops and to acquire and raise livestock in exchange for the requisite supervision. Now clients would feed themselves and sell their surplus to feed other people, thereby finally having a chance to raise their income. This was a winning situation for everyone because, as Howard Tolley, the head of the BAE explained, this production would come from “the output of farmers who otherwise stand idly by, unable to pitch in full strength to produce the foods we need so desperately.” In 1942, the FSA loaned money to more than 450,000 families to increase food production: either families who already were on the rehabilitation rolls or families (more than 25,000) brought on to the rolls specifically to grow food for themselves and the war effort.⁹

⁸ A report that strikes all of these notes: Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *They Too – Produce for Victory: Summarized from Annual Reports of Twenty Farm Security Administration Farm and Home Supervisors* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1942).

⁹ *Food for Defense* (Washington, D.C.: FSA, 1941); Howard R. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 200-204.

By the FSA's own accounting, this had dramatic results. Despite the fact that FSA borrowers constituted "only" about 8 percent of the nation's farmers in 1942, the FSA calculated that its clients had accounted for 38 percent of the country's increase in milk production, 17 percent of its increase in dry beans, and 9 percent of the increase in both its eggs and chickens. The increases that the FSA estimated its clients had made in 1942 over their own 1941 levels of production were just as impressive. The agency estimated that from one year to the next, they had produced 20 percent more milk, 31 percent more eggs, and 36 percent more chicken and pork. To really drive home its point, the FSA explained that this constituted enough of a bounty to provide more than 2.5 million "active men" with their milk for an entire year, for example; or enough eggs to feed more than 2.9 million men eggs for a year, though the number was somewhat misleading since it did not account for how much of their own production clients consumed themselves.¹⁰

The FSA touted similar accomplishments even among its poorest clients. In 1938, the agency had launched a program to rehabilitate more than 500 farm families who did not ordinarily qualify for its rehabilitation loans. Naturally, the effort targeted families living in selected counties in each of the poverty cultures (Appalachia, the Plantation South, Northern New Mexico, and the Cut Over), but also included families in Orange County, Vermont. As the social scientists who studied this effort explained, these families had failed to qualify for "standard rehabilitation loans" because of "mental or physical disabilities." (These were families that the FSA rated as "substandard"). All the families were "dependent on some form of relief. Isolated, without any plans for the future, they lived a hand-to-mouth existence, gradually succumbing to a feeling of inadequacy which in many instances resulted in their being over-

¹⁰ *The Farm Security Administration Goes to War: Record of Wartime Production by Farm Security Administration Active Stand Rural Rehabilitation and Tenant Purchase Borrowers, 1941 Actual – 1942 Actual – 1943 Planned* (Cincinnati: Farm Security Administration, 1943), 2-3, 6, 19.

It is impossible to know the precise accuracy of these numbers. The FSA used a "sampling" procedure and county rehabilitation supervisors provided the raw numbers. Supervisors had every incentive to estimate major advances among their "clients" in production.

aggressive or belligerent.” This, of course, was what rehabilitation was meant to correct. The social scientists—who worked for the BAE and had been commissioned to do the study by the FSA—concluded that in the wartime context, the nation could ill-afford to overlook the productive “potentiality” of “low-income farmers” such as these once they had been rehabilitated. The 50 families that the FSA “rehabilitated” in Laurens County, Georgia, for example, had barely canned anything at all before the special program began in 1938. (They averaged 14 quarts, in fact). By 1940, the FSA’s figures indicated that they were canning 413 quarts per year on average. The numbers of hens that the families owned had more than tripled. All of the families kept year round gardens. The numbers reported by farm and home supervisors were impressive in the other counties as well. In Beltrami County, Minnesota, for example, the families being rehabilitated in this special initiative increased their canning by nearly 45 percent.¹¹

As was always the case with rehabilitation, the process was about more than just food production. It also meant changing people’s personalities. The social scientists who studied this program discovered many signs of newfound initiative, people with the “self-direction” that rehabilitators found so desirable. They saw families preparing better balanced meals, growing a greater variety of vegetables in their gardens, finding new ways to earn income, making their own household furnishings, taking it upon themselves to produce foods that they had formerly purchased, finding inventive ways to scrounge up materials to improvise improvements to their homes, and, above all, people who now *wanted* to do all of these things. The clients of this initiative had “emerged from the shadow of yesterday’s breadlines to take their place in the Nation’s food production line.” They were “a different people. Out of their experiences since coming on the program in 1938 they have begun to develop a new philosophy of living – one which demands activity instead of inertia, cooperativeness instead of aggressiveness,

¹¹ Swiger and Taeuber, *They Too – Produce for Victory*, 1, 10, 12.

accomplishments instead of complaints, and self-reliance instead of dependence.” Their bodies were healthier and so were their minds. They could now do their part.¹²

The war’s most profound impact on New Deal anti-poverty efforts in the countryside would be in turning the poverty cultures, for the first time, from a problem into a solution. Even as the FSA touted the success of rehabilitation, it readied itself for the merciful opportunity that the war presented for moving rehabilitation away from the center of its efforts for the rural poor. Even some enthusiastic advocates of rehabilitation did not see it as much more than a way of holding suffering people on the land, in relatively more humane conditions than they would have otherwise faced, until better arrangements could be worked out. Conrad Taeuber was one such person. He was a rural sociologist, statistician, and a “senior social scientist” for the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. He had sung the praises of the FSA’s rehabilitation experiment in multiple reports in 1941 and 1942. He gave testimony before the House of Representatives’ Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration in February of 1942 that suggested just how much the ground was shifting because of the war, however. Taeuber had a lot to say about the nation’s rural “problem areas,” the name that New Dealers often gave the cultures of poverty. Much of his story was familiar to anyone who had paid attention to the problem of rural poverty for the last decade. Taeuber explained that millions of families lived on farms that earned less than \$400 in income in a year; millions more lived on farms bringing in less than \$1000. Thirty-nine percent of the nation’s farms covering one-third of its cropland produced only eight percent of America’s milk, twelve percent of its eggs, and fifteen percent of its cattle. Taeuber told Congress about the poorest rural counties (769 of them) that collectively enrolled one-sixth of the country’s school children but that expended only one-thirtieth (1/30) of its educational dollars. These were counties in which completing the fifth grade constituted “a high

¹² Rachel Rowe Swiger and Olaf F. Larson, *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow – Five Hundred Low-Income Farm Families in Wartime: Summarized from 1941-42 Annual Reports of Twenty Farm Security Administration Farm and Home Supervisors* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1943), 2 and passim; and Swiger and Taeuber, *They Too*, 1 and passim but especially 5-9.

level of educational achievement” and where completing the eighth grade was “exceptional.” In the farm homes in these counties, running water was nearly unheard of and only 12 percent of them had electricity.¹³

After nearly a decade of aggressive New Deal anti-poverty efforts, the main harvest in the poverty cultures was still, seemingly, misery. Conrad Taeuber insisted, however, that rural “problem areas” were finally “producing” something that the country desperately needed now that it had entered the war: they produced “manpower.” As Taeuber explained, there had been a “damming up of population” in the poorest areas of the countryside during the Depression decade. Some desperate souls had actually migrated back to farms during the early years of the crisis. Rates of population out-migration had declined too, nowhere more so than in the poorest areas. And young people continued to reach “maturity” at the same rate as they had before. Whatever else their straits, the nation’s rural “problem areas” had therefore “continued to produce manpower.” This collective crystallization of rural Americans’ potential—“manpower”—that Taeuber had assigned to poor areas was being “ineffectively used.” He insisted to Congress that “with proper guidance, the reservoir of manpower in rural problem areas can make a contribution to the labor needed in the present emergency.” The poorest rural counties in the country had become “areas from which workers can be recruited for the Nation’s total agricultural and industrial production without impairing its agricultural effort.” The cultures of poverty had finally made the journey from problem to solution.¹⁴

¹³ Conrad Taeuber, *Rural Manpower and War Production: Testimony given before the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942), 1-5.

For Taeuber’s positive assessments of rural rehabilitation, see, Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *Solving Problems Through Cooperation: Summarized from Annual Reports of Twenty Farm Security Administration Farm and Home Supervisors* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1942); Conrad Taeuber and Rachel Rowe, *Five Hundred Families Rehabilitate Themselves: Summarized from Annual Reports of Twenty-two Farm Security Administration Farm and Home Supervisors* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1941); Rachel Rowe Swiger and Conrad Taeuber, *Ill Fed, Ill Clothed, Ill Housed – Five Hundred Families in Need of Help* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1942).

¹⁴ Taeuber, *Rural Manpower*, 1, 3.

Conrad Taeuber had marshaled the same old statistics to make a very new case: he no longer argued for rehabilitation in place. He argued for a “manpower” harvest. He was not alone, and his timing (February of 1942) was not coincidental. All farmers who possessed living memory of World War I could recall not just the high commodity prices of the war period but the shortages in farm labor that it had created. The “problem” had been particularly acute in the South because millions of African Americans had migrated out of the region. The Extension Service had resorted to “work or fight” measures during World War I in order to coerce laborers into the fields at wage rates that employers found tolerable. In the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, conflict and violence had become routine during the First World War because landlords resented the economic advances that their black tenants made and whites generally despised the new independence that higher wages (and remittances from African American servicemen) had given to black women. They no longer had to work as domestics and washerwomen at whatever wages whites cared to dictate.¹⁵

Racial tensions and violence increased again in the South during the Second World War. Both in the South and in the nation at large, however, the crisis of farm labor would, for the most part, be avoided. As Taeuber explained to Congress early in 1942, rural population had either held steady or even increased in some places during the 1930s. Many parts of the countryside now had “surplus” population, especially the poorest areas. Given the dire circumstances in much of the countryside, it is little wonder that millions of rural Americans took the opportunity to leave. In the South, 3.2 million southerners left rural areas during the war. Nationally, an estimated 5 million rural Americans either left for cities or were inducted into the armed forces during the war period. The incredible “reservoir” of rural “manpower” meant that even with the exodus, however, it was not until relatively late in 1942 that

¹⁵ On the politics of World War I farm labor, especially in the South, see Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 79-112 and Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 38-109.

widespread concerns developed in government, among farmers who employed wage laborers, and in organizations such as the Farm Bureau that there might not be enough rural labor to bring in the massive harvest that the government was also demanding of farmers in the coming (1943) crop year.¹⁶

Remarkably, despite the exodus of people from rural areas, the number of them “employed” in agriculture declined by only 600,000 from 1939 to 1945. The aforementioned “surplus” of rural labor helps to explain this but so does the massive government-sponsored effort to mobilize rural “manpower” that happened during the war. The concept of “manpower” itself was crucial to the wartime mobilization of rural labor. The widespread use of the word of “manpower” was new. It had, relatively speaking, not been commonly used before 1939.¹⁷ The word’s prevalence was a product of the mobilization, in both industry and agriculture, that the war demanded. The word and concept was useful to the many government agencies trying to meet the country’s “manpower” needs for a number of reasons. Oddly enough, for a word gendered masculine, it was less threatening than other words or concepts. Newspaper headlines and reports during the war did not hesitate to trumpet a potential “Manpower Crisis.” It is difficult to envision the same headlines blaring about a looming “Labor Crisis.” Labor connotes many things: struggle, conflict, unions, strikes, wages, working conditions, and *actual work*. All of these things represented potential obstacles to winning the war. “Manpower’s” ability to decontextualize and depoliticize these issues made it useful. The word and concept lent itself to an understanding of labor and a set of metaphors about it that suggested that a potential labor shortage/crisis was nothing more than a rational problem with easily identifiable solutions;

¹⁶ Pete Daniel, “Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II,” *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (Dec., 1990), 886; Walter W. Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War* (Ames: The Iowa State College Press, 1947), 98.

¹⁷ Google’s Ngram Viewer allows users to chart the yearly frequency of words appearing in the more than 5 million books, published across multiple centuries, that Google has digitized. The Ngram Viewer shows the frequency of “manpower” exploding after 1939: http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=manpower&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share

solutions that would be agreeable to both labor and its employers. Manpower was a “resource” like any other: there might be a “shortage” of it, but that just meant that it had to be “mobilized” and “prioritized.” The biggest threat to victory was the “waste” of manpower, a phenomenon that could be fought by simply by “tapping” manpower that was “underused” or “underutilized,” especially in those places (poor places) that constituted “vast reservoirs of manpower.” Everything would be fine if the country could find “enough” manpower. All of this floated high above all the practical and very real issues that confronted all people who labored on farms, but especially for those who labored on farms for wages. As we will also see, the word manpower was also crucial in obscuring the extent to which American “manpower” was, in fact, womanpower, childpower, and poor-person-power.¹⁸

The Farm Security Administration eagerly embraced the manpower challenge. Before turning to that, it is important to understand the complexity of farm labor in America in the 1930s and 40s. The historical importance of land ownership in America originally muddled the meaning of “farm laborer.” Through most of the nineteenth century, “farmer” and “laborer” had been synonymous terms. As American farms became more market-oriented in the second half of the nineteenth century—and a process of class differentiation proceeded in agriculture—“farmers” became a separate class from “farm laborers,” both practically and linguistically. This was strange in its own way because what were farm men and women, after all, but people who labored on farms? “Farm laborer,” however, denoted a person’s landless status and the fact that he or she worked for wages rather than simply the fact of their laboring on a farm.¹⁹

¹⁸ *The Rural Manpower Picture: Statistical Summary by Regions and States* (Washington, D.C.: FSA, 1942); *Mobilizing Farm Manpower for War Production* (Washington, D.C.: FSA, 1942); *The Agricultural Manpower Situation* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942); *Recent Developments in the 1943 Agricultural Manpower Situation* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1943); *Memorandum on Manpower in Agriculture 1943* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1943); *Farm Labor Needs for Maximum Wartime Production, 1943* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1943); *Full Utilization of Manpower* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1943); *Management Improvement and Manpower Utilization Program* (Washington, D.C.: USDA, 1945).

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter alludes to this separation of the “farmer” and “laborer” categories: *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 120-124.

Despite decades of social scientific interest in American agriculture and rural life, “farm labor” had remained little-studied well into the 1930s. There were (and would continue to be) good reasons for this. The New Deal state denied farm laborers the basic protections that it “granted” to other workers and denied them Social Security benefits too, which eliminated a potentially important source of wage and employment data on agricultural laborers. The seasonality of farm labor and the mobility of many of the people who performed it, however, were the most important factors making it difficult to study farm labor or even to establish an accurate count of who and how many people performed this work. The numerous categories of farm laborers further muddled the waters. Some of them managed to work year round for wages on a single farm or on a number of farms in their locality; others performed farm labor only during peak seasonal demands. Some of these part time farm laborers worked for wages; others of them were women and children who performed extra labor during harvest periods and received no wages; others still were people who were “swapping work” with neighbors during harvest time. There was also the question of sharecroppers. The laws of southern states defined them as wage laborers who received their pay as a portion of a crop; their landlords also treated them as laborers rather than tenants.²⁰

The Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Census Bureau did not attempt to develop systematic data on farm laborers until 1930 and 1935. When they did, they counted as agricultural “wage workers” people who worked for at least two days for wages on a farm in a given week. (In other words, they counted people who performed that work the week when the

²⁰ On the varieties of farm laborers: Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler, and E.L. Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: USDA, BAE and FSA, 1938), 22-24. A small handful of economists and journalists were well ahead of rural sociologists in evincing a sustained interest in the status, numbers, and conditions of farm laborers. The economists Paul Taylor, Tom Vasey, and Varden Fuller were among those who did pioneering work and so did the journalist Carey McWilliams: Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Imperial Valley* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1928); Paul S. Taylor and Tom Vasey, *California Farm Labor* ([Washington, D.C.?]: Social Security Board, Bureau of Research and Statistics, 1937); Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Fields: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939).

survey was taken. The timing of a survey, therefore, greatly affected the number of laborers counted). Even this metric hardly provided a trustworthy count of the country's farm laborers. The Census counted more than 1.6 million *hired* farm laborers in January of 1935, but that was not even peak harvest time, and thus excluded hundreds of thousands of people who would ordinarily be working as farm laborers and for wages. That number also excluded the unpaid work of women and children. And none of this data purported to classify the category of the laborer. Year-round "hired hands," which were a dwindling part of the farm laboring class, could be treated almost like a member of the farm family. Statistics from the BAE and Census Bureau did not distinguish, however, between that kind of laborer and others, such as migratory laborers who might be around for only a few days each year.²¹

Farm "manpower," as it would be called during the war, was womanpower and childpower too. Here one has to consider both waged women and child laborers and unpaid workers, which were the vast majority. In April of 1930, the Census counted more than 900,000 women "engaged" in agriculture, a category that included women who operated farms. More than 171,000 of these women were "wage workers" while more than 475,000 of them were "unpaid family workers." April, when the count was performed, was not a peak month for agricultural labor. But the undercount in that figure reflected more than the timing. Male farm laborers often contracted with employers for the labor of their entire families. Employers also often expected women and children to be pressed into the fields at times of peak labor demand. In these situations, the male laborer frequently received the wage of the whole family. The census did not count these women and children because it counted the husband as the "wage worker."²²

²¹ Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 19.

²² *Backgrounds of the War Farm Labor Problem*, (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1942), 37-39; Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 27.

The number of children who worked as farm laborers is also difficult to assess too. In April of 1930—again, not a peak labor month—the census counted more than 469,000 children “employed” in agriculture. Most of these were “unpaid family workers,” but more than 67,000 of them worked for wages and more than 18,000 of those wage working children were aged 10-13. Seventy percent of the children aged 10-15 in the US who were “gainfully employed” actually worked in agriculture. These were not simply youngsters performing the ordinary “chores” that were widely considered to be a beneficial part of farm life. These children did much of the same work that adults undertook in the tobacco and cotton crops of the South, but also in sugar beet harvests and “truck crops” around the country. (Truck farmers resided near large cities and grew fruits and vegetables for sale in those cities. They were common in, among other places, New York and New Jersey). One estimate had it that about 37,000 children engaged in migratory farm work in California alone. Unlike in industry, there were no regulations on the age at which children could start work or the amount of hours they could legally remain at their tasks. These children’s parents had them work, of course, because they needed their labor or the income that they brought in if they worked for wages. This work almost certainly had to come at the expense of their educations and their physical health.²³

One group of experts, acknowledging that it was in all likelihood a vast undercount, estimated there were more than 5 million people in 1930, paid and unpaid, who could be counted as farm laborers (i.e. who worked for more than two days in a week). This estimate included the heads of sharecropper families, but not migratory laborers, because there were no reliable estimates on their numbers. One agricultural economist estimated that in 1940 there were more than 10.5 million “agricultural workers” in the United States. He surmised that only about 2.5 million of those workers were paid (“hired workers”) and that the ratio of paid

²³ *Farm Labor Problem*, 39-44; Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 27.

agricultural workers to unpaid “family members” in the farm labor force had held steady at a about a ratio of three unpaid workers for every one paid worker for several decades.²⁴

Aside from sharecroppers (if they are counted as laborers), the farm laborers in the 1930s who generated the most public interest were “migrant laborers.” These workers formed a number of “migrant streams” that followed a series of harvests over long distances. Among the most prominent of the migrant labor streams was that of the mostly African American laborers who followed fruit and vegetable harvests from Florida and Georgia, all the way up through New Jersey and New York through the spring and summer months, returning to the South in the fall. Another stream of mostly Hispanic migrants traveled from Texas to perform the labor of the sugar beet harvest in places like Colorado, Wyoming, Oregon, and Idaho. Other streams served the grain harvests that stretched from Texas to Montana and the cotton harvests in the Southwest that stretched from Texas to California. Within California, migrant laborers worked crops that covered nearly the whole breadth of the state, including peas, asparagus, cotton, lettuce, melons, deciduous fruits, and various truck crops. Oregon, Idaho, and the State of Washington also seasonally received large influxes of farm laborers. The people performing this labor were diverse. Many African American migrants on the eastern seaboard were former sharecroppers. Mexican, Filipino, and Japanese laborers comprised a significant proportion of west coast migrants. In other migrant streams, millworkers and farmers joined the migration, often with their whole families, to supplement their wages from farm and factory work. The most famous migrant workers were the so-called “Okies” displaced from the farms of the Great Plains, though that was far from the typical migrant experience. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, no one pretended to have an accurate count of the number of migrant laborers working

²⁴ Wheeler, Taylor, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 19; Wilcox, *Farmer in the Second World War*, 83.

in America, though one informed estimate in 1937 placed the number at between 200,000 and 350,000.²⁵

Many farm laborers, and especially migrant laborers, faced difficult or even horrendous living and working conditions. The Farm Security Administration conducted a study in 1940 gives a sense of what migrants confronted along the eastern seaboard. In the summer of 1940, the agency sent “field enumerators” to assess the conditions of migrant laborers harvesting fruits and vegetables on large farms in New Jersey. The FSA workers polled both farm owners and hundreds of farm laborers in two locations. The first location was in Central New Jersey, where the workforce was predominantly African American (having migrated from the South). The second location was in Burlington County, New Jersey, in the south central part of the state, where most of the workers were Italian and Italian-Americans who migrated annually from nearby cities (Philadelphia, Camden, and Trenton) to perform farm labor during the summers. The Italian laborers in Burlington County faced less difficult conditions than the African American farm workers in Central New Jersey. The Italians, because they returned annually, had managed to negotiate reasonable housing accommodations and wages from their employers. They also typically came with their full families and largely performed this labor to supplement what they earned from their jobs in the cities. These laborers could expect to have guaranteed work before they arrived each summer, because they returned to the same employers routinely, and to enjoy more working days from each employer than was typical for other farm laborers in New Jersey.²⁶

None of this was true for the African American laborers in Central New Jersey in the summer of 1940. They were “full time” migrants. As the FSA reported, they had “adopted

²⁵ Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-1947* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1951), 83-84; *Farm Labor Problem*, 59-72; Taylor, Wheeler, and Kirkpatrick, *Disadvantaged Classes*, 20-24.

²⁶ J. J. Kaufman, *Working and Living Conditions of Migratory Farm Laborers in New Jersey During the Summer of 1940* (Washington, D.C.: FSA, 1942), 1-20.

migratory farm work as a way of life because of the lack of other economic opportunities in the areas from which they originally came.” Unlike their Italian counterparts, these workers had no guarantees of employment when they arrived to areas where the harvest (mostly potatoes) was in progress, and they faced the prospect of more time waiting for their employment to begin (timing the harvest was tricky) and longer periods between the jobs that they managed to find. The work was “highly irregular.” The African American workers in Central New Jersey that FSA enumerators polled had spent an average of 22 days in the area in order to perform eight days of work. When a job at one farm ended, these workers wasted time and potential earnings in the search for another job. The housing that the workers lived in was not only cramped but frequently improvised. Along with the “houses, labor cabins, and barracks” that employers provided, workers sometimes lived in “wagon sheds, chicken coops, garages, warehouses, tool sheds, wagon houses, corn cribs, and other make-shift shelters.” “Sanitary facilities” available to black farm workers were “either inconveniently located, poor and inadequate for the demands made upon them, or [were] totally absent.”²⁷

The rural sociologists Carl F. Reuss and Lloyd H. Fisher published a study in 1941 that permits a more detailed understanding of the experiences and conditions of farm laborers who had migrated to the State of Washington’s Yakima Valley in the 1930s. Reuss and Fisher focused primarily on Yakima County, in the south-central part of the state, as representative of the Yakima Valley region as a whole. Its agriculture showed just how “industrial” farming could be on small, family-owned farms. In 1935, more than 70 percent of the farms in Yakima County were smaller than 50 acres. In 1929, the county produced more than \$30 million worth of farm products, however, an amount that only five counties in the nation exceeded. Most of this value came from fruit. (Yakima farmers also produced substantial crops of potatoes, beets, and hops). The labor demands for the fruit harvest were enormous. In 1935, one estimate had it that Yakima Valley as a whole needed 33,000 full time workers at the peak of the harvest in

²⁷ Ibid., 14-17.

September. This estimate assumed that only 6,000 of those workers would be residents of the Valley; the other 27,000 would be transients of some kind. (These figures were actually low. Most workers had a hard time achieving “full time” work because of the difficulty of stringing together enough jobs on enough farms to achieve “full time” employment. In all likelihood, it probably required many more than 33,000 people to do the work).²⁸

Many of the workers who supplied this area’s massive labor needs were truly migratory: they worked during the harvest and then moved on. Many of them were recent migrants who had settled in the area, however. Yakima County’s population had swelled by 27 percent between 1930 and 1940. More of these migrants came from the Plains States than anywhere else, “refugees” from the Dust Bowl disaster. The peak years of migration were between 1935 and 1938. Reuss and Fisher chose to study these recently-settled workers, ultimately interviewing more than 250 families. The sociologists excluded families who had arrived before 1930 and those that had arrived less than three months before they conducted their interviews in 1940. Their sample, then, hardly bore testament to the lives of the farm laborers who faced the worst conditions, which makes what they found all the more remarkable.²⁹

The seasonality of the work that farm laborers performed in Yakima County devastated their ability to support themselves. As Reuss and Fisher explained, “The cherry harvest provides employment for all for a week or ten days in June, the hop harvest for two to three weeks in late September and October. During the remainder of the harvest season competition for the available jobs is intense, jobs are of short duration, and periods of unemployment are frequent. Practically no farm work is available during the winter and industrial employment opportunities are almost as scarce, so that nearly all resident farm laborers are unemployed for almost the entire winter.” As in so many places that relied heavily on proletarianized agricultural labor,

²⁸ Carl F. Reuss and Lloyd H. Fisher, *The Adjustment of New Settlers in the Yakima Valley, Washington* (Pullman, Washington: State College of Washington Agricultural Experiment Station, 1941), 6-8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

public “relief” made up a substantial portion of farm workers’ incomes in Yakima County (and amounted to a massive subsidy to their employers). When they were not working, farm laboring families had to rely on public assistance to get by. In March of 1939 (when harvest demands were low), Reuss and Fisher found that 21 percent of the families in the whole of Yakima County received some kind of “relief.” They estimated that 75 percent of these families had arrived in the county after 1930. In a month like January, when there was little or no agricultural labor to perform, nearly half of the income of the farm laborers that the two sociologists interviewed came from “relief.”³⁰

Reuss and Fisher were able to establish a lot about the recent settlers in the Yakima Valley that normally was unknowable from the usual statistics on farm labor. They were not, for example, “a chronically restless group, but a fundamentally stable people.” Ninety percent of them had moved two or fewer times in the eleven years preceding their arrival in the Yakima Valley. Twenty percent of them had owned their own farms at some point; many more had rented farms in the past. It is no surprise, then, that most of them hoped to regain ownership status in the future. Reuss and Fisher’s interviews with the recent settlers also suggested that they *wanted* to like their new home but often found it difficult. Many of them commented favorably on the area’s weather and the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, but they disliked the hostility that they faced from some of the local residents and the fact that their employers treated them as a “lower social class.”³¹

As it was, the families were stuck doing everything they could to get by. Many of them lived in shanty towns that they had built in the unincorporated areas of the county, where shallow wells provided the only source of water and there were no sewage systems. Their children struggled in the local schools because they had been held out so often. In the 250 families that Reuss and Fisher interviewed, one-fourth of the boys and girls aged ten to fourteen

³⁰ Ibid., 14-15, 28-30.

³¹ Ibid., 37-38.

had “worked for pay.” For children aged five to nine, the figures were one of six boys and one of ten girls. Children performed this labor during periods of peak labor demand when the employers of adult male farm laborers were likely to press them for all the members of their families to join them in the fields.³²

As the war tightened the agricultural labor market throughout 1942, it was no surprise that the Farm Security Administration wanted to tackle the problem of farm labor. (The first year that employers of farm labor and their representatives began to grumble loudly about a farm labor “situation” was 1942). Taking on the challenge would make the agency relevant to the war effort and also allow it to expand its anti-poverty programs to include the most disadvantaged of the rural population and possibly to do so in a way that went beyond the standard, ameliorative rehabilitation methods that the FSA predominately had to offer. At the outbreak of the war in Europe, the Secretary of Agriculture had assigned most of the USDA’s responsibility for managing the farm labor situation to the FSA. The FSA’s Labor Division took the lead. Gregory Silvermaster, the head of Labor Division, exemplifies the approach that the FSA would take to farm labor. He argued that the problem was a rational one and fully amenable to solutions that the Farm Security Administration either had developed or could develop in the future. Late in 1942—as concern over labor reached its peak in anticipation of planting and harvesting the 1943 crop—Silvermaster explained that “the farm labor shortage calls for a genuine cooperative effort on the part of the Government, the farmer, and the farm workers.” If all could agree on a “sensible approach,” then “farmers need have no fears as to 1943.”³³

Silvermaster argued that employers had to “recognize that some old ideas about farm labor simply must go by the board.” He referred primarily to the South, where “anti-enticement”

³² Ibid., 16-22, 37.

³³ *Functions and Policies of the Labor Division* (Washington, D.C.: FSA, 1941); N. Gregory Silvermaster, *The Farm Labor Situation in 1942 and the Program of FSA for 1943: Paper Read by N. Gregory Silvermaster, Director, Labor Division, FSA, at the Administrator’s Staff Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 26, 1942* (Washington, D.C.: FSA, 1942), 3-4.

laws criminalized the “recruitment” of laborers away from their present jobs and where employers of farm labor reviled even the slightest rise in wages. But employers need not worry that an increase in wages would be excessive, according to Silvermaster. The main problem was simply a “maldistribution” of “manpower” on farms. The FSA official meant “farm manpower both as to operators [i.e. owners and tenants], many of whom are on farms too poor or too small to produce in proportion to the operator’s ability to work; and as to manpower of landless farm workers who make up the army of farm wage labor, particularly seasonal labor.” The way to fix this problem was to remove “the barriers that obstruct the migration of workers from areas of labor surplus—characterized by low wage-rates—to areas of labor needs—characterized by higher wages.” In adopting this conceptualization of the problem, Silvermaster took an important step away from the rehabilitation methods that had been the biggest component of New Deal rural anti-poverty initiatives since 1934. As he put it, “We all know that there are many farm operators and farm families working on land so scanty, so poor, so badly situated that no possible effort by the operating family can raise their income to a level of decent livelihood.” Before the war, this had meant “poor living,” which was bad enough. Now it also meant “that the experience, skill, and hard work of these people is being wasted, through no fault of their own. It means that the land they work isn’t worth their effort and industry.” Above all, “it means that this labor could be employed much more productively on better farms. It means, in short, that manpower is being wasted—real farm manpower, the kind we need to use to the maximum...[N]o American can afford to let that kind of waste go on.”³⁴

Ultimately, the FSA could not rid southern states of their enticement laws, nor could it do much to change the prevailing attitudes of farmers everywhere toward hired farm laborers. (Even outside the South, it did not take much to cause fears among farmers about shortages of labor or to elicit complaints about rising wages). What the FSA could do, was connect workers from areas of labor “surplus” with jobs in places of labor “deficit” and further work to bring

³⁴ Silvermaster, *Farm Labor Situation in 1942*, 6-10; *War Farm Labor Problem*, 4.

order, rationality, and better living and working conditions to the country's migrant labor streams, what Silvermaster had referred to elsewhere as bringing "migration movements under intelligent and humane control." This was how the FSA went to war when it came to farm labor. The wartime demand for labor and the rhetoric of "manpower" allowed the agency to portray the issue as one of rational management and to make the case for its involvement in the problem. Rural Americans in areas of low income, high poverty, and population "surplus" needed to get where the jobs were and the FSA would help to get them there. When it came to the country's migrant farm laborers, the FSA insisted that the most important problem confronting them was the untidiness of the labor market. Employers of farm labor used "haphazard" recruiting methods. Farm laborers themselves operated in the dark, using "rumors" and grapevine information to decide where to go for work. The result was too many migrant workers arriving in some places and too few in others. The FSA could address these issues. The FSA would not, however, confront the great variety of statuses and conditions that "manpower" encompassed or acknowledge the fact that addressing these problems would require political (rather than managerial) solutions no less than those confronting urban workers had.³⁵

A system of camps that the FSA established for both migratory and non-migratory farm laborers formed the centerpiece of the agency's wartime efforts. The FSA inherited a small camp program as soon as it absorbed the old Resettlement Administration in 1937. The RA's program had originated with the Rural Rehabilitation Division of California's Emergency Relief Administration in 1936. Because the farm labor problem made such a large part of California's rural poverty, the state's Emergency Relief Administration had set up "sanitary camps" for migrant workers in San Luis Obispo County. Even these earliest camps reflected the RA's fundamental interest in "rehabilitation": after initially providing tents and sanitary facilities, the agency expanded its camp program to provide a "healthy social life" for camp residents. This included the addition of community buildings so that residents could have recreational and

³⁵ *Functions and Policies*, 25.

meeting facilities. Through 1936, the RA had steadily built more of the camps, and then the FSA expanded the program after it absorbed the RA's functions in 1937. By the end of 1941, the FSA was operating or in the process of building 74 camps that could house more than 13,000 families. (Perhaps as many as 2 ½ times that number could cycle through the camps in a given year).³⁶

The FSA built two kinds of camps, permanent and mobile. The permanent camps served areas in which farm laborers could expect to find comparatively long periods of work. These camps contained "shelters" with about 10 by 14' of floor space for the workers (and often their families) who occupied them. The walls were made from corrugated metal and sat atop concrete slabs, which served as the floors. The FSA also set up canvas tents atop these slabs in some of the camps. The permanent camps had sewage and shower facilities. Some of them had nurseries for children, medical facilities, and garden plots. (The nurseries would relieve one of the greatest difficulties for farm laborers: the question of what to do with their youngest children while parents performed field work). The FSA encouraged the children in its camps to attend local schools, but even the best efforts ran up against the fact that the families moved frequently. The FSA also encouraged residents to manage the day-to-day affairs of the camps through elected committees. These committees handled disciplinary issues and could set rules to maintain "harmony" among the residents and were also the representatives of the camps residents to the camps' managers.³⁷

The mobile camps followed migratory workers as those workers followed harvests from place to place. The mobile camps provided canvas tents atop wooden platforms; a rolling generator provided electricity to light the camps and to produce hot water for bathing and clothes washing. During 1942, the FSA operated nearly 100 mobile camps. In the West, these

³⁶ Rasmussen, *Farm Labor Supply Program*, 11; Tolley, *Farmer Citizen at War*, 204-206; *Backgrounds of the Farm Labor Problem*, 107-116.

³⁷ Ibid.

camps were located In California, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. On the eastern seaboard, the mobile camps could be found in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York. In all of the camps (permanent and mobile), families were not charged “rent,” but they were asked to contribute ten cents per day to a “camp welfare fund” that could pay for camp improvements, activities, or even to provide relief to especially needy camp families. The FSA expected all resident families to contribute two hours’ worth of labor to camp upkeep each week. If a family could not afford the ten cent per day donation to the welfare fund, the FSA expected it to perform an extra two hours of work each week.³⁸

The historian Cindy Hahamovitch has explained that both farm laborers and their employers had mixed reactions to the camps. Many laborers welcomed the improved conditions that the camps offered and sought the shelters out as preferable to the dismal housing conditions that they faced otherwise. Other laborers avoided the camps, finding the intrusions that residents had to accept as a condition of living in them intolerable. Not all laborers were willing to submit to the camp regulations (curfews and bans on drinking and gambling, for example) or to submit to the discipline of the camp committees if they ran afoul of the rules. From employers’ perspective, some were dubious of the camps because they threatened the level of their control over their workers. Employers of farm labor expected laborers to work for them until a crop had been harvested. Anyone looking to hire laborers could walk into an FSA camp and make an offer. Some employers, then, were wary of the camps as places where “their” labor might be hired out from under them.³⁹

There is no question that the residents of the camps, while they were in them, had better housing and sanitary conditions than they would have otherwise experienced. The handful of academic authorities on the subject of farm labor had long conceived the poverty and poor conditions that agricultural workers faced in the same rational terms as the FSA. They assumed

³⁸ *Migrant Farm Labor: The Problem and Some Efforts to Meet It* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940), 7-11.

³⁹ Hahamovitch, *Fruits of their Labor*, 158-161.

that farm laborers would benefit not only from better working conditions and wages, but from eliminating the “wasted” time they spent searching for jobs. Strategically located, the camps acted as clearing houses for people hiring farm laborers. The FSA’s studies indicated that people who lived in its camps managed to work more regularly and to spend less time between jobs than was typical for farm laborers. In other words, the FSA enjoyed some success in its effort to improve the conditions confronting migrant farm laborers, to bring rationality and better management to America’s migrant streams, and also to better “utilize” the “manpower” of farm laborers. True to its concerns, the FSA also used the camps as an important source of data about migrants. The agency then publicized the tragic plight of so many farm workers. Gregory Silvermaster, the head of the FSA’s Labor Division, thought that these efforts had brought America to the “threshold” of extending the same rights and benefits to agricultural laborers that other Americans now enjoyed. (Farm workers had not earned the right to organize under the Wagner Act in 1935, nor had the Social Security system created in the same year provided them with workers’ benefits). Silvermaster thought too that the FSA’s studies of farm labor had given it “a very comprehensive picture of the social-economic aspects of the life of migrants and the incidence of migration, which will greatly enrich our knowledge of the [farm labor] problem.”⁴⁰

In addition to its camp program, the FSA launched an intensive effort to transport farm laborers from areas of proverbial labor “surplus” to those of “deficit” as part of its “manpower” drive during the war. The program began in the fall of 1942. By February of 1943, the FSA had transported more than 6000 workers as part of a “domestic workers” initiative, mostly to places

⁴⁰ William T. Ham, “Farm Labor in an Era of Change,” in *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940), 907-920; *Farm Labor Problem*, 32-25; *Employment and Earnings of Agricultural Workers, As Obtained from Weekly Employment Reports from FSA Migratory Labor Camps, 1941 Season, FSA Region XI, Oregon – Washington – Idaho; Labor Division Report, February 20, 1942, Includes Some Comparison with 1940 Data* (Portland, OR: FSA, 1942); *Population in Farm Security Administration Migratory Labor Camps, Current Report No. 1: An Analysis of Social and Economic Characteristics of Families Registering in FSA Migratory Labor Camps in California and Arizona from January to April, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: BAE and FSA, 1940). The Silvermaster quotation is from *Functions and Policies*, 24.

where they would perform “unskilled” agricultural labor, picking and harvesting cotton and fruit and vegetable crops. The greatest advantage of this program was that the FSA could and did negotiate minimum wages and housing conditions for the workers it “placed,” something it could not and did not do with the workers in its camps. Some of the transported farm laborers came from northern states (656 workers were recruited in Illinois and placed in jobs elsewhere, for example) but most of them came from the South and especially from the “Bootheel” of southeastern Missouri, a region that shared the plantation style of agriculture with the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. In one of those odd configurations that the New Deal often tended to create, in November and December of 1942, the FSA teamed up with the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union to transport some of its member and many other workers as well from Missouri to perform work in the cotton harvest in California. In 1943, similar initiatives transported Missouri farm laborers to perform work on the citrus crop in Florida and to take jobs at canneries in New Jersey. Another program brought the FSA and the Extension Service together to provide workers with more permanent jobs. The two agencies teamed up to transport “surplus” labor from Appalachian Kentucky to job training at Ohio State University, and from there to jobs on Ohio dairy farms, which were experiencing particularly acute labor shortages. Employers agreed that the jobs would last at least three months and paid the government a \$10 fee for each such worker that they hired. Lastly, in the summer of 1942, the Secretary of Agriculture (who was now Claude Wickard) began negotiations with the government of Mexico to arrange to transport Mexican workers to the US to perform farm labor. Wickard assigned responsibility for the eventual transportation program to the FSA. Between 1943 and 1947, the US government transported 219,546 Mexican workers and nearly 70,000 more workers from Jamaica, the Bahama Islands, and Barbados.⁴¹

⁴¹ Rasmussen, *Farm Labor Supply Program*, 27-28, 199-202; Woodruff, *American Congo*, 198; Hahamovitch, *Fruits of their Labor*, 188-190; Olaf F. Larson, *Report on Reconnaissance Work in Ohio and Kentucky for Pilot Project on Mobilizing Unproductively Used Rural Manpower, with Special*

The Farm Security Administration was not the only USDA agency looking to increase the productivity of agricultural labor during the war. The FSA's efforts focused on maximizing the contributions that experienced farm laborers could make to bringing in the massive harvests of the war period. The Extension Service took a different tack, one that shows just how important women and children were to wartime "manpower" mobilization in rural areas. In one of the most remarkable of domestic wartime labor initiatives, the Extension Service turned toward "tapping" "nonfarm" people for agricultural work. Although there had been similar initiatives during World War I, the immediate impetus for mobilizing nonfarm women and children into farm labor came from a New York newspaper columnist. Dorothy Thompson popularized the idea of a "Volunteer Land Corps" in the summer of 1942. She founded an organization that recruited New York City youths and placed them on farms to work through the summer harvest season in New Hampshire and Vermont. The program placed about 600 high school-aged children in this capacity. Thompson eventually presented her ambition to see a national application of her idea to M.L. Wilson, who had become the Director of the Extension Service in 1940. The Extension Service ran with the idea and early in 1943, it launched its "Victory Farm Volunteer" program to recruit nonfarm children to perform seasonal labor on farms. It hoped to place 650,000 high school students in this capacity in the first year of the program.⁴²

The Extension Service "recruited" its Victory Farm Volunteers in a number of ways. Publicity formed a major component of the effort. The Extension Service touted the program as an opportunity for nonfarm children to experience the "educational benefits" of farm work and, of course, to provide a patriotic service to their country while also receiving wages. The Extension Service also had the cooperation of groups such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and the YMCA and YWCA in drumming up paid volunteers. Schools provided a major source of "volunteers," as well. Some schools that participated in the Victory Farm Volunteers effort

Reference to a Dairy Labor Program (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1942); Olaf F. Larson *Manpower for War Work* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1943).

⁴² Rasmussen, *Farm Labor Supply Program*, 37-38, 112.

simply cancelled classes during periods of peak agricultural labor demand; others adjusted vacation breaks to coincide with harvests. New York State passed a law allowing high school children to miss up to 30 days of school in a year in order to perform farm labor. Many local schools also followed the conditional route: if a child was willing to work on a farm for a period, he or she could miss school. Most of this workforce came from rural towns, but in states with more urbanized populations, Extension Services sometimes arranged to send city children into the countryside to work. The Extension Service placed these Victory Farm Volunteers in a number of ways. The substantial majority of them participated in “day-haul programs,” which transported workers from town to farm and back again each day. There were also “live-in programs” that placed youths to live with farm families to work for extended periods and a “camp program” that housed Volunteers in camps while they performed seasonal labor.⁴³

As the Extension Service organized the Victory Farm Volunteers in 1943, it also launched the Women’s Land Army (WLA) to place nonfarm women on farms to perform labor. (There had also been a Women’s Land Army during World War I). The Extension Service believed it could place 10,000 women to work on farms on a year-round basis, another 50,000 to perform seasonal work, and 300,000 more to work anything from weekends to stretches of a few weeks, as needed. Women’s organizations such as the YWCA and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs actively promoted the Women’s Land Army, though the Extension Service did most of the “recruiting.” The prevalence of the WLA in a given area depended to a major degree on the extent to which women were normally a part of the agricultural labor force. In Oregon’s Willamette, Valley, for example, which had an industrial form of agriculture that already relied heavily of women farm workers, the WLA placement effort was prominent. Just as with the Victory Farm Volunteers, the Extension Service used day hauls, camps, and live-in programs to

⁴³ Ibid., 116, 120-121, 124-125.

place these workers, though ultimately very few women “lived-in” with the families for whom they labored.⁴⁴

The number of women and children “placed” in these programs, according to official Extension Service statistics, was extraordinary. The initiatives proved popular enough with farmers that Congress continued to fund them even after the war was over. In 1943, the Extension Service placed 834,916 young people (532,265 boys and 302,651 girls) to do work on farms through its Victory Farm Volunteers program. Between 1943 and 1947, the program placed more than 3.6 million high school-aged young people in this capacity. In 1943, the Extension Service placed 455,049 women workers through its Women’s Land Army efforts. Between 1943 and 1947, it placed more than 2,023,000 nonfarm women to perform labor on farms. Between both programs, the Extension Service matched more than 5.6 million people with farm jobs of some duration who would not have ordinarily had them.⁴⁵

The nature of the work that these women and children performed, and the conditions under which they performed it, varied widely. The Extension Service and the press touted both initiatives as voluntary and patriotic exercises. In places that did not ordinarily rely heavily on the labor of women and children in field crops, the work could and did take on the character of a patriotic service that made an adventure of necessity—and provided the chance, of course, to earn some wages. In the Northeast, for example, most of the volunteers were either teachers or students (from colleges and high schools) on their summer breaks, though numerous of them were also homemakers, unemployed women, or women looking to supplement their wages from industry. Farmers usually set these kinds of workers to tasks that were relatively easy for beginners to master, though not necessarily any less grueling for that fact. These laborers detasseled corn, gathered fruits and nuts, picked tomatoes, harvested potatoes, and stacked grain, for example. Observers from the BAE reported about the volunteer nonfarm labor

⁴⁴ Ibid., 138, 143, 147.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 126-130, 148-150.

initiatives that “family-size farmers who have never hired much labor seem to be the most willing to take a town boy to help with chores, learn to look after livestock, and maybe run a tractor.”⁴⁶

In many places, Victory Farm Volunteers and members of the Women Land Army performed work that was not “voluntary” or “patriotic” in the way that the Extension Service liked to imply. These people needed the wages and often had to perform the same grueling tasks that routinely faced fulltime farm laborers everywhere. Even accounting for the fact that southern states were heavily agricultural, the sheer numbers of “volunteers” “placed” in the southern states suggest that patriotism or voluntarism alone did not drive the program. In 1943, Arkansas placed more than 64,000 children Victory Farm Volunteers while California placed roughly 36,000. Mississippi was routinely at or near the top of list of nonfarm women and children that the Extension Service placed in agricultural jobs. The earliest historian of these efforts, who wrote his account for the USDA and who largely lauded the initiatives, conceded that “day-hauls were often characterized by under-age workers, too-long work hours, unfit transportation to fields, lack of supervision, and inadequate safety measures.” Underage meant children younger than fourteen.⁴⁷

Many farmers used volunteer laborers to augment or even replace traditional sources of migratory labor or as a temporary labor solution until employers could hire the foreign workers that the government was now transporting. In several counties with heavily industrialized agriculture in California, Colorado, and Montana, employers replaced the “volunteers” that they had used in 1942 with Mexican nationals in 1943. Employers in a New York county growing primarily vegetables were hoping to do the same. They reported that while they had used “urban youths, employed townspeople, and local Italian women” in 1942 in order to get their harvest in,

⁴⁶ Rasmussen, *Farm Labor Supply Program*, 114; *The Farm Labor Situation Eases Up* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1944), 5-6.

⁴⁷ Rasmussen, *Farm Labor Supply Program*, 141.

they hoped to avail themselves in 1943 of a workforce of southern African Americans and Jamaican, Barbadian, and Bahamian workers transported to New York by the government. In a county in Washington State, employers used more than 2000 Mexican workers and were relieved that they could use fewer “Okies” in their fields as well as “dispense with the use of large numbers of employed townspeople, women, and youth whom they used extensively as a last resort the year before.” Some of the “Okies” had talked of about suing the government because the transportation program had driven down otherwise good wages.⁴⁸

Even in Iowa, hardly a state with much class stratification, the volunteer farm labor programs tended to tap people who were economically marginal. In that state, farmers employing Victory Farm Volunteers had a hard time getting in touch with their workers because they tended to come from homes that did not have telephones. This was not a problem localized to Iowa. BAE observers who had canvassed the farm labor situation around the country reported that “the failure to recruit effectively in the middle- and upper-class groups means their source of potential farm labor remains largely untapped in most areas of the country.” They also reported that “from practically all of the same counties where non-farm youths and employed townspeople did farm work came reports of incidents which demonstrated that the emergency workers expected treatment from the employer clearly different from that commonly accorded low status hired farm workers.” Needless to say, such treatment was not always forthcoming from employers. A consistent point of contention for volunteer workers was having to work alongside laborers of different races or nationalities. Parents of Victory Farm Volunteers in New York complained when their children had to work alongside African Americans, Jamaicans, and Bahamians. Employers quickly learned that it was best to have “groups of markedly different status” work “in different fields, or in different parts of the same field.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Farm Labor Situation Eases Up*, 7, 10-13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

World War II had transformed the mission of the Farm Security Administration and it had brought the Extension Service into realms that revealed how much was being glossed over with talk of “manpower” and voluntarism. The war also transformed the USDA’s County Land Use Planning (CLUP) experiment. As we have seen, the USDA’s liberal economists had tried to bring order, rationality, and democratic and equitable management to America’s system of agricultural production. Originally centered in the AAA’s Program Planning Division (PPD), economists such as Howard Tolley, Foster F. Elliott, and Bushrod Allin had focused on using conservation payments as the means not simply to *reduce* agricultural output but to properly *adjust* it so that all farmers grew only what they could produce most efficiently. The AAA’s PPD economists also initiated an experiment that brought ordinary farmers into the planning process. They did this because they were committed democrats but also because they thought it was the only way for agricultural adjustment to proceed equitably. They envisioned democratically elected farmer representatives joining USDA technocrats to develop coordinated plans of agricultural development for every county in the country. Agricultural adjustment would require difficult choices—a lot of land would have to be retired, for example—but democratic planning was supposed to guarantee that the rights and interests of all groups were protected.

As some of the state extension services began to revolt against the planning pretensions of the AAA’s economists, the planners had seemed to snatch a victory from the jaws of defeat. The Mt. Weather Agreement of 1938 moved the planning- and democratically-minded economists from the AAA to the BAE’s new Division of State and Local Planning as it also made the BAE the “central planning agency” of all of the USDA. It seemed like democratic planning would become a reality. Rural sociologists from the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life worked with county agricultural authorities and local farmers in an effort to “delineate” every rural neighborhood and every rural community in the country. These neighborhoods and communities (which sociologists considered to be “natural groupings”)

would produce elected leaders responsive to the needs and desires of their constituents. These representatives would form neighborhood and community planning committees that would perform the work of agricultural planning in every county in concert with representatives from all of the USDA's agencies. The process would therefore not only democratize the USDA but also harmonize the activities of its many constituent parts. In the wake of the Mt. Weather Agreement in 1938, the USDA organized central committees to receive, synthesize, and apply all of the information and initiatives coming up from the grassroots. The idea was to put ordinary farmers completely in the driver's seat of USDA policy and administration.

The CLUP experiment was beleaguered before it even got fully off the ground in 1939 and 1940. Howard Tolley was the head of the BAE and more committed than anyone to democratic planning. He wanted it to be the center of all of the USDA's wartime mobilization efforts. Claude Wickard had become Secretary of Agriculture in February of 1940, however. Wickard had risen up through the ranks of the AAA and shared the suspicions of BAE-led grassroots planning that many others in the AAA held. Hostility from the Farm Bureau against planning had also continued to mount. Wickard did not want to deal with these kinds of headaches as the country began "defense mobilization" through 1940 and 1941. Rather than making the CLUP committees the center of the war effort, in July of 1940, Wickard ordered the creation of state and county Agricultural Planning Committees, which were also called Defense Boards and then later War Production Boards. These committees played the same coordinating function as the CLUP committees had—every USDA agency had representation on them—but dropped the democratic pretenses of CLUP and placed AAA rather than BAE representatives as chairs of the committees. Leading liberal economists like Howard Tolley and M.L. Wilson hated to see the BAE's planning role diminished (as well as to see the AAA's influence increased). Nonetheless, even some committed land use planners saw necessity in the change. Wilhelm Anderson, a Regional Planning Assistant in the BAE's Division of State and Local Planning, wrote to Bushrod Allin, the head of the whole democratic planning enterprise, to convey his

concerns several months before the US had even entered the war. He touched on the all the reasons why democratic planning would fall by the wayside during the war. He acknowledged that “we have all sworn by the Mount Weather Agreement and many of the boys regard it as the ‘bible’ of cooperative planning.” But the “policies and procedure” it demanded “require such infinite patience in their execution that they are wholly inapplicable to a war-time situation, and therefore should be scrapped.” He elaborated that “the endless discussions and debates that the democratic process in planning fosters does not have much of a place in a war-time economy...We cannot have six million farmers arguing endlessly as to what crops and how much they should individually produce. Only the Federal Government is in a position to determine what is needed, when, and how much.”⁵⁰

The irony was that the BAE’s economists had helped to conceive and build an important part of the administrative state that would mobilize American agriculture during the war and coordinate the efforts of the USDA’s various agencies even as their influence over that state was slipping from their grasp. The economists in the BAE’s Division of State and Local Planning had originally envisioned its vast system of neighborhood, county, and state committees—which they intended to coordinate the activities of all the agencies relating to agriculture—as channeling farmers’ desires upward from the grassroots. That vision never came to fruition. But it turned out that this administrative structure could be flipped and used to issue wartime production marching orders from the top. That happened when Wickard sidelined CLUP in favor of nominally new Defense Boards. The network of committees in thousands of counties intended to

⁵⁰ Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, reprint edition (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982, c1966), 202-206; Wilhelm Anderson to Bushrod Allin, [September 1941], Memoranda Within Division, Records of the Division of State and Local Planning, Records of Wilhelm Anderson, 1938-1942, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II.

foster democratic planning now became crucial in disseminating information to farmers about what to grow and in coordinating the work of all the agencies concerned with agriculture.⁵¹

The state that the liberal economists had helped to build also became a major part of the relentless wartime search for agricultural labor. Before the country had even entered the war, State and County Agricultural Planning Committees that Secretary of Agriculture Wickard had created had already added farm labor subcommittees. More than anything, the county farm labor subcommittees acted as the eyes and ears on the ground of the federal agencies involved in the recruitment, transportation, and “placement” of farm laborers. (The Farm Security Administration, Extension Service, United States Employment Service, and Department of Labor all played roles in this). These committees oversaw local efforts to match farm laborers with farmers in need of labor and any local efforts at providing housing for agricultural workers. They advised draft boards on local farm labor requirements so that they would issue an appropriate number of deferments to workers. The farm labor subcommittees reported when real or imagined labor shortages developed in a given county. They were also charged with identifying localized areas of “excess labor supply” so that “better utilization” of that labor could be achieved.⁵²

What the BAE planners lost in the democratic pretensions of the planning process and in their control over it, they gained in developing coordinated programs that might actually revolutionize standards of living throughout rural America. In January of 1941, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard put out a call for all of the USDA’s agencies to develop “Agriculture’s Plans to Aid in Defense and Meet the Impacts of War.” This built on the process

⁵¹ For the impressive gains in agricultural productivity that this helped to foster, see Wilcox, *Farmer in Second World War*, 3, 16, 51-53.

⁵² *Agricultural Planning in a World at War: A Progress Report Covering the Cooperative Agricultural Planning Program for the Year Ending June 30, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: USDA, 1942) contained in Agricultural Planning Field Service, Records of HR Tolley, 1934-1946, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II; “Reorganization of Department’s Agricultural Labor Committee and Procedure for Dealing with Problems of Farm Labor Supply,” Memorandum No. 820, Supplement 2, 3/10/1941, Agricultural Labor, Records of HR Tolley, 1934-1946, Box 1, RG 83, NARA II.

initiated under CLUP, though this was a hollowed out version of the style of grassroots planning that its advocates had originally envisioned. The BAE still played a coordinating and synthesizing role, but rather than absorbing what came up from grassroots committees of farmers, the BAE's job was to synthesize recommendations coming from USDA bureaucrats and experts. This did not make Wickard's initiative unambitious. He asked all the agencies concerned with agriculture, and their representatives on the local, state, and federal levels, effectively, what they would do if they had *carte blanche*, not only in terms of mobilizing to meet wartime production demands but also in avoiding the dismal collapse that had come to the countryside in the wake of the First World War. The US had not even yet entered the war and already grand ambitions for the postwar situation were developing. Wickard wanted no stone left unturned. What improvements could be brought to rural education? What could be done to equalize standards of health, sanitation, and housing between urban and rural areas? What kind of rural public works programs might be developed to provide jobs for the rural un- or underemployed? How could the country's forests be better and more efficiently managed? How could the consumption of agricultural goods be stimulated, in both foreign and domestic markets? What could be done to increase rates of landownership and shore up the status of the family farm? How were mechanization and technological advances generally going to affect agriculture and rural life?⁵³

This was a truly remarkable set of questions, and the BAE oversaw the production and publication of series of reports that rolled out through the war years and that synthesized the local and state wisdom on these subjects. More than 1700 technocrats from all the key agencies (Extension Service, BAE, Forest Service, SCS, Farm Credit Administration, Commodity Credit Corporation, FSA, and Rural Electrification Administration) made contributions to this effort.

⁵³ "Suggestions for a Unified State Agricultural Program to Meet the Impacts of War, 1941," 1/8/1941, p. 8-13, IBCC - Impact of War on Agriculture, Records of HR Tolley, 1934-1946, Box 4, RG 83, NARA II; "Post-Defense Planning: Memorandum 913, Supplement 1," 9/17/1941 IBCC - Post-Defense Planning, Records of HR Tolley, 1934-1946, Box 6, RG 83, NARA II.

Had the plans that the BAE helped to develop ever come to fruition, they would have amounted to the most far-reaching program for rural development ever attempted in the US. There were plans to bring the nation's forests under better management and to stop destructive practices that depleted them. There was a plan to do the same with the country's overgrazed and mismanaged range land. Experts on tenancy proffered plans to help more tenants obtain landownership and to improve the terms of tenancy in the cases where ownership was not feasible. The report on the future impact of technology and mechanization on rural life amounted to the most nuanced attempt yet produced to contemplate the role of the modestly-sized family farm in a rapidly industrializing agriculture. Perhaps the most remarkable plans of all covered "rural works," health, and housing. The rural works program would have effectively made the CCC a permanent American institution, but it would have also directed workers toward new areas, like building or improving housing for the rural poor. The plans for health contemplated extending health cooperatives of the kind that the FSA had started to all rural Americans and took note of the increasingly acute problem of doctor and nurse shortages in the countryside.⁵⁴

The kind of liberalism that these ambitions represented seemed so ascendant at that point that the major obstacle to fulfilling these plans appeared to be a potential postwar economic collapse. The USDA made plans on that front too, ones that reflected the Keynesian tenor of the war years. The leading figure was Mordecai Ezekiel. Ezekiel had been a member of the AAA's Program Planning Division in its earliest day. He was somewhat unusual among the USDA's liberal economists in that he did not come from a farm background. That seems to have

⁵⁴ *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1941), 43; *Review of Preliminary State Reports on Post-War Programs* (Washington, D.C.: USDA Interbureau Coordinating Committee on Post-War Programs, 1944); *Technology on the Farm: A Special Report by an Interbureau Committee and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940); *Better Health for Rural America: Plans of Action for Farm Communities* (Washington, D.C.: USDA Interbureau Committee on Post-War Programs, 1945); *Farm Tenure Improvement in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USDA Interbureau Committee on Post-war Programs, 1945).

pushed him toward considering the relationship between agriculture and industry sooner than most of his colleagues. Even as early as 1933, Ezekiel believed that the best solution to rural woes lay in stimulating the urban economy. He was a very early proponent of creating industrial jobs by boosting consumer purchasing power so that “surplus” rural population could be absorbed into the cities. Ezekiel had spent most of the 1930s working as an advisor in the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture. He joined the BAE in 1944, however, and oversaw the production of a series of reports that explored how industrial expansion could boost the farm economy (or, if it failed to happen, sink it). These reports explored various stimuli that might be applied to the economy, including changes in the tax code, more liberal credit policies, lower interest rates, and expanding the Social Security system to cover more workers and therefore even out consumer spending during periods of unemployment. The BAE also prepared a full employment plan for the “Cotton South.” The plan would have paid southern farmers to wean themselves off of cotton over a period of years while also investing in programs of agricultural diversification, jobs training, and industrialization. Nothing like it had ever been contemplated.⁵⁵

Carl Taylor, the sociologist who headed the BAE’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life (DFPRL), made plans during the war to make sure that culture sat precisely at the center of everything the USDA did as the country moved toward the postwar world. Along with M.L. Wilson, Taylor had done more than anyone to foster an expanding role for sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists in the USDA. Taylor had hired Arthur Raper and sent him to live in Greene County for two years beginning in 1940 as a “participant-observer” of the county’s Unified Farm Program. As we saw earlier, Taylor had also directed a concerted effort to use the RA/FSA resettlement communities to generate sociological information in the hope that some of it could be used by the administrators of those projects to improve the community-

⁵⁵ *The Reminiscences of Mordecai Ezekiel*, CUOHC, 43-44, 96-100, 123, and passim; *What Peace Can Mean to American Farmers: Agricultural Policy* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1945); *What Peace Can Mean to American Farmers: Post War Agriculture and Employment* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1945); *What Peace Can Mean to American Farmers: Expansion of Foreign Trade* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1945); *A Conversion Program for the Cotton South* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1945).

building efforts that happened in them. Starting in 1939, the sociologist had also sent social scientists to immerse themselves for periods of around five months in six rural communities that had been chosen to represent a “a continuum from a high degree of stability to an equally high degree of instability.” (The Old Order Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, had been chosen to represent the most stable kind of rural community possible while Sublette, Kansas, had been chosen as representative of the highest level of instability possible in a rural community). Taylor had intended the studies that came out of this effort to do a number of things. He hoped that they would give the social scientists interested in culture a better sense of why some rural “cultures” succeeded in achieving high levels of “stability” while others failed to do so. In the longer term, Taylor believed that a deep and nuanced understanding of the many different rural cultures that existed around the country was necessary for the success of the USDA’s many programs, whether they were aimed at introducing soil conservation practices, crop control, or anything else. Understanding overproduction, erosion, or any of the other problems that had plagued farmers as cultural phenomena particular to specific people and places would help the USDA’s many agencies develop programs acceptable to those people and capable of solving the problems at hand.⁵⁶

Taylor saw the war as an opportunity to build on these developments. He expanded the DFPRL’s efforts to send social scientists to study rural cultures around the country, launching an ambitious Rural Life Trends Project in 1942. Through the Rural Life Trends Project, the DFPRL wanted to generate information that would be useful to the war effort in the short term. In the long term, Taylor hoped to establish social scientists in a permanently interpretive role in dozens of rural communities around the country, with each community chosen so that in their totality they represented a full cross-section of rural America’s cultural and agricultural diversity. (The initial number of communities studied hovered between 32 and 36; the project

⁵⁶ Carl C. Taylor, “Psychological Adjustments and Historical Change,” 5/11/1939, Box 1, Folder 118, DFPRL Records.

eventually expanded to include 71 communities). The social scientists (anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists) in these communities would immerse themselves as “participant-observers” and study the whole range of historical and cultural factors that made communities tick and that we have already seen such experts studying: the fieldworkers’ final reports would include historical accounts of the communities but also surveys of their present systems of agriculture, observations of social phenomena (for example, “visiting” habits as indicators of the strength of rural neighborhoods), and analysis of all the elements of culture. Culture included anything from religious practices to local opinions about issues affecting agriculture as well as local habits, values, customs, or psychologies that social scientists judged as either promoting or impeding necessary change. The DFPRL called the investigative trips of the fieldworkers “cultural reconnaissances.” When fieldworkers around the country had submitted their finely honed community studies, a smaller team of experts would synthesize all of this information in a multi-volume comprehensive cultural survey of all of rural America. The information would need to be updated continually. Indeed, one of the missions of the social scientists in the field would be cultivating informants, both local leaders and ordinary farmers, who could be regularly sounded out about up-to-date developments in the countryside. This project would serve the mission of making sure that all of the USDA’s agencies could give farmers not just what they needed but also what they wanted or could be convinced to want. Taylor did not think there was any program in the USDA that did not and would not need to be informed by the information that this project generated.⁵⁷

Because it was wartime, the Rural Life Trends Project initially focused exclusively on generating culturally and sociologically useful information on the war effort. The fieldwork began in the fall of 1942. Arthur Raper had recently finished his job as a participant-observer in Greene County and was finishing his book manuscript on the effort there. Taylor placed Raper

⁵⁷ Arthur Raper, “Objectives and Methods of the Project on Rural Life Trends in Wartime,” 9/16/1943, Box 7, Folder 133, AFR Papers.

in charge of the Rural Life Trends Project. Raper oversaw the fieldwork of roughly two dozen social scientists who traveled the country in a kind of nation-wide beating of the bushes. Raper himself did quite a lot of fieldwork too, visiting dozens of counties. From 1942, through the end of the war, the fieldworkers returned at roughly four month intervals to the thirty-odd communities that had been selected. They cultivated dozens of informants in each place. The traveling social scientists gave special attention to the “manpower situation” in all the communities that they surveyed, with an eye toward identifying labor shortages or places where “manpower” was not being efficiently utilized. They made careful note of whether localities were successfully executing “manpower adjustments”: tapping new sources of labor, whether through the Victory Farm Volunteers and Women’s Land Army or the transportation initiatives that provided domestic and foreign workers. In what was a first, the Rural Life Trends fieldworkers also canvassed farmer “opinion” and “morale” to spot signs of anything that might hamper the war effort. They found, among other things, that American farmers had a near-universal gloomy sense that the postwar period would witness the same slump that had come after World War I.⁵⁸

In a hopeful finding, the DFPRL’s Rural Life Trends investigators reported that although the tempo of rural life had accelerated, signs of speculative frenzy were not widespread. For the most part, farmers were using their increased income “soberly,” paying off debts, saving, and expanding their operations in ways that served the war effort. The researchers also surmised that farmers were raising more food for home consumption, eating better, and modernizing their homes (adding linoleum, for example) when they could get the supplies. As a rule, the field researchers found that farmers opposed a minimum wage for farm laborers. They also opposed it for industrial workers and thought that the government had been too “lenient” on labor unions. Farmers almost always preferred to use the same “supplies” of farm labor that they were

⁵⁸ “Rural Life Trends: A Memorandum on Plans and Procedures,” 9/15/1942, Box 6, Folder 116; “The Farm Labor Situation Eases Up,” February 1944, Box 8, Folder 146; “Farmers at Work in Wartime,” August 1943, Box 7, Folder 133; “Farmers’ Opinions About Post-War Conditions,” September 1944, Box 8, Folder 148. All in AFR Papers.

accustomed to, though they had generally found the new wartime “sources” to be “acceptable.” (This meant that employers of farm labor in the West tended to prefer Mexican, Japanese, and even “Okie” laborers; in the Southeast, they preferred African American and local white laborers; Midwestern farmers still “preferred” local white laborers, and so forth). In places with racially diverse populations, Rural Life Trends fieldworkers paid close attention to signs of escalating racial tensions.⁵⁹

In 1943 and 1944, the Rural Life Trends Program accelerated and expanded. DFPRL broadened its fieldwork from 32 to 71 counties and began to gather information that would be useful for the period of “demobilization” following the war. By the time the war was drawing to a close in the summer of 1945, the Rural Life Trends researchers had turned most of their attention to population migration. The major question as the war wound down was the extent to which there would be a return migration to farms, whether that migration would prove permanent, and what kinds of problems it might cause. Researchers found that dairying areas (the Upper Midwest and much of the Northeast), for example, had not experienced heavy return migration to farms because fewer farmers had left those places during the war. Many of them had, in fact, been able to combine part time farm work with jobs in industries. Fieldworkers also reported that there was no evidence of large-scale unemployment in the South during 1945. They also picked up on some worrisome signs, however. Researchers reported signs of heavy return-migration to Appalachia, though it was not yet clear how much of this was permanent or related to normal seasonal migrations of labor that moved in and out of the area every year. In Idaho, Washington, and California (what USDA social scientists called the “Western Specialty-Crop Area”) the researchers reported the existence of a widespread housing shortage. The war

⁵⁹ “How Farmers Are Spending Their Increased Income,” June 1943, Box 7, Folder 131; “The Farmers’ Slant on Farm Labor,” 4/6/1943, Box 7, Folder 130; “Traditional Practices and Farm Labor Shortages,” [no month] 1943, Box 7, Folder 133. All in AFR Papers.

had seen a massive influx of population into those areas and the return of veterans only exacerbated the housing problem.⁶⁰

Late in 1944 and into 1945, Rural Life Trends fieldworkers began to submit the preliminary cultural reconnaissance reports that were supposed to be synthesized eventually into a complete cultural survey of rural America. The nature of the preliminary studies will be familiar. The reconnaissances of Midwestern communities focused on ethnic groups, using them as a lens to judge the strength of institutions and agricultural practices. Those on southern communities focused on race and, where appropriate, the plantation system. The southern studies pulled no punches. (In what had to one of the easier assignments for a DFPRL fieldworker, Arthur Raper conducted a cultural reconnaissance of Greene County and submitted a report on it). A cultural reconnaissance of six different counties in the Wheat Belt noted the presence of “suitcase farmers” and a general tendency toward “instability” in life there, but otherwise had nothing truly critical to say about the commercial agriculture that produced that instability. All of the cultural reconnaissances gave attention to rural neighborhoods, visiting patterns, and institutions.⁶¹

The war had seemed to bring the progressive forces in the BAE and FSA to a point of consolidating their gains and advancing them further. The democratic pretensions of the planners in the BAE’s Division of State and Local Planning had taken a back seat during the war.

⁶⁰ *Farm Population Adjustments Following the End of the War* (Washington, D.C.: BAE, 1946); Olaf F. Larson, “Current Problems and Post-War Prospects – Ada County, Idaho,” 1945, Box 1, Folder 36; Paul J. Jehlik, “Some Post-War Rural Trends in the Midwest,” January 1946, Box 1, Folder 92; “Current and Anticipated Rural Migration Problems: Izzard County, Arkansas,” May 1945, Box 1, Folder 65; Oscar Lewis, “Current and Anticipated Rural Migration Problem: Bell County, Texas,” Box 1, Folder 45. All but first cite in NAL Special Collections, DFPRL Records.

⁶¹ “A Generalized Procedure for the Preparation of Cultural Reconnaissance for the 71 Sample Counties, for the 8 Type-Farming Areas, and for the Nation as [a] Whole,” 12/10/1945, Box 8, Folder 155, AFR Papers; Oscar Lewis, “Cultural Reconnaissance: Bell County, Texas,” July 1945, Box 1, Folder 44; Ronald B. Almack, “Cultural Reconnaissance: Crawford County, Iowa,” December 1944, Box 1, Folder 12; A. H. Anderson, “The Culture of the Wheat Area: A Summary of Reconnaissance Surveys in Six Sample Counties,” Box 1, Folder 13; Arthur F. Raper, “Cultural Reconnaissance: Greene County, Georgia,” 9/13/1944, Box 1, Folder 74; M. Taylor Matthews, “Cultural Reconnaissance: Woods County, Oklahoma,” June 1945, Box 1, Folder 52. All in DFPRL Records.

Still, the planning and coordinating infrastructure that they had built had delivered a series of ideas and potential programs of rural development that, had they been enacted, would in all likelihood have dramatically improved the position of both commercial and non-commercial farmers throughout America. The social scientists of the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life had blanketed the country during the war, carefully monitoring local situations that might hamper the war effort even as they made plans to develop a cultural survey of the entire nation: something that would have looked like Raper's *Preface to Peasantry*, but blown up to massive proportions. The Farm Security Administration had assigned rehabilitation to the front lines in the effort to supply the country with food during the war. It had also created important new programs that tried to serve the interests of farm laborers even as those initiatives maintained a primary dedication to supplying employers of farm labor with "manpower" during the war at whatever cost.

All of this progress evaporated just as quickly as it had seemed to coalesce, revealing the weak position that the USDA's liberals had managed to create for themselves and the agencies in which they predominated. When it came to the FSA's farm labor programs, there was only so long that major employers of farm laborers (and their advocacy groups and their representatives in Congress) were going to countenance allowing this trouble-making reform advocate to control such an important initiative. Criticism mounted into the spring of 1943. Southern congressmen charged that the FSA was developing programs to drain the South of workers who were otherwise perfectly contented. Malcolm Tarver, an especially reactionary Congressional critic of the FSA from Georgia, accused it of having plans to use its "fly-by-night" transportation programs to rob the South of "hundreds of thousands, if not millions" of workers. The Farm Bureau lobbied against the labor programs as they presently existed too. In April of 1943, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard bowed to the pressure and handed the initiatives over to the newly created War Food Administration (WFA). They eventually came under the joint administration of the WFA and the Extension Service. The operation was re-dubbed the

Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program and the old FSA “camps” were re-christened “farm labor supply centers.” For good measure, in April of 1943, Congress also forbade the government from negotiating wages, hours, and working conditions for domestic farm laborers (as the FSA had done for those it transported) and required that any transportation of domestic farm laborers out of a county must have the prior approval from the local Extension agent. The “farm labor supply program,” therefore, increasingly became a cudgel against domestic, especially migrant, farm laborers. In some places, the labor supply centers excluded domestic workers. Those camps, if they housed only foreign workers (who did not travel with families), could accommodate more laborers. Migrant laborers increasingly found themselves being replaced by and competing with foreign workers.⁶²

Stripping the FSA of its farm labor programs was only one of several coups for the agency’s enemies. Ever since the days of the Resettlement Administration, its resettlement communities had attracted a vocal opposition from a minority in Congress. Critics had especially lambasted the “socialistic” cooperative arrangements on the projects. But the RA and FSA had always had their ardent defenders too, both in Congress and from organizations such as the Farmers’ Union and the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. As the American economy lifted, however, the sense that *something* had to be done for the rural poor, no matter how imperfect it was, began to wane. Critics of the FSA began to gain the upper hand. The “economy bloc” in Congress that emerged in 1940 crystallized the assault on the agency. These Congressional economizers had long resented and opposed at least some elements of the New Deal. As the country edged toward war, they used calls for austerity as their cover for an assault on the New Deal itself. From September of 1942, the Byrd Committee—Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures—gave FSA critics an institutional platform from which to pillory the agency. From that point, the head of the FSA, who was now C.B. Baldwin, faced the grim ritual of periodically appearing before Congress to answer frequently baseless charges

⁶² Wilcox, *Farmer Second World War*, 89-95; Hahamovitch, *Fruits of Their Labor*, 165, 173-175.

against himself and his agency. In an appropriations hearing, a senator from Tennessee called Baldwin a “communist.” The Farm Bureau gleefully sent investigators to resettlement communities around the country to drum up accusations of mismanagement and fraud. The Farm Bureau managed to find a judge in Alabama who claimed that the FSA was paying the poll taxes of its clients in that state. (It was not).⁶³

The barrage took its toll. In 1942, Congress appropriated a budget for the FSA 43 percent smaller than the President had requested. The agency’s appropriations were slashed by a comparable amount in 1943. The FSA hemorrhaged employees. It had more than 19,000 workers in 1942 but fewer than 9,000 in 1945. In 1946, Congress dealt with the remnants. It abolished the FSA and replaced it with the Farmers’ Home Administration (originally FHA; later FmHA). What had really been abolished was the FSA’s rehabilitation mission. The FmHA built itself around the old Tenant-Purchase program that the FSA had started in 1937. FmHA credit would come attached with the strings standard to good lending rather than those that had come with rehabilitation.⁶⁴

The more liberal elements of the BAE found themselves on the ropes too. We have already seen how the Division of State and Local Planning had watched CLUP get sidelined during the war, and this despite the fact that head of the entire BAE, Howard Tolley, was the biggest advocate of democratic land planning in the USDA. The Farm Bureau and some elements within the AAA and the Extension Service viewed the CLUP committees as potential rivals to their power and authority. The Farm Bureau in particular was not content to see democratic planning simply sidelined. It wanted the BAE’s planning functions (it was the “central planning agency” for the USDA) dismantled entirely. The Farm Bureau, therefore, orchestrated a successful lobbying campaign against grassroots planning. In 1943, Congress

⁶³ Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the FSA* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 335-337, 341-343, 347-353.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 352-362, 394, 398, 401-402.

forbid BAE money from funding “cooperative agricultural program formulation.” Late in 1945, the BAE would formally lose its role as the central planning agency in the USDA. From that point forward, the BAE would revert to its pre-1933 status as a compiler of statistical information on agriculture. Other USDA agencies could make of that information what they would, but the BAE would not be using its CLUP committees to foster a transformation of the USDA from the bottom up.⁶⁵

The collapse of the Rural Life Trends Project happened in an even more dramatic fashion and contributed to the BAE losing its status as the USDA’s planning agency. The DFPRL found itself under fire when one of its Rural Life Trends cultural reconnaissance reports raised the ire of southern Congressmen. The DFPRL had sent Frank Alexander to reconnoiter Coahoma County, Mississippi, in the Delta. Alexander was a sociologist and a native southerner. His report, for which he filed an initial summary in March of 1944, represented what the “cultural approach” to rural life and rural problems had to offer, analytically speaking, in its ability to shine a light on the worst of American social systems. Alexander explained bluntly that the culture of Coahoma had “two dominant features”: “one is Negro-white relations, the other is the plantation system of farming. Almost every phase of people’s thoughts and behavior is influenced by these two complexes. Schools, churches, families, law enforcement, public welfare, [and] earning a living are all under the domination of the plantation economy. Similarly, all of these institutions and activities are carried on within the definitions of white supremacy and racial segregation.” For good measure, in the course of his report, Alexander explained his belief that “militant Negro leadership in urban centers of the North is extending its influence to the rural Negroes of the county through Negro newspapers published in these northern cities.” Most explosively of all, after describing Coahoma’s system of segregation and disfranchisement, Alexander explained, “The patterns of racial segregation are for the most part strictly adhered to. However, strict caste segregation is sometimes violated by white men who resort to Negro

⁶⁵ Kirkendall, *Social Scientists*, 208-217

mistresses for sex satisfactions.” But mostly Alexander did what Arthur Raper had done in *Preface to Peasantry*. He damned the culture of Coahoma with difficult-to-dispute and publicly available facts: “Most of the land is owned by a small number of whites, a good many of whom have inherited their plantations. Over 90.0 percent of the farmers are tenants and around 85.0 percent are sharecroppers who are little more than farm laborers since they have neither farm tools nor workstock.”⁶⁶

The problem that white Mississippians were going to have with this cultural reconnaissance was not simply its specific findings but the mere fact that anyone had looked into these matters at all, let alone at the behest of the USDA. Apparently too serene in their faith that the truth was the truth, Carl Taylor and Arthur Raper sent a draft of Frank Alexander’s report to the Mississippi Extension service for comment early in 1945. Someone there forwarded it to Mississippi Congressman Jamie Whitten and it then made the rounds with Mississippi’s Congressional delegation. Everyone was shortly up in arms. Mississippi Congressman Dan R. McGehee told the Secretary of Agriculture (who was now Clinton Anderson) that “ninety percent of the stuff” in the cultural reconnaissance was “nothing but ball-faced [sic] damned lies.” McGehee was at least willing to give the new Secretary of Agriculture the benefit of the doubt that he “did not know what the many long haired, cracked brained, Un-American birds are doing that were placed in good positions in the Department of Agriculture prior to your going in,” adding that “the bird that concocted all this rot should be kicked into Kingdom Come.”⁶⁷

Congressman McGehee could make a lot of noise but his colleague Jamie Whitten could make a lot of trouble. He led the assault against the DFPRL. The Coahoma report had convinced Whitten that the DFPRL was in league with the blossoming civil rights movement that the war had fostered. The Secretary of Agriculture had no interest in making the Rural Life Trends

⁶⁶ Frank Alexander, “Summary of Coahoma County, Mississippi, Reconnaissance Report,” March 1944, Box 1, Folder 11, DFPRL Records.

⁶⁷ Arthur F. Raper, “A Prohibition on Cultural Studies,” 1-4, October 1943, Box 8, Folder 151, AFR Papers; Dan R. McGehee, quoted in Kirendall, *Social Scientists*, 236.

Project, or any “cultural” analyses, as the first big cause of his tenure. In the wake of the controversy over Frank Alexander’s Coahoma report, Secretary of Agriculture Anderson officially stripped the BAE of its role as the planning agency for the USDA. That was not enough for Jamie Whitten and other southern congressmen, however. In 1946, they succeeded in banning “cultural surveys” of the kind that were the DFPRL’s *raison d’etre*. For years, USDA appropriations would carry prohibitions on both county land use planning and cultural studies. As an institution, the DFPRL would carry on for a little while longer, but just like the BAE more generally, it was now a statistical agency. It could not concern itself with life and culture.⁶⁸

Never had the notation that countless DFPRL reports carried—“For Administrative Use”—conveyed more meaning than it did at the top of Frank Alexander’s cultural reconnaissance of Coahoma County. (Just as commonly, the reports carried the stamp, “For Administrative Use *Only*”). In that phrase is the bind that the DFPRL’s social scientists faced. However well-organized and well-equipped the agency was to render cultural analyses, it was not equipped to foster change or even to defend itself from the attacks of its critics. It is quite remarkable that when the controversy over the Coahoma study hit in 1945, Carl Taylor and Arthur Raper thought that a reasonable defense against the row was that Alexander’s study had not been “published;” it was simply a preliminary report being circulated among experts for constructive criticism. The two sociologists thought that Whitten was being unreasonable when he countered that it most surely had been “published”—he had a copy of it in his hands as proof enough of that. Its existence was the problem and no amount of peer review was going to change that.⁶⁹

In short, when DFPRL social science entered the realm of politics, its practitioners had to run for cover. But the solutions to Coahoma’s problems would have to be political. The DFPRL’s social scientists had invested themselves in the idea that the truth—if rendered logically,

⁶⁸ Kirkendall, *Social Scientists*, 239-251; Raper, “Prohibition on Cultural Studies,” 1-4.

⁶⁹ Raper, “Prohibition on Cultural Studies,” 3.

dispassionately, and comprehensively—would somehow, by being good social science, show people the good in rural cultures worth preserving and the bad in need of fixing. They had not invested enough thought into how to bridge the difference between social science and politics, how to go from delineating the good and bad to creating programs of action that could win political support. Showing people the truth was not going to be enough because the truth itself was the problem, not the absence of knowing it.

There was something similar in the case of the BAE's Division of State and Local Planning and the Farm Security Administration. The Division of State and Local Planning had indeed tried to bridge the divide between expertise and politics—and expertise and lay knowledge—in a process of democratic planning. That planning process, however, expected farmers to act as if they were social scientists who could see the bigger picture and the greater good in agricultural adjustment and rationally discuss their way through issues shot through with class and politics. The Farm Security Administration had done well-intentioned and sometimes good, if problematic, work for the rural poor. During the war, the FSA portrayed the people on its rehabilitation rolls as a kind of unmobilized army for food production. But the FSA did not have an army; it had “clients,” people under its stewardship. The FSA's stewardship had done some good things for farm laborers, but when the FSA was no longer there to steward after 1942, its programs became as much a tool for depressing farm wages as for anything else. The FSA had tried to uplift farm laborers but not necessarily to empower them. Farm laborers needed the political protections that the New Deal had afforded urban workers so that they could win their advances as rights rather than as perquisites of a benevolent bureaucracy's paternalism. And there were no lines of rehabilitation clients queuing up to sing the FSA's praises in its hour of need. The question of the political mobilization of the rural poor was so unpalatable that the FSA had never even suggested it. But even if it had (and had actually attempted it), it is not clear how rehabilitation clients could be mobilized as a constituency. At its best, rehabilitation was something to be experienced; at its worst, it was something to be

endured. Either way, it was a stepping stone to something else: the state of being rehabilitated, which was the state of not needing the FSA's services. Whatever its mistakes, it was always going to be exceptionally hard for the FSA to tap into a constituency to justify its continued existence.

The BAE's Division of State and Local Planning, the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, and the Farm Security Administration had become threatening to powerful interests during the war. Terminated without much difficulty, a remarkable period of experimentation in the USDA that had begun in 1933 and that attempted to revitalize rural life, in the fullest sense of phrase, ended in 1945.

Conclusion

As You Sow

Arthur Raper had come to California and found Greene County. As part of his work travelling the country for the Rural Trends Project, Raper arrived in the Central Valley late in November of 1944 to have a look at the farm operation of James G. Boswell. Raper was more than familiar with the Boswell name. Boswells were everywhere back in Greene County. James had fled Greene for California in the early 1920s after the boll weevil had arrived in Georgia. Having set himself up as a cotton factor in Pasadena, Boswell soon heard about the existence of prime farm land to the north, in the San Joaquin Valley, near the town of Corcoran. Boswell got busy building a cotton empire. By the time Raper showed up in 1944, the J.G. Boswell Company had thousands of acres planted in the fiber, enough to produce more cotton than all the farmers back in Greene did combined. Raper was used to seeing a society where King Cotton reigned over nearly everything, but what he saw in California staggered him. One of Boswell's fields covered 13,500 acres—21 square miles of cotton. On his property, Boswell had a cotton gin and oil mill complex that employed 250 people and a feedlot where more than 5,000 cattle fattened for the market on the cottonseed meal that the Boswells had by the truckload. This scion of Greene County had his labor situation under control too. In the 1930s, he had crushed strikes in the camps that he built to house more than 2,000 workers. During the wartime, Boswell had the help of the government in securing Mexican nationals for his labor force, along with some German POWs, and in colluding to set wages at \$2.25 for every one hundred pounds of cotton a worker picked. Near Corcoran, California, Raper saw cotton pickers who lived in the only houses

he had ever seen in his extensive travels that reminded him of sharecropper shacks in Greene County.¹

It was not lost on Raper that this was the Greene County plantation system unshackled from the chains of white supremacy. Greene's plantation complex, because of the conjoined brutality with which it treated its soil and its black citizens, had at least had the decency to collapse under its own weight. This thing in California was going to endure, however. It was a grimly sustainable enterprise because Boswell had pioneered a can't-lose factory-farming formula of low wages, extraordinary efficiency, technological dynamism, and endless government subsidy. Boswell had been building his empire for twenty years by the time Raper came along to get the lay of the land. Yet when the sociologist stood trying to absorb the reality of a 21-square-mile cotton field, the fiber had exercised its domain over most of this tract for only the past year. This land had recently been under water, part of Tulare Lake, the largest body of fresh water west of the Mississippi. It would not be that after the Boswells and other California cotton growers got done with it. The government was building the Pine Flat Dam, "reclaiming" parts of the lakebed and making the four rivers that had watered Tulare Lake water farmers' fields instead. The Boswell clan led a years-long campaign that defeated the government's insistence that water from Pine Flat would irrigate only farms 160 acres or smaller.²

When Raper stood and looked out over Boswell's monstrous cotton fields, though he could not yet perceive it fully, he was looking at the future of American agriculture. Over the next couple of decades, the kind of agriculture and rural life that Raper and other USDA liberals had fought for and tried to preserve would disappear. With most of the liberals decamping the

¹ Raper's Field Notes, "Some Comments on the James G. Boswell Co. Operations – Corcoran, California, Late November 1944," Box 8, Folder 150, in the Arthur Franklin Raper Papers #03966, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [Hereafter AFR Papers]; Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, *The King of California: J.G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 137-176.

² "James G. Boswell," AFR Papers; Arax and Wartzman, *King of California*, 185-211.

USDA after the war, there was no one there to put a break on the agency's productionist tendencies. In the 1950s, the USDA's economists finally embraced productionism while still trying to manage its impact on farm prices. Liberal economists had tried to control production in order to bring fair prices to farmers and consumers alike. They had also tried to pull a rabbit out of the productionist hat by adjusting agriculture as the means of rationalizing it, insisting that most American farm families could stay right where they were provided that they re-tooled their operations to produce what they could grow most efficiently. Postwar USDA economists had a new chimera, however, pursuing a "technological fix" that would obviate the need for production controls. USDA economists focused on encouraging efficiencies and innovation in "marketing," which now included everything from transportation and processing to the retailing of farm products. Efficient marketing of farm products, economists believed, would finally solve the bedeviling price problem to the satisfaction of both consumers and producers. Now there was no longer any question that it would be factory farms doing the producing. And the USDA, of course, carried on its older role of fostering increased agricultural productivity. As early as 1954, private and public agencies spent around \$200 million each year creating new technologies to increase the productivity of American agriculture. That figure did not account for money that the government spent every year disseminating the knowledge of those technologies to farmers. Through the auspices of the USDA and the land grant college complex, the public has therefore paid to develop many of the technological advances in agriculture and to disseminate the knowledge of them to farmers while those same developments have paved the way for the dispossession of all but the biggest and most efficient producers in agriculture. The public has paid for the subsidies too that have kept this agriculture afloat. It also seems increasingly obvious that the public has paid the "hidden costs" of what our food system has done to the environment and, in all likelihood, the health of the American food consumer. The

tack that the USDA has taken has also helped to shore up the extraordinary monopoly position that the largest food processors and agribusinesses today enjoy.³

The USDA's unreserved embrace of productionism and factory farming helped to enable the main driver of change in the postwar years: technology. As the historian Paul Conkin has pointed out, the period between 1950 and 1970 was more revolutionary than any other in America's agricultural history. Advances in "productivity" were astonishing, something that was true across virtually all of the major farm commodities. The number of "man hours" it took to produce a given quantity of a crop provided one measure of this. It had taken 147 hours of a person's labor to produce 100 bushels of corn in 1900, for example. In 1950, it took 14 hours to produce the same amount of corn and in 1990 it took 6. The change in cotton was even more incredible. The number of hours required to produce one bale of cotton in 1900 tumbled from 248 hours to 100 in 1950 and, remarkably, from there to only 5 in 1990. The change in the amount of labor that it took to raise chickens was almost unbelievable. It took 85 hours to produce 1000 pounds of broilers in 1929. In 1980, factory farmers could produce the same amount with just one hour of labor. Of course, yields rose incredibly too in the postwar period. The yield of wheat per acre surged to 36 bushels in 1970, up from 19 in 1950. The yield of cotton per acre nearly doubled in the same period, going from about 270 pounds to 513.⁴

Paul Conkin has identified four factors that drove these mindboggling advances in productivity between 1950 and 1970: new machines, the spread of electrification, the adoption of new chemical inputs (whether fertilizers, pesticides, or anything else), and advances in plant and animal breeding. With the USDA and private agribusinesses working relentlessly to supply

³ Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road To America's Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 89-92, 115; Willard W. Cochrane, *The Curse of American Agricultural Abundance: A Sustainable Solution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 26, 33-36; A. Eugene Havens, "Capitalist Development in the United States: State, Accumulation, and Agricultural Production Systems," in *Studies in the Transformation of U.S. Agriculture* edited by A. Eugene Havens with Gregory Hooks, Patrick H. Mooney, and Max J. Pfeffer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 43-51.

⁴ Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of Agriculture since 1929* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 98-99.

these new technologies, farmers actually had but little choice to adopt them. One of the most influential agricultural economists of the mid-twentieth century, Willard Cochrane, called this problem that of the “agricultural treadmill.” Larger and more capitalized farmers adopt new technologies first. This allows them to produce more and to capture larger profits before average farmers have caught up to the pace of technological change, which average farmers are now forced to do in order to compete with their better-positioned competitors. By the time smaller farms have caught up, however, the competitive advantages that the new technologies offered their earliest adopters are gone. But bigger farmers are by then on to adopting the next round of technological innovations. Smaller and less capitalized farmers are less equipped to handle the cyclical downturns in prices that all of this technological innovation brings to agriculture. The very debts that they take on in order to keep up with gains in productivity often force them out of business, to be gobbled up by their already larger and more competitive neighbors. The process is as relentless as it is destructive of the smaller and medium-sized farming operations. The logic of productionism that reigned after the war hailed every single advance in technology and productivity as a blessing. In fact, this “progress” had disturbing effects on the rural social structure. More than anything, it explains why ever since World War II there have been fewer and fewer farms that are increasingly bigger and more highly capitalized. In 2002, even though there were still more than 2 million farms in the US, a mere 322,625 of those farms accounted for 89 percent of the country’s farm income. That meant that the nation’s roughly 1.8 million remaining farms split just 11 percent of that income.⁵

After the war, the transformation in the Plantation South was nearest at hand and came quickest. The mechanical cotton picker, so long the stuff of anticipatory southern dreams and nightmares, finally began to rumble through the region’s wide, flat fields of fiber after World

⁵ Conkin, *Revolution*, 159; Willard Cochrane, *The Curse of American Agricultural Abundance: A Sustainable Solution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). Cochrane developed these ideas in the 1950s.

War II. Sharecropping held on longer in some places than others, but by the late 1960s, machines harvested most all southern cotton. Smaller farmers could no longer compete. Cotton production shifted to larger farms, especially in the Delta. Nearly a million farms produced cotton in the 1930s. That number had fallen to 300,000 in 1950 even before the widespread adoption of the mechanical harvester. In 1974, after the use of the cotton picking machines had become universal, only 80,000 farms produced cotton. These changes drastically altered the number of southerners who toiled as farm tenants. The lucky ones were “pulled” from southern farms—about three million people, two-thirds of them black—to better opportunities during the Depression and especially during the war. Another four million southerners migrated between 1950 and 1970, and half of those migrants were African Americans. This surely counted as a kind of emancipation for millions of poor southerners, but those who remained in the rural South faced as much or even more poverty as they ever had. The heavily African American Black Belt population that remained in the countryside vacated farms to live in rural towns and hamlets where institutions and services would be scarce and jobs even scarcer. Today, most people in the rural South no longer work in agriculture, living in places that are often very poor and where the local school system (or perhaps a prison) is as liable as not to be the largest employer.⁶

Although the USDA’s anti-poverty efforts had not proved terribly effective, the agency’s liberals had at least managed to dramatize to the whole nation the plight of millions of rural poor. In the postwar period, however, the poverty did not abate but it did become “invisible” with few people to publicize its existence. In 1955, a USDA report on “low-income” farmers found almost exactly the same concentrations of rural poverty that New Dealers had discovered two decades earlier: Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Great Lakes Cutover Region, northwest New Mexico, and the Cotton Belt. These areas remained mired in deep poverty despite the fact that

⁶ Conkin, *Revolution*, 106-107; Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 307-319; James C. Cobb *The South and America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97-98.

the country had entered the most affluent period in its history. (The only change in the geographic concentrations of rural poverty was the addition of a new one to the list. The Pacific Northwest qualified as a “problem area” by 1955). Although farm and rural populations declined rapidly after World War II, the percentage of the rural population that was poor remained disturbingly the same. By a fairly conservative definition of poverty, about 36 percent of America’s farmers were “low-income” in 1929. That percentage had actually crept up to 39 by 1939. In 1949, the number of low-income farms had dipped substantially to 30 percent, but by 1954 had climbed again to 32 percent. Through Depression and war and into the period of America’s greatest affluence, roughly one-third of America’s farm population lived on poor farms. This is to say nothing of those rural poor who did not live on farms.⁷

As it had in the South, technology transformed agriculture just as thoroughly in the rest of the country. In 1900, 41 percent of the American workforce found employment in agriculture. By 1945, that number was down to 16 percent. It was down further still to 4 percent by 1970. (At the turn of the twenty-first century, fewer than 2 percent of Americans worked in agriculture). The number of tractors on farms roughly doubled between 1945 and 1960. By 1970, tractors had almost fully replaced animal-power on American farms. As they have become larger, more capitalized, and technologically sophisticated, the variety of commodities produced on America’s farms has dwindled. In 1900, American farms produced more than five commodities for the market on average. In 2002, they produced fewer than two. The average size of farms has roughly tripled since 1940 as the number of farms has plummeted. Today farmers make up only a small percentage of even the rural population. By 2000, only twenty percent of rural counties

⁷ *Development of Agriculture’s Human Resources: A Report of Low-Income Farmers* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1955), 6-15; Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 47-48.

were considered “farm dependent.” The “farm problem,” therefore, is now only one part of what is more properly a “rural problem” or more properly still a “rural community problem.”⁸

The full unleashing of productionism had generally baleful impacts on agriculture, the environment, and rural life even outside the South. America’s agriculture has become fully industrial. Iowa was a corn state above all else in the first half of the twentieth century, but between all those rows of corn (metaphorically speaking) Iowans also managed to plant and raise the dozens of different food and animal crops that they used to feed themselves and their neighbors. Today, Iowa is all corn and soybeans; there is food everywhere, but none to eat. The factory farms that dominate today’s agricultural landscape are mining operations, taking everything while returning little or nothing of value to the earth. They mine water, soil, petroleum, and, of course, labor. It is hard to recognize something worthy of the name “agriculture” in much of this. We have “farms” that raise millions of chickens and hundreds of thousands of hogs every single year. The industrial hog farms build lagoons that hold hundreds of thousands of gallons of animal waste and that contaminate local groundwater and render the areas surrounding them generally uninhabitable because of the smell. In California, the Central Valley, which today harvests about one-third of all the farm produce in the US, routinely ranks as one the worst places in the country in terms of air quality. That is no paradox. The Valley is home to operations like Bolthouse Farms, which supplies 85 percent of the carrots that Americans consume, and that require enormous expenditures of the fossil fuels that are only one of the things polluting the air. The Central Valley is also home to the nation’s largest feedlot, which can hold 100,000 luckless bovines at a time. The atmosphere is so contaminated with fecal matter ground down under animal hoofs and born aloft as dust that visitors are struck by the fact that they do not just smell the feces in the Valley air; they taste it. The J.G. Boswell Company, which in its own way sprang from the soil of Greene County, is still there too, its

⁸ Carolyn Dimitri, Anne Effland, and Neilson Conklin, *The 20TH Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Research Service/USDA, 2005), 2-6.

200,000 acres embarrassing the original pretensions of the much smaller “farm” that Arthur Raper beheld.⁹

In 1972, the Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz famously declared that it was time for America’s farmers to “get big or get out.” Because of the immanent logic of productionism, a lot of both happened in the following years, especially in the Midwest. Farm income soared during the 1970s and land values exploded. Rising property values allowed farmers to leverage themselves to the hilt. Farm debt ballooned to \$212 billion in 1985, up from a now modest-seeming \$54 billion in 1971. By the late 1970s, grain prices began to plummet and in 1979, the Federal Reserve unceremoniously ended the riot of cheap credit. The bubble burst. In Iowa, land values cratered 63 percent in five years. Average net farm income in the state took an even more astonishing tumble, from nearly \$18,000 in 1981 to under \$2,000 in 1983. America’s new agriculture managed to do what even the South’s landlord class could not. It has all but eliminated the black, landowning farmer from the American landscape. The farm crisis was especially devastating to black farmers. There were only 33,000 black farmers in the US by 1982. In the 1960s, there were dozens of counties in which African American farmers were in a majority. Today there are none.¹⁰

The effects of the 1980s “farm crisis” on Midwestern communities were devastating. Once farms started to go under in mass, businesses followed. Small communities that supported dozens of downtown businesses—gas stations, department stores, groceries, implement dealers, cinemas, banks, small manufacturing plants—are now lucky if they have a handful of local proprietors and employers. Declining populations meant that school districts had to scramble to perform new consolidations on top of old consolidations. More affluent and educated people

⁹ Deborah Fitzgerald, “Eating and Remembering,” *Agricultural History* 79, no. 4, 2005, 395-396; Osha Gray Davidson, *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America’s Rural Ghetto, An Expanded Edition* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 41-42, 178; Mark Bittman, “California’s Central Valley, Land of a Billion Vegetables,” *New York Times*, 10/10/2012; Arax and Wartzman, *King of California*.

¹⁰ Davidson, *Broken Heartland*, 9, 15-17, 36-37.

tend to leave and the populations have aged. Those populations are no longer large enough in many rural communities to support basic public services. The issue of hospitals has been particularly acute. These communities also have high rates of poverty. Today the rural poor look just like their urban counterparts. They are more likely to be under- rather than un-employed. They are also more likely to be elderly, single mothers, and minorities. In the wake of the “farm crisis,” in the late 1980s, more than 9 million rural Americans lived below the poverty line. Some counties in Iowa had poverty rates nearing 30 percent. Since then, the fortunes of rural America have waxed and waned with the rest of the country. Poverty and unemployment are stubbornly high, however. It is no sign of rural prosperity, though it is frequently taken as such, but today, land values in rural American again rise. They will eventually fall, and when they do, the next inevitable round of dispossession and consolidation will come.¹¹

In almost every single particular, this is the nightmare that the sociologists who emerged in the 1910s and 1920s and the agrarian liberals who ran the USDA in the 1930s and early 1940s struggled to avoid. America no longer has an agriculture that sustains vibrant rural communities.

As Arthur Raper scouted the San Joaquin Valley late in 1944, trying to assimilate the awesome scope of the J.G. Boswell Corporation’s “farming” operations, he had some rueful thoughts. Raper noted that Boswell had not only accepted but demanded the help of the government in building his empire. The government provided Boswell with much of his labor during the war and had colluded with him to set wages that were supposed to be fair to him and his employees both, but that workers often viewed as too low. Boswell then turned, because it was wartime, and sold most of the cotton and beef that he produced to an American government

¹¹ Davidson, *Broken Heartland*, 9, 55-65, 74; Brian Lehmann, “Across Corn Belt, Farmland Prices Keep Soaring,” *New York Times*, 10/22/2012; Daniel Acker, “As Crop Prices Surge, Investment Firms and Farmers Vie for Land,” *New York Times*, 3/18/2013.

ravenous for food and fiber to keep its soldier fed and clothed. Uncle Sam had given him his water too. Raper noted the empire-builder's hypocrisy: "But Boswell does not want any of the government's silly stuff about 160 acres of land per holder, just because it helps work out a method to keep a lake from forming and to keep irrigation water coming down [from the Sierra Nevada Mountains]." Raper wondered, "But what of those thousands of people who live in temporary shelter, sleep on a plank bed of lumber, men without their families to pick Boswell cotton at \$2.25 a hundred?" There would be fewer people in the USDA to ask those kinds of questions in the coming decades.¹²

With their agencies so thoroughly routed, the USDA's liberals began to decamp the bureaucracy in the years following the war. The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization became a routine destination for former USDA economists. The most common path for USDA sociologists after the war was to take up careers in international rural development. Carl Taylor eventually went to work for the Ford Foundation and became an expert on "community development" in India. Raper had an incredible second act (which was actually more like the third act of a five act play) as an analyst of and an advisor to rural development projects around the world. He worked through the auspices of the Mutual Security Administration (MSA) and International Cooperation Administration (ICA). His travels brought him to Iran, Syria, Iraq, Sierra Leone, French Indochina, Japan, Taiwan, and probably at least a dozen other countries as he continued to work for the government into the late 1960s. Before joining the MSA and later the ICA, Raper served as an advisor on the land reform that the Allied Occupation government undertook in Japan. The work thrilled him. In a way, Raper had to go to Japan to see the kind of New Deal that he, in his heart, had always wanted in America, one that went after roots rather than branches. With the Japanese government and civil society prostrate, the Allied Occupation broke up the holdings of the country's landlord class in an effort to strike at Japan's "feudal" social relations and to create an independent, Japanese yeomanry. True to

¹² "James G. Boswell," AFR Papers.

the ambitions of the many former New Dealers who helped conceive the process, democratically elected committees oversaw the work of land reform in Japanese villages. The initiative in Japan even managed something that so many had insisted was impossible in the American South: farm tenants held half of the positions on these committees.¹³

Raper's best post-New Deal work came when he and his wife Martha moved to Comilla, East Pakistan, in 1964. The sociologist studied and advised the country's signature rural development initiative, the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development. In its way, the work was familiar to Raper. The Academy had turned Comilla into an anti-poverty laboratory just as the FSA had tried to do with Greene County in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Akhtar Hameed Khan, East Pakistan's (and one of the world's) leading development theorists, had hatched the idea behind the Academy. Technicians worked with Bengali rice farmers in this densely populated, very poor, and flood-prone region about 80 miles north of the Bay of Bengal. The Academy provided technical assistance to farmers and set up small-scale lending cooperatives for them to buy equipment and to fund improvements to their land. (This was a forerunner of the "micro-lending" approach to development). The Academy also developed an extension method that emphasized not just the desirability but the necessity of allowing Bengali villagers to direct and control the programs for their uplift. Indeed, the most prominent leitmotif of Raper's post-war career as a development specialist was his commitment to democracy and a self-conscious humility as the only antidotes to the hubris that was bound to creep into efforts to uplift the global poor. Between stints overseas, Raper trained American development workers in Washington. Again and again, in his training sessions, Raper returned to a number of key themes. His favorite notes to sound were the need for humility in the way that American

¹³ Carl C. Taylor, *India's Roots of Democracy: A Sociological Analysis of Rural India's Experience in Planned Development Since Independence* (New York: Praeger, 1965); Arthur F. Raper, *The Japanese Village In Transition* (Tokyo: General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, 1950); Arthur F. Raper, "Some Recent Changes in Japanese Village Life," *Rural Sociology* 16, no. 1, (March 1951), 3-16; Arthur F. Raper, "Some Effects of the Land Reform in Thirteen Japanese Villages," *Journal of Farm Economics* 33, no. 2 (May, 1951), 177-182.

development technicians approached their work; the need to operate through indigenous institutions and leaders; that it was the rural poor themselves who ought to both develop and ultimately control the programs aimed at their uplift; and that there were no silver bullet solutions to rural poverty. More than anything, Raper stressed that America's foreign aid workers had to be truly committed to democratic process in all of their aid programs.¹⁴

There is no question that the USDA was worse off for having lost the kind of social scientists who have figured in these pages. This is true despite the significant mistakes that these experts made in conceiving and executing the plans that they made. The strengths and weaknesses, however, emerged from the same place: an insistence that life and culture mattered. Whatever else might be said about the rural sociologists who emerged in the Teens and Twenties, in their studies and in the agenda that they tried to set, they began with the institutions and activities of rural people. They began with life, and they began with community. That gave them the conceptual lens with which to subvert the productionist insistence that profit and efficiency were all that mattered in agriculture. People mattered too and so did their quality of life. Sociologists' focus on the social side of agriculture allowed them to see this even as it also inclined them to blame farm people for failing to conform with the imperatives of modernity as experts defined them. Rural sociologists' conception of community could also be more than a little naïve, insisting in the face of the evidence to the contrary that all people, if they got to know one another and shared the same institutions, would see that they had the same interests, those of the "rural community."

It was admirable to defend rural communities, but in the hands of sociologists, community became a flight from politics. Rural sociologists refused to leave the elegant and ordered world of their theories about society and community to enter the real world, the place

¹⁴ Arthur F. Raper, *Rural Development in Action: The Comprehensive Experiment at Comilla, East Pakistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970); Arthur F. Raper, "Seventeen Points for Consideration of Technicians Working With Villagers," Box 13, Folder 246; Arthur F. Raper, "The Scope of Community Development Work," December 1954, Box 16, Folder 302. All but first cite in AFR Papers.

where people had untidy ways of living and where the truth was that different groups sometimes had interests that were antagonistic and irreconcilable. The tendency to flee from controversy and to avoid seeking political solutions to problems became only more vexing when experts concerned with rural life and culture entered government in the 1930s. When planners in the AAA and BAE designed their democratic programs of adjustment, they treated political questions as social scientific ones. Planning economists wanted to get overproduction under control and to do so while preserving millions of a particular kind of family farm: something modest in size, modest in its capitalization, and capable of supporting vibrant communities. Defending this kind of family farm would have required strong statutory action because healthy farms and healthy communities were not going to be protected by a “democratic” planning process that all but begged to be co-opted by the most powerful local interests.

Worst of all, when the AAA began keeping millions of acres of cotton land out of production in 1934, the USDA’s agrarian liberals accepted at face-value the sober assurances of the southerners in the Cotton Section that landlords would “carry” their tenants as they always had. The liberals never even tried to develop a program for the most pressing issue in American agriculture, which was the South’s tenancy problem. When the AAA began operating in the southern states, it gave these experts who cared so much about the quality of rural life a real chance to substantially improve the lives of countless poor farmers and to do so through administrative fiat. Never had the southern landlord class been more vulnerable and more receptive to the outside influence of the federal government. The liberals could have insisted that southern croppers and tenants make their own contracts with the AAA directly and therefore actually have the chance to assent to a program that would dramatically affect their fortunes. They could have also insisted that the tenants’ share of the AAA money be issued directly to them, rather than trusting their landlords to hand over the rightful portion. It would have been a credit to the USDA’s liberals as well if they had pushed to see that tenants and croppers got at least half of the benefit payments rather than simply giving the lion’s share of it

to landlords because they owned the land. Perhaps landlords would have balked and refused to participate in the program, though that does not seem entirely likely. It would have required saying “no” to a lot of money. Perhaps it would be too much to say that the liberals should have reached for everything, but it seems beyond question that they should have reached for more.

Rather than money or land, what the USDA offered most poor farmers was “rehabilitation.” Rehabilitation was a well-intentioned, though fraught undertaking. It could and did bring real improvements to the diets and health of poor farmers. It still left them stuck in poverty, however, and also required that they accept “supervision” that at its worst was demeaning and at its best was not likely to help them get very far. Much to their credit, however, the USDA’s liberals shifted some of their ambitions during the war years. Now it seemed like they really could do a lot while avoiding messy political battles. Planners wanted to bring a real New Deal to the countryside. They talked about public works and jobs programs and healthcare for everyone. Social scientists in the Division of Farm Population of Rural Life assumed that their cultural surveys of the countryside were going to inform all of the massive plans that were in the works. The Farm Security Administration probably had its finest hour in standing up for the interests of farm laborers, even if it did not stand up for these workers’ rights because the New Deal state had not granted them any. Still, the FSA retreated behind a “manpower” rhetoric that all but assured that it would not directly confront the fact that farm laborers were the most disadvantaged workers in the country. Maybe the FSA would have done more in the future, but as the war wound down, all the centers of USDA liberalism came under attack. By that point, people who were not at all adverse to politics—the Farm Bureau, Congressional conservatives, southern politicians—had caught up to the people who cared about the quality of rural life and made quick work of the best of their carefully laid plans.

At their best, the social scientists and USDA liberals who have appeared in these pages could act as a kind of conscience for an agency very often assumed not to have had much of one

during this period. They did so precisely because, as social scientists or reformers, their object was life and culture. Given its unreserved embrace of factory farms just a few years later, it is quite remarkable that in 1939, the USDA (through its Division of Farm Population and Rural Life) would send geographer/rural sociologist Walter Kollmorgen to study the Old Order Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to see what lessons their tightly-knit communities could offer to all farmers. Given how likely he was to upset the sensibilities of southern whites, it is no less remarkable that the USDA offered Arthur Raper a job in 1940 and sent him to observe the rehabilitation effort in Greene County. As much as anyone, Raper had shown in his work as a sociologist the profound connections between culture and agriculture. The way this particular iteration of the plantation system treated its soil was intimately intertwined with the way it treated its people. Social scientists like Raper insisted that a variation of this fact was true everywhere. They studied the best and worst of rural life because Americans needed the right kind of agriculture to build the right kind of rural communities no matter how different those things—the culture and agriculture—would be from place to place.

Had social scientists like Raper remained in the USDA, they would undoubtedly have had a lot to say about the costs of letting the J.G. Boswells of the world dominate the future of American agriculture. In 1940, the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life began funding the work of a young anthropologist, Walter Goldschmidt. In 1940, 1941, and later in 1944, Goldschmidt did many months of fieldwork studying the Central Valley communities of Wasco, Arvin, and Dinuba, California. Goldschmidt had designed his study to investigate the impact that industrial agricultural had on rural communities. Wasco and Dinuba had (by California standards) non-industrial agricultures. The farms were small, not that highly capitalized, and hired comparatively little labor. On the other hand, large factory farms surrounded Arvin, which help to determine its social structure. Goldschmidt used the by-now well-worn methods of USDA social scientists conducting their community studies as “participant-observers.” He gathered all the possible statistical data he could find, interviewed citizens from all walks of life,

and most importantly of all, as Goldschmidt explained about the community he spent the most time in, “We—my wife and I—made every effort to participate in Wasco society on that level which might be considered normal for persons of our background. We joined in community meetings, school functions, and club affairs; we attended churches and fraternized with as many groups as we could.”¹⁵

The community that Goldschmidt found in Arvin, with its factory farms, did not even seem like a community at all. When the anthropologist published his findings in 1947, he began with a simple and powerful declaration: “From industrialized sowing of the soil is reaped an urbanized rural society.” Calling Arvin “urbanized” obscured just how powerful an indictment of industrial agriculture Goldschmidt had to offer. In meticulous detail, he showed the truncated and troubled community that had developed in Arvin. The farms around the town were not only large, they were what would later be called agribusinesses, vertically integrated operations that invested in all of the infrastructure necessary to bring their fruits, nuts, and vegetables to market. Farmers housed their own labor on their farms and frequently had their own packing houses and processing plants as well. Some farmers even owned the companies that made the boxes in which their produce shipped. The highly capitalized nature of these operations, as Goldschmidt explained, meant that these farming operations depended on cheap labor above all else for their profits. Most of the laborers were Mexicans and “Okies,” and Goldschmidt documented just how thoroughly the landowning farmers of Arvin exploited these workers and marginalized them from the community and its institutions. The anthropologist even laid bare the ruling class ideology with which these factory farmers justified their actions. For good measure, he also documented the thinness of the actual “community” in Arvin. In town, there were no locally owned businesses. Every bank, implement dealer, and grocery store was part of either a regional or national chain. Arvin had not even bothered to incorporate itself. It had no parks, no sanitation or beautification department, no sidewalks, no street lights, no civic points

¹⁵ Walter Goldschmidt, *As You Sow* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1947), x.

of pride. Socially, everyone associated with people of their own class: the poor with the poor, the middle-class with the middle-class, and the well-to-do with the well-to-do. The local ruling-class reviled the FSA and viciously suppressed the strikes that periodically broke out among farm workers. When Goldschmidt turned to Wasco and Dinuba as contrasts to Arvin, he hardly needed to romanticize their community structures to make his point. These communities were not perfect. They too relied on a socially marginal class of laborers to bring in crops but to nowhere near the same degree as did farmers in Arvin. Most Wasco and Dinuba families lived on small farms and did most of their own labor, and their communities showed it. They had stronger institutions, better schools, and were less riven by class conflict. Wasco and Dinuba actually resembled communities. When he published his study in 1947, Goldschmidt called it simply, *As You Sow*.¹⁶

The postwar USDA could have offered much more to America's farmers than simple productionism had it remained open to the broader conception of rural life that has figured in these pages. Had there been more Goldschmidts and Rapers around, America's rural poverty would not have so readily become invisible. Rather than relentlessly asking simply how to maximize production for an increasingly tiny group of farmers, the USDA would have more consistently thought in terms of what was happening to rural communities and rural life: to the churches and schools and institutions that had meant so much to so many in the agency for so long. Life-oriented experts would have been there to press the idea that culture and agriculture are fundamentally connected. Healthy rural communities and healthy food consumers have to come from the right kind of agriculture. Instead, today most of the food that Americans consume comes from the kind of factory farms that created the social structure in Arvin, California. As those kinds of farms proliferated across the second half of the twentieth century, they helped to hollow out rural communities. Their dominance in our food system has meant that farm workers are still the most exploited laborers in America. But factory farms have not

¹⁶ Ibid., passim.

served their operators all that well either. Food corporations worth billions of dollars have made farmers into contractors and suppliers, rather than the sturdy, independent cultivators that American lore insists that they should be. The food that the factory farms and food processors produce may well be making us sick. Goldschmidt and the other agrarian liberals who have figured in these pages were right. Even today, we reap as we sow.

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