

**The Skyline Dream:**  
**The Story of a New Deal Resettlement Project**

**Unpublished Manuscript by**  
**Dr. David Campbell**

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Dedication Page, Foreword and Acknowledgments to be added

### Preface and Acknowledgments

In the summer of 1991 the United States Bureau of Census reported that one in five Alabamians were living below the poverty level.<sup>1</sup> Only four states, three of them Southern, had poverty rates worse than in Alabama. Additionally, in 1991 another report ranked Alabama forty-ninth nationally in child poverty, concluding that one in three of the state's children under twelve are "poor."<sup>2</sup> Each month, according to Food Research and Action Center, some 59,500 Alabama children suffer from hunger or poverty-related malnutrition.<sup>3</sup> Such figures are the sad legacies of the Alabama and Southern agricultural and economic system. This modern-day poverty has roots in slavery and, later, in farm tenancy, which in the late 1800s and early 1900s emerged as the dominant agricultural system in Alabama and the South.

During America's Great Depression of the 1930s, the federal government, as at no time before or since, initiated programs to eliminate this rural poverty that slavery and farm tenancy created. One of these programs was the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project, established in Jackson County, Alabama on Cumberland Mountain. At first the project was called Cumberland Mountain Farms, but due to confusion with a similarly named project, in 1937 the name was changed to Skyline Farms. In this book the project will be referred to as Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms up to the name change, where after it will be referred to as Skyline Farms.

Whatever the name, the project was one of the most unusual economic and social experiments ever attempted by an American governmental agency.

At Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms participants, most of them farm tenants, were presented with a dream, described in this book as the "Skyline Dream." Indeed, to those of the tenant world what they were offered was a dream, for if the project succeeded, the tenants would obtain their own house and farm and become financially self-reliant. Just as important, if their dream were realized, the project participants would no longer have to rely on someone else for a job or home. For the first time in their lives, they would become independent and free of debt. For those of the tenant world, there was no greater dream than to "own your own place."

Government officials at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms offered more than economic rehabilitation, however. Project officials wanted the participants to work together through land, farm, and industrial cooperatives. At one point project participants would be stockholders in a factory built by their own cooperative with money provided by the federal government. Such programs were dramatic breaks from governmental policy which traditionally had encouraged individualism and free enterprise economics.

There were many other breaks with the past at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. What was one of the nation's first prepaid health care programs was established at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline)

Farms and other similar projects. Additionally, officials attempted to end the cycle of poverty among the participants by building a school for the project children and by utilizing progressive teaching methods. Officials tried to enrich the participants' quality of life through arts and crafts programs and community plays and drama productions. Project officials organized a band and square dance team, not only for recreational and entertainment purposes, but to unify the community and develop a cooperative spirit among the participants. The band and square dance team traveled to Washington and performed for President and Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt. Before the project ended, such Americans as Rexford Tugwell, Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, Bascom Lundsford, Nicholas Ray, Margaret Valiant, Charles Seeger, and Will Alexander all would play some role in the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms drama as it unfolded. The real story of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, however, is that of the people for whom the project was intended--the tenant farmers and their families who were given the dream. This book is their story.

(acknowledgments go here)

Image One: Moving to the Mountain

It was 1935 and life for people living in the rural South was bleak as they struggled with personal hardships caused by the Great Depression. In May of that year Virgil and Ventrice Brewer, a young farm couple with two small children, rode up Cumberland Mountain, a 1,600-foot high Appalachian plateau in North Alabama's Jackson County. The government truck in which they rode was taking them and all their belongings to their new home on the mountain. Their driver followed a crooked, gravel road that wound through a rough, untamed wilderness, what in the lexicon of Appalachian South was called a "wildwoods." The Brewers and their children rode through a land filled with ancient hardwood trees, thick underbrush, exotic ginseng plants, and rare ferns. As the Brewers and other settlers would discover, the forest also housed harmless squirrels, rabbits, and wild turkeys that coexisted with poisonous diamondback rattlesnakes and copperheads. It was a hard land that was little different from that settled by pioneers in the Appalachian South during the 1800s.

After their truck had ground to the top of the mountain plateau, Mrs. Brewer saw the box-shaped, wooden shacks and asked her husband: "What are those? Are those corn cribs?" Mr. Brewer answered: "No. That is where we are going to live for awhile."<sup>1</sup> Although they would in time move to another house, the mountain they ascended that May day was to become the Brewers' home.

So began a journey that would involve the Brewers and some 200 other families in one of the most unique and intriguing social experiments in recent American history. It was a journey to be filled with hope and despair, happiness and sorrow, and achievement and bitter failure. The Brewers themselves would become pioneers, not only in the sense of settling a new place, but in taking part in a program that was to help lead rural America to a new age, one in which cooperation among people would be stressed. In the end the Brewers' experience on Cumberland Mountain would become a journey of bittersweet memories.



## Chapter 2

### Subsistence Homesteads and Cumberland Mountain

Under President Roosevelt's direction, the federal government began to establish programs in the 1930s to alleviate economic and social problems that the Depression had caused. These programs soon would affect the lives of Southern tenant farmers. The FERA, as noted, was given the job of providing relief to the unemployed. The FERA operated through a matching grant program in which the agency gave \$250 million directly to states and appropriated another \$250 million on a matching one-to-three basis with states and municipalities for relief projects.<sup>1</sup>

In order to give special attention to the farm population, in 1934 Hopkins and the FERA created the Division of Rural Rehabilitation and Stranded Populations (RRSP).<sup>2</sup> At first, the RRSP's assignment was to rehabilitate unemployed agricultural workers by loaning them money to farm. Farmers, theoretically, would use these loans to do such things as replace work stock or buy farm equipment.<sup>3</sup> All these FERA programs required that farmers were to repay loans. Through the loan program, the FERA expected that farmers eventually would work their way off relief rolls, at little final expense to the government when loans were repaid.

In initiating this program, however, FERA officials found that there were many instances in which loans to unemployed farmers were not sufficient for their rehabilitation. There were thousands of

American farmers who did not own land, or if they did, their land was submarginal and nonproductive. Another plan was needed for these farmers. FERA turned to the models set by the Department of Interior's Division of Subsistence Homesteads, headed by M. L. Wilson, a former director of the Rural Economics Division of Montana State Agricultural College. The Roosevelt Administration had created the Division of Subsistence Homesteads from a \$25 million appropriations that had been included in the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933.<sup>4</sup> This appropriation was made to the President to make loans and otherwise aid "in the purchase of subsistence homesteads."<sup>5</sup> Under this program the Division of Subsistence Homesteads bought land and built houses for unemployed workers.

This "subsistence homesteads" approach took several forms. In some projects workers were provided with houses only. In others participants received houses and a few acres of land for gardening. Some projects were in what were called "stranded" areas where industry or coal mines had closed, leaving workers with no prospects for jobs. In these areas the Division of Subsistence Homesteads established communities that permitted residents to farm part-time, and then officials hoped to entice industry to the area for additional jobs. Other projects were farm communities in which participants were provided a house and land to farm. Farmers were "resettled," from submarginal to more profitable land. With these

"subsistence homestead" projects, or resettlement projects, the federal government entered the planned rural community movement, which had been popularized by Elwood Mead in California.

In the 1910s and 1920s Mead successfully implemented some of his ideas to improve the quality of life in rural America. Mead, a civil engineer by profession, had decided that a prosperous and happy farm population was essential to a healthy democracy. Yet he saw social and economic problems in American agriculture and particularly troubling to him was that young people seemed to be leaving farm life behind. Mead believed that the solution to many of the problems in American agriculture was to emphasize group rather than individual farming. Consequently, he favored establishing cooperatives for farmers, who would live together in planned villages, or at least around a community center. Agricultural experts were to supervise these farms, according to Mead. Handicraft projects or small industries also might be added to these farm villages to boost their economies, Mead contended. According to his plan, participants would be carefully selected, and in order to assure stability, they would be granted only long-term purchase contracts.

In 1917 Mead was named chairman of California's Land Settlement Board. Under his direction, California did establish two such planned rural communities--the Durham and Delphi colonies. These colonies were based on the ideas that Mead had proposed. Their

initial success attracted the interest of the federal government and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads built its foundation on the approach that Mead had taken in California.<sup>6</sup>

There were a few dissenters to this idea of rebuilding rural America. Rexford Tugwell questioned whether it was wise to return people to the farm when such great changes were taking place in American agriculture. Farms were mechanizing, Tugwell pointed out, and they also were becoming larger. The small family farm, Tugwell warned, could become a thing of the past.<sup>7</sup> Still Mead's vision of idyllic farm villages with its Jeffersonian appeal was too powerful to be ignored in the great age of social experimentation that was the 1930s.

When the FERA began looking for ways to help "marginal" farmers, the agency turned to models set by Mead and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. Soon the FERA was experimenting with what essentially were planned communities. FERA accomplished this through rehabilitation corporations that were established in the states. Although proposals for programs were to initiate from the states, FERA officials did encourage rehabilitation corporation leaders to establish subsistence homesteads projects.

In Alabama this rehabilitation corporation was the Alabama Relief Administration (ARA). To reach the grassroots level, the ARA selected committees and chose a relief director for each county in order to provide aid. It was at this local level that the idea of the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project took shape. In 1934 in Jackson County, the future site of the project, H. N. "Harry" Ross was chosen relief director. (See Photograph, Harry Ross, p. 27.) Ross would play a major role in establishing and then managing Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Ross, like the tenant farmers he would lead, had felt the sting of the Depression. Prior to his appointment as Jackson County relief director, Ross worked as a construction engineer for the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCIR) in Birmingham, but he lost that job when the company laid off workers as a result of the Depression. Ross' former employer with TCIR was working for the ARA, and it was through this former TCIR boss that Ross obtained his job as Jackson County relief director.<sup>8</sup>

From all accounts Ross was an out-going, cheerful man, who the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms participants referred to as "Pop" Ross. In many ways Ross was a father-figure to the project participants, and like some family heads, he often demonstrated an authoritarian approach in relating to the participants. This would become a source of conflict within the project. Ross, too, was an optimist and certainly this personality trait was an asset to him as



H. N. "Harry" Ross in 1936. Ross was a key founder and project manager of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms during the first years. Photograph from "Cumberland Mountain Farms: Field Report and Final Budget," Box 44, RG 96, Project Records, Farmers Home Administration, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

a leader, but his optimism may have caused the tenants chosen for the project to believe their dream of owning their own home and farm easily would be realized. However, in 1934 in the midst of America's Great Depression, Ross' personality characteristics were of little concern to a people who were desperate for economic relief.

Ross found himself relief director in a county which reflected the South's great cultural diversity. Jackson County, located in the Northeast corner of the state, had traits of both the plantation South and Appalachia, and residents seemed torn between the two. On the one hand, the Tennessee River wound through the entire width of Jackson County, creating rich, alluvial bottom-land on which cotton plantations and the subsequent institution of slavery had been established. There was, then, some of the plantation South in the county economically and socially. As in other parts of the South, the county's emerging middle-class often identified with the image of the "Planter South."

On the other hand, much of the county's 729,600 acres were mountainous and ill-suited for the plantation system. There had been very few slaves in the mountains, and as a result of this the population in the mountains was overwhelmingly white, as was true of most of Appalachia. In their traditions, speech patterns, and attitudes, these whites were more like their neighbors to the north in east Tennessee or western North Carolina than they were to most whites to the south in their own state. Since they had not owned

slaves or been involved in the cotton economy, many of the ancestors of these mountain-heritage whites even had chosen to side with the Union during the Civil War. In the 1930s most of the county's white tenant farmers were descended from the mountain heritage.<sup>9</sup> This demographic split among the people of the county became a factor in the eventual outcome of the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project, as both groups frequently saw the other through stereotypical terms.

Since Jackson County was primarily an agricultural region when Ross took over as director of relief, he found that most of the 1,000 families on relief in the county were farmers.<sup>10</sup> The ARA divided families on relief into two categories: Group I farmers, who owned land but needed economic rehabilitation to recover from the Depression; and Group II farmers, those who had neither land nor equipment with which to farm.<sup>11</sup> Relief was provided to the Group I families through loans and by giving them jobs in the various work relief projects that Hopkins' FERA had begun. However, the Group II farm families, most of whom were displaced tenant farmers as a result of AAA policy, posed a special problem. They did not own land on which to live and most were without job skills, for farming was all that they had known.

Ross, as Jackson County's newly-appointed relief director, along with the Probate Judge of Jackson County, J. M. "Jim" Money, decided that a subsistence type program, like those advocated by the



FERA, was needed in Jackson County for the Group II relief recipients. Money had been active in the economic rehabilitation of the county for a number of years and through his efforts had made Jackson a leading county in establishing relief projects during both the Hoover and then Roosevelt administrations. Money, like Ross, played a key role in establishing the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project. Ross depended on Money's political insights and contacts in their efforts to land one of the FERA's subsistence homesteads projects for Jackson County.<sup>12</sup>

Jackson County certainly contained all the elements for assistance. The county had a substantial number of displaced tenant farmers and others farmed marginal land. Ross had the vision for a subsistence-type project. Money had the political skills to see such an idea turned into reality. As it would turn out, there would be another element added when a large track of land became available for a subsistence project.

In December of 1934 Ross and Money, who was now the chair of the Jackson County Rehabilitation Committee, led a delegation to Montgomery to meet with the Alabama relief director, Thad Holt.<sup>13</sup> The delegation pointed out that the county was desperate for relief and that there was little industry or manufacturing in the area to provide jobs for the unemployed farmers, even if they had any industrial training, which most did not. Furthermore, it was noted that there would be even more displaced farmers when the Tennessee

Valley Authority completed it's work on the Guntersville Dam and flooded some 57,000 acres of Jackson County's river-bottom land. A subsistence homesteads project, they maintained, would provide a place for those farmers to relocate. The trump card the delegation held was that a large track of relatively inexpensive land had become available for such a project.

The land was located on Cumberland Mountain, an unsettled plateau ranging from 700 to 1,600 feet in the northern portion of Jackson County. The mountain itself was part of a plateau range that extended into Tennessee and Kentucky. Like other mountains in southern Appalachia, Cumberland Mountain was relatively flat and thus could be farmed. Cumberland Mountain was sparsely settled, and used primarily by hunters. According to local lore, the mountain also was a popular site for whiskey-making operations that produced "moonshine" sold in Chattanooga and Nashville. As of the mid-1930s, Cumberland Mountain was much like the Appalachian frontier that pioneers had settled earlier in the region years before, and much like it had been when a misplaced group of Shawnee Indians supposedly lived there.<sup>14</sup> A road, however, recently had been constructed up the mountain with funds provided by President Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation and now for the first time the mountain was accessible.<sup>15</sup> Enter the Pierce Mining Company.

The Pierce Mining Company, headed by R. V. Pierce, was one of the businesses of the Pierce Estates Company of New York state. The Pierce family had made a fortune in the 1800s by selling patent medicines. To diversify, the Pierce family had gotten into the coal and timber business. Intending to eventually mine coal, the Pierce family in the early 1900s had bought approximately 30,000 acres of land on Cumberland Mountain. Coal deposits existed on Cumberland Mountain, though not in the quantity the Pierce Company originally had thought. The company opened a shaft mine on the mountain. However, the coal mining operation had been unprofitable and by the 1930s, the Pierce family was ready to sell their land on Cumberland Mountain and concentrate on other developments in Florida. Ross and Money could, as a result, tell ARA officials that there was available land for a subsistence homesteads project in Jackson County--the Pierce land.

The Jackson County delegation presented their case to state FERA officials on November 30, 1934, and a week later they were notified that Cumberland Mountain had been selected as the site of a "homestead colony."<sup>16</sup> The announcement was greeted enthusiastically, for in this age of economic depression, acquiring a rural subsistence project was tantamount to landing a major industry. The project was seen as a major step toward relieving the county's economic distress.

Yet the seeds of dissatisfaction with what would become Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms were planted as early as the first public announcement of the program. In the headline story announcing that Cumberland Mountain had been selected, the project was described as a "homestead colony."<sup>17</sup> This created confusion as to the exact nature of the project. Homesteading to most meant living on public land for a period of time, improving the land, and then gaining title to the property. Under the traditional "homesteading" process, the "homesteader" did not have to pay for the land. Many area people were familiar with the homesteading procedure, for farms in the county had been obtained under the old United States homesteading laws, and in fact some land still was being homesteaded in Jackson County. The news release clearly did say that project participants on Cumberland Mountain would be charged for their house and land, as was done in the subsistence homestead projects. It further was explained that participants would pay for their units by saving from what they made from the fifteen-cent-per-hour wages they were to be paid for their labor, then when their land was prepared, they could buy their land with money made from farming.<sup>18</sup>

Still the word "homesteading" stood out. It was a poor choice of words, one that later would haunt officials in charge of the project and confuse future tenants about how they were to acquire

their units. However, in December of 1934 these clouds were not on the horizon, and the door had opened in Jackson County to let those snarled in farm tenancy escape.

### Chapter 3

#### The Project and Controversy Begin

Once the Jackson County delegation won approval from the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, action to establish the project proceeded rapidly. On December 10th, three days after notification, the Pierce Estates Company, represented by their agent John L. Staples, and Harry Ross, relief director of the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation of Jackson County (RRCJC), signed an agreement in which the company leased 8,000 acres of land on Cumberland Mountain to the RRCJC for three years and granted the RRCJC "the privilege of clearing, building houses, barns, digging wells and making other improvements."<sup>1</sup> Improvement to the land was considered in-kind payment for the lease fee. The RRCJC was given the option of buying the land on or before the expiration of three years at \$7.50 per acre, or for a total of \$60,000.<sup>2</sup> The lease agreement was signed on December 10, 1934, and four days later the work to build a resettlement colony on Cumberland Mountain began.<sup>3</sup>

Carving a community out of the mountain wilderness was no easy task. People in the Appalachian South knew no harder work than "clearing new ground." By today's standards, tools were primitive: axes, saws, cross-saws, slinging blades, hoes, and shovels were used. Man, mules, and oxen were the machines. At times the underbrush was so dense a worker could only half-swing at a bush or tree, and when he came forward, his hands and arms might be ripped by briars. There

were no forest-clearing cutters or pinchers to be used, as there are in today's logging and land-clearing operations. Nature was not easily conquered.

Yet this was the task that workers first faced at the newly-founded project on Cumberland Mountain. The work began when eight men, selected from relief rolls, and a supervisor drove in a truck to the project site. Their first assignment was to clear land for a headquarters building and then construct it. One of the men recalled: "It was a bad day. We saw snow, sleet, rain and sunshine all in one day. We got out there and built up a little fire in the woods to keep from freezing. None of us had on enough clothes to keep us warm. . . We went to work gathering sandstone off the top of the ground to build the foundation for a kitchen. Our first thought was to fix a place to eat. We brushed the snow off the rocks and carried them to the site picked for the first building. The sandstone wore the skin off our fingers before the day was over, and they were bleeding when we stopped work. That was how we got this thing started, and it was no place for children."<sup>4</sup>

As workers at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms struggled to build a community on the mountain, officials in the Roosevelt Administration worked to convince the public that such programs were beneficial to American agricultural and economic recovery. Other countries, Roosevelt officials maintained, had solved their rural problems through these type programs. Secretary of Agriculture Henry

Wallace, for example, in a statement given at the Congressional hearings on the Bankhead Farm Tenancy Bill, said that Ireland essentially had abolished the farm tenancy system through a similar approach. Wallace stated the Irish tenant system was one of "the most adominable that has ever developed in the Western world."<sup>5</sup> It was reformed, he noted, by the government buying up large estates and reselling the land to tenant operators "on a long time payment plan with low rates of interest."<sup>6</sup> Wallace further said that now Ireland "has been transformed from an island of poverty stricken tenants into a nation of independent farm owners."<sup>7</sup> Other European countries, including Denmark, Finland, and Germany, had begun similar tenant programs, Wallace said.

Carl Taylor, who by now had become an influential voice in the Department of Agriculture, also used the Irish comparison in advocating the rural resettlement programs in the United States. Taylor noted that the Irish Land Purchase Act of 1903 had permitted the government to purchase land on the appraisal value, then resell it to tenants with a three-and-one-half percent sixty-eight year loan.<sup>8</sup> The Irish program had been an "unqualified success, according to Taylor."<sup>9</sup> Taylor's description of the Irish program was very similar to what eventually would be the Roosevelt Administration's basic terms for resettlement.



Roosevelt officials studiously avoided any comparisons between these projects and the farm collective movement in the Soviet Union. To many Americans, including conservative members of Congress, the redivision of land in the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution was one of the horrors of communism. Whenever possible, Roosevelt officials distanced themselves from this association. In his speech on the Bankhead Tenancy Bill, Wallace pointed out that the present condition of American tenants made them "fertile soil for Communist and Socialist agitators."<sup>10</sup> Wallace went on to say: "The American way to preserve the traditional order is to provide these refugees (tenants) of the economic system with an opportunity to build and develop their own homes and to live on the land which they may call their own."<sup>11</sup> In his statement Wallace had converted a program which critics would later declare to be communistic into a plan which was clearly the "American way." In the years to come, however, the critics who raised the issue of communism would become more vocal and undermine the efforts of the federal agencies to maintain the resettlement communities, including Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms.

While the debate raged in Washington about the resettlement concept, workers in Jackson County continued with their project, seemingly oblivious to the public relations problems faced by the

Roosevelt Administration. By January 1935 fifty men were working at the project site on Cumberland Mountain, all having been drawn from the county's relief rolls. Most workers rode to the mountain each day in a project truck. The men were so eager for work that some walked four to five miles one way each day to meet their ride to the mountain.<sup>12</sup> One worker stated that usually he left his home at three in the morning and returned at nine that night.<sup>13</sup> For those workers wanting to stay on the mountain overnight, primitive barracks were built. The men could stay at the project during the week and return to their families on the weekend. Meals were served to the workers, who were often desperately hungry. One project participant, Stonewall Fairbanks, a cook, later recalled: "People now can't realize how bad things were back then. The men who started working here a lot of times didn't have money to buy food. I would look out at a crowd of hungry people every morning. There would be as many as 200 some mornings. There would nearly be a stampede when we would put the food out. The meat would be stringy and tough. But the men would just throw their heads back and swallow it whole, they were so hungry. Young people today, they can't understand that."<sup>14</sup>

Virgil Brewer, who worked as a cook at the project for a time, recalled what the men ate: "We used beans. Pinto beans, white lima beans, and great northern, and we'd give them beef. . . . We used

potatoes to make beef stew and such as that. We cooked cornbread and biscuits."<sup>15</sup> As the project increased in size, Brewer recalled cooking for as many as 247 workers.<sup>16</sup>

Other than creating jobs for the workers, the specifics of the goals of the project were hazy to the men, and no doubt to project managers and officials. This much was understood. Work entitled the men to a \$7.50 "grocery order" for themselves and their families. Later, the policy changed and the men were to be given fifteen cents in credit for each hour of work they performed at the project. The men were not paid in cash and the credit was to be applied toward the purchase of a house and farm unit.<sup>17</sup> Still later, project participants would say, officials changed this policy and would not accept in-kind work as credit toward purchase.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, there was a lack of clarity of the goals and procedures for the project. This communication problem between the officials and participants over the specific procedures of the project eventually would cause bitter conflicts within the resettlement community.

During the first months, the project did quickly create jobs, and not just for those selected as farmers. The Works Progress Administration hired workers to construct buildings, build roads and bridges, and clear land, creating jobs at the project. Overall during the first months of its existence, the project seemingly was proceeding smoothly, at least at the local level.

However at the national level changes were occurring. These changes resulted from realignments within the federal bureaucracy over the control of the resettlement projects. Until 1935 the resettlement projects had been conducted on several fronts. The Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, and the FERA all were active in resettlement community development, and efforts and services were being duplicated. For this reason, on April 30, 1935, a major organizational change in the Roosevelt Administration occurred when the Resettlement Administration (RA) was created as an independent agency within the Department of Agriculture.<sup>19</sup> The RA was to be headed by Rexford Tugwell, a former Columbia University economist and Undersecretary of Agriculture. The RA took over the rural rehabilitation and land programs that had been operated by the other agencies. Importantly, the RA was assigned the job, already begun at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, of resettling farmers from submarginal to more productive land. RA also was to assist these farmers in becoming financially self-sufficient.<sup>20</sup>

Tugwell and the RA took a varied approach to resettlement and community development. As noted previously, Tugwell himself was not fond of the resettlement farm projects, such as Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, believing that they were an anachronism, and that the day of the small farm was coming to an end.<sup>21</sup> Tugwell favored relocating families in "greenbelt" or "industrial" communities near

cities, where they had employment opportunities in industry. However, because of the previous activity of the FERA and the departments of Agriculture and the Interior, and due to the fact that most Roosevelt officials held fast to the rural Jeffersonian image of America, Tugwell and RA were committed to the resettlement farm communities. Many, including Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, had been started, and now there was no turning back. The RA's ranks swelled as employees were added from nine different federal agencies to continue the work of rural rehabilitation and resettlement. In time the RA would employ 4,200 workers, about the same number of farmers the agency would resettle in its stormy, two-year existence.<sup>22</sup>

The RA storm winds would whirl around Rexford Tugwell, who fast became one of the Roosevelt Administration's most controversial figures. In time criticism of Tugwell would impede the development of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Tugwell was an intellectual and visionary with, as Paul Conkin describes him, the "temperament of an extremely sensitive artist."<sup>23</sup> The phrase a "bureaucratic poet" would perhaps best describe Tugwell.<sup>24</sup> As with other intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, Tugwell had examined other societies and economic systems. It was his interest in the socialist system that would bring Tugwell under fire, although there is no indication that

Tugwell ever endorsed the socialist system, but only sought from it what could be applied to the collapsed American economy, such as coordinating industry and developing cooperative movements.<sup>25</sup>

Yet many Americans found Tugwell's opinions on the Soviet socialist system difficult to accept. For example, in his 1935 book on American economic life, written with Thomas Munro and Roy Stryker, Tugwell wrote that the Soviet Union might "force us, and other 'capitalistic' nations to make very definite concessions to the ideas of which she is the champion."<sup>26</sup> Tugwell, Munro, and Stryker wrote that economically the Soviet system might surpass the capitalistic system because of planning and central management, the avoidance of the duplication of effort, and the enervation of conflicts "which are imposed by the very nature of our institutions."<sup>27</sup> Tugwell, Munro, and Stryker were quick to point out that the Soviet system had led to problems of "bureaucracy, personal aggrandizement, graft, and inefficiency," although government officials were attempting to solve these problems.<sup>28</sup> Tugwell, Munro, and Stryker emphasized that they were examining the Soviet system only to provide Americans with a broader view, one that could result in new, experimental economic attitudes. They did so, they said, for "every student who is interested in peace, prosperity, and progress. . . ."<sup>29</sup> Certainly, these were noble and honorable intellectual pursuits. Yet to many Americans preoccupied by fears of a communist revolution in the United States similar to the Russian Revolution, Tugwell's

intellectual searching was threatening. Quickly, Tugwell was deemed the "radical" of the Roosevelt Administration, the communist "Red" who threatened the American way of life.<sup>30</sup> Throughout his years in public service, Tugwell could never escape from these accusations.

As the newly-appointed head of the RA, Tugwell brought some heavy baggage to the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, a project which, like others similar to it, already had raised suspicions about its "collectivist" nature. Tugwell's image was not helped when in November of 1935 it was announced the RA was planning "a rural collectivist community patterned along the lines of a Soviet state farm."<sup>31</sup> The specific project was Ak-Sarben Village in Nebraska and Tugwell aides described the program as "cooperative rather than communistic."<sup>32</sup> However, the damage was done. Tugwell and the RA were doing what many Americans had feared they would: setting up a "collectivist community along the lines of a Soviet state farm."

Another element now had been added to the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms effort. Even as land was being cleared, controversy was gathering, controversy totally unrelated to the lives of the tenants and workers who labored on the mountain and dreamed of better days to come. They were participants in one of the projects that to many Americans was "communistic." The world slowly was settling on Cumberland Mountain.

### Image Two: A New Home

During the summer of 1935, after moving to Cumberland Mountain, the Brewers and their two children lived in their temporary house. Their house was no more than a shack, consisting of two rooms with barely enough space for chairs or any type of furniture other than their beds.<sup>1</sup> (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 1, p. 111.) The Brewers considered themselves lucky, they said, to have moved to Cumberland Mountain in May, when the mountain weather was relatively pleasant. During the winter, families living in the project shacks had seen snow blow through the cracks of their houses and water left indoors overnight would be frozen by morning.

During the summer, the Brewers were notified they were selected for one of the farm units and would be moving into a permanent house. In September of 1935, the Brewers moved to their new house on forty acres of land. The house had two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a combination living/dining room. (For an example of a project house see Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 3, p. 113.) The house was unfinished and the Brewers themselves put down the flooring, constructed the walls and ceiling. Years later, Mr. Brewer recalled moving into the house for the first time: "It was a real good feeling. We thought we had something that we never had before. We'd always lived in somebody else's house when I farmed. And usually it was just an old shack of some kind. It was the first time we ever felt like we were going to have a place that was our own."<sup>2</sup> Mrs.



Brewer remembered: "We thought the house was grand, even though it wasn't even finished. When it was finished, it really was grand! We did a lot of work at that place fixing it up."<sup>3</sup> The Brewers lived in the house for the next nine years. They were living at the house when their third child was born. To the government the Brewers' project house and farm were identified as Unit 60. To the Brewers Unit 60 was the center of their lives.

## Chapter 4

### The Community Takes Shape

By the fall of 1935 some twenty-five houses had been completed at the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project. Importantly, specific plans for the project were being formulated. Participants were told they would be given the opportunity to buy a house and farm unit through a plan that the government devised. Plans for the project are outlined in a report that project leaders filed with the RA. The report, now housed in U. S. Library of Congress records, is entitled "Cumberland Mountain Farms: Outline of Plan and Procedure of Operation of the Cumberland Mountain Farms. Jackson County Rural Homesteading Project."<sup>1</sup>

The report states the purpose of the "Cumberland Mountain Farms Homesteading Project was: (1) To provide opportunities for self-maintenance for two hundred farm families who have been removed from relief rolls; (2) To clear and improve 8,000 acres of land recently acquired and build homes for rural relief families of Jackson County; (3) To improve the standards of living of these families by providing adequate housing, medical, recreational and home economics programs, and religious and cultural activities."<sup>2</sup> These were the goals approved by the local project leaders, the Alabama Relief Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Resettlement Administration.

The "self-maintenance" of the families was to be achieved by "training them in farming methods and rural home building while they are preparing for future homesteading."<sup>3</sup> The original report states that the "head of the household and other adult members of the families" would be given the opportunity to work full-time on the project.<sup>4</sup> However, only the head of the household would receive pay for his work. The other adult family members "would only receive credit for their labor which is recognized as payment on a farm and home in return for this work."<sup>5</sup> The report states that "the total labor cost" was to be charged to the project, and when completed, each farm would be appraised and assigned to the families performing the services. "Accumulated credit" was to be accepted "as downpayment on the house and farm," the report concluded.<sup>6</sup>

Project families were to buy their units with money made from farming. However, it was realized that it would take time for this plan to develop. Farmers could not farm until their land was cleared and this was a slow process. Until the families could establish themselves financially, the federal government some how would have to provide for them. At first, workers were given "grocery credit" for their food and were not paid cash. Later they were paid fifteen cents per hour in credit for a fifty-five hour week.<sup>7</sup> But once a family moved into their house and unit, they were not paid, and instead were given a yearly loan to operate their farm and manage

their home. In retrospect, federal officials themselves seemed confused about exactly how the financial aspect of the project would be arranged.

A critical question in regard to the project was in regard to how the families would be able to buy their units. Families later would remember they had been told their work would be credited toward payment on their unit.<sup>8</sup> An original RA document describing the project supports their claim. To resolve this issue, federal officials later would pay each family a lump sum (\$300) for work they had done on their unit, and at that point disallow credit for work.<sup>9</sup>

Even as plans for the project were crystallized, there remained a communication gap between the officials in Washington and the field workers. At the local, state, and federal levels, officials seemed especially uncertain concerning how land would be transferred to the farmer. Since programs such as Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms were new, operating details had not been specified. The confusion was compounded due to programs having been started by different officials and agencies within the government. Records of the project during these first years show ideas ricocheting through the federal government and shifting from one layer of bureaucracy to another, usually in an altered form.

Locally, the participants knew only that they were to be given a chance to own their own house and farm. A clear problem was that most of the tenants only heard the word "homestead" and assumed if

they lived on the land long enough, it would belong to them. Beyond that, they left the planning up to the government and did what they were asked. Others were reassured by project managers that the details would be worked out. Some at Cumberland Mountain, no doubt, certainly were given the advice that Rexford Tugwell had offered the project manager, Harry Ross, at Cumberland Farms on a site visit. "Quit worrying and keep working," Ross said Tugwell had advised him.<sup>10</sup>

After Tugwell and the RA took over FERA and Subsistence Homestead resettlement projects, the agency had to decide whether or not to continue with each project. In making this decision, the RA sought the advice of agricultural experts. The opinions from these experts universally concluded that Cumberland Mountain had good agricultural potential. In July of 1935, for example, C. A. Moore of the University of Tennessee's Agricultural Experiment Station, stated that "this project presents unusual agricultural opportunities to the homesteaders."<sup>11</sup> Moore's report to the RA noted that the prevailing soils of Cumberland Mountain were "fine, sandy loams with good retentive subsoils," only lacking in some phosphate and lime.<sup>12</sup> Moore wrote that the soil, rain, and weather conditions were especially favorable for raising Irish potatoes and that Cumberland Mountain was located at a potentially good distribution point for

potato marketing. Moore concluded that the project was "a proper utilization of funds appropriated for relief of low income families.

. . . "13

Such reports persuaded Tugwell and RA officials that the Cumberland Mountain project was worth continuing and consequently in late summer of 1935 the RA took over Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms.<sup>14</sup> RA maintained control of the project until the agency was dissolved in 1936 and its responsibilities were assumed by the Farm Security Administration. Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms was one of three farm community programs the RA and later the FSA maintained in Alabama. The other two were for blacks. They were Gee's Bend in Wilcox County and Prairie Farms in Macon County.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, which was begun by the FERA, the RA began both these projects. Both projects were smaller than Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. In regard to the number of participants and land that was involved, Gee's Bend consisted of 100 units, and Prairie Farms had thirty-four. Nationwide, the RA would begin or take over from Subsistence Homesteads and the FERA the development and management of forty farm communities.<sup>16</sup> The largest of these in terms of housing units were Roanoke Farms (294) in Halifax County, North Carolina; Dyess Colony (275) in Mississippi County, Arkansas; Plum Bayou (200) in Jefferson County, Arkansas; Penderlea Homesteads (195) in Pender County, North Carolina; and Cumberland Mountain (or Skyline) Farms (181).<sup>17</sup>

Yet the farm communities were not the only type projects with which officials in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, FERA, and RA experimented in the 1930s. Other types of resettlement programs were established, such as the industrial housing developments in or near cities. In these projects, workers were placed near jobs in industrial areas. Instead of through farming, these workers were to buy their home and land (usually a few acres) from their salaries and wages. Several of these industrial projects existed in Alabama, including Bankhead Farms at Jasper; Greenwood, Mount Olive, and Palmerdale homesteads near Birmingham; and Cahaba (or Trussville) Homesteads near Trussville. Throughout the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, there were twenty-six industrial projects operated at one time or another by the federal agencies.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, what were called "garden cities" were built. These were houses built in carefully designed and planned neighborhoods in or near cities and industry. Tugwell favored the "garden city" concept and believed workers needed to be relocated near cities where there were job opportunities. These "garden cities" included Greenbelt near Washington, D. C.; Greendale in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Greenhills in Cincinnati, Ohio; and Aberdeen Gardens in Newport News, Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

Federal agencies, primarily Subsistence Homesteads, FERA, and RA, established still other community projects. These included projects for "stranded" workers, such as coal miners, who had no

prospect for jobs. These projects combined resettlement near industry with part-time farming and included Arthurdale in Reedsville, West Virginia; Cumberland Homesteads in Crossville, Tennessee; Tygart Valley Homesteads in Elkins, West Virginia; and Westmoreland Homesteads in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Subsistence Homesteads began each of these projects.<sup>20</sup> The Cumberland Homesteads in Tennessee would cause great administrative confusion with Cumberland Mountain Farms because of the similarity in name, resulting in an eventual change in name of Cumberland Mountain Farms to Skyline Farms.

Additionally, there were co-operative farms established: Casa Grande Valley Farms in Pinal County, Arizona, and Lake Dick in Jefferson and Arkansas counties, Arkansas. There was a co-operative sugar-cane plantation in Louisiana--Terrebonne in Terrebonne Parish. The plantation was the home of some seventy-one families.<sup>21</sup> In these experimental programs, federal officials turned the management and operation of the projects over to the participants. There was a co-operative industrial project started by Jewish garment workers in Highstown, New Jersey, and first administered by Subsistence Homesteads. There were farm village projects in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Texas, projects in which participants could buy a house and three acres of land and work on co-operative farms. The largest of these was Woodlake in Texas, founded by the FERA in 1934, and supposedly serving as a model, along with Cumberland Mountain



(Skyline) Farms, for other FERA communities, especially in regard to their efforts to establish co-operatives.<sup>22</sup> There were even two forest homesteads in Kentucky and Wisconsin, the latter, the Drummond Project, for workers in a national forest.<sup>23</sup>

The breakdown of the American economic system had created an era of planned community development that was unparalleled in America. Community planners were permitted to act on their dreams, seemingly limited only by their imagination. America was being reshaped as never before, and the vision of a new America reached Alabama and Jackson County with the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project.

By the spring of 1936 Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms was booming with an estimated 1,186 people and 234 families living near the project, although many of these people were temporary construction workers.<sup>24</sup> The project was receiving increasing attention. Pat Jones, a reporter with the Birmingham News, after a visit to Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms wrote an article in which he described the project as "a Canaan hill on a hilltop."<sup>25</sup> Jones gave this description of the project:

"The route across the plateau follows a road through trees unblemished by signs of civilization. Paths and byways are missing. So are telephone and power lines, signboards and highway markers. A short distance from the shelf of the mountain, the first building comes in view. Tiny, new and

unpainted, it is located in a clearing among the trees. A small stable at the rear is surrounded by a picket fence, each part of which appears just off the sawmill. No garden spot stretches beyond the stable. Stumps, left to decay, stand on all sides of the buildings and to within a few feet of the front door. A mile or so farther, the path leads through an arch. Across the top of this white gateway is painted in red letters: "Cumberland Mountain Farms." Houses become more numerous. A few more winding turns among the forests, and a crowd, wearing faded overalls and odd-looking dresses, is seen standing in front of a conspicuous stone building. This is the community center."<sup>26</sup>

Jones described a community that rapidly was taking shape, one being built entirely from materials native to the area, except for nails, hinges, and other hardware supplies. Project sawmills produced the lumber for houses and buildings. Even the wooden shingles for the roofs were made on the project. J. A. Houston, a native craftsman, built the furniture with a home-made lathe.<sup>27</sup> Sandstone rock was quarried from the mountain and was used to build a school, the commissary, and the project manager's office.

At first, a temporary, wooden school was built for project children and three hundred children, ranging in age from seven to nineteen, attended the school. A "teacheridge" dormitory was built for the unmarried women teachers at the project.<sup>28</sup> Project officials

received a \$25,000 WPA grant to build the permanent school.<sup>29</sup> W. H. Kessler, a noted Southern landscape architect, served as the consultant on the design of the school.<sup>30</sup> When Jones visited Cumberland Mountain in the spring of 1936, perhaps the most attractive completed feature of the project was the community store. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 11, p. 121.) Bill Hoskins, the project masonry foreman, had crafted the commissary's sandstone structure, using techniques that he had learned from his father, who had learned the craft from his father in Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

Most important to the participating families were the houses that were being built. The houses ranged in size from three to five rooms, depending on the number of family members. The house styles varied. The first house completed was of four rooms, had a large porch with oak porch posts, a stone foundation, and a sandstone chimney for the fireplace. Other houses had different styles. Some were built with no porch, and a large single hall; and others were built with enclosed porches, overhanging gables and eaves, stone foundations and steps. Most houses, if painted, were green or red. At worse, the houses were somewhat box-like, but they generally were pleasing architecturally. The houses included a gas cooking range, kitchen sink, cabinets, and an ice box. Wells were drilled at each house to provide water. There was no indoor plumbing or electricity.

The houses were built at an average cost of \$600.<sup>32</sup> Project participants were paid to help construct the houses themselves, although the RA's Construction Division did most of the work. Project participants were responsible for "finishing the house out," which would include flooring, building walls, and installing doors and windows. That project participants themselves worked on their units was atypical of other RA projects, where the RA Construction Division usually built the houses entirely. However, Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) farms project officials, particularly Harry Ross, felt that involving the participants in the building process not only provided them with job opportunities, but created senses of accomplishment and belonging as well.<sup>33</sup> W. H. Kessler endorsed Ross' approach after a visit to the project by writing: "The people themselves are very proud of their houses and the families seem to be very happy and contented and the men are actually enjoying the work."<sup>34</sup> Kessler, officially a community manager with RA, went on to say that the workers at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms had ". . . learned to produce and use these materials (hard wood and sandstone) in a way that is remarkable" in constructing their homes.<sup>35</sup> Kessler believed that using the participants to build the houses was a "fine plan."<sup>36</sup>

Some RA inspectors questioned the quality of construction, Kessler noted, and wanted to bring in skilled workmen from the outside to build the houses. However, Kessler did not find the

inspectors' complaints to be justified, and he believed it would be a mistake to take the work responsibility away from the project participants and managers.<sup>37</sup> Will Alexander, at this time serving as assistant administrator to Tugwell, responded to Kessler's concerns by writing that it was important for the project to have quality construction and that he had received photographs which showed that some untreated lumber had warped.<sup>38</sup> Alexander, who would soon head the RA and later the Farm Security Administration, concluded that local workers could be used in construction, but that care should be taken to assure materials were not defective.<sup>39</sup>

The Alexander/Kessler exchange did not settle the issue, which as minor as it seems, was crucial in the overall planning of the project. Locally, Harry Ross believed it was important to have the participants build their own units, because this instilled a sense of cooperation and togetherness among the workers. Also, Ross believed the participants could identify more with a project that they had helped build.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, Ross also wanted the project participants to be credited for their work at the project, and then be able to use this credit toward the purchase of their unit. To the RA, using local labor was inefficient. RA believed that the Construction Division could accomplish the work better and less expensively.

A compromise of sorts on the issue was reached when it was agreed that the structure of the homes would be built by the Construction Division, then the participants would "finish" the home out. Participants were for a time credited for their work, but eventually this policy was changed, and the farmers were given a lump sum due them for their labor, as noted.<sup>41</sup> To Ross, this was a major set-back for the farmers in their quest for land ownership.<sup>42</sup>

By 1936 RA officials completed their plans for Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Critically important in this was the agricultural plan for the project. Agriculture was the lifeblood of the project: if the agricultural plan was not fulfilled, then the project participants would not be able to purchase their units. Officials in the Rural Resettlement Division (RRD) of RA finalized the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms agricultural plan.<sup>43</sup> Typically, a farm unit at the project, RRD officials theorized, should consist of fifty acres. Of these fifty acres, forty should be planted in crops and nine sown into pasture. For conservation reasons, one acre was to be left unused, according to the plan. Of the crop land, twelve acres were to be planted in cotton, which at ten cents per pound would provide the farmer with an estimated \$270 per year. Cotton seed sold at one cent a pound would bring in another \$54. According to this plan, cotton was to be a key cash crop for the project farmers.

Potatoes were the next most important crop, according to the plan. Three acres of Irish potatoes at a dollar a pound would bring in \$300 for the farm families. Corn (twelve acres), oats (ten acres), and wheat (two acres) was to be used primarily for livestock feed. Each farm unit would include livestock: two mules, one cow, fifty hens and 150 friars, one calf, a brood sow and twelve hogs. RRD officials projected that livestock would produce the farmer \$100 from eggs, \$80 from milk, \$37.50 from the sale of friars, \$10 from a calf sold each year, and \$144 from the the sale of hogs. Livestock sales, RRD officials predicted, would provide the farmer with \$271.50, to go along with the \$672.50 from crops, for a cash income of \$844 per year. However, by the time farm operating and living expenses were deducted, along with the repayment of an RA rehabilitation loan, the farmer could expect a balance at the end of the year of \$9. Obviously, farmers would be walking a financial tightrope in their efforts to purchase a farm unit.<sup>44</sup>

There was little margin for error in the plan, as the \$9 year-end balance indicates. Especially crucial was the \$324, more than a third of the anticipated yearly family income, that was to result from cotton farming. By the summer of 1936, land was still being cleared and no cotton had been planted. Indeed, there was some question as to whether the Cumberland Mountain soil and climate would

be suited for cotton even when the land was prepared. Neither was it certain that the ten cent per pound price would hold. Yet the economic success of the project would hinge on these intangibles.

By the summer of 1936, enthusiasm for Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms was high. County officials and project leaders decided to hold a "giant celebration" for the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms on the Fourth of July. The event was attended by 3,500 people, including Congressman-elect John Sparkman of the Eighth Congressional District, of which Cumberland Mountain was a part. Sparkman credited his Democratic Party and President Franklin Roosevelt with "putting the common man and woman back on the road to freedom and prosperity" through such projects as Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms.<sup>45</sup> Under Roosevelt, Sparkman said, "the Declaration of Independence had come to life."<sup>46</sup>

Sparkman, a young attorney from Huntsville, was just beginning a Congressional political career that would eventually see him elected to the U. S. Senate from Alabama and run as a Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate on the Adlai Stevenson ticket in 1952. Also present at the celebration was the county's probate judge, J. M. Money, who had been centrally instrumental in bringing the project to Jackson County. Ironically, in less than ten years Money would call on his long-time friend, Sparkman, to use his influence to keep some of the project participants from being forced to move from their homes.



William J. Davis represented the RA at the celebration. During his speech, Davis, an assistant regional director of RA, said that Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms was intended to give "those unfortunate citizens of this community a new start, a new deal, which, if properly utilized, should provide them and their children with many of the good things of life and an equal opportunity in the marketplace."<sup>47</sup> Davis finished his speech in a flourish, stating: "And now my message to you: on this mountain you have an opportunity such as has been given to few men and women--an opportunity to make a living, an opportunity to educate your children and to improve your own education, an opportunity to develop a new community whose future lies in the hands of your people and your children, a special and privileged opportunity in the marketplace."<sup>48</sup> On that hot Fourth of July day, the Skyline dream that Davis described did seem possible, and in time project participants almost would grasp the dream, only to have it slip through their hands like quicksilver.

These Fourth-of-July speeches closely matched the enthusiasm associated with Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms in 1936 and 1937, for there were great expectations for the project. Indeed the project manager, Harry Ross, talked of adding 30,000 to 40,000 more acres to the project and he envisioned one day mining the seam of coal underneath the ground on Cumberland Mountain.<sup>49</sup>

As the project pushed ahead, there were more organizational changes in Washington. Tugwell had been under persistent attack for his social and economic philosophy concerning rural America. Politically, the Republican Party had accused Tugwell and the RA of setting up "communist farms" with projects such as Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms.<sup>50</sup> Tugwell and the RA were an issue in the 1936 election, but obviously not enough of one to sway voters away from an astounding, landslide vote for Roosevelt over the Republican candidate Alfred Landon.<sup>51</sup> Soon after the election, Tugwell announced he was resigning as head of the RA to pursue private business interests. Tugwell's reasons for resigning were not explicitly stated at the time, although Paul Conkin would note years later that Tugwell implied he had been forced out by Roosevelt himself, not for personal reasons but for political expediency.<sup>52</sup> Tugwell, apparently, had simply become a political liability to the Roosevelt Administration and could not seem to crack the public perception that he favored communism. Tugwell's legacy to Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms was tremendous, as it was to all the community development programs. Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms would be set up on a cooperative basis, an approach envisioned by Tugwell. This effort to establish a cooperative community would be one of the key elements of the project, and indeed one of the most

significant experimental approaches to change the American economy in modern history. Even though Tugwell left the RA and community projects, his ideas and vision remained.

Tugwell, too, hand-picked his successor at RA, backing Will Alexander for the position. Alexander, more known nationally for his inter-racial efforts, continued the RA programs in the direction Tugwell had set. Under Alexander there would be no more new rural development programs, such as Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, for Tugwell and RA already had announced they would not begin any new community programs, but only continue those that already existed.<sup>53</sup> Still, Alexander and the RA had much work before them for few of the projects were near completion.

Another bureaucratic change occurred on December 31, 1936 when the RA, by executive order, became a permanent part of the Department of Agriculture instead of an independent agency within the organization. The move was considered a victory for the departing Tugwell, who wanted to see the work of the RA protected and continued and to Tugwell this was the surest way to accomplish that goal.<sup>54</sup> By the end of 1936, then, the organizational management of projects like Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms had stabilized. Alexander would not be the lightning rod that Tugwell had been, but, nonetheless, there were more changes and controversies soon to follow.

## Chapter 5

### Only the Pure in Heart

On Cumberland Mountain project participants and their supervisors continued to create their community, seemingly oblivious to events occurring at the federal level. As was typical of many programs in the Roosevelt Administration, the project had at first more energy and activity than clearly defined goals. However, as the community developed, officials sharpened the original plans for the project.<sup>1</sup> Specific goals were defined, a participant selection process was developed, cooperative associations were created, and a procedure for the transference and purchase of land by the farm tenants was established. The end result was a minutely designed and intricately planned rural community which utilized, perhaps to an extent never before or since, the full resources of the federal government in economic and social planning and rural rehabilitation.

Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms involved much more than just economic rehabilitation for tenant farmers. The project served as a real-life laboratory for federal officials to enact some of the programs that had been proposed to improve the quality of life for rural Americans. During the 1930s, rural sociologists and academicians affected social policy to a degree perhaps never before or since reached in American government, as is evident in the case of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Some academicians even assumed policy-making, administrative roles in the Roosevelt Administration.

Rural sociologist Carl Taylor, for example, in 1926 had written Rural Sociology: In Its Economic, Historical and Psychological Aspects.<sup>2</sup> In this book Taylor graphically described a rural America that was riddled with poverty, lacked adequate health care, had inadequate schools for children, and offered few social and recreational activities. In 1935 Taylor became director of the Rural Resettlement Division, a part of Tugwell's RA. As director of the RRD, Taylor initiated programs at the resettlement projects to deal with problems he had described as a sociologist. Indeed, improving health care, education, and the overall quality of life became goals of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Project officials even went so far at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms as to build a "model home" so that home economists could demonstrate what a "well ordered" home should be like.<sup>3</sup>

A key to the success of the project were the characteristics of the farm families who were chosen to participate. Federal officials wanted families who would adapt and benefit from the project. Therefore, a careful selection process was necessary. By the time Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms was established, there already existed federal guidelines for selecting resettlement project families. First, the families to be chosen had to be listed as Group II families on the relief rolls. These were the families most in

need of rehabilitation and who lacked land or equipment to farm. At the beginning of the project there were 500 Group II families in Jackson County, consisting of 2,500-3,000 people.<sup>4</sup>

There were additional stipulations about what criteria these Group II families should meet in order to be accepted into the project. Taken into consideration were: (1) does the family have farm experience; (2) are all members of the family willing to live in a rural community; (3) are the men and women of the project capable of performing the physical work involved in farming; and (4) are the families young enough to do the work necessary to complete a long-term contract agreement.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, there were other standards on which the families were to be assessed. Families should have a good employment record, "indicating steadiness and initiative," and families were sought that enjoyed a "good reputation" and name within their communities.<sup>6</sup> Farmers with skills as blacksmiths, truck drivers, carpenters, painters, or stone masons also were sought, for they would be needed to help build the project.

Participants were chosen primarily from Jackson County. There were enough people on the county's relief rolls to supply the project, and also it was believed that the project would be more stable if participants had roots in the area. The exception to this was that some families were brought from Coffee County, Alabama, to Cumberland Mountain. These families said that the government had promised them farms at a work-relief program there. The compromise

to the situation was to bring them to the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms Project.<sup>7</sup> There is no record of the exact number of families that came from Coffee County, but it appears to have been small.

Another criteria for the project was that the participants be white. There was no racial integration at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. The Roosevelt Administration followed the racial status quo in the South, and maintained segregated projects. The federal government did establish projects for blacks, such as Gee's Bend. No doubt, the integration of projects would have been difficult in the South during the 1930s, especially given the strong racial prejudices that existed.

The criteria established for acceptance into the project were to be applied in the formal selection process used at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. This process began with the director of relief, Harry Ross, and a trained social worker, who was to be provided by the county. Ross and the social worker would review case records in the county relief papers and from these select prospective participants to interview. If the applicant were considered to be a potential participant, then the director of relief submitted the case to the Jackson County Relief Committee, which was composed of the chair of the committee, the director of relief, the director of work, the farm demonstration agent, the home demonstration agent, a businessperson, and a farmer.<sup>8</sup> After their screening, if an

applicant was selected, the committee would recommend to the project manager the family be accepted into the project. The process was intended to assure that capable, hard-working families participated in the project.

Although the guidelines and selection process seemed to have been followed generally, sometimes families were accepted for the project without going through the process. Perhaps this could be expected in an organization as politically attuned as was Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Sometimes a person with political influence could see to it that a certain family was selected. Or the project manager might look for an individual with a certain skill, such as a musician or baseball player, who although lacking other criteria, was seen as an asset to the project.<sup>9</sup> Yet these individuals usually weren't selected as farmers. But rather, they were chosen for one of the "subsistence homes" on the project. These were houses with only several acres of land that served as homes for project participants who worked as truck drivers, carpenters, cooks, painters, furniture-makers, or had other skills. The project manager had great latitude in selecting these workers for the project.<sup>10</sup>

Data compiled by the FSA reveals some other puzzling exceptions to the criteria established to be chosen for the project. In analyzing why the settlers needed assistance, the FSA report concluded that about half were selected because of poor farm conditions. These families lived on farms that were too small or



infertile to be productive. Another thirty percent were selected because they were poor farm managers or lacked sufficient agricultural training to be self-sufficient and were chosen to learn these skills at the project. Finally, and perhaps the most remarkable, fifteen percent were chosen because they were destitute as a "result of illnesses and physical handicaps."<sup>11</sup> Although the RA/FSA's intentions were certainly humane and compassionate in selecting participants with "illnesses and physical handicaps" for the project, at the same time these individuals could not be expected to perform the great physical labor necessary to make their farm units profitable. Misdirected compassion could easily become bureaucratic cruelty if the selected participants were asked to do work they were not physically capable of accomplishing. Early in the project, the poor physical health of some of the participants was noted by one of the Special Skills Division workers, who facetiously suggested that "hospitalization rather than resettlement" might be in order for some of the project participants.<sup>12</sup>

Taken as a whole, it does appear that the selection criteria were followed at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. For example, a RA 1937 study by C. P. Loomis and D. M. Davidson found that the population on seven of rural communities, including Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, was young compared to the rural population in general.<sup>13</sup> Loomis and Davidson found that approximately nine percent of males and seven percent of females in rural America were

over sixty years of age.<sup>14</sup> But in the RA-managed rural communities, less than one percent of either sex was over sixty.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, there was a smaller percentage of 45-60 year olds at the resettlement projects than in the rural population at large. Most participating families were, then, relatively young, as the guidelines had determined they be. Loomis and Davidson also found that on Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) farms the average family size was five. Moreover, since parents were young, their children were also, with about one half of the project children in the rural communities being under fifteen.<sup>16</sup>

However, again there were apparent exceptions to the age profile at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. A report later compiled by the FSA found that the range in the age of husbands at the project was from seventeen to eighty, and that of the wives sixteen to sixty-four.<sup>17</sup> The lower and upper ages, although they were atypical, were obvious problems in that an eighty-year-old farmer could not be expected to pay off a forty-year purchase contract, and seventeen was a very young age at which to be managing a new farm. Although most families fell within the guidelines set out by the FERA, RA, and FSA, apparently somewhere along the line exceptions were made. Certainly it is important to consider that when gauging the overall success of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms, it was the project officials who chose the participants.

In addition to establishing a selection process for the project, officials by late 1936 had set forth the legal structure of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Importantly, the RA/FSA, following Tugwell's direction, would stress the cooperative aspect of the project. In his analysis of the American economic order, Tugwell along with co-authors Stryker and Munro, contended that cooperatives were under-utilized in the United States. Cooperatives were based on cooperation, the authors maintained, which was simply "working together."<sup>18</sup> Tugwell, Stryker, and Munro pointed that there were three essential classifications of economic cooperatives: cooperative credit and banking associations, cooperative associations for production, and associations of producers to sell cooperatively either raw materials or finished products.<sup>19</sup> World-wide the cooperative movement was so formidable that it could not be dismissed as "merely a Utopian dream," the authors asserted.<sup>20</sup> Cooperatives let members pool resources and buy in volume in amounts large enough to reduce costs. To many economists at the time, the cooperative approach was needed, because unbridled individualism, and the competition it caused, had been a factor in bringing about the Depression.

Tugwell, Stryker, and Munro seemingly were aware that strong advocacy for cooperatives might bring on charges of socialism and anti-capitalism. Consequently, they argued that cooperatives were actually a part of the world movement toward democracy, for

cooperatives localized "the control of social functions" and gave each individual "an equal say with every other individual concerning the policies proposed and the operations carried on."<sup>21</sup> For Tugwell, establishing cooperatives was a cornerstone of his economic philosophy. Paul Conkin described Tugwell's desire for a collectivized, cooperative society to be "almost a religion."<sup>22</sup> Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms would reflect this philosophy, as would other rural communities touched by the RA.

The cooperative concept, as expressed by Tugwell, Stryker and Munro, was applied to the legal and social structure of Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. In May 1936 the first of the cooperative association at the project was organized. It was named the Cumberland Farms Cooperative Association (CFCA) and was formed as a nonprofit organization without capital stock.<sup>23</sup> The cooperation was established legally based on an unusual Alabama law (Alabama Code of 1928, Article 9, Section 7046) that had been passed specifically to permit an Alabama town, Fairhope, to become a single tax colony, one in which a flat tax was levied on all residents. The Alabama law permitted ten or more persons to establish nonprofit cooperatives for "mutual benefit." The CFCA was formed, according to probated records, for "the rehabilitation of the members," primarily through agricultural pursuits.<sup>24</sup> The CFCA also by terms of incorporation was

authorized to borrow unlimited money, goods, or services from the RA or other federal or state agencies. Membership in this Cooperative was open to all producers in the project for a one dollar fee.<sup>25</sup>

With a loan of \$15,000 from the RA, the CFCA began operations in January of 1937. The Cooperative, at first, assumed control of and operated the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms store, the community commissary that had been opened originally by the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. Store managers bought provisions and sold them to project participants at cost, plus a ten percent operating fee.<sup>26</sup> Later the Cooperative branched out into other activities, including purchasing and marketing farm products from the members, and managing a workshop, garage, blacksmith shop, and canning plant.

Presumably, the federal officials who devised the cooperative plan envisioned the participants themselves making operating decisions at some point. However, this never happened, for project officials dominated the cooperation. Harry Ross, the project manager, was the first director of the cooperative. Ross, along with the project bookkeeper/secretary, and three farm participants served on the first Cooperative Board of Directors.<sup>27</sup> The project participants were leaders in name only. The cooperative effort was more of a paper one with the project managers and officials actually

making the decisions. As will be seen, the tenants, as individualistic Americans, did not always take well to the autocratic nature of the project.

The cooperative concept was utilized further at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms when in May of 1937 another cooperative, the Skyline Farms Homestead Association (SFHA), was incorporated. The Homestead Association, as it was called, had more far-reaching powers than the CFCA. It was incorporated to "rehabilitate and render self-supporting the families (rural families of low income) by assisting or participating in the establishment, development and maintenance of farms, homes and other facilities. . ."28 The Homestead Association, under its laws of incorporation, could "acquire or assist in acquiring" buildings, plants, mills, factories, industries, commercial establishments, farms pasturages, homesteads, and community and cooperative enterprises.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the Homestead Association was empowered to "sell, lease, mortgage, (and) pledge" any real property owned by the Cooperative.<sup>30</sup> This included the lease and purchase of the farm houses and units.

The Homestead Cooperative had the power to convey the project property to the selected participants. In addition to this authority, the Homestead Association was authorized to provide power, light, and gas and water services to the project.<sup>31</sup> As with the CFCA, incorporation papers show that the officers and directors of the Homestead Association were led by project managers, including

Ross and the project purchasing agent. William J. Davis, the assistant in the RA's regional office in Atlanta who spoke at the Fourth of July Celebration, even was an officer, although he did not live at the project.<sup>32</sup> Project participants did hold cooperative meetings, however, at which community matters were discussed. Members of the Association even had their own secret password--the word "Home."<sup>33</sup>

The RA loaned the Homestead Association \$27,300. The money was to be used to build a cotton gin and seed house, a general warehouse, potato curing house, potato storage warehouse, syrup mill, machine shop and garage, feed and grist mill, canning plant, and marketing shed. With the loan from the government the Homestead Association was off and running. The project had the funds to create the economic cooperative that federal officials, such as Tugwell, believed would reshape rural America.

Additionally, another cooperative association was formed in 1938--the Skyline Industrial Company (SIC). This cooperative was organized to build a factory at the project with a \$490,000 loan from the federal government. The factory building and equipment were owned by the cooperative and were leased to the Dexdale Hosiery Mills of Landsdale, Pennsylvania. An operating company, owned jointly by the cooperative and Dexdale, was formed to supervise plant operations, with Dexdale owning fifty-one percent of the stock and the cooperation forty-nine percent.<sup>34</sup> Several other factories were

established at RA/FSA community development programs. These would be the most controversial of all community development programs. Although the factories were operated by private companies, the mechanism which created them, a cooperative actually building a factory, struck too much of socialism to many Americans. However, the RA and FSA decided that the factories were needed to boost the local economies of the projects. Within two years of the establishment of the Skyline Industrial Company, the factory opened at the project.

Other services were provided at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) farms on a cooperative basis, although these organizations were never legally incorporated. There was a Skyline Health Association, which provided health care to members. Each member was to contribute \$25 per year for ordinary health care. In reality, the participating families usually paid their yearly fee with a grant from the RA/FSA. The organization provided for a full-time nurse at the project and a physician part-time. Essentially, the participants in the Skyline Health Association were paying a fixed fee in advance for their medical care. As such, the Skyline Health Association was one of the first prepaid type programs, or Health Maintenance Organizations (HMO), in the United States, having been developed concurrently with the Kaiser-Permanente HMO in California and the Health Insurance Program of New York in the 1930s.<sup>35</sup>



Furthermore, the Skyline Veterinary Association operated on a cooperative basis. Project participants contributed \$5 per year to this organization and veterinary needs were provided. The idea of cooperative veterinary associations had been advanced by many agricultural economists as a means to reducing veterinarian costs. At Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms the idea was implemented.

The cooperative approach was more than just a theory at the project. The cooperative concept, so-long admired by rural sociologists and economists, was applied at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. Through this experience it was thought that farm production and marketing could be maximized, the economy developed, and social service needs fulfilled. Only in other rural development programs had the federal government ever involved itself in social planning to the extent that it did at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms.

In addition to establishing a selection process and cooperatives, the RA/FSA devised a procedure through which the participating families were to buy their home and farm. At first, the head of the household signed a contract entitled "Lease of Land With Option For Renewel or Purchase"<sup>36</sup> In this contract the farmer agreed to lease the unit at a fixed rate from the Skyline Farms Homestead Association. In signing the lease, the farmer agreed to: (1) continuously use the property; (2) comply in planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops, livestock, and dairy enterprises

as determined by the Skyline Farms Homesteads Cooperative; (3) maintain the property in good condition and repair for agricultural purposes--free of weeds, brush, washes and gullies; (4) not commit or permit any unlawful acts, activities or nuisances on the property; (5) not cut timber, remove gravel or sand from the property without the consent of the Cooperative; (6) not demolish or change the location of principal buildings or structures or erect new ones on the property; (7) not sublet any part of the property or "mortgage or encumber" any crops, livestock, tools, or farm equipment on the property; (8) give the Cooperative the right to improve the property through soil erosion prevention programs or alterations and repairs; and (9) grant the Cooperative the right to terminate the lease within ten days notice if any terms of the contract were violated.<sup>37</sup>

Once the farm family had meet the terms of the rent/lease agreement and proven itself financially, a "Purchase" contract was to be signed. This contract, it was understood, was entered into when the family had paid twenty-five percent of the assessed value of the land. The "Purchase" contract included most of the stipulations of the "Lease" contract, including an agreement to plant only what the Cooperative determined, to maintain the property for agricultural purposes, to not commit unlawful acts, activities or nuisances on the property, not remove timber, alter or change buildings, and not to lease or mortgage any part of the land or farm equipment without the Cooperative's consent. Upon signing the lease, the farmer acquired

title to the property, but nonetheless was under the obligations of the "Purchase" contract. The farm family in essence would not have full control of their property for forty years. Additionally, under the "Purchase" contract the farmer would agree to notify the Cooperative of his/her desire to sell the property, and then the Cooperative had sixty days to act on it's option to buy the unit.<sup>38</sup>

To make certain that each family knew the intent of the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms Project, federal officials provided them with a statement, to be signed by both the husband and wife, acknowledging that the purpose and regulations of the project had been fully explained to them. In the one-page statement, the families agreed to "make every effort" to comply with all financial obligations and to fulfill their share of cooperative activities, including making medical payments to the health association. They agreed to operate their farms in such a way that within a period of time they would no longer need government loans. They agreed to obtain all financial assistance from the government, and not from outside sources, thus eliminating any potential conflicting obligations. They agreed to operate the farm based on the instructions of the project home and farm supervisors. They agreed to keep their home and surroundings neat and clean, and to maintain terraces, fences, and buildings. They agreed not to sublet the land or hire labor other than seasonal workers. They agreed to refrain from the excessive use of intoxicants, drugs or "anything else that

will interfere with the success of the program."<sup>39</sup> Finally, the selected participants agreed to "make every effort to measure up to the moral and social standards of the project, and participate in and support programs for the up-building and betterment of my family and community."<sup>40</sup> To document that all this was done, the families agreed to keep a farm and home record book.

Critically important to the project was the issue of the lease/purchase price of each unit and how much to charge for payments. The matter was debated intently within the RA and later the FSA. E. E. Agger, an RA assistant administrator, concluded that based on studies by RA's Community Organization and Maintenance Section, the average rental/purchase payment at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms should be \$16.70 per month.<sup>41</sup> However, he stated that since the project was not in full operation at this time (1937) a sliding scale should be used, beginning with a \$10 per month payment the first year, \$13.50 per month the second year, and then \$16.70 per month the third year.<sup>42</sup> Robert Hudgens, RA Southeastern Regional Director, disagreed with Agger, contending that the farmers at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms would not be able to pay even the lesser amount (\$10 per month) given the uncompleted status of the project.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the RA/FSA worked out a plan for what the farm participants would pay. Costs were based not only on the houses and farms, but for constructing the community buildings, including the school and commissary, and administrative and engineering costs.<sup>44</sup> Essentially, participants were being asked to pay for the project.

Costs per farm unit were broken down as follows: four-room house, well, sanitary privys: \$629.84; Improvement on units, including building a poultry house, corn-crib, stable, and fencing: \$257.00; land (forty acres at \$7.50 per acre): \$300; community developments, including the administrator's building, men and women's workshop and equipment, commissary, warehouse, school, community dwellings, electric lines, sewerage: \$188.93; administrative and engineering expense: \$95.57; and transfer of units to owners upon completion of the project: \$45. The total amount owned on each unit was \$1,496.34 and the farm families would be credited with \$300 for their work. Thus, the net owed per family upon the completion of their unit would be \$1,196.34.<sup>45</sup>

A liquidation plan was formulated that farm families would follow to pay for their units. Payments were established on a sliding scale, beginning at \$92.15 the first year and decreasing over a twenty-seven year period to \$46.32.<sup>46</sup> The amount charged would be effected by the size of the unit and the time the lease/purchase agreement was made. For a typical forty-acre unit, then farm families would be charged \$92.15 per year, reduced to \$76.20 by the

tenth year, \$58.48 the twentieth year, then \$46.32 by the twenty-seventh and final year. One of the original farm participants confirms that this was the approximate initial yearly charge for his families' unit. "About \$100 per year," is how much he remembers being charged for his unit.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, as Hudgens predicted, he, like other participants, would not be able to meet those payments.

Another legal change was made in the project when the name Cumberland Mountain Farms was changed officially to Skyline Farms. The name was changed because Cumberland Mountain Farms and Cumberland Homesteads in Crossville, Tennessee, often had been confused, particularly within the federal bureaucracy. The RA had been assigned the management of both the Cumberland Homesteads and the Cumberland Mountain Farms project, and since the Cumberland Homesteads was established first, Cumberland Mountain Farms was chosen for a name change.

RA officials held a contest to select a new name for the project, and many were suggested, including, Alabama Mountain Farms, Alabama Skyline Farms, Alto, Alto Farms, Roosevelt Happy Farms, Jackson Trail Farms, Jackson County Farms, Evergreen Farms, Rossville and Rossville Farms.<sup>48</sup> Alto and Alto Farms were suggested based on the location of the community of Alto on Cumberland Mountain, and the names Rossville and Rossville Farms reflect Harry Ross' important role in the project. In January of 1937 Robert W. Hudgens, the

Southeastern regional director of RA, chose Skyline Farms as the new name of the project.<sup>49</sup> The name Skyline was chosen because officials felt that the word "Skyline" would be attractive in marketing potatoes grown at the project. Typically, there was some confusion within the RA about what name Hudgens actually had chosen and in fact for several days the project was referred to as Alto Farms within the bureaucracy.<sup>50</sup>

By 1937 government officials felt confident enough to even expand the size of the Skyline Farms project. Another 4,947 acres of land was leased with an option to buy from the Pierce Corporation. In 1938 the option was exercised at \$7.50 per acre. Federal officials already had acted on their option to buy the original land that had been leased for the project. Thus, the total acreage of the project increased to 12,987, bought for a total price of \$96,123.<sup>51</sup> This would be the final size of the project.

At the federal level once again there were changes taking place that would effect Skyline Farms. This time, the changes centered around the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. This legislation was sponsored by U. S. Senator John H. Bankhead, a Democrat from Alabama, and U. S. House of Representative member Marvin Jones, a Democrat from Texas. Both men had sponsored legislation in Congress to help farmers, particularly tenant farmers.

Bankhead was a puzzle to some of the liberal New Dealers. To most he was a conservative, having served as a successful corporate attorney for steel interests before being elected to the U.S. Senate, and then becoming an effective spokesman for the "cotton bloc" in the Senate. In the Senate Bankhead even had been active in fighting anti-lynching legislation.<sup>52</sup> Yet Bankhead pushed innovative legislation, such as the subsistence homestead bill, to assist deprived American tenant farmers. Sidney Baldwin, in his outstanding history of the FSA, reconciles these contradictions in Bankhead's ideas by saying that Bankhead was actually a political moderate who supported liberal New Deal programs, while at the same time having to balance his "allegiance to a conservative Southern constituency."<sup>53</sup>

Jones, too, posed the same contradictions as did Bankhead. He was born on a small cotton farm in Texas, near the Oklahoma border, and knew poverty first-hand. Jones had worked as a cotton farm tenant before putting himself through Southwestern University (now Southern Methodist University) and the University of Texas Law School. According to Baldwin, Jones was an ardent believer in the agrarian ideal and had an "abiding belief in the value of farming and rural life."<sup>54</sup>

Jones and Bankhead combined their efforts into the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Bill, legislation which was first introduced in Congress in 1935. However, without strong support from President Roosevelt, the bill did not pass. By 1937 Roosevelt had



given his full endorsement and support to a revised Bankhead-Jones Bill, and, according to Baldwin, the problem of farm tenancy had become a burning issue in America at this time. With Roosevelt's backing and with the seemingly national sense of mission to do something about the plight of American tenant farmers, in 1937 the legislation passed.<sup>55</sup>

Nationally, there were mixed reviews of the legislation, depending primarily on the political spectrum from which it was analyzed. For many of the liberal New Dealers, the legislation did not go far enough in the procedures it established to end rural poverty. They found very little new in the approach that the Bankhead-Jones Act established and felt that the monetary commitment was insufficient to make even a dent on the problem. To more conservative members of Congress, the legislation was a further example the government was intruding into the private economy and personal lives of Americans.

Included among the provisions of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act were:

1. Provide loans to assist tenants, sharecroppers, and farm laborers in becoming farm owners and operators;
2. Assist farmers through loans in buying livestock, farm equipment, supplies and other needs, refinancing, indebtedness and for family subsistence;
3. And a submarginal land program of conservation and utilization, including land retirement and development.<sup>56</sup>

Following the passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, President Roosevelt directed Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace to transfer operations of the Resettlement Administration to conform to provisions of the legislation.<sup>57</sup> Wallace, in turn, issued a memorandum changing the name of the Resettlement Administration to the Farm Security Administration and he assigned to it the relevant functions of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act.<sup>58</sup> Since "resettlement" was only a part of what the Resettlement Administration was doing already, Wallace felt that a change in name of the agency was in order.

At first, the change was one in name only. The personnel and responsibilities of the RA and the FSA essentially were the same. Will Alexander, director of the RA, became director of the FSA. The FSA continued the activities of the RA, including helping tenants become landowners through loans, refinancing and rehabilitating small

farmers who were in danger of losing their land, withdrawing submarginal land from cultivation, and helping migrant workers, and managing the community development programs, such as Skyline Farms. Later, Wallace created the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), which took over actual physical land management from the FSA. The BAE was then responsible for the various conservation projects and the FSA, as Baldwin described it, concentrated on the "people" aspect of the farm problem.<sup>59</sup>

The word "security" in the Farm Security Administration symbolized the prevailing attitude of American Congress at the time. Congress wanted to "secure" farm life in the country. The agrarian ideal still held a powerful sway over the American mind. Critics of the FSA contended that the agency did not have enough authority to end rural poverty. Nothing new, it was contended, was created in the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, only a recognition of the farm problem. Actual farm policy remained the same. The FSA, it was contended, was simply a "banking institution," which would make loans to the farmers most likely able to repay, and ignore the vast numbers of the rural poor who lived in poverty. The goals of FSA, it was maintained, were too limited and offered nothing new. What was needed was a far-reaching land reform program which would get the government involved in land-use planning and control and even land

ownership, much like what had already been attempted on Cumberland Mountain with the Skyline Farms project and other rural development programs.

Yet since the RA had been formed, there was a moratorium on establishing any new resettlement projects, and the creation of the FSA did not change that. The FSA could only continue what had been begun on Cumberland Mountain. Moreover, with the creation of the FSA and the limited authority it was granted, Skyline Farms and the rural resettlement community programs suddenly had become management relics. These programs sprang from the early 1930s when land-use policy, as forwarded by Tugwell, was more in favor. This land-use policy had been based on a social vision of rural America that included utopian-type rural communities and villages operating on a cooperative basis. Now the emphasis was not in detailed land-use and social planning and development, but rather in making loans to farmers that they could use to pull themselves out of poverty.

The policy shifts and swirls and power struggles in Washington carried the Skyline Farms participants along with them like a river, a river whose flow the farmers did not control, or little understood. During the first years of the project, the river seemed steady and sure and to the participants the flow was destined to carry them away from the poverty that they had known. This feeling is conveyed in the community newspaper that had been established at the project. In it a Skyline Farms participant wrote: "We people on Cumberland Farms

are rich in many ways. We have a home, a farm, a job, a reasonable amount of security against the wolf, and a family to enjoy. We have all the necessities and many of the luxuries of life. We have happiness, which is the richest blessing of all the blessings. Only happy people are rich."<sup>60</sup>

For the Skyline participants, then, the future looked bright during the early days of the project. The participants even had their own slogan for their project--"Only the Pure in Heart."<sup>61</sup> The participants felt a special sense of mission as they built a new life and world out of the wilderness on the mountain. All that was needed now was time, time to see the dream fulfilled.

## Chapter 6

### The Farms in Photographs

When the Resettlement Administration was established, Rex Tugwell realized that it would be controversial. Threatening fires burned within and around the agency. Within the federal bureaucracy itself, some personnel saw the newly-created agency as an interloper into their domains.<sup>1</sup> Workers within the Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, for example, sometimes perceived the RA as threatening to their power base.<sup>2</sup> Yet the most pointed, intense opposition to Tugwell and the RA came from critics of the Roosevelt Administration and his New Deal programs. Critics said these programs were threats to the traditional American free enterprise system.<sup>3</sup> Because of their cooperative aspects and close involvement into the lives of participants, the RA resettlement programs often were compared to Russian collectives. The resettlement projects, such as Skyline Farms, became lightning rods for the critics' wrath.

In response to the public image problem this opposition created for the RA, Tugwell countered by developing an Information Division within the organization. This Information Division tried to offset critics' charges against the RA by showing what exactly the agency was accomplishing. In doing this, of course, the Information Division usually placed the RA in the best possible light. This Information Division, directed by John Franklin Carter, consisted of

five sections: (1) an editorial section to handle all news releases; (2) a special publications section to provide information and articles to magazines and other periodicals; (3) a radio department to release broadcast information; (4) a documentary film section; and (5) a photographic section.<sup>4</sup>

The Information Division proved itself to be extremely active. Pare Lorenz, for example, was chosen to produce documentary films for the RA and the result was "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and "The River," two landmark productions in the history of American documentary films, not only because their information/propaganda value, but also due to their outstanding artistic and technical quality. Ironically, Lorenz' "The River" dealt with the effort of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the federal government to harness and control the Tennessee River, which flowed just south of Cumberland Mountain.

The Photographic Division of the Information Service would most directly effect Skyline Farms. As a whole, photographers in this division would create what is perhaps the most artistic, imaginative, and humanistic body of work in the history of American photography. To head the Photographic Division Tugwell turned to one of his former students at Columbia University, Roy Stryker, who in 1935 was working as an economics professor at Columbia. Stryker had been considered somewhat of a radical at Columbia, because of his teaching methods. He refused to use a textbook in his economics courses and instead

took his students to labor meetings, banks, produce markets, slaughter houses, museums and slums.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Stryker was fascinated by the use of photographs as teaching aids. He later said: "I got impatient because the bright boys at Columbia had never seen a rag doll, a corn tester, or an old dasher churn. I dug up pictures to show city boys things that every farm boy already knows about."<sup>6</sup>

Impressed by Stryker's use of photography in economics, Tugwell asked Stryker to co-author his book on American economic life, with Stryker concentrating on the illustrations and photographs. Stryker, then, became a co-author along with Tugwell and Thomas Munro of a book that Stryker would later say that the economists called sociology and the sociologists called a "collection of pictures."<sup>7</sup> After rising through the ranks of the federal bureaucracy, Tugwell then called on his protege Stryker to head the Historical Division of the RA, which included the photography department of the Information Division. Stryker's job description was vague. It read that he was to: ". . . direct the activities of investigators, photographers, economists, sociologists and statisticians engaged in the accumulation and compilations of reports. . . statistics, photographic material, vital statistics, agricultural surveys, maps and sketches necessary to make accurate descriptions of the various. . . phases of the Resettlement Administration, particularly with regard to the historical, sociological and economic aspects of the



several programs and their accomplishments."<sup>8</sup> The assignment was general enough to permit Stryker to do as he pleased in his work, which was to Stryker's liking.

As far as the technology of photography was concerned, Stryker knew very little. Stryker himself was not an accomplished photographer. He claimed to have stopped taking photographs altogether after his aunt got better pictures than he did at a family reunion with "her ten-dollar Brownie," while he used a state-of-the-art Leica. "I never snapped a shutter after that," Stryker said.<sup>9</sup> Despite his technical deficiencies, Stryker knew photographs, and had an intuitive, artistic touch and sense about what were great pictures, just as did the staff of photographers that Stryker hired. Tugwell had told Stryker that he wanted his photographers through their work to introduce "Americans to America."<sup>10</sup> This is what Stryker set out to accomplish.

Prior to this, various government agencies had made some outstanding photography collections of various American subjects, including Matthew Brady's Civil War shots, photographs of the West by the Bureau of Reclamation, pictures by the Forest Service of timberlands, and the Extension Services' pictures of American pre-World War I agriculture. But as Stryker and co-author Nancy Wood noted in their book In This Proud Land, there had been nothing in previous collections of American photographic subjects, except in

Brady's work, "that would really move people."<sup>11</sup> Stryker and his ingenious collection of photographers were to change that and in so doing elevate the standards of American photography to new heights.

Stryker would direct the photography project from July 1935 to October of 1943. He was in charge as the program shifted from the RA to the FSA to the Office of War Information (OWI). During this time photographers under Stryker's supervision made some 270,000 pictures. Among the photographers who worked for Stryker were Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Jack Delano, Marion Post Wolcott, Gordon Parks, John Vachon, Ben Shahn, Carl Mydans, and Arthur Rothstein.

Working out of his office in Washington and home on Connecticut Avenue in the city, Stryker provided detailed instructions to his photographers about pictures that he wanted them to take. Yet at the same time, he gave them freedom to pursue their art. It was Stryker's vision that bound the photography project and created a body of work that is art, sociology, journalism, economics, and history combined.

Stryker himself was surprised at the results of his project. He later recalled: ". . . what pictures they were. I had no idea what was going to happen. I expected competence. I did not expect to be shocked at what began to come across my desk. The first three men that went out--Carl Mydans, Walker Evans and Ben Shahn--began sending in some astounding stuff that first fall, about the same time that I saw the great work Dorothea Lange was doing in California and

decided to hire her. Then Arthur Rothstein, who had set up the lab, started taking pictures. Every day was for me an education and a revelation. I could hardly wait to get to the mail in the morning."<sup>12</sup> FSA photographers, guided by Stryker, crossed the United States to capture not just the face of the nation, but its spirit as well.

What these photographers accomplished was remarkable. Their photographs in time have become etched in the American mind, such as Dorothea Lange's photograph of the face of a migrant woman and her children, perhaps as the most identifiable photograph of the Depression era, one that has come to symbolize the period. Russell Lee in his work showed the proud and defiant resoluteness of Americans in the Southwest, particularly Texas and New Mexico, as the people there went on with their lives during the Depression. John Vachon's pictures conveyed the stark beauty of the Great Plains and captured the strong-will of the people who forged out their living in the region. There were city scenes taken by Marion Post Wolcott and Jack Delano, as well as their photographs of rural America, including Wolcott's pictures of the Gee's Bend project in Alabama, to go along with the photographs taken there by Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange. Walker Evans' photographs of tenant farmers and rural scenes in Hale County, Alabama were to become a part of James Agee's Let Us

Now Praise Famous Men. Evans' photographs are considered the most artistic of all the FSA works and served as a perfect visual parallel to Agee's lyrical words.

Of the FSA photographers, it was Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, and Ben Shahn who photographed Skyline Farms. As a whole, their works there capture the essence of the project in its early stages, and like other pictures made by the FSA photographers, the Skyline images often cross into the realm of art, capturing the tone, mood, and emotions of a people in a particular time and place.

The FSA photographers were at Skyline in 1935, 1936, and 1937--when hopes for the project were high. The works of Arthur Rothstein at Skyline Farms are the most distinct and striking of those made at the project. Rothstein, like Stryker, had followed an unorthodox path in becoming a photographer. He had been a chemistry major at Columbia, where he had studied world civilization under Stryker, as well as having known him as a founding member of the Columbia University Camera Club.<sup>13</sup> Rothstein was the first photographer hired by Stryker for the Historical Section; he was only twenty years old at the time. Stryker relied on Rothstein's technical knowledge to plan and organize the RA photographic laboratory and to purchase needed equipment.<sup>14</sup> Throughout his career, Rothstein held in disdain the idea that photography was art. Rather, to Rothstein, photography should be documentary.<sup>15</sup> Yet Rothstein's skills were more than just descriptive, for he took some

of the most emotionally evocative photographs of the Depression era, including "Dust Storm, Cimarron County, 1936," a picture of a dust bowl farmer, Arthur Coble, and his two young sons as they walked through a sand storm to their farmhouse, which was nearly covered with sand.

Rothstein had created a whirlwind of his own for Stryker and the RA/FSA when in 1936 he slightly altered the background of shots of a steer skull that he was photographing to show the devastating and deadly impact of a drought in South Dakota. New Deal critics noticed the background change and accused the RA/FSA of falsifying information. Stryker stood behind Rothstein during the controversy, contending that the effects of the drought was what were important, not a slight variation of the picture's background.<sup>16</sup>

One of Rothstein's first assignments under Stryker was to photograph the Skyline Farms project in 1935. Rothstein would again return to the project in 1937. Some of Rothstein's most outstanding photographs were made at the Skyline Farms project, as Rothstein proved himself to be more than just a technician.

Rothstein accomplished his primary assignment from Stryker and the RA--to photograph the social and economic problems that the agency was attempting to solve. Rothstein captured the stark poverty of the project participants with his photograph of the temporary shacks in which people were living until they could move into a house. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 1 and 2, pp. 111 and 112.)

One Rothstein photograph of the shacks showed a farm mother, holding an infant, with a young child by her side. The mother and child peered blankly out the door of their shack, the hopelessness and despair of the Depression and their lives etched in their faces. In keeping with his assignment, Rothstein photographed a newly-constructed project house, obviously to contrast how the lives of the families would be improved when the project was completed. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 3, p. 113.) The new house was neat, seemingly well-constructed, and included a small front porch. Certainly, it was a dramatic improvement over the shacks to which the farm families had become accustomed.

Rothstein, however, went beyond the public relations aspect of his assignment, especially when he photographed children. One 1935 photograph showed a young boy, blonde-headed, dressed in overalls, sitting in the doorway of a farm building. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 4, p. 114.) The boy was bare-footed, with one foot wrapped in a bandage. Rothstein had struck the image of the All-American farm boy, and his mixture of shadows and light in the photograph gave the picture a sharply-defined image. Another Rothstein photograph, "Children, 1935," showed a boy and two twin girls sitting with a boy on the steps of a home, with one of the girls drawing attention to a long cut on her knee. (See Skyline

Portfolio, Photograph 5, p. 115.) The innocent-child image, no doubt, was effective propaganda for the RA, but it was also life as it existed at Skyline Farms.

Still another Rothstein photograph showed a project mother and her four children outside a house. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 6, p. 116.) The children huddled closely beside the mother as if seeking protection. The mother had a wistful expression in her face and stood proud and defiant. Again the propaganda value of the photograph was obvious: these are the people the RA is helping. Rothstein had done his job. Yet at the same time, he was photographing real scenes and real people and his camera spoke truthfully.

Rothstein took other photographs that demonstrate his technical and artistic skills. One, "Clearing Land by Burning Stumps, 1935," shows two men outside a project house, talking while they burn stumps, tree limbs, and debris. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 7, p. 117.) The white smoke drifting from the ground creates a brilliant contrast of black and white in the photograph. The white smoke gives a dream-like image to the scene, yet the details of the photograph are clearly focused. The photograph is Rothstein at his best: turning a typical project scene into a multidimensional visual composition.

Rothstein made other outstanding photographs, such as "A Farmer After A Shopping Trip, 1935," which shows a middle-aged project man walking down a muddy road, his arms loaded with sacks of food and supplies, presumably obtained at the commissary. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 8, p. 118.) The man's clothing is tattered and quite obviously he has suffered through hard times. The man carries the supplies like valued Christmas presents, and the message of the photograph is clear: this is what the RA is doing for America's poor.

Another photograph shows two men standing beside a cart that is pulled by a mule. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 9, p. 119.) It is, obviously, cold weather. Newly-cleared land forms the background of the photograph. The men seem cheerful and resilient. The picture conveys the "make-do" spirit of the project participants, and as such was again the type of visual publicity that Stryker and the RA sought.

Still another Rothstein photograph, "Farm Vegetables, 1935," is of a basket of apples and a bucket of corn, simply displayed on a porch. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 10, p. 120.) This photograph symbolically displays the rewards of the project: food for an impoverished group of people. At the same time, the picture, no doubt, struck a chord with Americans who held to the Jeffersonian belief of the purity and simplicity of rural life. Rothstein's counterbalance of light and dark in the photograph creates an



impressionistic tone to the picture, as if it could be a painting. At the same time, the picture reveals minute detail. It was again Rothstein at his best.

Rothstein in his two trips to Skyline Farms made numerous other photographs of the project. Some were obligatory, such as those made of men at the sawmill, a furniture-maker, men at a stone quarry, and a man making wooden shingles for project houses and buildings. One photograph, taken in 1937, shows the community commissary, a building constructed of native sandstone. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 11, p. 121.) Not all of Rothstein's photographs are as original or as emotionally evocative as "Mother and Children," or "Farmer After A Shopping Trip," or as visually well-composed as "Farm Vegetables." In many cases Rothstein merely was doing his job--photographing a government project. Yet at his best, Rothstein, especially in his masterful use of shadows and light, reached a level of artistic brilliance in his photographs that few photographers have attained.

Rothstein worked under Stryker for five years in the Photography Division. No doubt, the experience was a formative education for Rothstein, who would build on what he had learned to become one of America's most renowned photographers. Stryker was never certain how long Rothstein would stay with his agency. In 1937, for example, Stryker wrote Russell Lee that while producing "brilliant" photographs, Rothstein seemed "restless" and ready to

move on to other projects.<sup>17</sup> News/picture magazines, such as Life Magazine, were becoming popular and Rothstein had become interested in that field of photography.<sup>18</sup>

In 1940 Rothstein did leave the RA/FSA Photography Division for Look Magazine. Rothstein soon afterwards resigned from Look, however, to join the Office of War Information, where he once again worked briefly under Stryker. Rothstein then became an Army photographer and served for three years during World War II in the China-Burma-India theater. After his Army stint, Rothstein went back to Look Magazine in 1946 and worked as Director of Photography until 1972, when the magazine ceased publication. Rothstein then went to work for Parade Magazine as Director of Photography and later Associate Editor.

Rothstein achieved one of the most outstanding careers in American photography. He published several technical books on photography, as well as anthologies of his work with the RA/FSA, the OWI/Army, and career as a magazine photographer. One of Rothstein's Skyline photographs appears in his book The Depression Years: As Photographed by Arthur Rothstein.<sup>19</sup> The picture is of a school classroom scene and shows a teacher with her students. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 12, p. 122.) The students are attending the temporary school built at the project and they are seen sitting on chairs fashioned from tree stumps. A large coal-oil barrel in the center of the room provides heat.

Exhibitions of Rothstein's works have been displayed at the Smithsonian Institution, the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Royal Photographic Society in London, and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, among other showings.<sup>20</sup> At the time of his death in 1985 at age seventy, Rothstein was recognized as one of America's greatest photographers, one of several of similar status who began their careers with Stryker and the RA/FSA.

Ben Shahn, too, was assigned to photograph the Skyline Farms project. Shahn visited the project in 1937 and especially was attracted to the music traditions of the participants. One of Shahn's best photographs of the project was of three men, two playing guitars and singing while the third sang. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 13, p. 123.) The men, neatly dressed, appear to be singing enthusiastically. Each was associated with the community band.<sup>21</sup> Years later a sister to two of the men recalled carefully ironing her brothers clothes for them before they performed.<sup>22</sup> The brothers always wanted to make a good impression for the project, she said. The photograph certainly belies what would become a popular notion years later that the participants did not take pride in themselves or the project.

Another Shahn photograph shows a woman sitting in a chair in front of her house playing a fiddle, or violin as it also was called at the time. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 14, p. 124.) A chicken is perched on the steps to her house. The house is little

more than a shack, and the woman has on a worn, tattered dress. With his photograph Shahn caught instantly the important role of music to the Skyline Farms participants. It was a picture which showed that, despite the bleakness of their lives, the participants still had enough spirit to play and sing music. To the project participants, music was something that transcended their poverty. The woman, identified as Ms. Mary McClain by Shahn, became somewhat of a mystery in the project years later. Only one man could recall her. He remembered once passing her house where she sat "out front, playing her fiddle."<sup>23</sup>

Other Shahn photographs displayed the importance of music in the lives of the project participants. One photograph shows a young boy tuning a guitar, as he sat in the bed of a truck with other boys and a man. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 15, p. 125.) Still another Shahn photograph shows the community square dancers performing. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 16, p. 126.) The next year the dancers would perform for President and Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt in Washington on the White House grounds.

While it was the music which fascinated Shahn at the project, he did photograph other subjects, such as a picture of one of the project's stone quarries. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 17, p. 127.) With its broad line shapes and shadow contrasts, the

photograph reflects elements of the murals and posters that Shahn created. Shahn's artistic eye and his photographic mind met in this one picture.

Shahn had begun work in the Special Skills Division of the RA as a painter and graphic artist. In 1935 Shahn was loaned to Stryker's department upon the recommendation of Walker Evans.<sup>24</sup> Shahn worked for the RA/FSA to 1938. After leaving the agency, Shahn veered away from photography and took his artistic skills to new areas. During the 1960s and 1970s, Shahn became known for his paintings and poster art creations. Yet there was consistency in the subject matter and themes of Shahn's work, even after he turned to painting and away from photography. Shahn always displayed a social conscience in his work--as a photographer, muralist, graphic artist, or painter.<sup>25</sup> That social conscience, along with his artistic vision, eventually won for Shahn recognition as one of the most important American artists of the Twentieth Century.

Carl Mydans in 1936 also photographed the Skyline Farms project. Mydans took school scenes, including the project children playing outside the temporary school as a teacher strove to maintain some semblance of order. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 18, p. 128.) Another Mydans' photograph shows a man teaching children at a blackboard. (See Skyline Portfolio, Photograph 19, p. 129.) Both photographs later would be included in Mydans' book on photojournalism.<sup>26</sup>

Mydans worked with the RA only in 1935 and 1936. He made two extensive working tours while with the agency--one through the South, including the stop at Skyline Farms, and the other through New England, concentrating on New Hampshire and Vermont.<sup>27</sup> On his Southern tour, Mydans reported that he met some resistance to taking photographs, because many subjects had never seen a camera before.<sup>28</sup> Mydans left the RA and Stryker to work for Life Magazine, a newly-created picture magazine established by Time Inc.

Mydans, like Rothstein, went on to become a highly-successful and honored photographer, one who is perhaps best remembered for war photography. Mydans spent World War II in Finland, France, Italy, China, and the Philippines as a photojournalist for Life. He was captured by the Japanese and spent nearly two years as a prisoner of war.<sup>29</sup> He was released in time to see France liberated, and was with Eric Severeid and other war correspondents when they "liberated" writer Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Tokas from hiding.<sup>30</sup> Mydans served as a war correspondent during the Korean Conflict and for his work, most accomplished under fire, received the U.S. Golden Camera Gold Achievement Award. During his career, Mydans, who died in 1988, photographed such figures as William Faulkner, Winston Churchill, Douglas MacArthur, Ezra Pound, and Charles Lindburgh.

The work of Rothstein, Shahn, and Mydans preserved for future generations images of Skyline Farms. Their photographs were made when the project was young and enthusiasm for its success was high.

Stryker later said that during these years of the New Deal, he and photographers in his agency had a great sense of purpose. He wrote: ". . . there was exhilaration in Washington, a feeling that things were being mended, that great wrongs were being corrected, that there were no problems so big they wouldn't yield to the application of good sense and hard work. . . There was a unifying source of inspiration, a great intelligence at work. It was called the New Deal and we were proud to be in on it."<sup>31</sup>

By the time Skyline Farms ended, Stryker and his photographers were involved in a myriad of interests far removed from Cumberland Mountain. Stryker no longer headed the photography division, the remnants of which during World War II had become a part of the Office of War Information. History is left, then, without a visual record of the ending of Skyline Farms. One can only imagine what an outstanding record this would have been if Rothstein, Shahn, and Mydans, under Stryker's prodding guidance, had been present to photograph the Skyline Farms in its last days.

The photographs that were taken themselves were almost lost, according to Stryker. Stryker said that there was some sentiment in government to destroy the negatives to the 270,000 pictures that the RA/FSA and OWI photographers had made.<sup>32</sup> However, Archibald MacLeish, an old friend of Stryker's, arranged to have the photographs housed in the U. S. Library of Congress, which MacLeish headed. Stryker narrowed the 270,000 negatives to 170,000 and 40,000

pictures were developed from these negatives and placed on file in the Library of Congress.<sup>33</sup> With this, a national treasury was preserved. Years later these photographs would help to tell the story of Skyline Farms and its people.



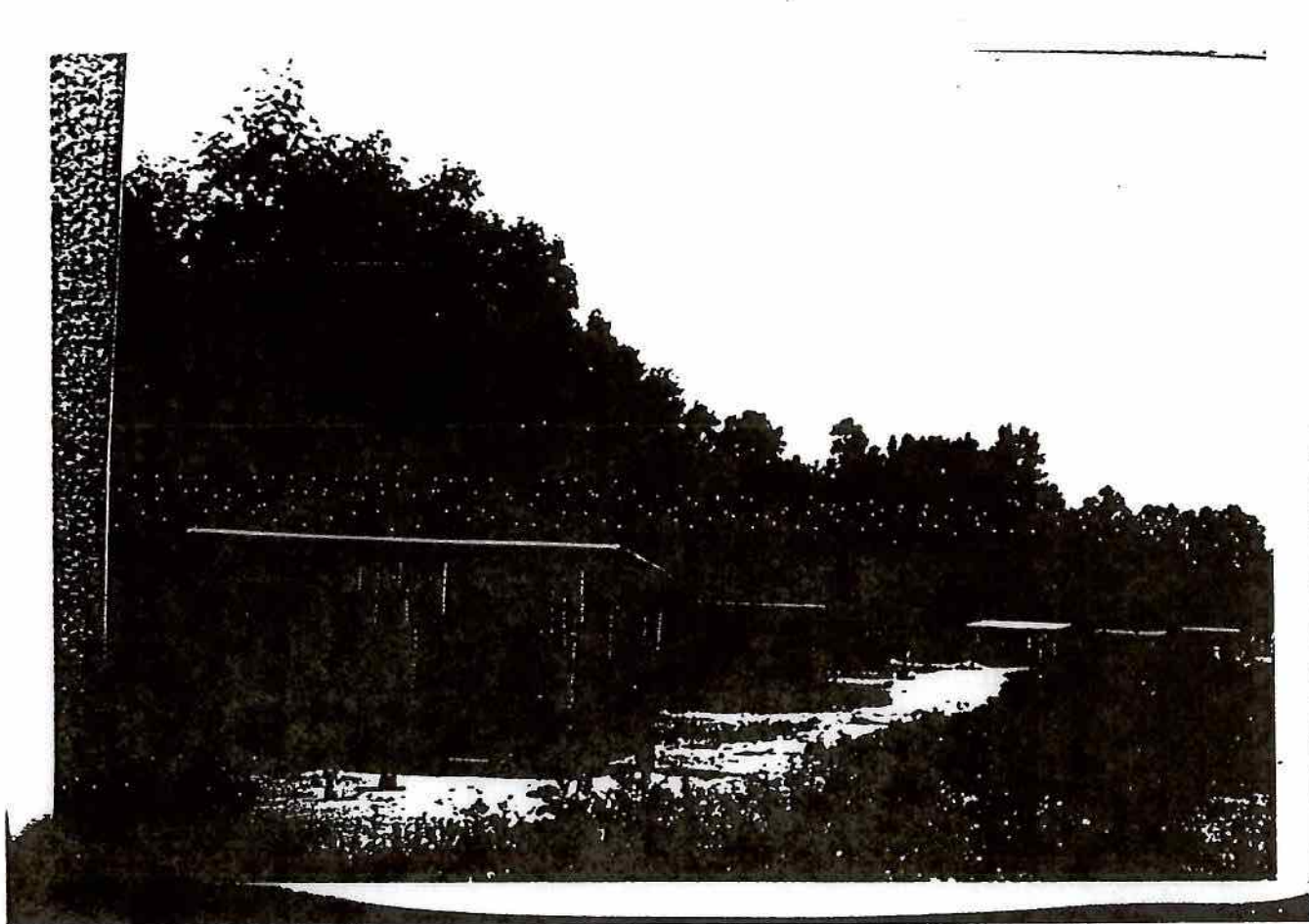
### Skyline Portfolio

The following photographs were made by RA/FSA photographers Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein, and Carl Mydans. The photographs were made at the project in 1935, 1936, and 1937. The original photographs are in the U. S. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D. C. Their identifying number is listed along with the photograph.

The photographs also may be seen in "Skyline Farms Revisited," an exhibit sponsored by the Scottsboro-Jackson Heritage Center, Northeast Alabama State Junior College, and supported by a grant from the Alabama Humanities Foundation, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The exhibit is available for display upon request. Inquiries may be made at the Scottsboro-Jackson Heritage Center in Scottsboro, Alabama.

All photographs are from P&P Microfilm Lot 1606, negative number 656M-669M, 6275M-6300M, 25189-25198, etc., Prints and Photographs Division, U. S. Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Photograph 1

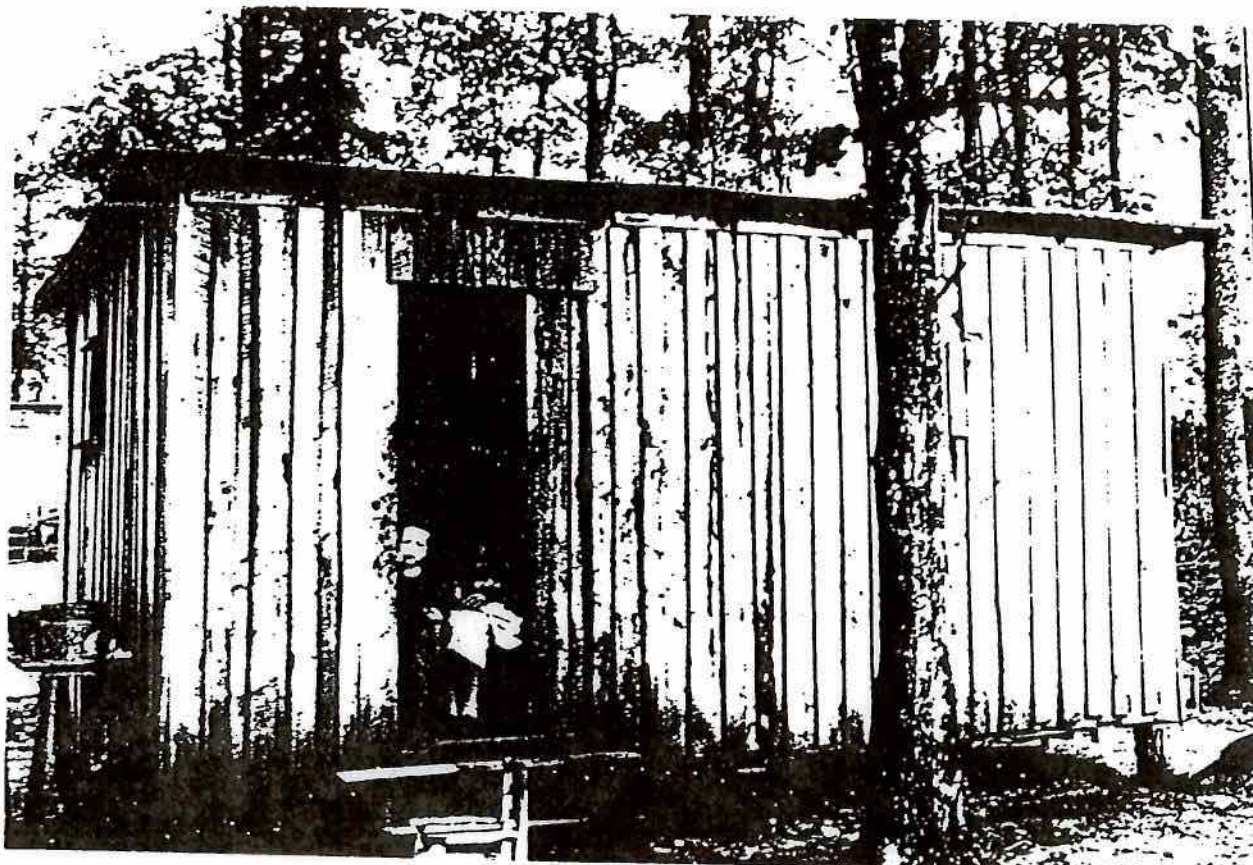


Temporary Housing for Families

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order # 481-D

Photograph 2

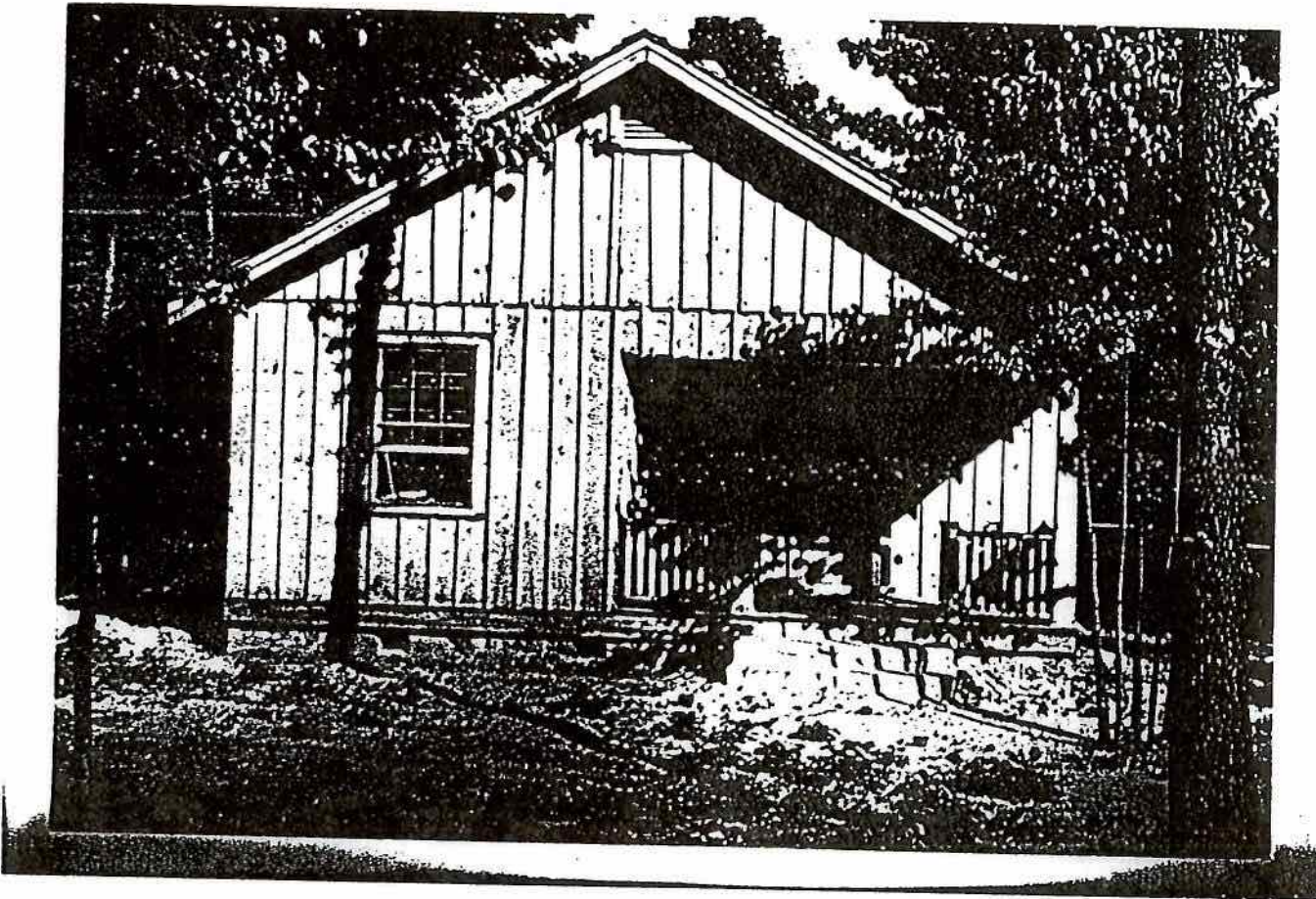


Family Living in Temporary Shack

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order #478-D

Photograph 3



A New House for a Farm Family

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order #482-D

Photograph 4



Boy

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order #2082-M

Photograph 5



Children

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order #2088-Y4

Photograph 6



The Wife and Children of a Resettled Farmer

Arthur Rothstein, 1937

Order #2070-44

Photograph 7



Clearing Land by Burning Stumps

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order #2082-M1



Photograph 8

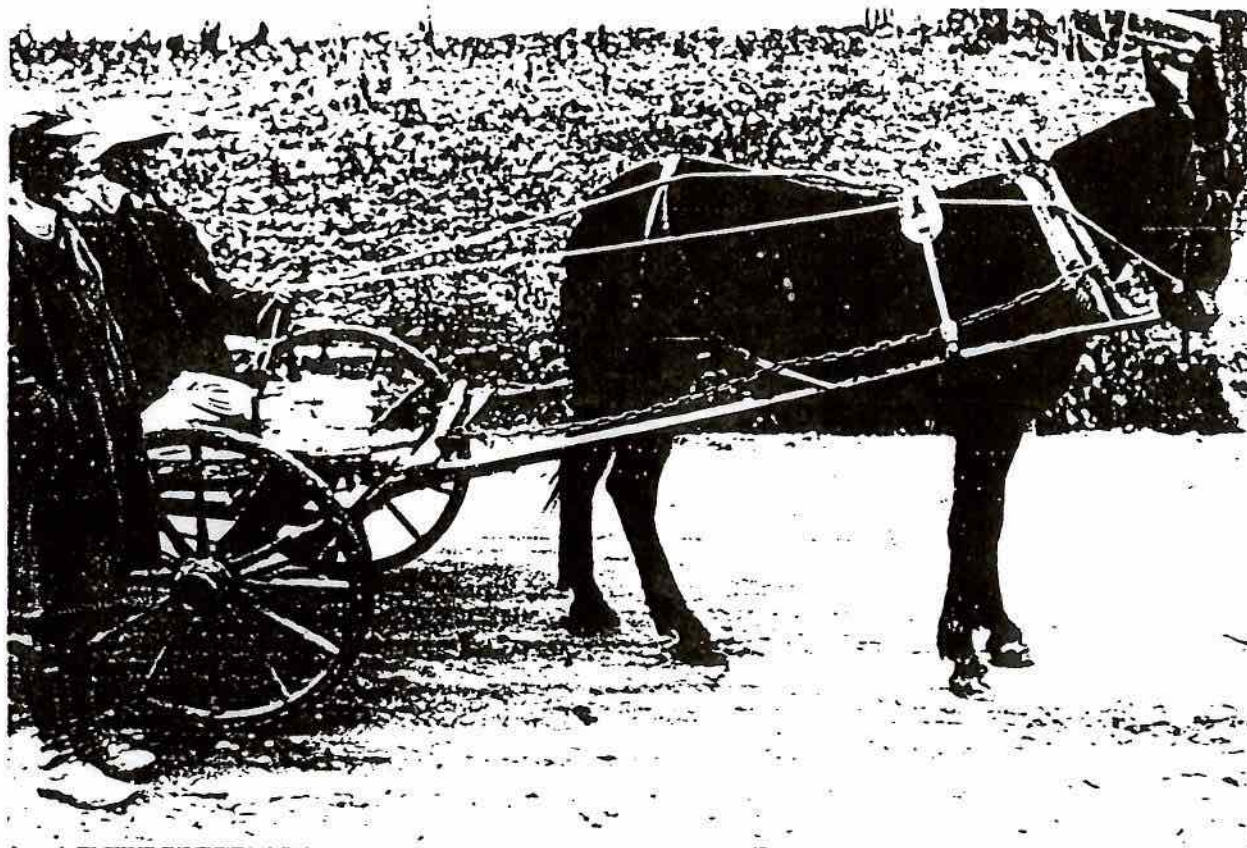


A Farmer After a Shopping Trip

Arthur Rothstein, 1937

Order #25196-D

Photograph 9

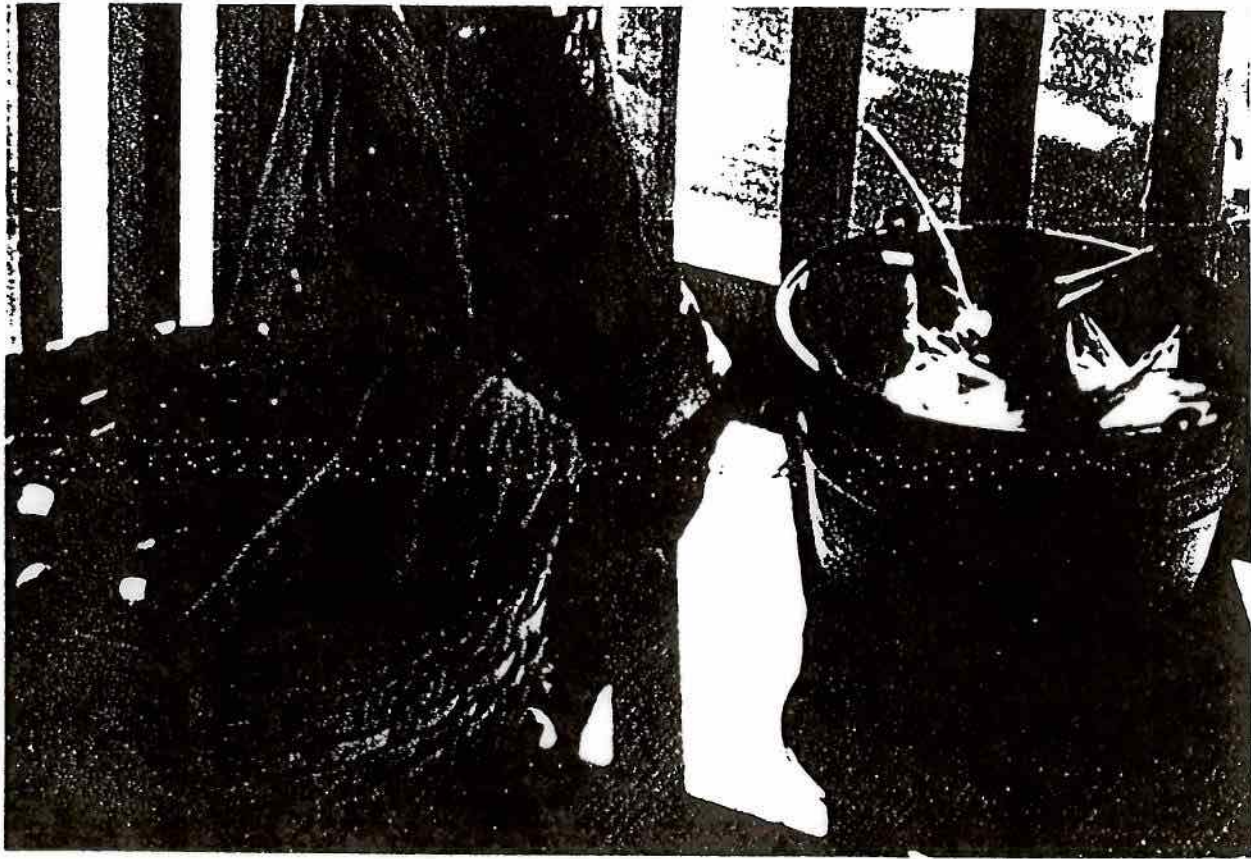


Farmers With Wagon and Mule

Arthur Rothstein, 1937

Order #25483-D

Photograph 10

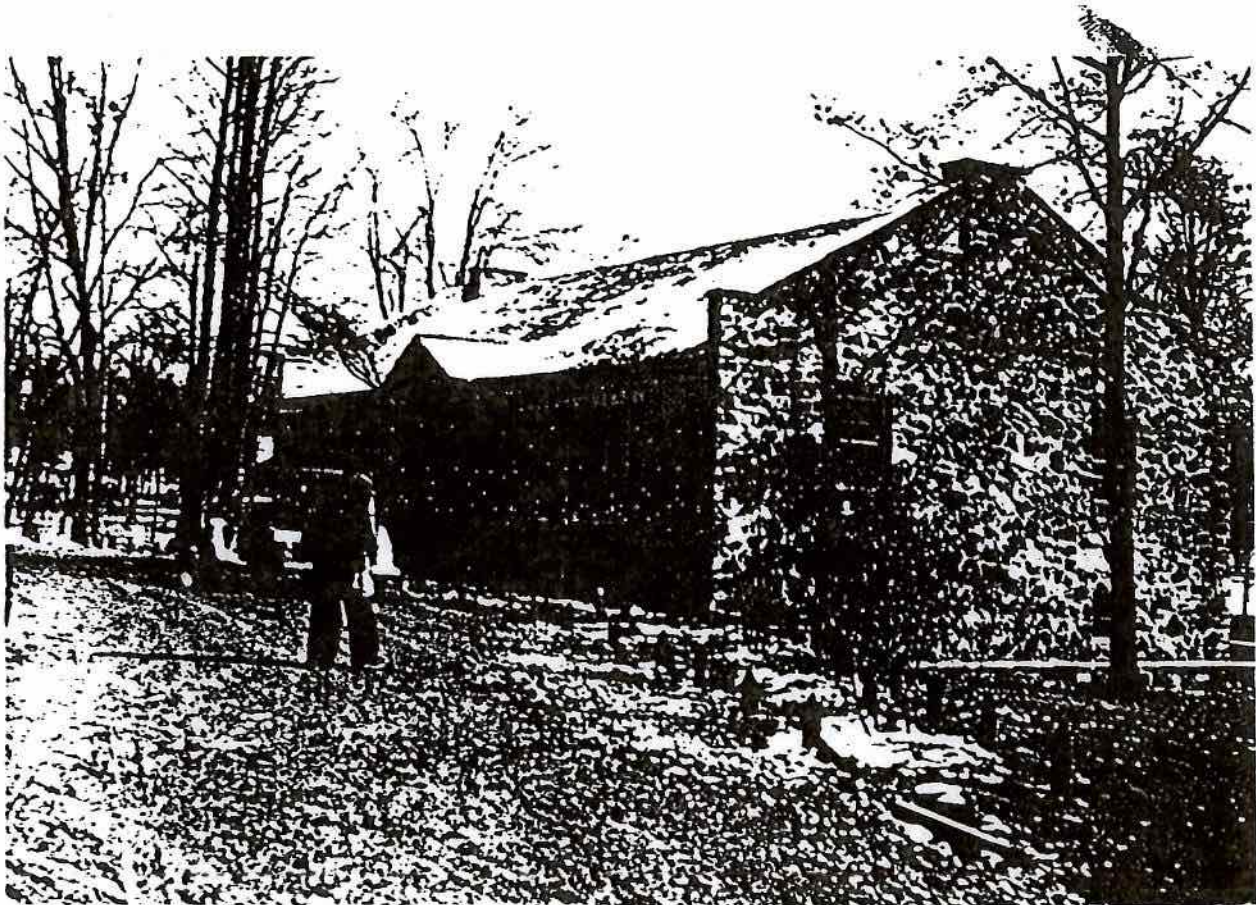


Farm Vegetables

Arthur Rothstein, 1935

Order #2080-M5

Photograph 11

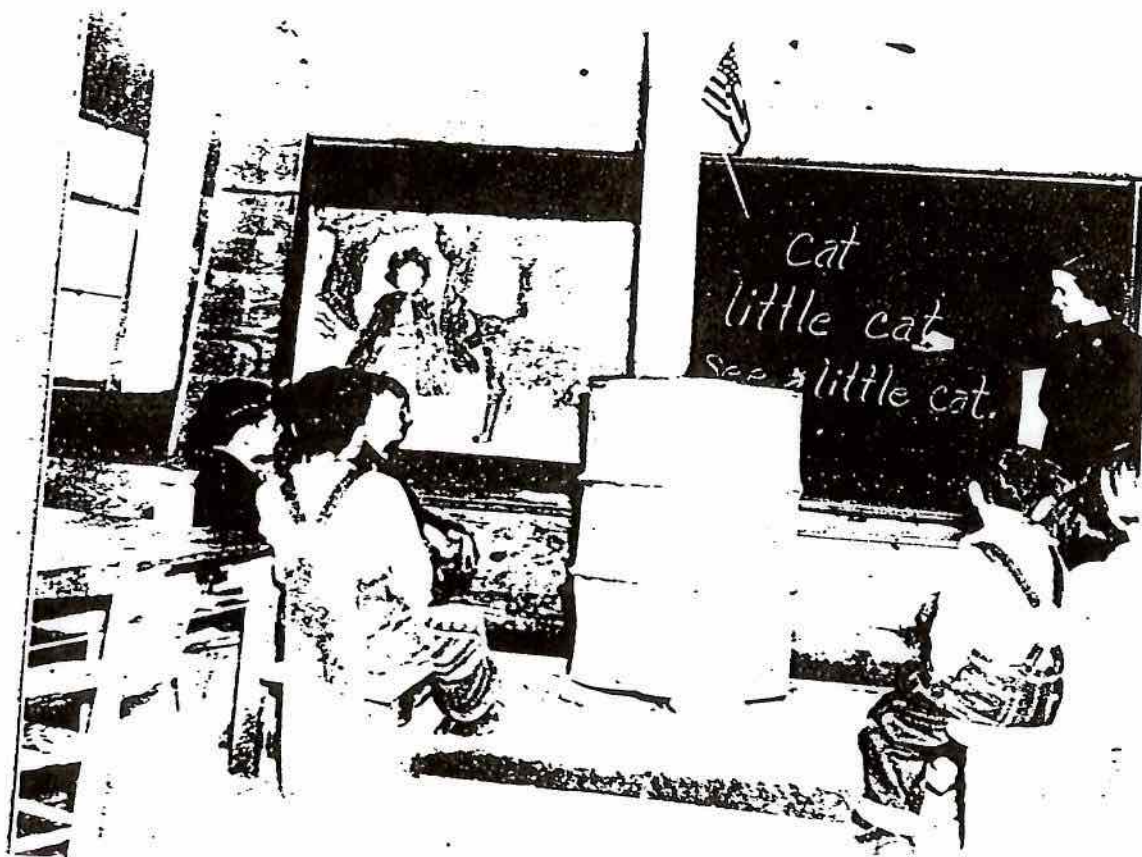


Store at Skyline Farms

Arthur Rothstein, 1937

Order #25194-D

Photograph 12



Learning to Read

Arthur Rothstein, 1937

Order #25198-D

Photograph 13



Musicians Playing for Square Dance

Ben Shahn, 1937

Order #6285-M2

Photograph 14

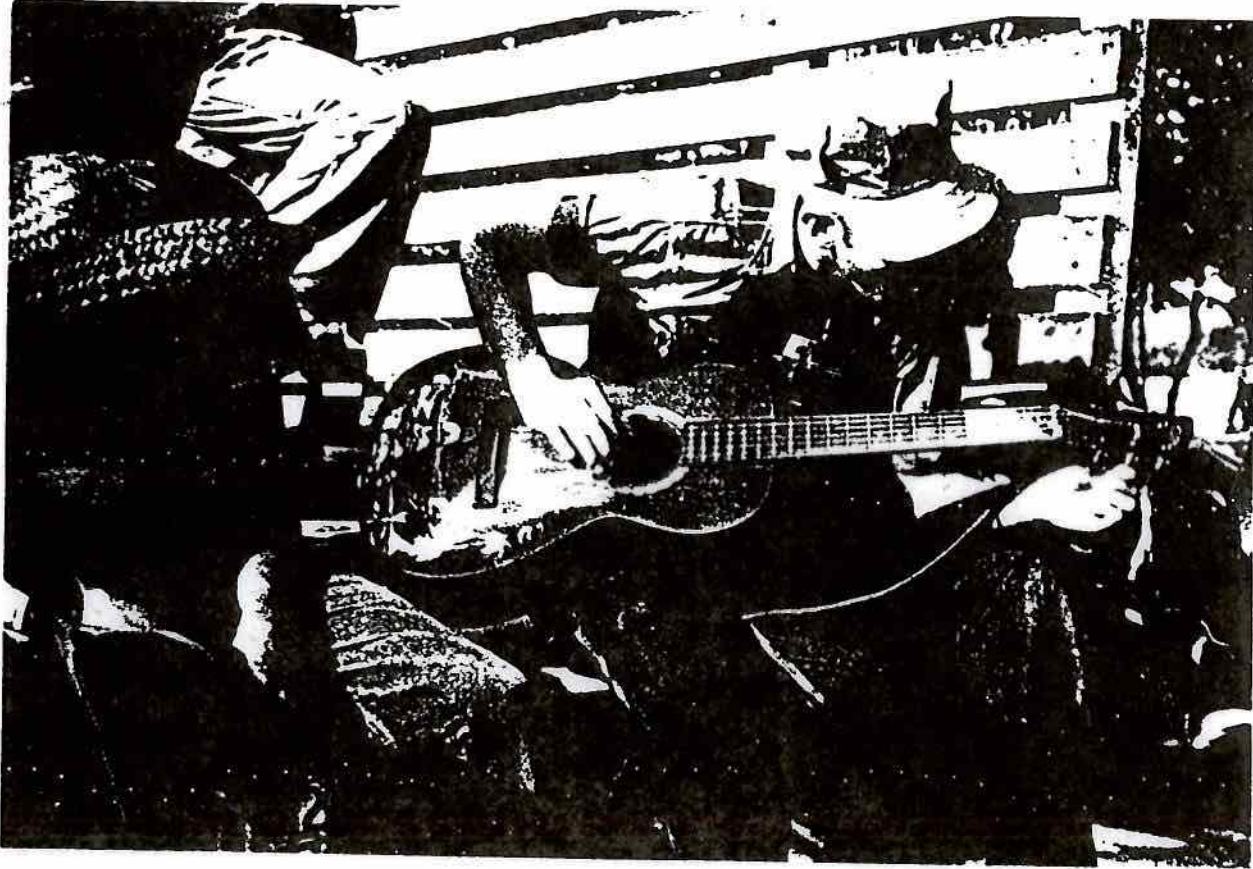


Woman and Her Fiddle

Ben Shahn, 1937

Order #6295-M4

Photograph 15



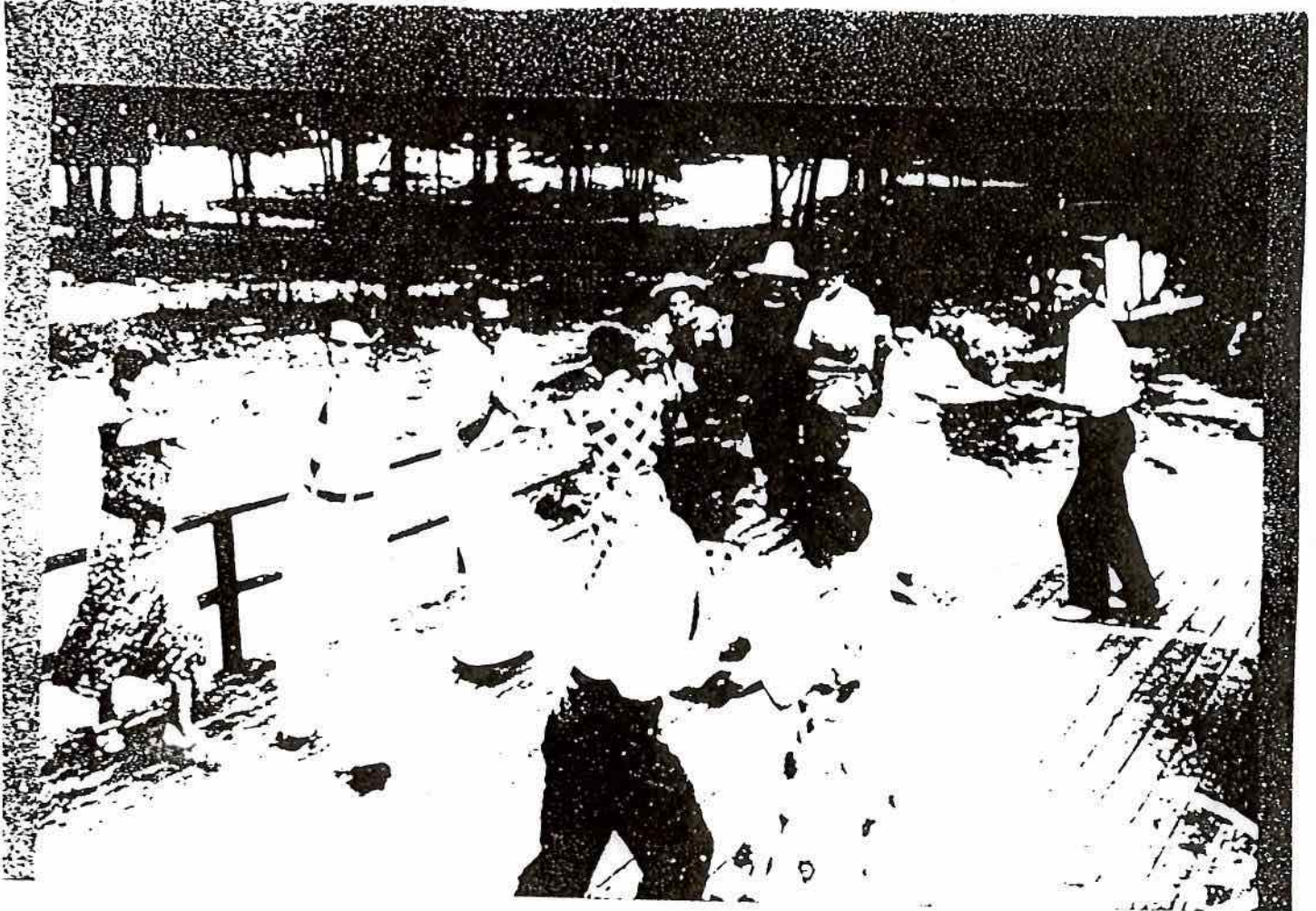
A Young Musician

Ben Shahn, 1937

Order #6292-M1



Photograph 16

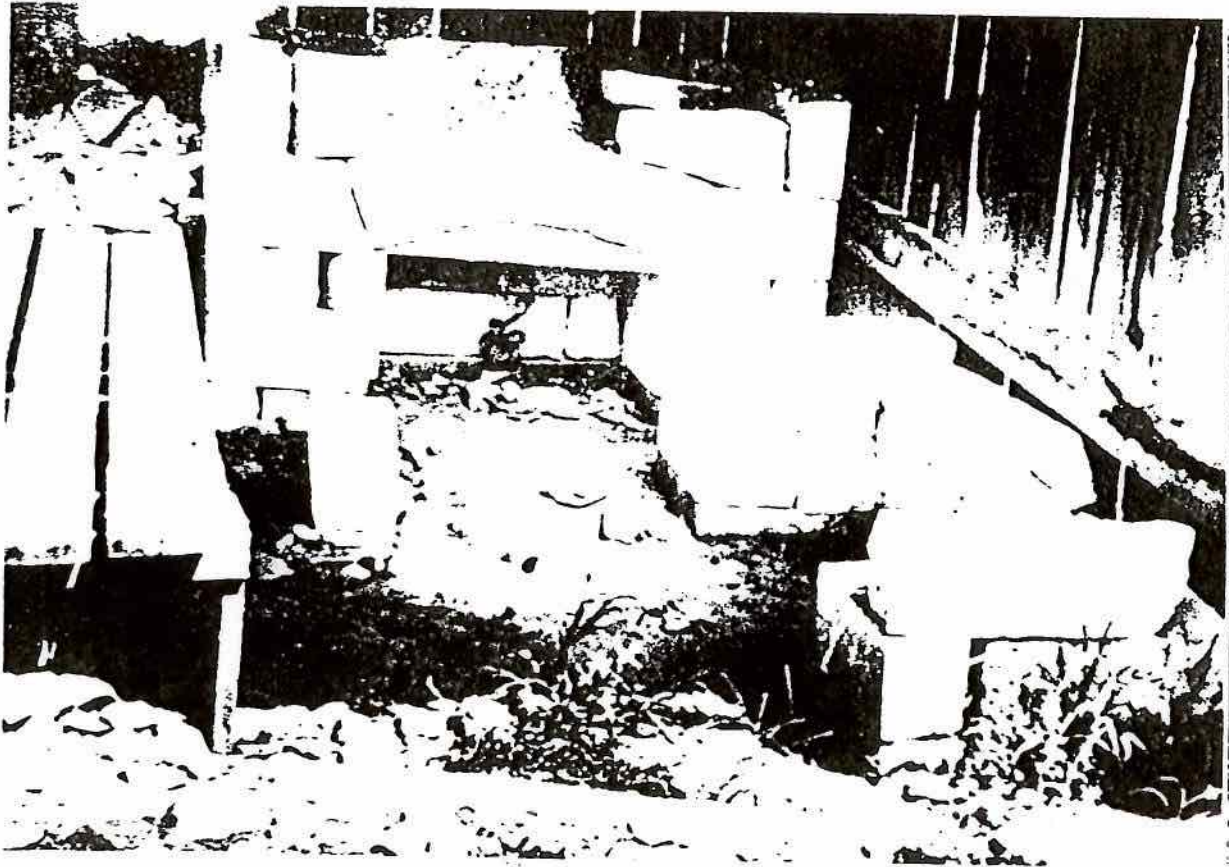


Square Dance

Ben Shahn, 1937

Order #6275-XS

Photograph 17

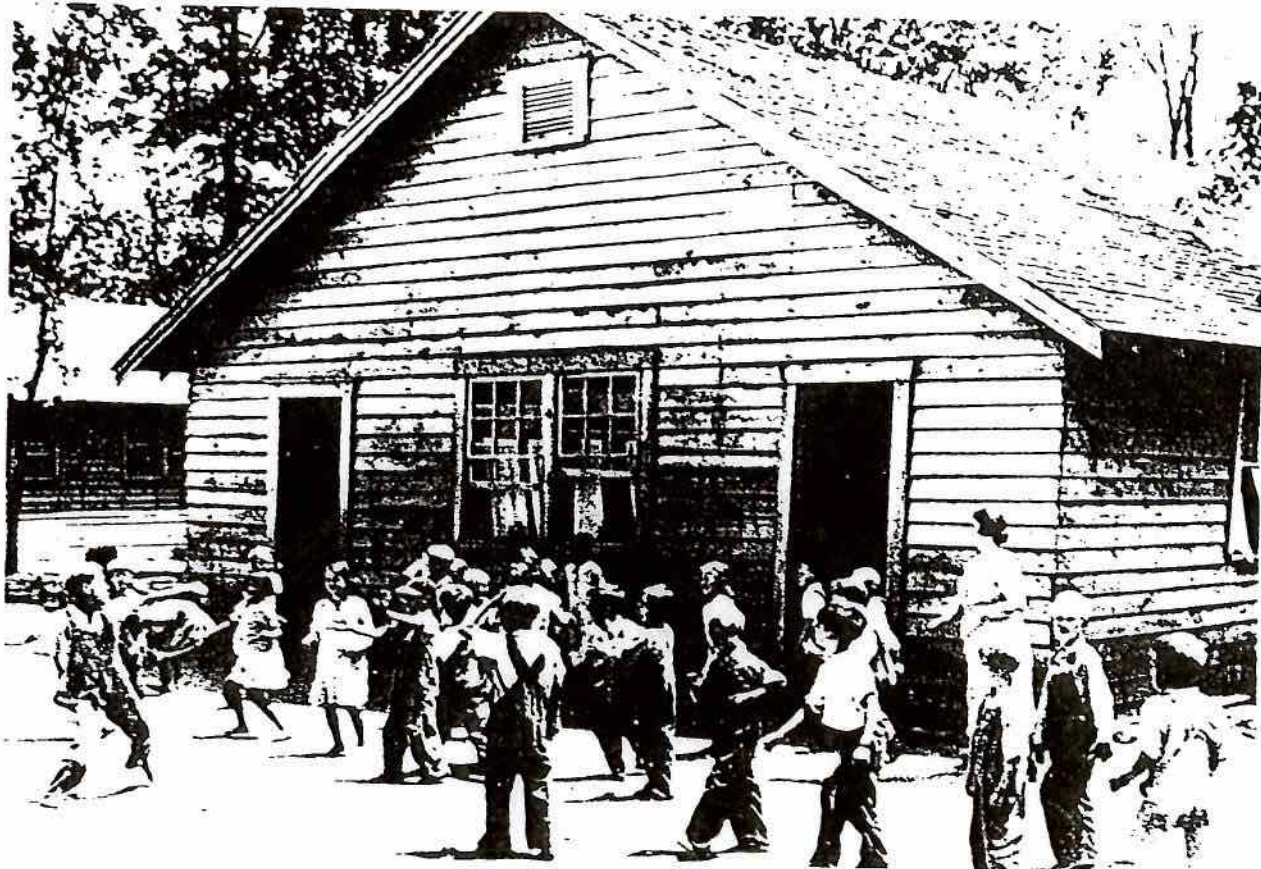


A Stone Quarry

Ben Shahn, 1937

Order #6298-M2

Photograph 18



School House and School Yard Scene

Carl Mydans, 1936

Order #6622-D

Photograph 19



Teacher With Students

Carl Mydans, 1936

Order #

## Chapter 7

## Skyline Jubilee

One of the most unique programs within the RA/FSA was the Special Skills Division, which at first was headed by Grace Falke, an executive assistant in the RA who later married Rexford Tugwell.<sup>1</sup> During the 1930s, the Special Skills Division was the cutting edge in the federal government's effort to improve the quality of life of rural America with "cultural enrichment" programs. Special Skills workers provided innovative programs to solve the problems of rural life that academicians had identified. At the resettlement communities, such as Skyline Farms, the Special Skills Division conducted programs for project participants in ceramics, weaving, furniture design, folk music and dancing, and producing pageants and plays. Project directors and officials even to a degree attempted to improve the quality of life at Skyline Farms by altering people's religious views.

The genesis of such programs lay in the work of rural sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s, who while acknowledging the positive aspects of rural life, found rural life to be oppressive and lacking in social opportunities. Carl Taylor, as noted, was one of those sociologists. Taylor's book on rural sociology led to an appointment in 1933 as a staff member with the Division of Subsistence Homesteads.<sup>2</sup> In 1935 Taylor was appointed to head the Rural Resettlement Division (RRD) of the RA.

Taylor's ideas on rural life structured the agenda for the Rural Resettlement Division in regard to social programs. For a sociologist who analyzed the standard of living and problems in rural America, no doubt for Taylor being chosen to direct the RA's resettlement projects was a dream come true. Taylor, and other academicians brought into government by Tugwell and Roosevelt, could at communities such as Skyline Farms attempt to solve the rural problems they had described.

A number of experiments were conducted at Skyline Farms to improve the quality of life. Arts and crafts programs were begun, pageants and plays were produced, and a community band and square dance team was formed. The band and square dance team became so accomplished that they were chosen to perform on the White House grounds for President and Mrs. Roosevelt.

The concept behind such activities as these was the belief, expressed by Taylor and others, that rural life should provide more social opportunities for people to offset isolation. Moreover, social activities, it was thought, would create a more cooperative attitude among rural residents. Cooperativeness could be accomplished through "play." In his book on rural sociology, Taylor stressed the importance of "play" in human life. "Play," as Taylor described it, included such activities as sports, dancing, music, pageants, and community field days. To Taylor these types of activities helped develop: (1) community interest; (2)

cooperativeness through team play and in the organizing and promoting play activities; (3) leadership; (4) loyalty to community teams; and (5) an increased interaction among people as a result of the activities.<sup>3</sup> Taylor believed that a lack of social contacts made it difficult for rural people "to cooperate in economic activities."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Taylor felt that this lack of social contact caused rural Americans to have "feeble imagination and narrow judgment, and often led to "bitter hostilities" among them.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor singled out denominational, or fundamentalist religion, as a frequent impediment to a richer quality of life in rural America. Taylor wrote that the rural church too often had restricted " . . . preaching to individual salvation along, the insistence on denominational creeds, and the encouragement of an undying loyalty to sectarian beliefs and dogmas. . ."<sup>6</sup> The rural church, to Taylor, had not expanded people's "understanding, appreciation, and vision of life."<sup>7</sup> The rural church had "frowned upon play," including all forms of recreation, but particularly sports, dancing and card playing, and other social activities.<sup>8</sup> Denominational religion, Taylor said, particularly condemned play on Sundays as a "violation of the Sabbath."<sup>9</sup> Yet as Taylor noted, Sundays were the only days that many rural families had for leisure activity.

Remarkably, federal officials associated with the Skyline Farms did attempt to alter religious views at the project, although the effort was subtle and did not impose beliefs on anyone. Officials

established a nondenominational Christian "Union" Sunday School at the project and members met at the community center.<sup>10</sup> This Union class brought in ministers from the more moderate Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches in the area. This was an apparent effort on the project leaders' part to make religion less denominational at the project. However, this Union Sunday School was attended mainly by project FSA employees and not by the participants themselves.

The government's effort to broaden religious ideas led to a complaint from a Baptist minister who worked with the project participants. The minister, Frank Moore, wrote a letter to Will Alexander contending that ". . . there is a feeling that the government is seeking to exercise too much influence over church matters."<sup>11</sup> Prior to his complaint, Moore had strongly supported the project and had praised the federal government for initiating such a program as Skyline Farms.<sup>12</sup> Moore later contended that FSA employees and officials at the project had "talked against denominational work."<sup>13</sup> Moore went on to say that it was not his intention to "find fault" with the project officials, but that he spoke for the seventy-five percent of the project participants who were Baptists.<sup>14</sup> ". . . I do want to feel that no one is allowed to bother with the peoples' religious life," Moore concluded.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, Moore asked Alexander for permission to develop a church adjacent to the project, and inquired if loans were available from the government to help accomplish this.<sup>16</sup> Alexander responded to Moore by saying that the



FSA believed in "complete religious freedom as well as civil liberty" and that "religious preference is entirely a matter of individual choice" at the project.<sup>17</sup> He added that loans were not available for religious work, but that project participants could contribute from their incomes if they so wished.<sup>18</sup>

This mild effort by the FSA to offer an alternative to religious life at Skyline Farms obviously was never successful. The Union Sunday School did not attract more than a few members. But the effort exemplifies the degree to which rehabilitation was attempted at the project. Not only were jobs provided, and opportunities to become landowners created, but an effort was made to change the basic religious and value orientation of the people through nondenominational religion. As weak as the attempt was, the effort was new territory for the American government.

In regard to other social activities, Taylor in his book maintained that plays and pageants also could enrich communities. These productions, he reasoned, involved the community in a common effort, potentially portrayed the outstanding facts of the people's historical experience, and suggested ideals and aspirations necessary for further development.<sup>19</sup> Based on this advice, Special Skills Division workers did produce plays and pageants at Skyline Farms.

Margaret Valiant of Special Skills produced and directed a Christmas play at the school auditorium. Actors in this production wore animal masks that were made at the project, and the set was

designed in such a way that only the heads of the actors were seen. The play was based on the old folk legend that animals acquire the ability to speak on Christmas Eve. Valiant's script had the animals describing how much better off they were in their "new homes," and how men were learning to show each other as much consideration as they had their livestock in the past.<sup>20</sup>

Margaret Valiant was one of many Special Skills workers who were at Skyline Farms. Prior to the Depression, Valiant was a trained opera singer who had lived and worked in Europe. Years later, she would say of her work with Special Skills: "What we had in mind I don't think was written out precisely, but it was basically to restore a sense of confidence in the people at that time who were very frightened by the changes they did not anticipate."<sup>21</sup> While a Special Skills worker, Valiant produced many plays and programs, including one which involved Hollywood actors at a migrant camp in California.

On another occasion at Skyline Farms, Special Skills workers produced a black "minstrel show." The production included project participants, their faces colored black, performing skits and stunts, telling jokes, and singing such songs as "Liza Jane," "Dixie," and "Old Black Joe."<sup>22</sup> Several key managers at the project, including Harry Ross, took part in the presentation, which the community newspaper described as a "big success."<sup>23</sup>

That blacks were presented in such a stereotypical, patronizing manner as a "minstrel show" reflects the racial climate of America in the 1930s. The Roosevelt New Deal programs had accepted the racial status quo of the South and segregation was maintained in most programs, including the Skyline Farms project. Stereotypical racial humor was a part of the prejudice that existed toward blacks during the period. No doubt, Special Skills workers considered themselves progressive, liberal thinkers, and in a more racially enlightened age, they would have felt uncomfortable with programs that sought to unify a community by presenting a racial group in demeaning, stereotypical terms. During the 1930s, however, such stereotypes were very much a part of American culture. Project participants even would accept, at least on the surface, patronizing stereotypes of themselves as mountain "hillbillies."

Families at Skyline Farms were the focus of other social rehabilitation efforts. These programs were so extensive that federal officials sometimes clashed over territorial control of the activities. For example, R. W. Hudgens, the Southeastern Regional Director of RA, in a letter to Rexford Tugwell complained that two Special Skills Division workers had visited "Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms without the knowledge of this office."<sup>24</sup> Hudgens pointed out that another RA agency, the Education and Training Section, which also conducted social rehabilitation, already had workers at the project and had "a very definitely planned program in

this Region, especially on Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms."<sup>25</sup> Hudgens reminded Tugwell that according to policy, Special Skills Staff workers were not to visit a project unless they were requested to do so by the community manager or regional director.<sup>26</sup> Social rehabilitation in America was at a crest point, when a regional director could protest about having too many workers at a project.

Despite Hudgens' protest, the Special Skills Division was active at Skyline Farms. Charles Seeger, a technical assistant in music with the Special Skills Division, filed one of the first reports from the project when on April 5, 1936, Seeger sent back a glowing account of Skyline Farms. He described the project as "the most fascinating place" he had come in contact with since joining the agency.<sup>27</sup> Seeger wrote: "At last I am 'sold' on a community! There's nothing like it--at least in my experience."<sup>28</sup> Seeger went on to say: "The key to understanding of the place is in the motto 'Only the pure in heart.' When you first see this, you are heartily disgusted with the apparent cant and sentimentality. But when you realize that the motto is a subtle joke--a joke in the truly American style--you begin to sit up. It passes beyond a sense of humor: it is a sense of seriousness."<sup>29</sup> Seeger recommended that the Special Skills Division develop a full array of programs at Skyline Farms--music, drama, painting and sculpture, wood-working, weaving, landscaping, and even pottery.<sup>30</sup>

Seeger, whose son Pete would become a noted American folk singer, was attracted to Skyline Farms because it was a project led by "the sheer force of agreement among the 'subscribers' (they are not 'homesteaders') upon what their common good consists of, and upon the method of attaining this good."<sup>31</sup> Project participants working for the "common good" had an especial appeal to Seeger, for he was one of the members of the Pierre Degeyter Club, a group of American Communist musicians whose organization was named after the co-writer of "The Internationale."<sup>32</sup> Seeger looked for true "proletarian music" that workers could enjoy after the revolution.<sup>33</sup> Folk music, he believed, was the most progressive of all music because it was created and performed by the people.

The Special Skills Division acted on Seeger's request that more work be done at Skyline Farms. A main focus of activity was in regard to music and the Special Skills Division's work would leave a lasting legacy. Bascom Lunsford of Special Skills was sent to the project. Lunsford had given up a career as a lawyer and politician in North Carolina to become a folk song collector. Prior, to working at Skyline Farms, Lunsford had organized the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Ashville, N. C. In the years following his Special Skills experiences, Lunsford would become recognized as one of the foremost folk music collectors in Appalachian. He himself was a musician, specializing in the banjo, and he composed original songs, writing them in the traditional Appalachian style. Lunsford's

initial visit to the project, apparently, was not well received. Margaret Valiant reported to the agency that project school officials, particularly the principal, had been uncooperative with Lunsford, but that differences seemed resolved.<sup>34</sup> Lunsford, apparently, was caught in the territorial struggle between the Special Skills Division and the RA's Education and Training Section. Also, although it was not specified in Valiant's report, some of the resistance to Lunsford may have resulted from opposition to music and folk dancing by the more fundamental religious groups at the project.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the initial resistance that Lunsford encountered, after a few weeks of training he organized a program of what he called "folk music and dancing."<sup>36</sup> On February 16, 1937, the group of folk dancers and traditional musicians performed on stage at the city school auditorium in Scottsboro. Although Lunsford expressed mild disappointment with the attendance at the performance, he seemed pleased and encouraged by the quality of the dancers and musicians.

In the program, project participants performed traditional square dance numbers handed down to them through the generations, such as "Home," "Right Hands Across and Left Back," "Ladies Docedo," and the "Grapevine Twist."<sup>37</sup> Ironically, Lunsford and the Special Skills workers had taught the dancers additional square dance numbers--routines that as Southern mountain people, the government workers felt, they should know. It was an odd but in retrospect

insightful twist: government workers teaching the tenant farmers and mountain people their own culture. Yet again this approach was popular at the time, for rural sociologists such as Carl Taylor had maintained that much of the folk culture was being lost and that it should be preserved, for such activities as dancing and music added to the overall enjoyment of life for farm people.<sup>38</sup>

Later, one of the project participants would recall that the Special Skills workers did teach them square dance numbers, but added that "we taught them a few things, too."<sup>39</sup> Included among the square dance numbers taught by Lunsford and the Special Skills workers to the participants were: "Mill Wheel," "London Bridge," "Ladies for a Circle and Gents the Same," "Gents Come Through and Make a Little Basket," and "Ladies Come Through and Make a Little Basket."<sup>40</sup> Lunsford reported that Silas Shavers, a project participant, served as the square dance caller. He also noted that W. I. "Ike" Floyd, the timber resources supervisor at the project, had helped greatly in organizing the program.

Lunsford reported that while at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms he had collected a number of songs. Indeed, Lunsford had tapped a golden seam of Appalachian music. Lunsford wrote:

"Following are the names of some of the ballads, or songs which I have secured: "The Little Yellow Hound," (Edward), "How Come the Blood on Your Shirt Sleeve," (Edward), "The Merrie Golden Tree," "There Was a Bride Come Through the Land,"

(The Wife of Usher's Well)." The above ballads are variants of the Child classifications. Other songs or selections are the "Monkey Song," "Just Before the Battle Mother," "The Very Last Time I Saw Him," "Floyd Collins," "Seven Years With the Wrong Woman," "Conversation With Death," "The Backward Song," "Hick's Farewell," "Devilish Mary," and "Pot Rack Pole". The last of which is an unusual text of the old song "Willie Weaver " which I give here (author's note: Lunsford sent a copy of this song to Hyning) just as it was handed to me by Walter Murphy, young son of J. H. Murphy, who handed in the "Merrie Golden Tree."<sup>41</sup>

Lunsford had discovered a rich musical heritage among the settlers. Indeed, four of the songs collected by Lunsford at the project were variants of songs included in Francis James Child's benchmark listing of ballads of British origin. The song "The Merrie Golden Tree," collected by Lunsford at the project, was a variant of the song "The Golden Vanity," which told of the betrayal of a young man who had agreed to sink a "robber ship" for the captain of the ship the "Golden Vanity." In return the young man would receive money and be allowed to marry the captain's daughter, or so the captain promised. The captain betrayed the young man after he sank the "robber ship" and let him drown at sea.

According to Lunsford, the song "There Was a Bride come Through the Land" was a variant of the old English ballad "The Wife of Usher's Well," a narrative song about how the three sons of the Wife



of Usher return to her as apparitions after they had drowned at sea. Such stories of ghosts and the supernatural were popular throughout Appalachia. In his collection, Child identified "The Wife of Usher's Well" as of British origin. The other two songs collected by Lunsford at Skyline Farms, "The Little Yellow Hound," and "How Come the Blood on Your Shirt Sleeve," were variants of the British ballad "Edward," a song of intrigue and murder that also was listed in the Child collection as of British origin. Although they were not listed in the Child collection, the other songs identified by Lunsford in his report to Dornbush also were folk songs--American folk songs. These songs, made in the tradition of the Anglo/American ballads, only were of more recent date than their British ancestors.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously encouraged by his work, Lunsford in his report asked that he be allowed to stay at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms for another month. He wanted to arrange to have the folk music/dance program presented at one other location before he returned to Washington. He closed by requesting that he be allowed to do some recording at the project, contending that would "help me greatly in creating interest in the things I am trying to do."<sup>43</sup> Robert Van Hyning responded to Lunsford by saying he could remain at Skyline Farms until mid-March, if "this is satisfactory to Mr. Ross."<sup>44</sup> Hyning encouraged Lunsford to teach new songs to the children and "subscribers" in the project and not to mention recording the settlers until it was "an assured thing."<sup>45</sup> Hyning cautioned

Lunsford that people at the project might find it difficult to understand "the present advisory nature of Special Skills services to communities."<sup>46</sup> Obviously, the message that Hyning was sending to Lunsford was to play it low-key. Hyning, like other Special Skills Division officials at the time, was attempting to steer Special Skills through the turbulent bureaucratic seas as smoothly as possible.

Lunsford did stay at the project until mid-March at which time he was released from his duties with the Special Skills Division. Grace Falke notified Robert Hudgens of this action on March 13, 1937.<sup>47</sup> Ms. Falke explained to Hudgens that the decision was due to "an administrative cut in personnel."<sup>48</sup> Ms. Falke added that Margaret Valiant would continue to work at Skyline Farms, contingent upon the approval of Harry Ross.

Characteristically, Lunsford was not to be deterred. He continued to collect folk songs in Appalachia and after being released by Special Skills, Lunsford worked with John Lair, founder of the Renfro Barn Dance, for WLW Radio in Cincinnati, Ohio. Lunsford was a talent scout and coordinator for folk programs for WLW. In time Lunsford collected more than 300 songs for the U. S. Library of Congress and Columbia University.<sup>49</sup> He continued his work in the Appalachian Mountains, and hosted the annual Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, which featured square dancers, fiddlers, banjo players, and mouth harp musicians. In 1939 Lunsford brought the Soco

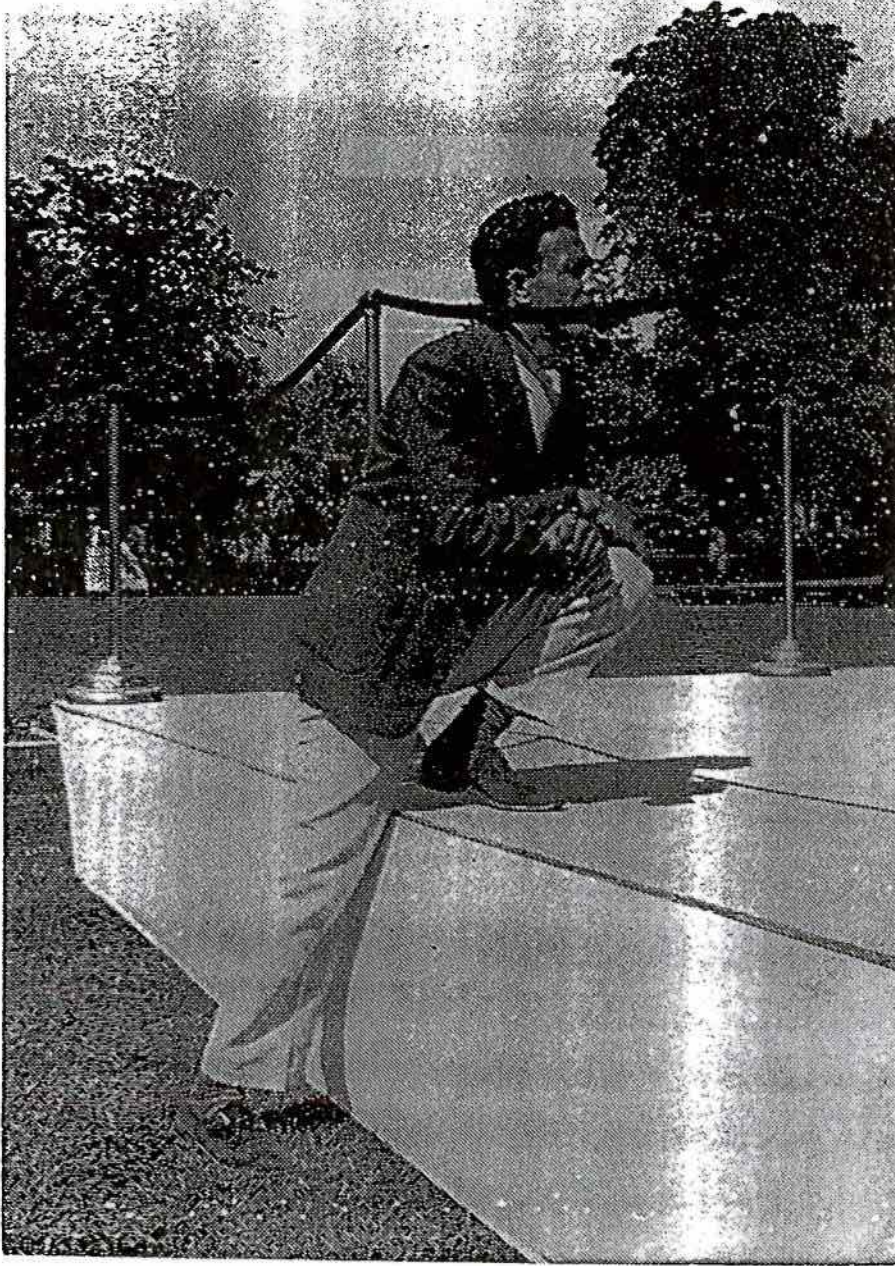
Gap (North Carolina) square dance team to Washington to perform at the White House for the King and Queen of England.<sup>50</sup> Lunsford later expressed his philosophy toward mountain folk music by saying: "My business was to draw attention to the fine cultural value of our traditional music and our dancing and the fine honor of our people. I was trying to perpetuate the real, true cultural worth of the mountain people. Our section, you know, has been slandered. People had the notion that it was somehow inferior. Now, they've turned around and found there might be something in it."<sup>51</sup>

Lunsford's experience at Skyline Farms was only a beginning of his effort to correct the "slander perpetuated against the mountain people" and he was at the project for only a short time. However, the work he accomplished at Skyline Farms would soon lead to other more far-reaching events in regard to the cultural heritage of the project and would show some of the participants a life that only a few years before they had never imagined.

This experience was set in motion when in the summer of 1937 the project musicians and dancers performed at Lunsford's three-day Mountain Dance and Music Festival in Ashville.<sup>52</sup> While in Ashville, the musicians played on a local radio program. Although Lunsford was no longer with Special Skills, he had not forgotten the Skyline musicians and dancers. By bringing the musicians and dancers to Ashville, Lunsford had laid the groundwork for the big performance for the Skyline Farms group that was soon to occur.

This performance took place in Washington on May 12, 1938, on the grounds of the White House. The Skyline dancers and musicians, on the recommendation of Nicholas Ray and based on their showing in Ashville, were asked to perform at a garden party hosted by Mrs. Roosevelt. Ray and Katherine Dietz, the regional educational and community advisor for RA, planned the program and trip to Washington. Ray at the time was a specialist in theatre and drama productions with Special Skills Division. (See Photograph: Nicholas Ray, p. 146.) Ray's work at Skyline Farms was the beginning to a long and successful career. He would later produce and co-host a national radio program for CBS with Woody Guthrie, then move to Hollywood to become a highly-regarded movie director, including in his career credits the James Dean epic "Rebel Without A Cause."<sup>53</sup> Based on Ray's recommendation, Mrs. Roosevelt asked the Skyline dancers and musicians to perform at the White House at her expense.<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Roosevelt had developed a special interest in the resettlement community programs, especially Arthurdale in Virginia.

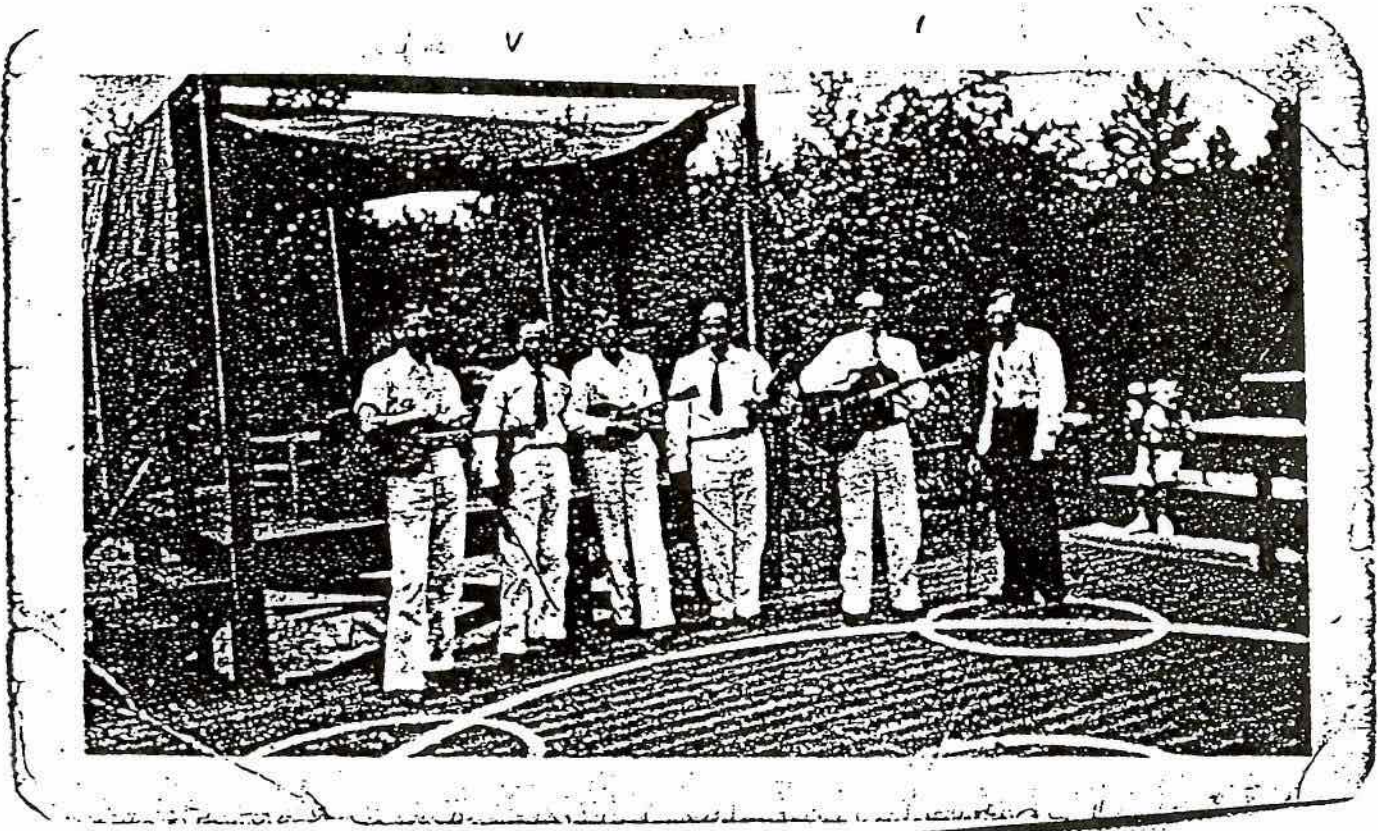
Ray arrived at Skyline Farms in April of 1938 to produce the Washington program, and also to interest the schools and community in the use of theatre for enrichment and enjoyment.<sup>55</sup> At the project Ray found the rich, musical heritage that Lunsford had discovered. The community band that had been organized and that would travel to Washington was named the Skyline Farms Band. The band consisted of Chester Allen, guitar and vocals; Clifford Anderson, dobro; H. L.



Nicholas Ray stage-side at the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms performance on the lawn of the White House in 1955. Ray later would direct movies, including "Rebel Without A Cause"

"Hub" Green, fiddle; Thomas Holt, tenor guitar; Joe Sharp, mandolin and vocals; and Reubin Rousseau, fiddle. (See photograph, Skyline Farms Band, p. 148.) The band had honed its skills playing at the community dances held at the project on Friday nights. Also, as was the tradition, the band often played at homes in the community, sometimes until the early hours of the morning. During these local performances, other musicians, such as Walter Holt, Lake Weldon, and Crady "Red" Campbell, would play with the band. On some occasions the Holt sisters, Irene and Lucille, would play with the band, with Irene playing the mandolin and guitar and singing, while Lucille sang and played the mandolin.

Traditional music was a part of the subculture of the Appalachian farmers and had been passed from generation to generation. Walter Holt recalls that his father played a fiddle and bought him his own instrument as a young boy.<sup>56</sup> His father played the fiddle in the old mountain style, Holt said, tuning it in the straight A chord, rather than in the G chord used in tuning by modern fiddlers.<sup>57</sup> Holt admired the skill of the old style fiddlers, because they were constantly "moving their fingers" when they played to hit the right notes.<sup>58</sup>



The Skyline Farms Band. Left to right: Chester Allen, Rubin Rousseau, Joe Sharp, Herbert Green, Thomas Hold, and Clifford Anderson. Photograph taken at the Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms project. Photograph provided by Mrs. Sue Ward. Picture identification by Joe Sharp.

A key member of the band was Chester Allen, a talented, humorous entertainer with a deep, booming voice, who along with his friend Grady "Red" Campbell had recorded commercially before coming to Skyline Farms. (See Photographs: Chester Allen and Grady "Red" Campbell, p. 150.) Allen and Campbell had recorded in the early 1930s in Atlanta for the Victor Bluebird label, a branch of RCA Records.<sup>59</sup> Allen and Campbell recorded the songs "New Huntsville Jail," "Fool Drinking Daddy," "Drinking Fool," and "Railroad Blues."<sup>60</sup> The songs were released regionally by RCA and sold relatively well, according to Campbell.<sup>61</sup> Allen and Campbell were paid \$25 each for their recordings and they used the money to go to Ohio to visit relatives there.<sup>62</sup>

In Ohio, Allen and Campbell played at clubs and saloons. Once while Campbell was in Alabama, Allen appeared on the Cincinnati Barn Dance, a popular music show and radio program, similar to the Grand Ole Opry or Louisiana Hayride. At one of these appearances Allen later claimed to have taught country musician Grandpaw Jones the traditional folk song "Old Rattler" as they sat backstage: "Old Rattler" would become the song most identified with Jones during his career. Allen and Campbell hoboed trains to and from Ohio and Alabama, with one jumping on the moving train first, and the other waiting down the track to throw their instruments to the one on board, then himself catching the train, by then moving so fast that it "would just straighten you out in the air when you grabbed it."<sup>63</sup>





Chester Allen



Grady "Red" Campbell

Allen and Campbell were recorded by the Victor Record Company prior to living at Cumberland Mountain (Skyline) Farms. They remained friends through the years until Allen's death.

Campbell worked for his father as a well-driller at Skyline Farms and he had gotten his friend Allen a job at the project as a painter. Campbell later would recall that a "misunderstanding with a local policeman" caused him not to be at the project in 1938 when the band went to Washington.

The musicians, then, that Seeger, Lunsford, and Ray found at Skyline Farms were not strictly amateurs and Allen and Campbell even had some commercial music experience. Also, the musicians at the project had been influenced to a degree by the contemporary music they heard on the radio during the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>64</sup> The band played many of the Jimmie Rodgers' "blue yodels" that were popular at the time.

Ray continued the work done by Seeger, Lunsford, and other Special Skills music specialists, such as R. W. Hampton and Leonard Kirk. He, too, threaded gently through the bureaucracy at Skyline Farms. He wrote Dornbush that Miss Dietz, the RA regional educational and community specialist at the project, had at first questioned him about his intent to include "some foreign folk tune" in the music program "which was not indigenous to the mountain people."<sup>65</sup> After assuring her this was not his intent and after agreeing to her request that he travel to the Birmingham area to advise officials there about drama productions, Ray said that his working relationship with Miss Dietz was "definitely on the up-grade."<sup>66</sup>

Ray worked with Dietz, Ross, and W. I. "Ike" Floyd in planning the Washington performance. He particularly relied on Floyd, the project's timber resource manager and manager and director of the square dancers and band. While working with the dancers and musicians, Ray at the same time coordinated travel arrangements and the performance in Washington with the FSA office. Ray was meticulous in his approach, specifying the exact stage dimensions the band and dancers would need. Ray soon produced an outline for the program and he described it to Dornbush:

"When the group is announced the orchestra will play one number out of which an individual will "cut out" a solo fiddle tune. A homesteader will address the audience briefly giving exact location, etc. of Skyline Farms. This will be followed by his calling on one or two members of the group. (All of which, orchestra, dance team, etc. will be seated on the stage from beginning.) The first will tell of the first day on the mountain. The second will follow with background and explanation of the term "sculling" as it applies to community life, i.e. Oftentimes, when a man on the mountain came in possession of an article badly needed and was questioned about it, he would reply, "I sculled it." This was as satisfactory an explanation as if he had said, "ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies." I thought the incident we might use is when one of the men asked his foreman to be let off work an hour

early and the foreman asked, "What for?" John replied, "I want to go to a neighbors and borrow a setting of eggs." Two days later John again asked leave from work an hour early and when asked to explain said, "I want to go borrow a setting hen to hatch the eggs I borrowed the other day." That's sculling, too.<sup>67</sup>

Ray notified Dornbush that after the "humor" part of the program, the "orchestra," as he called the band, would play another number---"out of which will step Chester Allen who will give his rendition of a Fox chase."<sup>68</sup> He further stated that Allen's performance would be followed by a square dance, and then two mountain ballads to conclude the program.<sup>69</sup> Ray stated that the program was thirty-nine minutes long with time left for encores. Importantly, Ray wrote: "If there is to be any emphasis on idea whatsoever, it will be this--"We started out as relief clients and the government gave us a chance to own our own homes and make our own way. And that's what we're doing. And in the natural course of our own community life, a community which we govern ourselves, we have to provide our own entertainment. What we have done today just happens to be the way we entertain ourselves. We hope it is entertaining to you, too."<sup>70</sup>

As well-intentioned as Ray and the Special Skills Division were in bringing the dancers and musicians to Washington, obviously they had not quite broken through to a complete understating of the mountain people and the tenant subculture, as evident in Ray's

opening he had written for the performance. The opening portrayed the project participants in stereotypical terms. In some respects the dialogue opening was like a white Appalachian minstrel show. In fairness, however, self-effacing, "rube" humor was and is a staple among rural Americans, and Ray was in this sense only following a style that he did not create. Moreover, in looking back the project participants fondly would recall their trip to Washington and speak well of Nicholas Ray both as a person and organizer.<sup>71</sup>

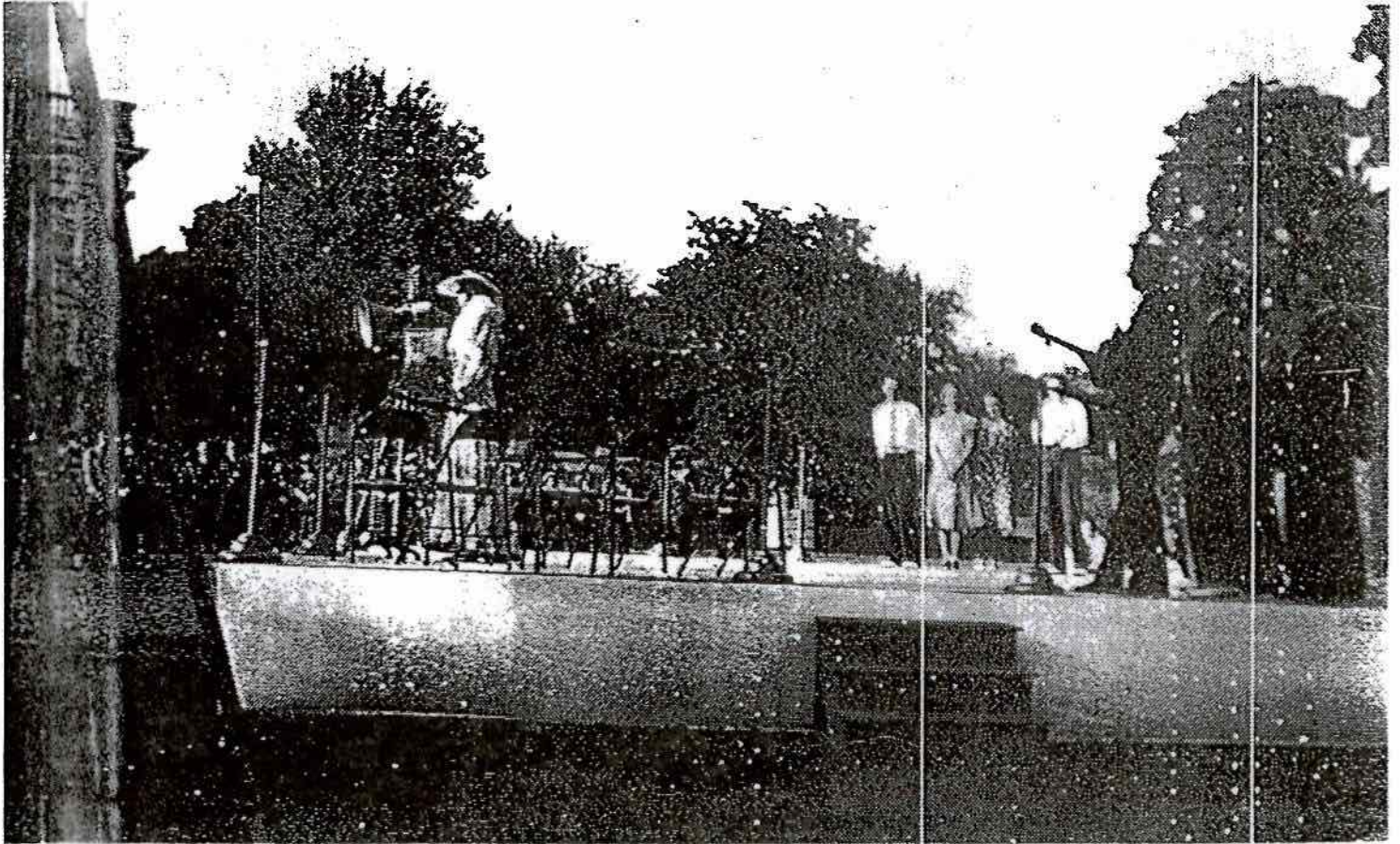
Ray received official notice from Washington that the group was to perform on May 12, 1938. On May 10 a group of twenty-nine Skyline Farms residents began the 750-mile trip to Washington by car, crossing through East Tennessee and on into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. They stayed at a "tourist camp" outside of Washington. In addition to the band members, the group consisted of Mr. and Mrs. W. I. "Ike" Floyd, Willie Rodgers, Opal Holsonback, Mrs. A. Walker, Prince Whorton, Mrs. E. E. Wilson, John Lindsey, J. W. Holmand, Edith Green, Mr. and Mrs. Elton Kennamer, Mr. and Mrs. N. E., Waldrop, Walter Freeman, Juanita Jarnagin, Jane Floyd, M. L. Lands, Mr. and Mrs. Otis Sharpe, and Mr. and Mrs. W. N. Ross. (See Photograph: The Skyline Farms Group in Washington, D. C. May 1938, p. 155.)

The group performed at a garden party hosted by Mrs. Roosevelt for women executives of the government departments, with Mrs. Roosevelt serving as the hostess, assisted by Cabinet member wives.<sup>72</sup>



Skyline Farms musical group visits Washington, D.C., in 1938. Photograph provided by Ms. Pluma Sparks.

Some 2,323 people attended the garden party, including President Roosevelt, and by all reports the performance was a resounding success. Hope Ridings Miller, the Washington Post society editor, called the performance "a highlight of the afternoon's entertainment."<sup>73</sup> Mrs. Roosevelt introduced the group by saying that they had come 750 miles by automobile to "play" just like they did every Friday night at their community house on a plateau in the lower Cumberland Mountains. (See Photograph: Mrs. Roosevelt Introduces the Skyline Group, p. 157.) After Mrs. Roosevelt's introduction "Ike" Floyd served as master of ceremonies. The band began by playing "Alabama Jubilee." Then the eight couples who were the square dancers performed their numbers. According to news releases in their routines the performers "opened and shut the garden gate, "ocean waved," and "broad sashshayed," "threaded the needle," and "rang up four."<sup>74</sup> Among other numbers the band played were "Old Hen Cackled," "Old Rattler," and "Over the Mountain," the concluding song.<sup>75</sup> Chester Allen led the vocals on "Old Rattler," and during the song imitated a hound dog chasing a rabbit, and as always he provided his own sound effects. According to those present, President Roosevelt roared with laughter when Allen performed his number. Roosevelt himself was a fan of "authentic mountain music."<sup>76</sup> Ms. Miller concluded her report on the program in the Washington Post



Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt Introduces the Skyline Group

May 12, 1938

Photograph courtesy of Joe Sharp and Jean Hill.



by writing: "Judging by the thunder of applause following each performance the gingham-clad girls and coatless boys were highly successful as entertainers."<sup>77</sup>

Obviously, the project participants had come a long way and not just geographically. Only a few years before they had been unemployed or marginally-employed farm tenants, destitute, with little hope for the future. For a day, however, they had performed for President and Mrs. Roosevelt in a city far removed from the mountain that was their home. In that city they had been treated as special guests. It was a remarkable journey.

Later, Mrs. Roosevelt gave the group a personal tour of the White House, where each met the President in his office. Chester Allen would recall: "When he spoke to you, there was a wake behind him. . . you could feel it. It wasn't just put-on or make-up. He meant what he said. And that smile on his face. He didn't act like he was worried about a thing in the world."<sup>78</sup> While in Washington, the band would again perform for Roosevelt and his guests aboard the Presidential Yacht on the Potomac River.<sup>79</sup> They toured the city, visiting the Washington Monument, the Capitol, the Supreme Court Building, the Lincoln Memorial, and drove up Connecticut Avenue to the National Zoo.

After its performances for President and Mrs. Roosevelt, the band had yet another engagement, for arrangements had been made for Alan Lomax to record the group for the U. S. Library of Congress. Lomax had begun work for the Library of Congress in 1937, following in his father John's footsteps as a traditional music collector. Both father and son would in time become renowned ethnomusicologists. In their collaboration Our Singing Country Alan Lomax and his father clearly stated how folk music was to them an unappreciated American art form when they wrote: "We have known country fiddlers who couldn't read or write, but could play two, three, or four hundred tunes. We have known white ballad singers who remembered one, two, three hundred ballads. We have known Negroes who could sing several hundred spirituals. We have shaken hands with a Mexican share-cropper who carried in his head the text, tunes, and state directions for a Miracle play requiring four hours and twenty actors."<sup>80</sup> The Lomaxes were intent on redefining art to include the music and folk stories of rural America. To the Lomaxes, standards of judgment were relative and the folk idiom should only be judged on its own merit.

In Washington Lomax recorded the Skyline Farms Band performing seven songs: "John Henry," "Cumberland Mountain Farms," "Cotton Mill Colic," "Cacklin' Hen," "Here Rattler Here," "Let Me Be Your Salty Dog," and "Roll on Buddy."<sup>81</sup> Three of the songs, "John Henry," "Roll On, Buddy," and "Cotton Mill Colic" were work/laborer songs,

appropriate enough to be sung by tenant farmers who were carving out a new community on an uncleared mountaintop. "John Henry," of course, through the years has been one of the most popular American folk ballads, and tells of John Henry, a black steel driver who worked in the Big Bend Tunnell on the C & O Railroad in the West Virginia mountains about 1870.<sup>82</sup> In the song John Henry beats the newly-invented steam driver in a head-to-head contest of man against machine, then he dies from the physical strain of the contest, although the real-life John Henry died from natural causes unrelated to the event according to Lomax. The Skyline Farms Band performed a short version of one of the more than fifty variations of the song, with John Henry making a last, dying request to take his steel-diving hammer and "wrap it in gold and give it to the girl I love."<sup>83</sup> In the song John Henry tells the girl, Paulie Ann, to "do the best you can."<sup>84</sup> For the Skyline Farms Band and the people for whom they usually sang, the song was perfect: it told of the spirit and hardship of a "working man" and how humans were better than machines.

"Roll On, Buddy" was another railroad song. Lomax recorded the Skyline Farms Band members a cappella and they hauntingly sang of the "nine pound hammer" being "just a little too heavy."<sup>85</sup> They sang of:

"Going cross the mountain  
                   going cross the mountain  
 Going to see my darling  
                   see my darling

Ain't a gonna come back

ain't a gonna come back"<sup>86</sup>

According to Lomax, "Roll On Buddy" was a "white mountain cousin" to the family of black and white songs that crossed the racial line in the Appalachian mountains, as both groups sang about similar work experiences.<sup>87</sup>

The other work song, "Cotton Mill Colic," was of more recent vintage than "John Henry." The song was written in 1926 by Dave McCarn a Gaston County, North Carolina textile worker. McCarn recorded the song for the Victor Company in 1930 and it sold well and was played by radio stations, primarily in the South.<sup>88</sup> In Washington Lomax recorded Joe Sharp of the Skyline Farms Band singing "Cotton Mill Colic."<sup>89</sup> Sharp years later would say he had learned the song "off the radio."<sup>90</sup> In the song Sharp sang of the plight of the cotton mill worker:

"When you buy clothes on the easy term  
 And the collector treats you like mealy worms  
 One dollar down, then Lord knows if you don't make a payment,  
 they'll take your clothes.

When you go to bed  
 You can't sleep  
 Owe so much at the end of the week.

I'm gonna starve

Everybody will

Can't make a living at a cotton mill."<sup>91</sup>

For most of the project participants, working in the cotton mills of the South was equally as hard and impoverishing as working as a tenant farmer. Yet many tenant farmers, including those at Skyline Farms, eventually would become textile workers.

Of all the songs recorded by Alan Lomax of the Skyline Farms Band, "These Old Cumberland Mountain Farms" is perhaps the most revealing as far as life at the project is concerned. The song was written by Grady "Red" Campbell, who years later would recall that whenever the band played audiences always requested the song.<sup>92</sup> In the song Campbell and the Band put the feelings and experiences of the Skyline Farms participants into words. Those words as recorded by Lomax in Washington stated:

It is hard to be bound down in prison

But it's worse on these Cumberland Mountain farms

Druther be in some old penitentiary

Or up in old iron Tennessee.

Now hear me I've climbed them ole mountains

Through the rain and the sleet and the snow

If you're hired when you meet Mr. Richards  
Bow your head when you meet Captain Ross.  
Young \_\_\_\_\_ he run a commissary  
Mister, you be he was a thief,  
He sold apples at fifty cents a dozen  
And potatoes was strictly ten cents each.

When the Coffee County boys came to the mountain  
They expected to get lots to eat  
But when they called them in to dinner  
They got salmon, corn doggers and meat.

It is seventy miles to Chattanooga  
It's a one hundred and twenty to Nashville  
It's a thousand miles from here to civilization  
But it's only a few steps from here to hell.

Young people you've all heard my story  
And I hope you don't think it all wrong  
If you doubt the words I have told you

See Red Campbell for he composed this song."<sup>93</sup>

Campbell/Sharp's comparison of the project to a prison, "only a few steps from hell," did not match the glowing reports of the community going back to FSA headquarters in Washington at the time the Skyline

Band performed in Washington. Soon, however, the reports of what was happening at the project would change to more closely match the song, and suddenly the song became much less humorous.

Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger later included "These Old Cumberland Mountain Farms" in their book Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People.<sup>94</sup> Guthrie, obviously not knowing that Skyline Farms was a government project, wrote: "Some landlords make it so hard on us that we can't stand it any longer. Won't let you live, won't let you die. Won't let you eat, won't let you starve, won't let you work, won't let you rest. It's a sorry place to live in."<sup>95</sup>

Lomax recorded three other songs by the Skyline Farms Band. One was "Cacklin Hen," a lively square dance, instrumental number, with the band providing the hen "cackling" sound effects. "Salty Dog" was another fast-paced number about a man "looking for a woman (that) ain't got no man."<sup>96</sup> The song, one of the most risqué tunes of the 1920s, originally was recorded by black blues singer Papa Charlie Johnson as "Salty Dog Blues."<sup>97</sup> Later, the song was recorded by the Allen Brothers from Chattanooga, Tennessee, two of the more popular country recording artists of the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>98</sup> "Here, Rattler, Here" was a dance tune in which the singer, Chester Allen, called his prize hound dog.<sup>99</sup> As at the White House concert, Allen provided the sound effects of a dog barking, which had so captivated President Roosevelt.

The next year (1939) Herbert Halpert came to Skyline Farms with his mobile unit to record the band and other singers. Halpert was on his "Southern Recording Expedition," a field trip sponsored jointly by the U. S. Library of Congress and the Works Progress Administration. Halpert and his assistant, Abbott Ferris, traveled the South in their "sound wagon," a converted U.S. Army ambulance, and they concentrated on recording Anglo-American fiddle music.<sup>100</sup> In a brief visit to Skyline Farms, Halpert used a portable, battery-powered recorder to record various Skyline musicians, including the Skyline Farms Band, at the community school.<sup>101</sup> Halpert re-recorded a number of the songs that Lomax recorded of the Skyline Farms Band in Washington, although in some cases the musicians had changed the song titles slightly. Halpert listed the members of the "Skyline Farms String Band" as: Chester Allen, guitar and violin; Joe Sharp, mandolin; Thomas Holt, guitar; and Herbert Green, violin. Allen, Sharp, and Holt sang the vocals with Allen again providing the sound effects on "Old Hen Cackle" and "Ol' Rattler."<sup>102</sup> Halpert recorded the Band playing "John Henry," "Skyline Salty Dog," "Old Hen Cackle," "Cumberland Mountain Blues," and "Ol' Rattler"--the songs recorded by Lomax in Washington.<sup>103</sup>

However, Halpert went beyond the commercial music the Skyline Farms Band had learned from the radio and records to try to trace the origins of the music. Halpert asked the performers to explain the background to a number of the songs. In their answers members of the



Skyline Farms Band, particularly Allen, seemed to sense that their music was supposedly representative of Appalachia, and they responded accordingly. Allen consistently answered that the Band had learned a song from their "forefathers" or "we just picked it up on the mountain here" in response to Halpert's questions about song origins. In truth, Allen at this point already had been recorded commercially, and the band members had access to radio and records, from which they had learned many songs.

At one point Halpert and Allen had this conversation in regard to the origin of the song "Old Rattler":

Halpert: Well, suppose you tell me the name of this piece.

Allen: Old Rattler

Halpert: Where'd you pick it up?

Allen: Well, I picked up most of it from a hound dog.

Halpert: And the rest of it?

Allen: From, well, just the mountain people 'round through here.

Halpert: Did you add anything to it?

Allen: Oh yeah. I added my part to it.

Halpert: What was your part?

Allen: The barking part, of course.

Halpert: All right. Bark away.<sup>104</sup>

Allen's quick wit made an interesting, although sometimes frustrating, interview for Halpert.

Later Allen would describe to Halpert a song that he had written. The song was "Cincinnati Blues," and included the stanza:

I love Cincinnati. Lord I always loved this town.  
 But the wind and snow done got so cold I'm for Alabam.  
 I can hear Alabama callin' and I know I'm going back.  
 I'll settle down upon the farm in a Cumberland mountain  
 shack.<sup>105</sup>

Allen explained to Halpert he had written the song once when he was "just sitting up there at the Renfro Valley Barn Dance. . . and just got blue and went to making up this song."<sup>106</sup>

At Skyline Halpert sought out the older, traditional folk ballads. He recorded four young girls singing the "play-party" song "Green Coffee Grows on a White Oak Stump."<sup>107</sup> And he also recorded "The Miller," sung by a boy and three girls. The song included the verse:

Happy was a miller boy, lived on the hill  
 All the corn he had come a rollin' down the hill.  
 Hand on the hopper and a foot on the slat,  
 Every time the wheel turned  
 The boys turned back.<sup>108</sup>

Halpert's final recording at the Skyline school was of sisters Irene and Lucille Holt, who sang a religious song they had written, in which they warned that on the "resurrection morning" you will wish

"that you was one of us."<sup>109</sup> With that Halpert and Ferris in their "sound wagon" continued their journey across the South, recording next railroad "steel callers" and sacred harp singers.

Seeger, Lunsford, Lomax, and Halpert all brought into focus the role music played in the subcultural lifestyle of the Southern tenant farmer. Music was important in that lifestyle: the people looked to music not just to escape from daily drudgery, although certainly the music did permit them this. But the music, as it does universally regardless of the form, defined life for the tenants and clarified their emotions and feelings. For the tenants the musicians played and spoke a language and conveyed feelings for which they themselves often did not have words, as is true with any music. To their credit, Seeger, Lunsford, Lomax, and Halpert worked within the parameters of this music and tried to preserve it without changing it to what most of the modern world would have considered a more acceptable form. This was no small insight, for in years to come, the children of the tenants themselves often would dissociate themselves from their parents' music, as if it somehow bound them to the rural poverty their families had known and from which they were trying to escape.

As for the Skyline Farms Band members, following their grand performance for the President, they continued to play as a band in the Cumberland Mountain area during the next several years. The Band, however, began to break up in the early and middle forties, as

members left the project for one reason or another. However, all continued in music in some capacity through the years, although none became professional musicians. They did play with various bands and groups in the area, performing country and gospel music. Chester Allen was offered a recording contract, but he never pursued a professional career. Instead, Allen performed at local shows in the area, or made appearances on AM radio. Whenever he performed, he sang "Ol' Rattler," the song that had made the President laugh during a troubled time in America and the world. After leaving the project, Allen worked at various jobs, including car salesman, an occupation for which no doubt his abundant charm was an asset. Of the original Skyline Farms Band members that performed in Washington, as of the summer of 1991, only Clifford Anderson and Joe Sharp were still living. "Sometimes" band members Walter Holt and Grady "Red" Campbell also were alive.

The performance for the President remained a high point in the lives of the Skyline Band members. When one of the band members, Thomas Holt, died in the spring of 1991, it was announced in his obituary that he had been one of the members of the Skyline Farms Band that had played at the White House for President and Mrs. Roosevelt. For those from the project who performed at the White House that May day, the memory of the event lasted a lifetime.

## Chapter 8

### The Dream Begins to Fade

In many ways the Skyline group's trip to Washington and their performance at the White House was the pinnacle of the Skyline Farms project. For beginning in late 1938 and into 1939, problems intensified at the project. Flaws in the agricultural plan for the project emerged and internal conflicts developed. By the end of the 1930s decade, the great enthusiasm which had so characterized the project in the first years had waned.

Additionally, by the late 1930s the project had become in some ways a victim of its own success. More people applied to become participants in the project than could be accepted. The rejection of some of these applicants created controversy, not just at the project but state-wide and nationally. In the distant background to all these problems were the voices of the persistent critics of the Roosevelt Administration, who complained that the New Deal programs, such programs as Skyline Farms, were wasteful and interfered with the free enterprise system. These critics eagerly magnified any local problems that arose at the resettlement programs. Consequently, FSA and Skyline Farms officials had to maintain a delicate balancing act in handling problems to prevent them from becoming national issues that might undermine the Roosevelt Administration's resettlement programs.

From the beginning, the success of the project depended on making the farm units profitable. Much of the profit was to come from raising and selling cotton. According to initial projections, thirty-nine percent of the farmers' yearly cash income at Skyline Farms was to come from cotton.<sup>1</sup> Farmers were to use this income to buy their house and land. By early 1938 it was obvious it would take longer than anticipated to ready the project land for cotton. The thick forest was difficult to clear. Even when cleared, this "new ground," as project participants called it, was not fertile cotton land.

That it was taking longer to prepare the land to grow cotton was evident as early as December of 1937 when Robert Hudgens wrote Will Alexander requesting money designated to construct a project cotton gin be placed in a bank savings account.<sup>2</sup> Hudgens requested this on behalf of the Skyline Farms Homestead Association, which had received a loan of \$27,300 from the United States government to build the community store, a general warehouse, a potato curing house, a syrup plant, and the cotton gin.<sup>3</sup> In explaining his request, Hudgens noted that "agricultural operations had not advanced sufficiently to justify the immediate development of a cotton gin."<sup>4</sup> Hudgens said that not enough land had been cleared and readied for cultivation to justify building the cotton gin, and because of this, some \$12,000 was not needed for "immediate expenditure."<sup>5</sup> FSA records show that in June of 1939, \$10,000 belonging to the Skyline Homestead

Association was placed in area banks: \$5,000 each going to the First Federal Savings and Loan Association of Florence and the First Federal Savings and Loan Association of Gadsden.<sup>6</sup>

The action taken by the FSA with Skyline Farms funds was strange indeed. Here, after all, was a social agency placing money designated for rehabilitation into a bank savings account because there was no need to spend the money, even though the nation was attempting to recover from its worst economic depression in history. Eventually, the money would be spent, but for operating costs of the Homestead Association, and not for constructing the cotton gin, a facility that was never built.<sup>7</sup>

The production problems at Skyline Farms were compounded by unanticipated low cotton prices in the late 1930s and early 1940s. New Deal cotton programs, with their emphasis on crop reduction, were not affecting greatly the price of cotton in Alabama. These programs had operated on the premise that by taking land out of cultivation, less cotton would be produced, and the price would increase. As was intended, the amount of cotton planted did decrease in Alabama: falling some one million acres--from 3,019,000 acres planted in 1932, the last year of the Hoover Presidency, to 2,058,000 acres planted in 1938.<sup>8</sup> Initially, cotton prices did respond to the Roosevelt crop reduction program, rising from 6.83 cents per pound in 1932 to more acceptable 12.10 in 1934. But by 1937 and 1938 cotton prices dropped again, falling to 8.53 and 8.50 cents per pound for those years

again, falling to 8.53 and 8.50 cents per pound for those years respectively. (See Table I.) It was not until the war years that cotton prices increased substantially, reaching 22.59 cents per pound in 1945, the year that Skyline Farms was ending. It was not until after the project had ended that cotton prices went up considerably--rising to 33.66 and 32.21 cents per pound in 1946 and 1947. (See Table I.)

As noted, the project greatly depended on the successful production and sale of cotton.<sup>9</sup> Project farmers were economically dependent on selling cotton according to the farm plan that had been devised for them. But that farm plan for the project had left little room for error. Farmers yearly had to pay for their house and land, for living expenses, and for their RA/FSA farm loan. These payments left the typical family with only nine dollars at the end of the year.<sup>10</sup> The failure of cotton to materialize as a profitable crop, whether due to low prices or infertile land, meant disaster as far as the farmers were concerned. By 1938 and 1939 it appeared that cotton was not going to be the economic mainstay of the project.

Another problem arose as project officials finalized their list of families to be accepted into the project. In May of 1939, E. S. Morgan, FSA Regional Five director, notified FSA director Will Alexander that the first families had been selected for the project. He provided Alexander with a list of one hundred and forty-five families who had at this point been chosen to participate.<sup>11</sup>



TABLE I  
COTTON PRICES IN ALABAMA: 1932-1949

| Year | Acreage<br>Harvested | Yield Per<br>Acre (lbs.) | Total Bales<br>Produced | Price Per<br>Lb. (cents) |
|------|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1928 | 3,437,000            | 154                      | 1,107,000               | 18.04                    |
| 1929 | 3,556,000            | 180                      | 1,337,000               | 16.55                    |
| 1930 | 3,582,000            | 196                      | 1,467,000               | 9.06                     |
| 1931 | 3,271,000            | 207                      | 1,415,000               | 5.64                     |
| 1932 | 3,019,000            | 150                      | 947,000                 | 6.83                     |
| 1933 | 2,318,000            | 200                      | 969,000                 | 10.60                    |
| 1934 | 2,133,000            | 213                      | 950,000                 | 12.10                    |
| 1935 | 2,243,000            | 226                      | 1,059,000               | 10.70                    |
| 1936 | 2,321,000            | 226                      | 1,145,000               | 12.21                    |
| 1937 | 2,694,000            | 290                      | 1,631,000               | 8.53                     |
| 1938 | 2,058,000            | 251                      | 1,081,000               | 8.50                     |
| 1939 | 2,020,000            | 186                      | 785,000                 | 9.21                     |
| 1940 | 1,961,000            | 190                      | 779,000                 | 9.77                     |
| 1941 | 1,746,000            | 217                      | 790,000                 | 17.37                    |
| 1942 | 1,702,000            | 261                      | 925,000                 | 19.00                    |
| 1943 | 1,620,000            | 285                      | 959,000                 | 20.06                    |
| 1944 | 1,393,000            | 347                      | 1,006,000               | 20.96                    |
| 1945 | 1,379,000            | 324                      | 931,000                 | 22.59                    |
| 1946 | 1,530,000            | 258                      | 822,000                 | 33.66                    |
| 1947 | 1,500,000            | 298                      | 931,000                 | 32.21                    |
| 1948 | 1,630,000            | 353                      | 1,197,000               | 30.86                    |
| 1949 | 1,890,000            | 216                      | 851,000                 | 29.98                    |

SOURCE: Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Auburn University, 100 Years: Alabama Crop, Livestock and Income Data, Unpublished Report, Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn University, Auburn, Al.

The units these families occupied varied in size and purpose, depending upon the number of family members and the general quality of the land. Some of the units consisted of more than the standard forty acres. In fact, there were thirty units which contained a house and supporting farm buildings and 56 to 124 acres of land.<sup>12</sup> In all, approximately ninety units consisted of a house, farm buildings, and forty acres. Also, there were units consisting of only a house and two to twelve acres of land. These were called "subsistence units" and they were for non-farm workers at the project, such as truck drivers, carpenters, or painters.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, ten other units were occupied by project personnel, including Harry Ross, the project manager, B. J. East, the construction foreman, W. D. Lucas, farm manager and his assistant, John J. Vandiver, physician Dr. A. Zimmerman and nurse Mary Sharp Barkley.<sup>14</sup> One of these units, called the "teacherage," was occupied by the female teachers at the project school.

In the early stages, families had come to Cumberland Mountain hoping that they would be accepted into the project. Once on the mountain, a number of the men had been hired as laborers. They helped build the community store and school, or worked building the road up Cumberland Mountain that led to the project. These jobs were with the WPA and not the FSA, and when construction ended, there were no more jobs and the men were out of work. Additionally, there were also some families who had taken construction jobs, then been

accepted for the project, but for various reasons, had been dismissed. A number of these people continued to stay at the project. R. W. Hudgens, an FSA assistant director at the time, estimated there were ninety families who were on the project without authorization.<sup>15</sup>

Many of these "squatter" families, as the FSA described them, lived at what was called Bluff City. Here families had been permitted to build temporary houses in which to live until their construction jobs were complete. These houses were, as one FSA report described them, "hovels." Most were one-room shacks, thrown together with scrap wood and tin.<sup>16</sup> This "shanty-town," as it also was called, was an embarrassment to officials, who had, after all, begun the project to eliminate such housing problems as these.

By the spring of 1939 construction jobs at Skyline Farms were ending. Consequently, during February and March of 1939 the "squatter" families were told informally that they should move from Bluff City by April 15, 1939. At this point a member of the Bluff City residents tried to get the eviction order postponed to a later date. At first, twenty-three men representing their families petitioned Junior Thomas, the FSA official at Skyline who was responsible for removing the families.<sup>17</sup> They asked that they at least be allowed to stay in their homes until the WPA road project was completed or permanently abandoned. As long as the road project remained uncompleted, they maintained, they would be needed as

workers, and as it was, they were located near their jobs. They pointed out that it would be difficult for them to find other houses in which to live.<sup>18</sup> The men closed their petition by warning:

"Another consideration is the fact that to drastically and needlessly move a large number of families who are considered unable to help themselves would more than likely attract unfavorable publicity to the Farm Security Administration or to its officials."<sup>19</sup> The signers of the petition were aware of the sensitive position the FSA was in regarding the public's perception of the resettlement programs. These resettlement communities were controversial as it was, and they did not need any more negative publicity.

When the men got no response, one of them again wrote Thomas, requesting a reply. The man was Rubin Rousseau, a WPA construction timekeeper who previously had been a part of the Skyline project. Rousseau played the violin in the Skyline Farms Band and had been with the group during their Washington performance. He was pointed in criticizing the FSA. He wrote to Thomas: "In expressing my opinion of this affair, I will say that I do not blame you for your efforts to carry out the orders of a superior, but will say, regardless of its author, that any procedure which is designed to ruthlessly and needlessly move a colony of people who are considered helpless and who have no place to move is thoroughly undemocratic, inhumanitarian and totally out of harmony with the policies of this present Administration. Furthermore, such a procedure is bound to

become liable to public disapproval sooner or later."<sup>20</sup> Rousseau added that the unsightly appearance of the houses was no reason to tear them down and force the residents to move. Those who found them "unpleasant and repulsive" could simply not look at them, he wrote.<sup>21</sup>

Rousseau gave Thomas little time to reply, for two days later, he took his complaint literally to the top and wrote Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt had impressed the Skyline group with her friendliness during the group's trip to Washington. Rousseau again appealed on behalf of the Bluff City residents for Mrs. Roosevelt to ask President Roosevelt to influence FSA officials to postpone their order to vacate Bluff City.<sup>22</sup> In his letter Rousseau once more implied that the situation at the project could be damaging publicity for the FSA and Roosevelt Administration. He warned that he and the petition signers could go to the newspapers with their story. However, he said that they were taking another route, which was to ask Roosevelt himself for help. Rousseau went on to write: "By way of introducing myself, I played the violin at your White House Lawn Party last spring, and I also wrote the letter of appreciation which was addressed to you from the entire Skyline Farms group. I still feel the same way about the Roosevelts as I did when I wrote this letter."<sup>23</sup> Rousseau's letter to Mrs. Roosevelt had taken the Bluff City residents' complaint to a new level. After having written Mrs. Roosevelt, Rousseau wrote Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and continued his complaint against the FSA.<sup>24</sup> In this letter Rousseau

brought up another charge against the agency. He included photographs of a house on the project that was not located in Bluff City. The house, he said, belonged to a former resident of Bluff City who was being permitted to live at another location on the project. To Rousseau, this was unfair, since other Bluff City residents were being forced to move without being provided with replacement housing on the project.<sup>25</sup>

In Washington the complaints to Mrs. Roosevelt and Secretary Wallace filtered through the federal bureaucracy. R. W. Hudgens, the FSA assistant administrator, sent copies of Rousseau's letters to E. S. Morgan, FSA Region Five director. Hudgens supported the plans to have the Bluff City houses removed from the project, and suggested that Morgan have someone explain to Rousseau "why it is impossible for these people to remain on the project after completion of construction work."<sup>26</sup> Later, J. O. Walker, director of the FSA's Resettlement Division, responded to Rousseau.<sup>27</sup> Walker informed Rousseau that his letters had been referred to him. He thanked Rousseau for his "interest in this" and assured him "that the matters brought up by you are being given consideration."<sup>28</sup>

When it became apparent to the petitioners that the decision to have them moved from Bluff City had not changed, they proceeded with their implied threat to reveal the situation to the newspapers. According to William Dent, FSA Regional Information Advisor, Grover Phillips, another Bluff City resident, sent letters critical of the

Skyline Project to "wire services, newspapers, Investigation Section, G-Man Hoover, Mrs. Roosevelt and others. . ."29 Dent stated that the complaints that reached the newspapers were "quite sensational."30

The complaints included "tales of misappropriation of funds and materials to forceful evictions and a case of premature birth because of these forceful evictions."31 Dent said his office's investigation of the stories found no truth in them, and that there had been no evictions or threats of evictions, except in the case of one family that had moved on to the land of one of the families chosen for the project.32

In a weekly field report, Dent stated that residents of the Bluff City community were being "influenced to leave," and a few "disgruntled residents" were trying to "create all the disturbance they can and bring as much unfavorable publicity to the project as possible."33 He believed their motive in creating the disturbances was to prevent the FSA from continuing plans to remove the families and houses at Bluff City. Dent wrote that he had received a tip from the Associated Press that the morning newspaper in Birmingham was to carry a story headlined: "Farm Family Ejected from FSA Community-Skyline Farms."34 Dent said that "by the use of several phone calls and explanations this story has been headed off. . ."35 Dent noted that as a result of the Information Office's work, the Bluff City controversy would be confined to an insertion in an overall story on Skyline Farms.36 In order to counter a "barrage of

unfavorable letters" from the Bluff City dissidents that had reached state newspapers, Dent and the Information Office asked reporters from various newspapers in the state to visit the project. The intent was to show the "various successes and accomplishments of the project" and to "take the lid off" the complaints by having the reporters investigate the problem and interview the complainants personally.<sup>37</sup>

The effort at "damage control" on the part of Dent and the Information Office seemingly did work. The articles that appeared in regional newspapers on the project as a result of the controversy were generally favorable. Reporter Gould Beech in an article in the Birmingham News described the Bluff City controversy as a "slum clearance" problem.<sup>38</sup> Beech wrote that about half of the twenty-eight families at Bluff City originally had been a part of the project as farmers, but they had been dismissed because they were not in good enough health to do the work to purchase a farm, or they were unsuitable for farming, or they had not "cooperated."<sup>39</sup> In his article Beech interviewed both Grover Phillips and Rubin Rousseau. Phillips was described as the father of seven children who had been a "homesteader" and had been asked to move by the project manager. He was at the time of the controversy working with the WPA and living in Bluff City. Beech stated that Phillips had filed a claim with the FSA stating he was owed \$2,500 for his work at the project.



Beech also described Rousseau as a Bluff City resident who had been dismissed from the Skyline Farms project. In the article Rousseau said he had no complaint about his dismissal. However, he said that the project had not been "properly managed" and that the government was "morally obligated" to take care of the residents of Bluff City since the project was designed to help low-income farmers.<sup>40</sup> Among the newspaper photographs taken at Skyline Farms was one which pictured Phillips and Rousseau standing together and they were described as "not satisfied" with the project.

The article did permit project personnel to present their side of the story. Harry Ross stated officials were helping the families find jobs or to relocate. Ross went on to say that the families would get subsistence loans if funds were available. Phillips himself said that he had gotten a \$50 grant to be used to permit him to get a job on another farm off the project. Ross further stated that there had been no forcible evictions at Bluff City and that no formal notices of evictions had been sent.<sup>41</sup>

The entire Bluff City episode reveals both the very sensitive and delicate environment in which the FSA lived. Obviously, the project could not accept all the families who wanted farms. Yet rejection of some families was bound to create some resentment. Critics of the FSA and the resettlement communities were eager to use such problems as the Bluff City controversy to show how rehabilitation was failing, and FSA officials realized this.

Consequently, FSA officials, through the agency's Information Office, fought a constant battle to maintain a positive image of resettlement, while at the same time struggling with the very real problems of rehabilitation. In time, the battle would take its toll, and the foundation on which the FSA rested became increasingly unstable.

As for the Bluff City residents, some did ask a young Scottsboro attorney, Robert E. Jones, to investigate their case. Jones later would become an U. S. Congressman from the Eight Alabama District and serve for thirty years. Jones considered handling the case but decided that the FSA was within its jurisdiction and had the authority to select the families it wanted for the project.<sup>42</sup> Little by little the families then left Bluff City and the project as the WPA jobs ended. In time, the hovels that were their homes were removed, as the project officials had intended. The FSA had prevailed, but clearly the road to building a cooperative, harmonious community on Cumberland Mountain had become rocky and treacherous.

It perhaps was natural that those people not selected for the project might be discontented. Indeed, several of the key leaders in the Bluff City controversy were those who had initially been accepted into the project, then for various reasons, dismissed. However, what is even more indicative of deep-rooted dissension at the project is that a number of the families who were selected as participants also were dissatisfied and registered their protest.

This is evident in what followed the Bluff City controversy. In September of 1939, sixty-four people associated with the Skyline Farms project signed a petition they sent to U. S. Attorney Jim Smith in Birmingham in which they charged Project Manager Harry Ross with diversion of labor and materials at the project.<sup>43</sup> Among the complaints was that Ross had directed that chimney rocks on government property be moved to private property and that labor for this was paid for with government funds.<sup>44</sup> The petition also alleged that lumber from the project sawmill had been used to build a private home and that workers who constructed the home had been paid with government money.<sup>45</sup> In other charges, the complainants contended that a worker had not been paid money that had been promised him, and that another resident had cleared nine and one half acres of land on his unit, only to be told he would have to move.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the most telling remark of all in the petition was: "Mr. H. M. Ross (is) taking over liberty away from people of Skyline Farms because people don't do just like he wanted them to do."<sup>47</sup> The statement indicates that the participants were having difficulty in following the rules, orders, and regulations inherent in the governmental bureaucracy of the project. They were, after all, Americans, and had been raised to be independent individuals. Adapting to a community based on mutual cooperation was for the participants a difficult undertaking.

Several of the people who signed the petition charging Ross with the various allegations were those who had signed the earlier Bluff City complaint, including among these Grover Phillips and Rubin Rousseau. However, some twenty-three of the complainants who signed the petition against Ross were original subscribers to the project--those selected in 1938. These included not just workers on the project, but individuals representing families who were working farm units. That these individuals signed the petition reflected a deep level of frustration among the participants.

After receiving the petition, U. S. Attorney Smith sent it to the Works Progress Administration in Washington. Smith assumed that WPA headquarters was the appropriate place for an investigation of the charges to begin. The WPA Division of Investigation, in turn, reported that the WPA did not operate the Skyline Farms project, which, they explained, was under the jurisdiction of the FSA.<sup>48</sup> Smith, consequently, sent the complaint to the FSA.<sup>49</sup> Then the FSA investigated the charges.

The FSA Investigation Division cleared Ross of all allegations.<sup>50</sup> E. S. Morgan, the FSA Region Five director, wrote to Will Alexander that "the charges either failed to stand up under investigation or that the action complained of was justified."<sup>51</sup> Morgan concluded that in view of the facts, "we believe that no further action is necessary."<sup>52</sup> With that the investigation was ended.

The episode was bound to have had at least a psychological effect on Ross, however. Only a few years before, Ross was being widely lauded as the key founder of the project. One newspaper account even described him as a "Moses" who had lead "the Depression victims from the slough of oppression to the promised land. . ."53 Yet a sizable number of those very people who he led had accused him of diversion of labor and material. It is apparent their motives were to undermine Ross in order to have him removed as project manager.

Part of their dissatisfaction stemmed, no doubt, from the morass of rules and regulations that were inherent in the project and which Ross enforced. However, Ross' personality, too, may have contributed to the resentment. From all accounts, he was a stern, authoritarian leader, although he was at the same time a friendly, out-going, and compassionate man. His personality, however, was probably out of step with the fiercely independent mountain people, who quite often had difficulty in recognizing that the rules, regulations, and the cooperative approach at the project were intended for their benefit.

Moreover, as early as 1936 workers with the Special Skills Division had noticed that a "class" split seemed to be developing in the project. In letters to Charles Seeger, both R. W. Hampton and Leonard Kirk said that this division was along the lines of the "salaried" personnel at the project and the "homesteaders," or

participants.<sup>54</sup> "They speak of our group and the other group," Kirk wrote.<sup>55</sup> The petition against Ross was in all likelihood an outgrowth of the group conflict that had emerged at the project. Whatever the cause of the conflict, Ross would not remain at the Skyline Farms project long after the Bluff City and alleged mismanagement controversies, although nowhere in the FSA records is there any indication that he was ever guilty of policy violations or diversion of funds.

There were yet other cases of dissent and conflict in what was planned to be the harmonious, cooperative community of Skyline Farms. Early in the project, one family was evicted legally because they were determined to be "undesirable and a menace" to the community.<sup>56</sup> On at least two other occasions federal officials had the regional attorney evict families who were determined to be "undesirable."<sup>57</sup> On still another occasion, John Vandiver, one of the project farm management specialists, recalled having to evict a project participant.<sup>58</sup> Vandiver said the incident occurred when one of the tenants claimed he should have been paid for work that the project managers said he had not done. The tenant demanded payment from another farm specialist who worked with Vandiver, and when he refused to pay him, the tenant struck him with the handle of a heavy knife.<sup>59</sup>

Later, the tenant told others in the project he intended to physically hurt Vandiver. When the statement was repeated to him, Vandiver took the threat seriously, and armed himself with a gun.

Vandiver then went to the participant's house, and when he first approached the man, Vandiver told him that "he had come prepared."<sup>60</sup> He then ordered the tenant to leave the project within twenty-four hours and told him he had found a house for him on a farm in the valley. The man moved his family off the project without incident.<sup>61</sup>

Such events as these, of course, were isolated, and it would be erroneous to characterize the entire project by such confrontations. As with so many occurrences, it is the atypical which is remembered, and certainly this is true in regard to Skyline Farms. In reality most of the project participants lived their lives quietly and did what was required of them. Typical of these settlers was Talmadge Hooper, who in 1939 told a reporter with the Birmingham News:

"Before I came here I had been a share-cropper since I was married. I didn't have anything but my hat and a family when I came here, and now you can see for yourself what I've got--eight hogs, and they were bought without a loan; 180 young chickens coming along; the finest little mule in the county, she'll be paid for soon; plows, tools, and furniture in the house."<sup>62</sup>

Hooper's statement reflected the overall attitude of the Skyline Farms participants. While they might privately have resented the barrage of rules and regulations they faced and might sometimes have felt their individuality was threatened by the project officials who constantly told them what to do, they for the most part realized they had an opportunity to own their own house and farm. Skyline

Farms was their chance to break through the wall of poverty that had held them. At the same time, the isolated controversies and conflicts which occurred reveal how formidably difficult was the RA/FSA task of creating a cooperative community in a competitive, individualistic society.



### Image Three: Life at the Project

After moving in, Virgil and Ventrice Brewer had a great deal of work remaining to complete their house. The ceiling, walls, and window and door frames all had to be added. But the work to the Brewers was worth it, for they believed that one day they would own the house and farm. At first they had understood that they would be permitted to "homestead" the unit.<sup>1</sup> Then they were told, they said, that the work they did on the house would go toward the purchase.<sup>2</sup>

The Brewers "finished out" their house and readied it for their family. The house itself contained two bedrooms--one for the Brewers and one for their two children and the third child who later would be born at the project. At first the house had no electricity. The house was lighted at night by coal oil lamps. A fireplace warmed the house during the winter. The Brewers did obtain electricity in 1939, when electricity was provided at the project for the factory.

The most demanding work at the project for the Brewers was in clearing their land. Even though most of their land had been rough-cleared, there were still stumps, roots, and rocks that had to be moved before farming could begin. When not tending to her children and household duties, Mrs. Brewer worked alongside her husband in the fields. She helped dig and move rocks from the newly-cleared ground. When the land finally was ready for planting, Mr. Brewer plowed the field with mules.

The Brewers received a yearly loan from FSA officials to plant their crops and operate their farm. How much they obtained depended on the farm plan that was devised each year for them by one of the farm specialists. Most years, the loan was for about \$400 dollars. At first, the Brewers raised potatoes and corn and later planted a few acres of cotton, all under the supervision of the farm specialist.

During the summer, Mrs. Brewer spent hour after hour canning vegetables from their garden. The canned vegetables were saved for the winters. "I canned four to five hundred quart jars about every year," she later said.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Brewer was mystified that the home economist at the project gave canning lessons to the farm women. "They wanted to teach us things we already knew how to do," she would later say. "Sometimes they acted like we didn't know anything."<sup>4</sup>

The winters were cold on the mountain. The winter of 1940 was the worse. Snow and ice covered the ground from January to mid-February and the roads up and down the mountain were impassable. The roads were so slick that a caterpillar tractor had to pull vehicles up the mountain. Few people, including the Brewers, owned automobiles anyway. In the winter of 1940 Cumberland Mountain virtually was shut off from the world. The residents only contact with the outside world were radio broadcasts.

The Brewers' lives were full and demanding. They had little time to attend such events as the square dances held on Friday nights, or the movies that were sometimes shown at the project school. They did know a few of the musicians and took pride in their performance for the President and Mrs. Roosevelt in Washington.<sup>5</sup> The Brewers knew almost everyone at the project. Years later, when asked about certain individuals who were there, Mr. Brewer might recall: "Yes. I remember him. He had epilepsy and he would go into sort of a daze. I remember sometimes he would be plowing in his field and he would forget what he was doing and he would just be standing there and his mule would just be going around in circles. I would talk to him and after awhile he'd get over it and he'd catch his mule and go back to plowing."<sup>6</sup> The Brewers knew many project participants from their involvement in the Baptist Church they attended each Sunday. The church adjoined the project. The Brewers were what other project members would describe as "good neighbors"--people who worked hard and were devoted to their children. They were the type of family for which such a project as Skyline Farms was intended. As project participants they eagerly pursued the Skyline Dream.

## Chapter 9

## The Years Before the Fall

Despite the problems occurring at Skyline Farms, the FSA continued to develop the project, and by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the structure of the community was established. Farmers worked their land under the supervision of the project farm specialists. Families bought supplies at the commissary and children attended the community school. Social activities continued at the project. The Skyline Farms Band regularly performed and played for square dances at the community school, or at the platform especially built for the square dancers near the commissary. A baseball team was organized, and played against teams from towns and communities throughout the area. The baseball team was a great source of pride to the community. Arts and crafts programs were conducted for children and adults at the community school. Importantly, a factory, built by the government, was operating and provided jobs for the community.

By the summer of 1940 the FSA reported that a total of 155 units had been completed at Skyline Farms and twenty-six more units were planned.<sup>1</sup> The FSA stated that by August of 1940 lease and purchase contracts had been given to thirty-two farmers at the project.<sup>2</sup> These "lease and purchase" contracts were essentially promises of future sales. The agreements were only between the farmer and the FSA, which still held title to property. Under the

"lease and purchase procedure" a set price for the project unit was set, and once the farmer had paid twenty-five percent of that value, he would receive a quitclaim deed to the property.<sup>3</sup> The farmer then agreed to pay off the remaining debt over forty years at three percent interest.<sup>4</sup> According to the FSA report, the Skyline Farms units for which the project farmers obtained the "lease and purchase" contracts varied in size from 56 to 124 acres and had an average assessment price of \$2,662.<sup>5</sup> The average annual payment of families came to \$129.78 per month, excluding taxes and insurance.<sup>6</sup> None of these "lease and purchase" contracts were legally recorded in probate and no titles were granted to any of the farm families. Even after a "lease and purchase" contract was signed, the FSA held near complete control over the property.

According to the FSA report, another ninety-five families rented farm units from the FSA, but did not have "lease and purchase contracts."<sup>7</sup> These families had farms averaging about forty acres. Their annual cash rent was from \$40 to \$150.<sup>8</sup> In actuality, there was not a great deal of difference between those farmers who had the "lease and purchase" contracts and those who were renting. Neither had legal title and no deeds had been probated to anyone. Both groups were essentially "trial" farmers and the FSA was to decide whether or not individuals in either category would be given the chance to buy their units.

Many of the farmers were now confused by the procedure through which they were to acquire legal title. They had been told they could homestead their land. Then, they said, they were told they could purchase the land through in-kind work. Now there was a new procedure--the "lease and purchase" contract. The matter of in-kind work was resolved when the FSA give each family a lump sum of money (about \$300) to compensate them for their previous work. One of the farmers later stated that the project manager, Harry Ross, had not wanted the farmers to be paid in this manner, for by the late 1930s he realized the only way they could obtain their units was through in-kind work. The project farmer said: "He (Harry Ross) came back from meeting with the FSA after they told him about giving us the one payment, and he said 'That's it. Nobody is going to be able to buy their place.'"<sup>9</sup> Additionally, farmers who had been assigned units could not work at other jobs. They were to be full-time farmers.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the farm units at the project, there also were eighteen "subsistence units."<sup>11</sup> These were units for those who had jobs at the project, such as truck drivers or carpenters, but did not farm. These units consisted of from two to twelve acres and rented for \$4 to \$10 per month.<sup>12</sup> Houses also were provided for ten of the project personnel, who paid monthly rent (\$10 to \$15) to live in them.

By the early 1940s more than one thousand people lived at the project.<sup>13</sup> An active, thriving community had been built at Skyline Farms. The project had a commissary, health clinic, school, central office, warehouses, a potato processing facility, four sawmills, a rock quarry, roads, various small canneries, and a syrup plant. There was a baseball field, and a square dance platform. Additionally, electricity was brought to the project in 1939, and the project participants, usually through loans at the commissary, began to purchase refrigerators and radios. Although the work at the project was hard, certainly the quality of life for the participants had improved and a structurally well-organized community had been created from the mountain wilderness.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s the most significant addition to the project was a hosiery mill. The hosiery mill was one of the most interesting aspects of the entire project. It had originated when RA officials realized that in most rural resettlement communities a greater economic base was needed than just agriculture. Consequently, these officials became interested in securing small industries for the rural resettlement communities. But there had been great opposition in Congress to this idea, because it was contended that federal funds should not be used by a government agency to directly subsidize industry. This, in the opponents' minds, would be socialism. Acting on this Congressional perspective, the U. S. Comptroller General had refused to allow the RA to use

government funds for industrial growth in the rural resettlement communities.<sup>14</sup> However, in the summer of 1937 the FSA officials found a way to circumvent this barrier: cooperative associations made up of participants at the projects were organized. Then the FSA, now in charge of the projects, made loans directly to the cooperatives to build industry.<sup>15</sup> The U. S. Comptroller General approved this approach, and the FSA could expand the economic base of several of its communities through industrial growth.

On June 21, 1937, M. L. Wilson, the Undersecretary of Agriculture, announced that loan agreements had been made to several rural resettlement community cooperatives.<sup>16</sup> These industrial enterprises included: a wood dimension mill at Tygart Valley; a tractor assembly plant at Arthurdale; a pants factory at Westmoreland; and hosiery mills at Cumberland Homesteads, Penderlea Homesteads, Bankhead Farms, Red House, and Skyline Farms.<sup>17</sup> As badly needed as the economic growth might have been, the decision by RA/FSA to build industry at the resettlement communities opened up new avenues of criticism. Allegations of "communism" or "socialism" increased as government agencies entered into what many saw as a taboo area: the private industrial economy.

To RA/FSA officials, however, adding industry to the rural communities was necessary to create a solid economic base for the



projects. Harry Ross expressed this point of view when in a 1939 interview he stated: "Land here is limited, and unless some livelihood is provided for the children as they come of age, they will drift into teen-age marriage with the choice of going back to share-cropping or crowding into the cities. If our experiment is to attempt to get to the bottom of the problem in the South, it was necessary for us to seek a combination of agriculture and industry."<sup>18</sup> Skyline Farms thus became one of the first resettlement communities nationwide to be included in the controversial industrial expansion plan.

At Skyline Farms an industrial cooperative was created. This organization was incorporated August 1, 1938, and was named the Skyline Industrial Company.<sup>19</sup> As stated in the incorporation papers, the purposes of the Skyline Industrial Company were to: ". . . carry on any lawful agricultural, mercantile, mining manufacturing, mechanical or building business, including the construction, equipment and operation of stores, buildings, plants, mills, gins, warehouses, factories, industries, and other improvements and facilities or any other enterprises or activities of any kind."<sup>20</sup>

The company, at least technically, was owned by one hundred members of the Skyline Farms project. These members, no more than one per family, subscribed to stock in the company at \$10 per share.<sup>21</sup> A board of directors was chosen that consisted of project participants Buster Hastings, M. L. Lands, W. D. Holsanback, Oscar

Pennington, and W. M. Holman. With this cooperative incorporated, the FSA now had the mechanism through which to initiate industrial expansion at Skyline Farms.

The Dexdale Hosiery Mill of Lansdale, Pennsylvania was the second ingredient in this FSA industrial expansion effort. In September of 1937 the Dexdale Company reached an agreement with the FSA to operate and manage five silk-throwing and hosiery mills at resettlement communities, including one at Skyline Farms. According to this agreement, the FSA would, through the cooperatives, build and equip the plants and Dexdale would operate them. In return, Dexdale would receive a share of the annual earnings, but got no guaranteed fee.<sup>22</sup>

To operate in Alabama, Dexdale officials, too, had to file incorporation papers and did so August 4, 1938, naming their corporation the Skyline Manufacturing Company, Inc.<sup>23</sup> The purposes of this company were to "manufacture, knit, process, distribute, buy, sell and generally deal in hosiery, knitted wear and textiles of every kind, type, material and description. . ." <sup>24</sup> The company was owned by three Dexdale officials--Ludwig Schierenbeck, Arthur Paul, and Emil J. Berger. The Skyline Manufacturing Company began business with \$25,000, the amount of capitol stock purchased by the three Pennsylvania men.<sup>25</sup>

Dexdale and the Skyline Manufacturing Company then formed an operating company to supervise the construction and operation of the plant.<sup>26</sup> The association and Dexdale each subscribed to \$50,000 of stock in the operating company, with Dexdale owning majority control at 51 percent.<sup>27</sup> Dexdale was then given a forty-five year lease on the plant and equipment and was to pay rentals on the plant to cover payments to the government, plus all taxes, the cost of maintenance, and depreciation and insurance.<sup>28</sup>

In explaining why Dexdale was chosen to manage and operate the plant, FSA officials noted that Dexdale already had an established outlet for its products and enjoyed a good reputation for production and merchandising.<sup>29</sup> The FSA, ever sensitive to criticism of intrusion into the private economy, also noted that the plant was a new industry, and therefore would not take away from any industries locally.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, FSA officials said, Dexdale had assured them that the Skyline Farms plant would not affect its operation in Lansdale, and that establishing new mills on government projects was nothing more than a normal expansion of the company's operations.<sup>31</sup>

In 1938 the FSA made a loan of \$490,000 to the Skyline Industrial Company to construct the plant and purchase operating equipment. Of this, \$139,700 was for the purchase of the factory site and the construction of the factory, including all permanent fixtures.<sup>32</sup> Another \$248,000 was for the purchase of the mill knitting and throwing equipment.<sup>33</sup> The loan made to the Skyline

Industrial Company was to be repaid over a forty year period at three percent interest with principal payments deferred for the first three years and the interest amortized over the last thirty-seven years.<sup>34</sup>

In constructing the plant, the FSA set policy which attempted to provide jobs for project participants. Max Egloff of the FSA Labor Relations Division stated that project participants were to be given preference in hiring for construction.<sup>35</sup> But Egloff noted that there would not be many jobs at the plant for which the participants would be suited, such as common labor, carpentry, or concrete worker. Most work, he noted, would be done by skilled union laborers.<sup>36</sup> However, he said that Labor Relations did anticipate that some "homesteaders" could be employed in some capacity, including the following: common labor and watchmen (thirty-five cents per hour); rough carpenters and painters (fifty-five cents per hour); roofers, bricklayers' helpers, and truck drivers (fifty cents per hour); concrete workers (fifty cents per hour); and concrete mix operators (forty-five cents per hour).<sup>37</sup> Some jobs, then, were created for project participants during the construction phase of the hosiery mill. However, the jobs were available only to family members of the farmers, or to those living in the subsistence houses. As noted previously, the farmers themselves were expected to devote all their efforts to their farming activities, and could not be employed in any other capacity.

The plant went into operation on September 11, 1939, and produced women's hosiery. Although there was no binding agreement between Dexdale and the FSA on this, Skyline Farms families were given preference for work at the hosiery mill. Since many of the project residents did not know how to operate the plant equipment, a number of them went in small groups for training to the Dexdale headquarters in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. When they returned, they instructed other project participants how to operate the plant equipment.<sup>38</sup>

Initially, approximately forty people were hired at the plant at an average monthly wage of \$74.50.<sup>39</sup> The monthly pay at the plant ranged from \$40 per month for apprentice workers to \$120 per month for experienced workers.<sup>40</sup> By March of 1941 the plant had expanded to one hundred and twelve employees, most of whom were young people from the project farm families, although others lived in the "subsistence units" on the project, and some were even heads of families on farm units which did not have enough acreage to be successful operations.<sup>41</sup> The income from the plant permitted the project families to supplement their earnings and elevate their standard of living. E. S. Morgan wrote: "Probably the reason the income from our mill has meant so much to our families is because the standards of living were formerly so low that even a salary of \$40.00. . . means more to these people than a much larger salary



treated every one with dignity. I never saw anything that wasn't on the up and up with Harry Ross. He was a leader. He came from the steel mills. He was tough. But he was always fair to all who worked there."<sup>46</sup> Mrs. Flowers added that as a "leader," Ross would accomplish whatever he set out to do. She noted that he had little use of bookkeeping and bureaucracy, but there were other personnel at the project who were meticulous and beyond reproach in handling the project's paperwork.<sup>47</sup>

After being transferred to the Cahaba Project, Ross soon left the FSA. For a time he worked for the Corps of Engineers, traveling extensively to inspect facilities for them.<sup>48</sup> Later, he went into business for himself, and sometimes worked for private manufacturing companies.<sup>49</sup> Whatever frustration Ross experienced at the project seemed to have been tempered by the years. His niece, Ms. Marilyn Hancock, recalled that Ross and his wife, Belle Guthrie Ross, "had very fond memories of their time at Skyline Farms."<sup>50</sup> The Ross' kept a Cokesbury Hymnal they had used at Skyline Farms as a memento from their years there.<sup>51</sup> In his later years, Ross entertained his family with stories about his experiences at the project. Ross died in 1971 and his wife died eight years later. "He was a good man," one of the project participants, David Clay Paradise, said years later. Paradise stated: "I remember one time how he gave all the men who were working outdoors coats when we were about to freeze to death during the winter. He said, 'I want you all to come in here,'

and we went in to his office and he gave each one of us a coat."<sup>52</sup> To many, Harry Ross was the Skyline Farms project. His departure signaled a great change.

The FSA chose Thomas C. "Tommy" David to replace Ross as project manager. David was a young, well-respected administrator from Georgia. Prior to joining the FSA, David had co-written a book with Ralph McGill on educational and agricultural practices in Scandinavia. McGill was just starting his newspaper career when he was selected for a fellowship from the Rosenwald Fund to support the study. David and McGill rode bicycles throughout the Scandinavian countries and observed first-hand agricultural practices and life in these countries.<sup>53</sup> Since the Skyline Farms project was struggling financially mainly because of agricultural problems, the FSA hoped that David might revitalize the project with his knowledge of Scandinavian agricultural practices. From all accounts, David took a more administrative than personal approach to the project than had Ross, although David was respected and well-liked by the project participants.

At the national level, another change took place in 1940 when Will Alexander resigned as FSA director to become vice-president of the Rosenwald Fund. Alexander, Edwin Embree, and Charles Johnson had been supported financially by the Rosenwald Fund when they wrote The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, a work which had helped bring the plight of the Southern tenant farmer into national focus.<sup>54</sup> Ironically,



upon his resignation from FSA, Alexander went to work for the organization that had through its financial support helped call attention to the problem of farm tenancy.

By 1940 Alexander, a man of ideas and vision, was ready to leave government work. He, like Ross, had never been comfortable in the federal bureaucracy and later would say: "I never liked the housekeeping in the Department of Agriculture. I like to talk things over and try to see where we go next. It seemed logical for me to leave Farm Security and go to the Rosenwald Fund."<sup>55</sup>

After leaving FSA, Alexander became more active in efforts to solve American racial problems. During World War II, he served as a special consultant to the Office of War Information on dispelling what some considered potentially dangerous racial rumors that circulated in the country.<sup>56</sup> Following World War II and until his death in 1956, Alexander helped establish biracial committees in a number of American cities.

Calvin Benham (C. B.) Baldwin was chosen to replace Will Alexander as the FSA director. Baldwin, like Alexander, had been one of the first administrators Rex Tugwell had chosen for RA.<sup>57</sup> Baldwin had been an RA assistant administrator and continued in that capacity in the FSA under Alexander. Baldwin's emergence as head of the FSA brought about no dramatic changes in the overall goals and direction of the organization, for philosophically he was in line with Tugwell, Alexander, and other New Deal thinkers as far as social policy was

concerned. It would be Baldwin who would be asked to defend this social policy and the FSA programs in 1942 and 1943 when some members of Congress intensely and relentlessly attacked the organization.

By the early 1940s, the plan to raise cotton as the economic foundation of the project still had not materialized. Some cotton was raised, but the "new ground" at the project was proving difficult for growing cotton. The ground had not been worked enough to have the proper soil mixtures needed for cotton to flourish. Moreover, the cool air on the mountain caused the farmers to delay planting the cotton until late spring. In the summer and early fall, the cool night air on the mountain caused the cotton to develop slowly. Usually, the cotton bolls would not open until late into the fall. When the bolls opened this late in the season, early frost often stained the cotton, resulting in a low-grade quality and substantially reducing the cotton's market value.<sup>58</sup>

Since by the early 1940s it had become obvious that cotton was not the money crop on which the project could depend, other crops were developed. In particular, project officials turned to producing potatoes. Potatoes grew well in the sandy loam soil of the project farms and the rainfall and climate of the mountain were well-suited for the crop. "We used to be able to just scoop potatoes up from the ground with our hands," one project participant later recalled.<sup>59</sup> Potato hot beds, a processing plant, and curing building were built on the project to maximize the crop's potential. Farmers raised

Irish potatoes and Puerto Rican sweet potatoes, and soon project managers were marketing "Skyline Farms Brand" potatoes throughout the Southeast. (See Photograph, Farmers Unload Potatoes, p. 209.) The potatoes, marketed through the Farms Cooperative Association, were sold as far away as Chicago, Illinois, and Cincinnati, Ohio, where they were shipped by train. Additionally, potatoes were trucked to stores in Atlanta, Georgia, and Birmingham and Huntsville, Alabama.

Despite the farmers' success in raising potatoes, the crop never became highly profitable for the farmers because of a low market price. Potato prices had increased dramatically in 1936--the year the farms were being prepared at Skyline Farms. However, the market price of potatoes dropped just as dramatically in 1937. (See Table II, p. 210.) For the years 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, and 1941, potato prices fell to record lows in Alabama, averaging 95 cents per hundred pounds these years. During this five-year period, a time that was critical to the success of the project, potato market prices were lower than they had been in Alabama during any five-year period since 1910. The low market prices were due to simple supply and demand economics: more tons of potatoes were produced in Alabama during this period than ever before, and since the supply was high, the market demand was low, resulting in depressed prices. (See Table II, p. 210.)



Farmers Unload Potatoes In Birmingham.

Photograph Courtesy of the Scottsboro-Jackson Heritage Center,  
Scottsboro, Al.

Table II  
 Potato Prices in Alabama: 1934-1949

| Year | Total Production: Per<br>Thousands 100 Weight | Price Per<br>100 Weight |
|------|---|-------------------------|
| 1934 | 1,897   | .90                     |
| 1935 | 1,683   | .95                     |
| 1936 | 1,827   | 2.17                    |
| 1937 | 2,397   | .85                     |
| 1938 | 2,565   | .92                     |
| 1939 | 2,851   | 1.00                    |
| 1940 | 2,632   | 1.08                    |
| 1941 | 3,370   | .93                     |
| 1942 | 2,371   | 1.50                    |
| 1943 | 2,876   | 2.55                    |
| 1944 | 1,879   | 2.03                    |
| 1945 | 2,926   | 2.95                    |
| 1946 | 2,754   | 2.43                    |
| 1947 | 1,911   | 2.17                    |
| 1948 | 2,054   | 2.85                    |
| 1949 | 1,867   | 3.00                    |

Source: Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology,  
 Auburn University, 100 Years: Alabama Crop, Livestock and Income  
 Data, Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn University, Auburn, Al.

Elton Kennamer, the purchasing agent at the project, later recalled what happened when the market for potatoes collapsed: "We'd pack those potatoes and take them down to Scottsboro and load them in a refrigerated car (train) and send them to Cincinnati. They'd get up there, and they had been sending up so many from over the Southeast. . . the market was flooded and no one would buy our potatoes. They would just sit there until they started rotting. . . We got one broker to take a car that had been sitting on the track several days. He took a car just for the freight. So we lost all the potatoes and the cost of producing them and packaging them... That proved a big loss. . . and a lot (of farm participants) went into debt."<sup>60</sup>

Potatoes, then, had not become the money crop to replace cotton as the agricultural lifeblood of the project. Farmers successfully raised potatoes, but could not sell them for enough to buy their units. By the early 1940s, the project had stabilized economically and the FSA was forced to continue to loan farmers money. At the end of each year, farmers had no profits with which to pay on their units. They were going further and further in debt, as they had done as tenant farmers. Only this time, the farmers owed the federal government, instead of private landowners and businesses.

Cotton and potatoes were stressed as the money crops at Skyline Farms, but other crops also were raised. Farmers grew corn, mostly for feed for their livestock. They also experimented with "truck farm

crops," such as peas, cabbage, carrots, and tomatoes. These crops were used by the project participants themselves, or sometimes sold at street markets in nearby cities. To better utilize these vegetables, in 1938 each farm family was provided with pressure cookers for canning and general use. Vegetables and fruits were canned for the winter months and soon families were averaging canning five hundred quarts a year. Some sugar cane was raised on the project to make syrup and a small plant was built to process the syrup. Apple trees also were planted: it was believed the cool climate of the mountain would help yield a bountiful apple crop. The apple trees in time were productive, but most Skyline Farms families were gone before the slow-maturing trees bore fruit.

Project farmers also raised hogs, pigs, and chickens. At first, they raised this livestock for their own use, but later some livestock was sold commercially. (See Photograph, Children Observe Livestock Operation, p. 213.) Some families for a time raised broilers which were sold for the early spring market. However, the livestock operations were on such a small scale, and market prices usually were so low, that little income was derived from these efforts.

In the early days of the project, some oxen were used to work the farms, but soon afterward project officials provided mules for the farmers as workstock. The oxen had been useful in dragging huge logs from the forest after trees were cut, but the mules proved more



Children Observe Livestock Operation At Project.

Photograph Courtesy of the Scottsboro-Jackson Heritage Center



agile in plowing the "new ground" on the mountain. John Vandiver, one of the farm management specialists at the project, recalls buying mules for the project in Scottsboro, Alabama, and Winchester, Tennessee.<sup>61</sup> Vandiver remembers buying two hundred mules for the project over a two year period. After identifying the age of some mules that he was buying, he recalls being told by a mule-trader that "you're the first government man that I ever saw that knew about mules."<sup>62</sup> His trick in buying mules, Vandiver said, was that he knew that mules shed their corner tooth when they are five years old, and that one without the tooth was an older mule.

Each farm family received one or two mules, depending on the size of their farm. The cost of the mules was charged to the farmer's account to be repaid with money made from the crops and livestock. Project officials formed an association for farmers that provided for veterinarian services for the mules and other livestock, charging members \$5 per year. A farmer would report a problem, then the farm management specialists and project director decided if the veterinarian's services were needed.<sup>63</sup> This type veterinarian service was an idea that had been proposed by rural sociologists during the 1920s and early 1930s as a way that farmers might use cooperatives to reduce costs through sharing expenses.

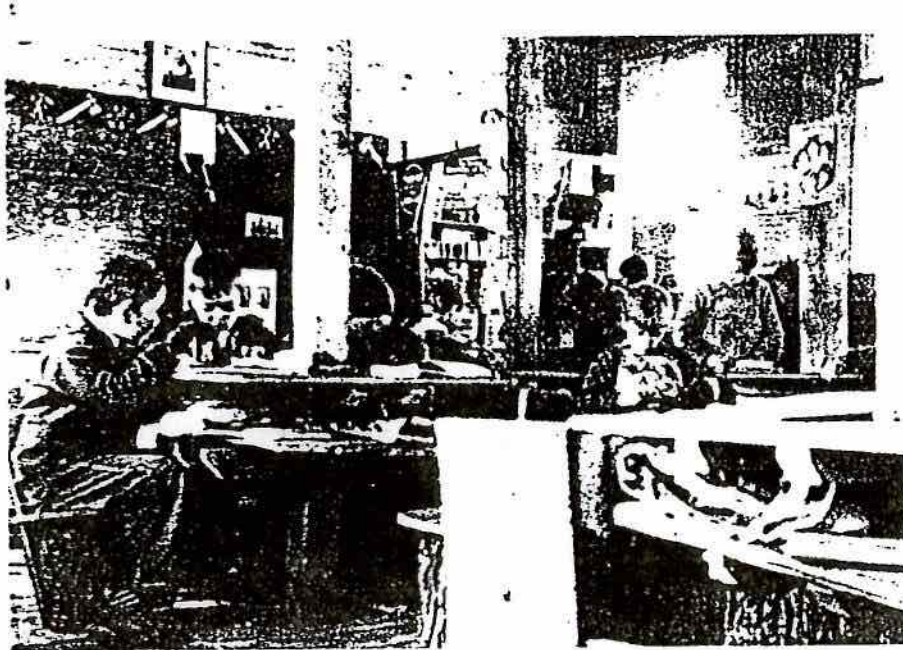
Every year the farm specialists devised a management plan for each project farmer. The plan specified what types of crops the farmer would raise and their acreage. If the farmer was involved in

livestock operations, these plans, too, were determined. Based on the individual plans, the FSA then made operating loans to the farmers. The loans, usually of \$300 to \$400, essentially were the standard rural rehabilitation loans the FSA gave to farm families nationally. The loans would include payments for such items as seed, fertilizer, livestock feed, and other farming expenses. The loans were all credited to the farmers account and were to be repaid at the end of the year based on income from selling the crops. In addition to the loans, the FSA made direct money grants to the farmers that did not have to be repaid.<sup>64</sup> These grants were distributed at the discretion of the project manager and the farm management specialists, and usually would be written into the yearly farm plan, although they, too, sometimes were distributed during the year for various emergencies a farm family might experience. These grants were provided to farm families to cover financial shortfalls that occurred during the year.

The grants also served as a kind of bonus to the farmers as an incentive for hard work and for having a cooperative attitude. These payments, averaging about \$20 each, also were a part of the FSA national grant program and by 1943 grants had been given to some 500,000 destitute farm families for such purposes as subsistence needs, medical care, hospitalization, participation in health associations, sanitary facilities, and household equipment.<sup>65</sup>

In looking back, certainly project officials made a resourceful, imaginative effort to make the small project farms as productive as possible. Farm specialists, working with FSA advisors and officials from Alabama's land-grant college, Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University), applied what were then modern-day agricultural techniques at the project, and they experimented with many different crops. Despite this, project officials could never compensate for the unanticipated loss in what was to be the project's money crop--cotton. Income from other farm operations were minimal, as they were at the time for other American farmers.

Despite the economic problems experienced at the project, other aspects of the community continued to develop, according to RA/FSA plans. Children attended the Skyline Farms school. A temporary school had been built when the project first opened. Desks and chairs were fashioned out of tree stumps and the rooms were heated during the wintertime by coal burning stoves. (See Photograph, Children at School, p. 217.) A new school building opened in 1938. The new school building was the pride of the community: it was constructed out of native sandstone rock from Cumberland Mountain. Dogwood trees were planted around the building, based on landscape architect W. H. Kessler's plan and design.<sup>66</sup> The school consisted of eleven classrooms and an auditorium. When the new school opened for its first full year, some 420 students enrolled, resulting in an



Children prepare lessons in the first temporary school. Photograph provided by Gay and Ola Vaught.

Children At School.

Photograph Courtesy of the Scottsboro-Jackson Heritage Center,  
Scottsboro, Al.

average of 47 students per classroom.<sup>67</sup> The Jackson County School System furnished the teachers, but received federal funds to offset their salaries and the expense of operating the school.<sup>68</sup>

Since the school was on a federal project, it operated somewhat differently than did area schools. At first teachers taught on an individualized basis, depending on the student's level and not their age.<sup>69</sup> Using this approach, a ten-year-old student might be in the same class with an eighteen-year-old. During the 1960s and 1970s, this type of individualized instruction became popular in American education during.

As far as teaching methods were concerned, the school system at the project was ahead of its time in other ways. Project officials rejected the traditional A, B, C, D, F system of grading, and instead used a grading system that was an inventory of each child's progress based on their tested level of ability. Project officials believed the traditional system of grading "did not do the child justice when the philosophy back of such a system rated or graded each child according to his standing compared to the best member of the class."<sup>70</sup> The grading system at the Skyline Farms school reflects how the cooperative attitude that was being fostered at the project had spilled into the educational system.

Later, the school officials turned to age-grouping of students: all twelve and thirteen-year-olds were in a classroom, or all seven and eight-year-olds, for example. Project officials felt that

age-grouping benefited the students socially and emotionally. At the same time, students still received individualized instruction within their age group.<sup>71</sup>

An advantage for the school was that since it was federally supported, it was better financed than most area schools. Because of its relative affluence, the school was the only one in Alabama that taught home economics and agriculture to junior high school students.<sup>72</sup> Students in the Vocational Education Program at the school were taught skills by working on various project jobs. One year students built chicken brooders and poultry houses and constructed wagon beds and furniture for project homes.<sup>73</sup>

The school also had the advantage of having the services of the various educational and cultural workers with FSA's Special Skills Division and the Regional Education and Training Division. Few schools in Alabama, or America for that matter, had such individuals as Margaret Valiant, Nicholas Ray, or Bascom Lunsford working with their students. This resulted in some highly creative school programs and projects. (See Photograph, Circus Parade at School, p. 220.) Teachers at the school also were assisted by a consultant who came once a month from Florence State Teacher's College (now the University of North Alabama.) The consultant observed teachers in the classroom then met with them to discuss methods that might be used to improve instruction relating to progressive education ideas.<sup>74</sup>



A Circus Parade At School.

Photograph Courtesy of the Scottsboro-Jackson Heritage Center.

Another advantage was that the Skyline School was open more weeks per year than most schools in the area and in Alabama at the time. Due to a lack of funding, many area schools were open only five months per year. However, one year the Skyline School was open eleven months as teachers worked to catch students up on subjects they had missed from previous years.<sup>75</sup> Project parents were required to see to it that their children attended school. Parents were told that if they did not send their children to school, they would be expelled from the project.

During the first years of the project, the school provided an opportunity for many of the children to attend school for the first time. Many project children had fallen behind educationally. Still others had not attended school because of the economic hardships of their families, or simply because there had been no tradition of formal education within their families in the past. After all, children began working at young ages in the tenant world and for many of them this deprived them of educational opportunities, or led them to believe education was unnecessary since they would be doing farm work anyway. As at other schools, when they did begin to attend school, the students were sometimes reluctant and defiant. One of the teachers, Agee Strickland, would later recall:

"Many of the kids had never been in school to any extent and they didn't always take kindly to it. I had a class of thirteen and fourteen-year-olds. I remember that there were



these big mountain acorns that used to be out there, and the boys would get them before school or during recess, and stuff them in their pockets. When they got back in the classroom, every time I would turn my back, one of them would take one of those acorns out of his pocket, and throw it against the wall. When the acorn would hit the wall, it sounded like a gun going off. I finally caught one of the boys doing it and gave him a pretty good paddling, although the government said we weren't suppose to whip the kids. After that, the boys all emptied out their pockets during recess. There were these little piles of acorns all in the schoolyard."<sup>76</sup>

Strickland worked at the school for only a short time and then became a principal at another Jackson County school near his home. He said that during the few months he was at the project, he could see the children making progress educationally.<sup>77</sup> After a few years, attending school became a normal part of community life for the children at Skyline Farms, and they did so, as children would in any other community.

The school itself soon became the project's social center. Various meetings, programs, and activities were held at the school, including the 1939 session in which Herbert Halpert recorded the Skyline Farms musicians. The popularity of the school, therefore, caused even more of a blow to the community when the school caught fire and burned in January of 1941. The fire occurred at night while

the school was closed for the 1940 Christmas holidays. A scarlet fever outbreak had delayed the re-opening of the school in early January.<sup>78</sup> Rumors swirled through the community about the origin of the fire. Some residents contended the fire had been set by laborers who hoped to create new construction jobs for themselves by burning the building so it would have to be rebuilt.<sup>79</sup> Others said the fire was set by some religious fundamentalists who were displeased that officials were permitting square dances to be held at the school.<sup>80</sup> Still others contended that it was set by intruders who had started fires in the building to keep warm during the cold winter night.<sup>81</sup> Despite the rumors, no case of arson was ever substantiated and project officials concluded that the fire had started accidentally.

After the fire, students resumed school in whatever buildings were available at the project. Classes were held in the small churches near the project, and some even were conducted in the potato sheds. The FSA rebuilt the school in the same style and materials as the original and within two years the students were back in a new building. The educational opportunities provided for the children of the project at the school most certainly helped many of them break free of the cycle of farm tenancy poverty that had trapped their parents. The long-term effects of this education were substantial.

In addition to providing educational opportunities at Skyline Farms, RA and FSA officials attempted to improve the health standards of the project participants. Inadequate health care, of course, had

been a persistent problem for American tenant farmers through the years. Project leaders and the FSA attacked the health care problem through preventive techniques and by organizing a health care association.

The preventive techniques including giving all the farm families basic medical examinations.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, children were given medical examinations at the school and they were inoculated for typhoid, smallpox, and diphtheria.<sup>83</sup> Medical problems identified in these examinations were treated. Additionally, one year some three hundred children were tested for intestinal disorders, and one-third tested positive, including cases of hookworm, trachomas, and ascaris.<sup>84</sup> These cases were treated. Preventive medicine was stressed through prenatal and postnatal clinics that were held for expectant mothers and for those just having given birth.<sup>85</sup> "Well baby" clinics were conducted each month and at which babies were measured, weighed, and the mother given advice about raising a healthy baby.<sup>86</sup> In yet another area, that of health care, it is again apparent that the FSA and project officials were ahead of their time in stressing preventive medicine.

Project officials attempted to control for the spread of disease through weekly inspections of the drinking water at the school.<sup>87</sup> Homes and all out-buildings also were inspected weekly for problems with sanitation.<sup>88</sup> Project officials, RA, and FSA personnel were certainly sensitive to the health needs of the participants and

concerned with their welfare. At the same time, they also were aware of how bad the publicity would be if an epidemic did occur at one of the resettlement communities. This attitude is reflected in an inter-office memorandum sent by Frank Schmitt, the director of the RA Construction Division, to the coordinator of construction, Col. Philip B. Fleming, concerning well correction work at Skyline Farms. Schmitt wrote that the well work needed to be done because ". . . a nice epidemic of cholera up there would be awfully hard to explain if we did get some leaky casings."<sup>89</sup> Officials were aware that the resettlement communities had enough critics without creating any more by an epidemic which could have been prevented.

Professional health care was provided at a clinic that was built at the project. At first a physician was available at the clinic full-time, but later physician care was provided only on a part-time basis. A nurse was available at the project at all times. The Health Clinic was one of fourteen built in the RA/FSA communities throughout the United States. For many participants at the project, this was the first time they had access to trained medical personnel. Especially important was that physicians attended the birth of children at the project. Tommy David, the project manager, reported that this was an example in just how far the project had come in improving health care, for prior to living at Skyline Farms, untrained midwives and family members typically had attended to the mother and child during birth.<sup>90</sup> Officials worked with physicians

from Scottsboro to provide medical care at the project. After the full-time physician had left the project, there were occasions during the snow-bound winter months when the on-duty physician would be brought up the mountain by a tractor or bulldozer to provide medical services during emergencies.<sup>91</sup>

Importantly, a health care association/cooperative was organized for the project participants at Skyline Farms. The RA/FSA organized other such health care associations/cooperatives at resettlement communities. These health care associations/cooperatives were predecessors to prepaid group health insurance plans and Health Maintenance Organizations (HMO's). The RA/FSA role in establishing these health cooperatives marked the first time that the government had supported group medicine.<sup>92</sup> At Skyline Farms, participants paid a yearly fee that covered health care expenses for themselves and their families.

According to a 1943 audit of the project, the monthly fee charged members was \$25 per family. Records of the audit show that there were one hundred and one families belonging to the association/cooperative and that the administrator/bookkeeper for the program was the project nurse, Mrs. Mary Sharp Barkley.<sup>93</sup> Since families at the project were large, the cost per person was approximately \$3.50 a year. Once having paid the membership dues for the association/cooperative, all medical expenses, including dental, were provided. No doubt, this access to medical care improved the

lives of the project participants, many of whom had been without medical care previously. Tommy David in an activities report stated: "During the winter months we had an unusually large amount of sickness and the funds set aside for our Health Association have been practically exhausted, but even with this condition prevailing, our families are in much better condition than they were formerly."<sup>94</sup>

David also noted that many of the Skyline Farms participants were getting to the age where more medical attention was required, and this had put a strain on the finances of the Health Association.<sup>95</sup> This financial strain occurred even though the Health Association was subsidized with funds from the RA/FSA. Despite financial problems, project officials did deliver health care to project participants and encouraged preventive medicine in an era before such an approach was widely known. Improving the overall quality of the project participants' health was no small accomplishment.

The success of the Health Association at Skyline Farms was mirrored in other similar programs established by the RA and FSA.<sup>96</sup> In some areas, health care was provided on a county-wide basis for rehabilitation clients, who would receive medical care from cooperating physicians. The cost of the services in these counties usually was less than where a clinic and medical personnel were

provided, such as at Skyline Farms. Most rural physicians were willing to work with these programs, because they were assured of a fee or regular salary.<sup>97</sup>

As for other aspects of the community, there was a police officer at the project. Yet there was no jail. From all accounts a jail would have been unnecessary. In the RA/FSA records there is no indication of major, serious crime occurring at Skyline Farms. The most persistent problem seemed to have been alcohol abuse. When it came to alcohol, the attitude of the project participants was divided, as it was among members of the Southern tenant subculture elsewhere. On the one hand, the religious fundamentalists considered drunkenness to be one of the worse sins. Indeed, the condemnation of alcohol left no place in the fundamentalists' mind for moderate use. To them, any use of alcohol was sinful. Many of the project participants, doubtless, maintained this attitude.

On the other hand, making alcohol, or moonshining as it was called, was a subcultural tradition among Southern tenants. This craft was something that had been passed down through the generations and in some cases extended as far back as Scot-Irish ancestors. Consequently, some of the project participants no doubt appreciated good, well-made white whiskey, or moonshine. Project Manager Harry Ross noted: "These people have been used to moonshine liquor all

their lives. When their jobs began up here, they came to work with bottles of it, just as if it had been a part of their lunches. I had to do some tall talking to get them out of that habit."<sup>98</sup>

Since it was so isolated, Cumberland Mountain traditionally had been a location where moonshining operations existed. Some moonshining activity continued as the Skyline Farms project developed. John Vandiver recalled leaving the project one day to check timber on the mountain. He and a co-worker, he said, came upon a man living with his family in a small house in the middle of the forest. The man had no visible means of support. He advised Vandiver that "it would be best if he didn't come around this part of the mountain."<sup>99</sup> The man, Vandiver assumed, was a "lookout" for others who were operating stills in the mountain's isolated coves and hollows. Alcohol, then, was available to those living at the project.

Those project participants guilty of public intoxication were required to do community service work as punishment. All project participants were required to sign contracts which, among many other provisions, stated they would not use any intoxicants to excess. If they persistently broke that agreement, they would be expelled from the project. Because of their authority, project officials at Skyline Farms needed perhaps less police force than in similar communities of the same size. The officials had an ultimate method of social control: they could simply force people not abiding by the



project rules to leave. Unquestionably, cases of alcohol abuse did occur at the project, as would be expected from the subcultural traditions of the tenants, and due to the fact that poverty often does breed alcohol and drug abuse. Yet certainly this behavior did not characterize the project and in actuality alcohol abuse was probably much less extensive at Skyline Farms than in the Southern tenant subcultural world.

As indicated in attitudes concerning alcohol, religious beliefs were important in the lives of the Skyline Farms participants. There were three main churches that served the project. One was at the Skyline Baptist Church, whose pastor in a letter to Will Alexander, stated that seventy-five percent of the project participants were Baptists.<sup>100</sup> Under Moore's direction the Baptists built several small churches near the project so a church would be accessible to all people.<sup>101</sup> A Primitive Baptist Church was located adjacent to the project. The Primitive Baptists tended to be more fundamentalist in their religious philosophy than most Southern denominations.

Perhaps the most interesting church that was active at Skyline Farms was one established by the Episcopalian Church. This church at Skyline was an offshot of an Episcopalian mission that had been founded in Jackson County during the 1920s--the House of Happiness.<sup>102</sup> The House of Happiness Mission had been founded to provide social services to poor mountain people in the area. From this base, a mission on Cumberland Mountain was established. The

mission also provided social work services to participants at Skyline Farms, but since it was evangelical in nature, officials there also tried to win church members. This effort was never successful, however, and the mission was abandoned several years after the Skyline Farms project ended.<sup>103</sup>

Additionally, project officials established a nondenominational Union Church that never attracted many members, other than the officials themselves. As noted previously, this effort to secularize the project participants never took hold and in fact drew some criticism that the project officials were working against denominational churches.<sup>104</sup>

By the early 1940s, the Skyline Farms project was well established. Farm families had been selected and land cleared. Roads to and within the community had been built. There were one hundred and forty farms in operation.<sup>105</sup> There were one hundred and eighty-one houses and the project was home to some one thousand people. In addition to farmers, there were carpenters, painters, truck drivers, furniture-makers, and blacksmiths. A school had been built and project children were receiving an education. Health care was provided. There was a factory which provided additional income to the project families. There was a well-stocked community store that served the project participants and was managed as a cooperative. There was a community band and baseball team, and other social and recreational activities were available. There were

churches for religious worship nearby. All the pieces to secure the participants' dream of owning their own house and farm seemingly were in place. But for many of these farm families the dream was about to turn into a nightmare.

## Chapter 10

### The Project Comes to an End

From the beginning, the Roosevelt Administration had been criticized for establishing what some Americans considered to be experimental social programs. The resettlement communities, such as Skyline Farms, were the lightning rods that these critics struck. They contended that the Roosevelt Administration had overstepped its governmental authority by setting up cooperatives and by establishing industries which competed with private companies.

These opponents had gotten the FSA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to concede as early as 1937 that they would not establish any new resettlement communities. Yet beyond this agreement, there was no clear government directive or policy concerning the projects.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the FSA continued to operate under Title IV of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act which authorized the FSA to complete and manage the resettlement communities.<sup>2</sup>

In 1938 Congress began making appropriations directly to the Department of Agriculture for rural rehabilitation. When this occurred, new policies aimed at the resettlement communities were formulated. Most important of these policies was the Congressional directive that the FSA use money for the resettlement projects only for "liquidation and management."<sup>3</sup> In essence Congress was ordering the FSA to end the projects. However, directives remained vague and at this point were not strongly supported. As a result, the FSA made

no real concerted effort to "liquidate" projects such as Skyline Farms, and instead continued to establish cooperative associations. In some cases the FSA even bought additional land for the projects.

Through the late 1930s, the FSA still had strong enough support to ignore the intensifying demands from Congress concerning the resettlement projects. However, support for the programs weakened as America became more and more involved in the international conflict that led to the Second World War. America was brought fully into that war with the Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941.

America's involvement in the war effected the FSA's resettlement projects in several ways. First, the war stimulated the American industrial economy, initially through the U. S. role in producing materials for European allies, then through the great industrial effort that was needed to supply the American military when the United States entered the conflict. Jobs were created by this industrial boom and the New Deal make-work programs became increasingly less necessary.

Moreover, America's preoccupation with the war took the Roosevelt Administration's focus off Southern rural poverty. Roosevelt, too, would make political concessions, sometimes involving his New Deal social programs, to keep together a political coalition strong enough to implement his war policy. Roosevelt himself stated that "Win the War" had become a more appropriate slogan for his

Presidency than "New Deal."<sup>4</sup> If there was any positive impact of the war on the resettlement projects, it was that it was hoped that they could be used to produce food for the war effort.

As support weakened, critics of the New Deal social programs massed an all-out assault to end them. Since these programs were vulnerable, critics often aimed their assaults at the resettlement community projects, hoping in turn to undermine the entire New Deal.<sup>5</sup> The resettlement communities and the FSA became the points of attack, beginning in Congress in 1941, when the Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures was formed. The committee was chaired by Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, a staunch opponent of the FSA. The committee in Congress came to be known as the Byrd Committee.

Sidney Baldwin in his analysis of the FSA pointed out that although the Byrd Committee had no more than investigative authority, the committee members represented an influential bipartisan group.<sup>6</sup> The Byrd Committee, according to Baldwin, focused its investigation of "nonessential federal expenditures" on the FSA. With only a day's notice to prepare, C. B. Baldwin, the FSA administrator, was called before the committee for what amounted to interrogation. Baldwin was asked to explain administrative expenses and clarify why the FSA and the WPA were duplicating services.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Baldwin also was asked to explain how the financial operations of the resettlement communities, such as Skyline Farms, were administered, and to convey

how well FSA loan recipients were progressing on repayment.<sup>8</sup> The Byrd Committee hearings and the questioning of Baldwin were the first wave of Congressional assaults on the FSA and the resettlement communities.

In 1942 the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) officially joined the ranks of those opposed to the FSA. The AFBF represented the "big business" side of American agriculture and was not supportive of FSA programs for low-income farmers, especially since these programs were seen as potentially damaging to the free enterprise system. The AFBF opposed the FSA strongly enough to send six detectives to eight Southern states to investigate the agency's activities, concentrating on the activities of the cooperative associations and "socialistic" farm projects.<sup>9</sup> AFBF officials added fodder to the Byrd Committee hearings, by having an Alabama probate judge, Robert K. Greene from Greensboro, testify that the FSA had paid the poll tax fees of clients in Hale County, Alabama, in order to build a political base.<sup>10</sup> The FSA explained that FSA supervisors in counties took into account all delinquent taxes in making out a yearly farm and home management plan, and that the cumulative poll tax was in essence a delinquent tax.<sup>11</sup> Despite this defense, the FSA was damaged politically and the poll tax testimony became a national news story, conveying the message to the American public that the FSA was buying votes in the South with federal money.

AFBF officials in their testimony before the Bryd Committee further contended that the FSA was promoting "socialistic and impractical farming projects," and was attempting to regiment client families to the point that their initiative and self-respect were being destroyed.<sup>12</sup> Baldwin and other supporters of the FSA answered all the charges point-by-point, but quite obviously, the FSA was on the defensive and attacks on the agency were becoming more and more intense.

The FSA again was brought under scrutiny in April and May of 1942 when Senate subcommittee appropriations hearings were held. In these hearings Farm Bureau leaders from Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, and Texas appeared before the subcommittee and repeated criticisms of the FSA that had been raised during the Bryd Committee proceedings.<sup>13</sup> Senator Kenneth D. McKeller of Tennessee gave the most bitter attack to date against the FSA and C. B. Baldwin. McKeller, who had been opposed to the the Cumberland Farms Project in his state, criticized the FSA for advocating socialized medicine and for refusing to abolish what he considered to be the dangerous resettlement projects.<sup>14</sup> McKeller accused the FSA of wasting money on "no-account people" and went on to state that Baldwin was "not far removed from being a Communist."<sup>15</sup> Baldwin was defended from McKeller's allegations by Senator John Bankhead of Alabama, who refuted the charges and stated that if there was any basis of criticism of Baldwin it "is because of his generosity" in helping the poor.<sup>16</sup>



Baldwin defended the FSA by testifying before the appropriations committee that the organization simply was attempting to help the small, family farmer.<sup>17</sup>

While reeling from attacks by the Byrd Committee and the U. S. Senate, the FSA also was hit in the U. S. House of Representatives, where Representative Malcolm C. Tarver of Georgia, the chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, accused the agency of operating "collective" farms and contended the FSA was in open defiance of Congress by continuing the resettlement communities. Tarver based his charges that the FSA was defying Congress in regard to the 1938 directive from Congress to the Department of Agriculture to "liquidate" the resettlement community programs.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the combined assault of the Bryd Committee and Tarver's House Committee on Agriculture, Congress requested a "rapid liquidation of all remaining" FSA resettlement community projects.<sup>19</sup> All this occurred as project participants continued to live and work on Cumberland Mountain, far removed from the heated governmental struggles that would seal their fate.

The assault against the FSA was not yet over. In early 1943 Representative Harold D. Cooley of North Carolina obtained a resolution in Congress authorizing him to conduct a complete investigation of the FSA.<sup>20</sup> The Cooley Investigation, as it would be called, would eventually cause the FSA to be abolished and would bring an end to the Skyline Farms project. The Skyline Farms project

specifically was singled out for criticism in the resolution that created the Cooley Committee. In this resolution it was noted that clients at the project had made little progress in repaying loans. As of February 1943, it was noted, \$425,980 in rehabilitation loans had been made to individual project families at Skyline Farms. The matured principal on the loans had reached \$104,097. Yet repayment on the principal was only \$88,893.<sup>21</sup> The figures were used as an example to show how poorly clients at the resettlement communities were repaying their rehabilitation loans.

In this final showdown, both the opponents and supporters of the FSA massed their forces for the Cooley Committee investigation and hearings. During these lengthy hearings, begun in 1943 and continued on into 1944, at one time or another President Roosevelt, the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Welfare Council, and the American Federation of Labor all gave their support to the FSA and endorsed the agency's activities.<sup>22</sup> The Farm Bureau persisted in its attack on the FSA, augmented by criticisms from many Congressmen, such as John W. Flannigan, Jr. of Virginia. The Cooley Committee investigation focused on the FSA resettlement communities, such as Skyline Farms.

Rex Tugwell, then serving as governor of the territory of Puerto Rico, was blamed for the resettlement communities, and there were attempts made during the hearing is to connect these projects to Tugwell's visit to the Soviet Union prior to becoming a member of

Roosevelt's New Deal team.<sup>23</sup> Tugwell's shadow hovered over project participants at Skyline Farms, just as it did at other resettlement communities, although the participants continued to live their lives most oblivious to who Tugwell was or what he had believed or had not believed. In time the allegations that the government had started "communist" programs would filter down to some project participants themselves. They would later say they had heard the project had ended because the government said it was "communist."<sup>24</sup> The project participants seemingly were unaware that because of their participation in the resettlement communities, it was they who were being implicated in what were considered the "communists activities" that Tugwell, the RA, and the FSA had instigated.

Cooley himself was no one-sided critic of the FSA and did want some of its programs to continue.<sup>25</sup> Cooley believed in the ideal of the small farmer and homeowner. Yet he strongly disliked governmental bureaucracy and collectivism.<sup>26</sup> However, throughout the hearings, Cooley consistently expressed the opinion that the FSA had overstepped its authority and had not followed the directives of Congress, as set out in the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act.<sup>27</sup> C. B. Baldwin again was asked to defend the FSA, and according to Paul Conkin, Baldwin this time was an ineffective, submissive spokesman for the agency.<sup>28</sup> The barrage directed at the FSA apparently had taken its toll on Baldwin, who was more inclined to acquiesce to this

interrogators than in previous hearings. At one point Baldwin refused to defend the resettlement communities and cooperative projects, saying that all of them "should be discontinued."<sup>29</sup>

Baldwin's nonexistent defense of the resettlement communities came at a time when the Roosevelt Administration was concentrating on winning the Second World War, and did not want to offend conservative members of Congress by going out on a limb for what had been controversial and divisive programs. According to Conkin: "The embarrassing communities and other aspects of the Farm Security Administration were sacrificed (by the Roosevelt Administration) without a really strong effort in their defense."<sup>30</sup>

The Cooley Committee's final report sounded the death knell of Skyline Farms. In that report the committee among other things accused the FSA of starting collective farms; of "uprooting families," colonizing, regimenting, and "too closely supervising" its clients; of "deceiving clients with false promises of land ownership"; and of establishing industries that were in competition with private business.<sup>31</sup> The Cooley Committee concluded by recommending that a new agency be created--the Farmers Home Corporation and that it take over both the FSA and the Farm Credit Administration. In 1946 this recommendation was carried out by Congress, and the FSA officially was abolished.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the FSA, rooted in the years in which the Executive Branch was at its peak of power, was ended by one act of Congress after a nine-year existence. At the time, few project participants at Skyline Farms were aware of the long-lasting, bitter struggle that was occurring in the federal government. Yet this struggle would in the end drastically change and disrupt the lives to which the Skyline Farms participants had become accustomed.

In 1943 C. B. Baldwin promised Congress that the FSA would liquidate the resettlement communities. Yet he discovered that the FSA could not simply auction resettlement project land to private buyers, for the Solicitor of the Department of Agriculture had ruled that since money for the resettlement projects had been appropriated for the rehabilitation of needy families, then the projects would have to be sold in such a way that it would further rehabilitation.<sup>33</sup> In the end, it was determined the land on the projects could be sold to only those of low to moderate income, those who qualified for rehabilitation loans. Baldwin, too, did not want to end the projects so quickly that it harmed the participants. Consequently, he faced a dilemma in ending the projects.

Baldwin left the FSA before the matter of liquidation was resolved. In November of 1943 he resigned as Administrator of the FSA, to later join the Congress of Industrial Organizations' Political Action Committee. Roosevelt appointed Frank Hancock, a North Carolina Congressman, as FSA administrator. With the

appointment of the conservative Hancock to the position, Congress clearly controlled the FSA's future.<sup>34</sup> Hancock immediately began examining ways to dispose of the resettlement communities.<sup>35</sup> Soon the lives of the people at the Skyline Farms project would be changed by decisions made miles away in Washington, just as their lives had been changed some ten years before.

## Chapter 11

### Government Liquidation and an End to the Dream

For the farmers and other participants at Skyline Farms, the final months of the project were troubled times. The project had not developed economically and the farmers had gone deeper and deeper into debt. Project officials unsuccessfully had sought the proper agricultural foundation for the project. After it became apparent that cotton farming could not support the project, officials concentrated on raising potatoes, but due to poor market prices, potatoes were not a money crop for the farmers. Other crops, such as corn and hay, brought low market prices, and were used mainly as feed for livestock. The livestock operations proved no more than marginally profitable. Vegetables brought in some money to the participants when sold at local markets, but most vegetables were used as food by the project participants themselves.<sup>1</sup> Despite their efforts, officials simply could not devise an agricultural plan to make the small project farms profitable.

Yet this problem was not confined to Skyline Farms. The small, family-farm was becoming a thing of the past in Alabama and the South. In 1930 there were 261,000 farms in Alabama. During the Depression decade of the 1930s, the number of Alabama farms decreased to 241,000 and then to 220,000 by 1950. By 1960 the 120,000 farms in the state were one-third fewer than existed in 1930.<sup>2</sup> The farm tenancy system which had dominated Alabama's economic and social life

for decades was coming to an end. Unfortunately, the Alabama economic system that emerged could not absorb many of the displaced tenant families, who during the 1940s and 1950s often moved to northern states to work in industries there.

Those farmers who remained in business in Alabama and the South expanded the size of their farms to better utilize the machinery and technology that had become a part of agriculture. Expansion also helped them to diversify their crops. The Skyline Farms farmers could not keep pace with these trends. They did not have the capital to expand, mechanize, or diversify their operations. These changes only could come through money provided by the FSA, which at this point wanted to divest itself of the resettlement communities--not expand them. Rex Tugwell's reservations about beginning resettlement community projects for small farmers in an era of agricultural change was proving prophetic.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to agricultural problems, neither had the high expectations for the hosiery mill at the project been realized. The factory was successful at first and created a great sense of enthusiasm concerning its economic impact on the project. However, financial problems at the hosiery mill occurred. The plant produced silk hosiery for women and in the early 1940s silk became scarce due to a disruption in market supplies brought on by the war. Also, silk was needed to make parachutes for the military. As a result, silk was in short supply and the factory could not operate at capacity.



Dexdale officials substituted nylon and rayon for silk at the plant, but the throwing equipment was designed to use silk, and the machines were not as efficient with the substitute materials. The hosiery mill went into a financial tailspin and the Skyline Industrial Company made very little progress in repaying the government loan that had established the factory.<sup>4</sup>

In 1942 Dexdale announced that due to the financial problems, workers were to be laid off at the hosiery mill.<sup>5</sup> The layoff was yet another jolt to Skyline Farms and was compounded by another Dexdale announcement. Dexdale officials notified the FSA that they would not continue to give preference in hiring to Skyline Farms participants.<sup>6</sup> Prior to constructing the plant, Dexdale had agreed informally to hire as many workers from the Skyline Farms project as possible. However, with their announcement Dexdale changed this policy. Dexdale officials told the FSA that the best, most qualified workers would be hired at the plant, with preference given to the project participants only if they were qualified as workers. In a letter to the FSA, Dexdale officials noted that the hosiery mill was after all a business and should be operated in such a way as to maximize production and efficiency.<sup>7</sup> Hiring the best, most qualified workers was therefore essential to the successful operation of the factory.

The challenge faced by the RA/FSA in establishing a cooperative community in a competitive, free enterprise system is no more apparent than in the decision by Dexdale officials to hire more

non-project workers. The decision illustrates the problems federal and project officials faced in attempting to create a cooperative community in America. Dexdale, as a private business, was concerned with profits. Without profits no one would have a job at the factory, plant officials reasoned. With Dexdale's announcement, and because of the financial problems the hosiery mill was experiencing, still another stone in the Skyline Farms foundation had crumbled. Project participants began to realize that the dream was slipping from their grasps.

By 1943 and 1944 many of the farmers originally selected for the project had left.<sup>8</sup> They had made little progress toward purchasing their units. Consequently, when jobs became available elsewhere, they left the project.<sup>9</sup> A number of these families from Skyline "went North," as they described it, to find work.<sup>10</sup> What was left of the Skyline Farms concept was altered by Congressional orders. Congress ordered the FSA to give new families at the projects "quitclaim" deeds to their property. These "quitclaim" deeds gave title to the family. These families did not have to abide by FSA provisions and directives in maintaining and managing their land. The FSA was out of the business of building resettlement communities. Those buyers who were given the "quitclaim deeds" usually also got FSA rehabilitation loans, but there were no strings

attached. All the family had to do was make their payments. Only the original families at Skyline Farms remained under the old RA/FSA plans for the project.

Although many original families did leave, others at the project held on, hoping they some how could keep their homes and farms. Some families continued to maintain that the government had "promised them" they could homestead their property.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1940s, however, it was difficult for the farmers to substantiate this claim, especially since so many project founders, including Harry Ross, had left. Ross' successor as project manager, Tommy David, also left in 1943 to become an officer in the U. S. Navy. David was replaced by Lucian Paul, an agriculture graduate from Alabama Polytechnic Institute (Auburn University). Yet another project manager, Edron Childers, followed Paul. The constant change in leadership at Skyline Farms no doubt added to the participants' confusion about their future.

The families who remained the final months heard persistent rumors that the project was about to end and they would be forced to move away. They did not acquiesce quietly to this possibility, but instead did what they could to keep their homes and farms. On one occasion, several project farmers met with U. S. Senator John Sparkman at his office in Huntsville to ask that he do what he could

to prevent them and their families from being removed from the project.<sup>12</sup> Sparkman was cordial, but said that the matter was out of his hands.

The farmers' apprehension increased as it became more and more apparent that an end to the project was nearing. The farmers then turned to J. M. Money, the former Jackson County probate judge, to intervene on their behalf. In 1934, Money had been centrally instrumental in bringing the project to the county. Indeed, he and Harry Ross accurately could be described as the co-founders of the project. In 1936, when there was great optimism and exuberance for the project, Money and his friend Senator Sparkman once had spoken at the same Fourth of July celebration at Skyline Farms. Sparkman on that occasion declared that the Roosevelt Administration "has put the common man and woman back on the road to freedom and prosperity" and that in the last few years "we have seen the Declaration of Independence come to life."<sup>13</sup>

In 1944 project farmers asked Money to use his influence with Sparkman on their behalf. Money responded by writing this to Sparkman: "Some of these parties are really alright and are raising a lot of stuff and it looks like (they) ought to have a chance to stay. Of course, a lot has been wasted on the management of these farms and the farmers are not to blame for that. They think a lot of you and they came to me to write you and send you this paper. I really think they have a side to this as well as the ones in charge.

Be careful and keep them your friends and ease along with it. Write W. T. Bradford a nice letter also. Of course they are waiting for your reply but take your time as you understand. Best wishes, Your Friend, J. M. Money."<sup>14</sup>

The "paper" to which Money referred in his letter was a copy of the Skyline Homesteads Association's incorporation documents. Money sent this document to Sparkman to show him that since the farmers owned the land at the project through their cooperative, the FSA did not have the legal authority to force them to leave.

Sparkman did write Bradford, acknowledging him of his awareness of the problem. Bradford in turn wrote back to Sparkman:

". . . I'm the chairman of the Skyline Community Club and also director of the Homestead Association. The farmers have asked (me) to get in touch with you. They feel that they are being mistreated and (I) think so myself. Now we have always had to sew whatever our project manager said. . . the money that we have borrowed, we had to spend it where and how he said (and) his name had to be on every check. And (we had to) plant just what he said and plant and sell how and where he said, and as you know we started this project about ten years ago when farm products would not bring much price and (we) lived so far from the market that handling charges consumed our cash crops. . . We started these farms in the timber and brush. They are just beginning to get where they will produce and our manager and

the FSA committee says that no, that none of us will have a chance to buy our homes because we owe too much. Now is that giving the farmers of Skyline a fair deal?"<sup>15</sup>

The project farmer ended his letter to Sparkman by saying that he was "pleading with you with troubled heart and a worried mind for myself and the farmers of Skyline."<sup>16</sup>

Sparkman took the appeals by Money and Bradford to the highest FSA administrative levels in Washington. E. S. Morgan, FSA Region 5 director, was asked by the FSA Administrator's Office to respond to Money's letter, which had been referred to the FSA by Sparkman. Morgan's response was to be conveyed to Sparkman. Morgan wrote to FSA Headquarters in Washington acknowledging he had received a copy of Money's letter and also a copy of the incorporation papers of the Skyline Farms Homestead Association.

As noted, project farmers and Money were contending that since farms were owned through the Homestead Association, and because the Homestead Association owned the land on the project, the government could not force the farmers to move. According to this interpretation, only the Homestead Association could decide on who could or could not live on the land. Morgan explained that the Homestead Association indeed had been organized, but "shortly thereafter plans in connection with the Skyline Farms Project was

changed and the association never functioned as was anticipated."<sup>17</sup> Morgan went on to add that the Homestead Association never had held title to any of the project farms.<sup>18</sup>

Morgan added that all the farm units on the project were to be liquidated as expediently as possible.<sup>19</sup> Morgan stated that Money's letter indicated the "homesteaders" were fearful they would have to move at the end of the year (1944). To this he stated: ". . . As you probably realize, farm units are sold only to those families approved by our local county advisory committee. This committee is established and functions in accordance with Title I of the Bankhead Jones Farm Tenancy Act. We do not know, of course, which of these families may be approved by the committee at the end of this year. We certainly hope that many of them which have not been making satisfactory progress heretofore may show more progress in production of repayment of debts and thus become eligible for purchase."<sup>20</sup> Morgan further noted it was incorrect to assume all the families would have to move at the end of the year. Those who were asked to move, he concluded, would be asked to do so in order that "eligible families may be given the opportunity to purchase the units."<sup>21</sup> With that Morgan ended his letter. From his response it was clear that the FSA plans were final and that the mandate from Congress to liquidate the resettlement projects being followed.

The FSA did evaluate families to determine which ones would be permitted to buy their units. Essentially, the Skyline Farms participants had to meet the same criteria for a rehabilitation loan as other American farmers. As a part of this criteria, as set forth in the Bankhead-Jones Tenant Farm Act, the project participants had to demonstrate they were financially capable of buying a unit. Of course, very few Skyline Farms participants could demonstrate this financial capability, for most were several thousand dollars in debt as a result of their experiences as farmers at the project.

The project farmers' fears finally were realized in August of 1944 when FSA administrators, under Frank Hancock's direction, gave orders to liquidate Skyline Farms. The final order to E. S. Morgan, the FSA District 5 Director, was direct and simple: "You are hereby authorized on behalf of the government to enter (into) a voluntary liquidation agreement with the Skyline Farms Homestead Association under the terms under which the association would agree to deliver it's personal property and other assets to the government for sale and the application of the proceeds to go to it's indebtedness with to the government."<sup>22</sup>

With this authorization, FSA officials began to notify project participants whether or not they could stay in their homes or would have to leave. Almost all the project participants were notified they would have to leave.



In August of 1944 Virgil and Ventrice Brewer received the notice stating they were ineligible to purchase their unit. They were told they would have to leave by December 31, 1944. Brewer and his family soon moved off the project, leaving behind the land that they had helped clear and then farmed and the house in which they had lived for nine years. Years later Brewer would state that the government had told them one thing, then done something else. "They gave us a crooked deal if there ever was such a thing as a crooked deal," Brewer said.<sup>23</sup> Brewer would add that he didn't have "stones to throw at them," but that it was "just a bad set-up."<sup>24</sup>

The Brewers were moved by a FSA worker to a small house adjacent to the project about a mile from the farm on which they had lived. Even before they had left their unit, the new buyer prepared to take over the farm. "He wanted to do some plowing before the weather got bad," Mr. Brewer later said. "I told him go right ahead."<sup>25</sup> The FSA worker in charge of their move purposely ignored that the Brewers had corn and hay in the fields to help them financially, Mr. Brewer said.<sup>26</sup> The new owner of the farm would later sell the corn and hay for the Brewers, Mr. Brewer said.<sup>27</sup> "He gave me the money and never charged me a penny," Mr. Brewer added. Shortly after moving off the project, Brewer and his family left the mountain when Mr. Brewer took job as a tenant farmer with a landowner near the Tennessee River. Eventually the government canceled the debt he had accumulated at the project. In time the Brewers once

again would make Cumberland Mountain their home, although by this time the cooperative, resettlement community the RA and the FSA had attempted to establish would exist only in memory.

When the FSA officially began to end the project, some families refused to relinquish their home and farm. These families were then forcibly evicted. FSA records identify at least six families at the project who were evicted by court procedures.<sup>28</sup> The Vann Davis family was one of those forcibly evicted from the project. The Davis' were among the original families selected for the project.<sup>29</sup> Prior to their eviction, Mr. Davis farmed at the project and Mrs. Davis worked at the hosiery mill. Two of the teachers at the school boarded with the Davis'. In 1944 the Davis' refused to move when asked to, because they said they had been promised that their home and farm would one day belong to them.<sup>30</sup> Mrs. Davis would later recall: "We worked hard out there. We cleared the land at our place. We improved the place, we even built extra buildings on it. I just think it was a low down dirty deal the way they did us. It was hurtful. It really hurt. My children loved that place."<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Davis went on to say that what bothered her and her family even more about being forced to leave was that one of her sons had been killed in combat in the Second World War. Her son, she said, was killed just weeks before she and her family were evicted. Mrs. Davis described the day her family was moved from their house: "Two men came out to move us. They had told us that if we weren't out by a

certain date, they would force us to leave. Me and my eight-year-old boy were at home when the men came out. My boy ran off to the barn crying when he saw them coming. He knew what they were there for. I always felt that I stood up for my rights, but this is one time that I let them get the best of me. I always tried to live right by the Lord. If it hadn't been for that I probably would have fought with them. They put all my son's things out on the road. These were things that he had before he went into the army and got killed. How do you think that made me feel seeing them move his things out?"<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Davis said she did not know the men who moved them. They told her, she said, that they were just doing what they had been told to do.<sup>33</sup> The government did not provide her family with anything when they were forced to leave, she said.<sup>34</sup>

The Davis' later bought a small farm on Cumberland Mountain from money Mr. Davis made as a construction worker. In the early 1960s the Davis' moved to Burlington, N. C. to be near their daughter. Mrs. Davis' sister, Mrs. Beulah Sharp, recalled: "She (Mrs. Davis) never really got over it (having to leave the project) until they moved away. There were too many bad memories out here. They took all their things and just threw them out."<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Sharp and her family also had given up their farm when they realized they would not be able to pay for it under the program in effect at the project. "I told my husband that we should just forget this place. There were too many losses. We left and saved

our money and bought a place of our own. Land was pretty cheap out here then."<sup>36</sup> In the Sharps' case, it was easier to buy land than to obtain it through the process established at the Skyline Farms project.

There are other accounts of project families being forced to leave, either forcibly or as a consequence of eviction notices. Mrs. Henry Black, a member of one of those families, stated: "We were told that the place would be ours, then they came and took it from us. We'd worked hard and cleared land, and then we lost it all. We worked so hard at it, I think it broke our health down."<sup>37</sup> The Blacks, also, had been among the first families selected for the project.<sup>38</sup>

An FSA report filed in February of 1945 is the best record to document what happened to the first families at the project. The report lists the status of the founding members of the Skyline Industrial Company--the one hundred project residents who had become stock owners in the company that had been given a loan to build the hosiery mill. The report noted the following of these one hundred project members:

48 moved away on their own volition

28 moved after receiving notice to vacate

6 evicted by court procedure

8 have received notice to vacate and cases referred to the

U.S. Attorney General

7 remain on the project with ten-year work agreements

3 deceased <sup>39</sup>

It was obvious the RA/FSA had not been successful in making small, independent farmers out of these who had come to the project some ten years before, as had been the intention.

When the resettlement projects were sold, buyers were given quitclaim deeds that provided them with legal title to their unit. The only restriction on these deeds was that the government reserved the mineral rights to the land. Other than this there were no stipulations. At Skyline Farms, as in other projects, the buyer only had to make a down payment (usually \$150 to \$200), agree to an assessed price, then make monthly payments on the loan the FSA gave them to buy their units under terms of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. The standard loan was repayment over forty years at three percent interest.

When the units were sold, probate records further verify what the FSA report reveals: very few of the original project families were chosen to keep their homes and farms. As a part of the analysis in this study, the names of the one hundred and forty-five "accepted families in occupancy" at Skyline Farms in 1939 were matched with transactions made by the United States government in Jackson County, Alabama, the site of the project, in 1944, 1945, and 1946--the years the project was liquidated.<sup>40</sup>

Of these families, it can be documented that only one project farmer was permitted to buy his unit. The farmer was David Clay Paradise, whose father had been among the first chosen for the project. In August of 1944 David Clay Paradise was told he could buy his family unit. His letter from the community manager stated: "I have been instructed by the County FSA Committee to notify you that you have been approved to buy a farm at Skyline as per your application with \$150 down payment. I shall be glad to work out your future plans on the buying of your farm."<sup>41</sup> In early 1945 Paradise and his wife Mary Lou signed the papers in which they agreed to purchase their house and sixty-five acre farm for \$2,900.<sup>42</sup> Other than Paradise, no other project farmer was permitted to buy a unit.

Paradise later explained that although it was his father who had been selected for the project, he had begun working at Skyline Farms as a boy.<sup>43</sup> He worked on construction jobs and at the hosiery mill, where he was employed in the early 1940s when his father had a serious stroke and was thereafter unable to work. At this point the younger Paradise began managing the farm, while still working at the hosiery mill.<sup>44</sup> Other farmers had not been permitted to work at any other jobs as long as they were project farmers. Paradise, then, had the advantage of an income outside of farming.

Also, Paradise said, he was frugal with his money, making sure he did not charge too much at the community commissary, a mistake he said many project families made.<sup>45</sup> Paradise said it helped that the

FSA officials knew him to be a hard-worker and good manager.<sup>46</sup> When the FSA committee screened the applicants in order to determine who could buy a unit, then, Paradise was on a sounder financial basis than others, and he was given a deed. Paradise kept the farm for several years, he said, and then sold it for \$4,900.<sup>47</sup> He said that when he sold it, he was making the payments on the unit, but that the farm was not very profitable.<sup>48</sup>

There are no final records of the precise number of farmers who were at Skyline Farms. The best estimate based on available information is that there were from one hundred and fifty to two hundred farmers at the project during its ten-year existence. David Clay and Mary Lou Paradise were the only farm family able to purchase their house and land.

Probate records in the years of the Skyline Farms liquidation reveal some odd situations pertaining to the project. Two original farm families are listed as obtaining deeds for land from the U. S. government during the 1944-46 period, but not from the FSA. The men obtained their land through the federal homesteading law, which stated individuals could obtain title to certain amounts (80 to 160 acres) by living on the land and improving it for five years. Apparently, these men left the Skyline Farms project, found land to homestead, and acquired land through this process.<sup>49</sup> Land still was being homesteaded in Jackson County through the mid-1940s.

Some participants did acquire houses, but not farms, when the project ended. These families were those who had jobs at the project, such as at the hosiery mill, but did not farm. They were permitted to buy their house and several acres along with it. There are four families, including that of Chester Allen, the Skyline Farms Band leader, who were original project members who were permitted to buy their houses when Skyline Farms was liquidated.<sup>50</sup> Typically, a house with five acres sold for \$800.

In liquidating the project, the FSA did sell units in varying amounts. In some cases, a project house and a relatively small amount of land (two to eight acres) were sold. In other cases, houses were torn down, farms combined, and a larger amount of land sold. The price of the unit depended on the quality of the house and land. Probated deeds record such sale prices as: house and ninety-two acres--\$2,799; house and eight acres--\$2,000; house and one hundred and twenty-three acres--\$2,900; house and one hundred and twenty-four acres--\$3,600; house and 4.6 acres--\$650; and a house and 4.9 acres--\$1,000.<sup>51</sup> In December of 1946 the last unit, a house and one and a half acres of land, was sold at Skyline Farms. The project was over.

In all real estate transactions, the FSA stipulated that only those qualified for a FSA loan would be permitted to buy a house or farm. As noted, based on orders of Congress, the FSA had to liquidate the project in such a way as to benefit low to low-moderate



income families, since this was how the money for the project had been appropriated to be spent. Moreover, the FSA did not want land speculators to buy into the project, then resale.

By 1945 and 1946 a "second generation" had moved to what had been the Skyline Farms project. These were people who met FSA loan criteria. The FSA had no real jurisdiction over the "second generation" farmers. However, in order to get a yearly farm loan, the FSA did have to approve the farmers agricultural plans. If the farmers chose not to pursue a loan, then they had to answer to no one. With the sale to the "second generation" farmers, the concept of the cooperative community, regulated by federal supervisors, was a thing of the past.

One final change in the resettlement legacy occurred in November of 1946, when Congress abolished the FSA. This was done through the Farmers' Home Corporation Act. Under this legislation, most of the functions of the FSA were transferred to a new agency that was created--the Farmers Home Administration (FHA). By this time the FSA had sold most of the land and buildings at Skyline Farms. However, the FHA assumed responsibility of seeing to it that the purchasers at the project paid their loans.

There is no documentation on how many of the "second generation" buyers eventually paid for their units. Some, such as John Jarnagin, farmed for a while on their unit, and then left. Jarnagin would later say that he was making enough to buy his unit,

but he located to a more productive farm elsewhere.<sup>52</sup> He, too, had problems with cotton as a crop, he said. He could grow the cotton well enough, he said, but due to the cold weather, the cotton bolls would not open until late in the fall, and then the frost would stain the cotton, resulting in a lower grade and consequent lower price for the cotton.<sup>53</sup> Project farmers, it was noted, had experienced this same problem. Because of the difficulty some of the "second generation" farmers had, a number either sold their units, or in a few cases simply moved.

Available information does indicate, however, that the overwhelming majority of the "second generation" farmers did obtain their farms. These farmers did not have to rely solely on farming for an income, as was required of the original farmers. Therefore, they could use income from other sources to pay for their units. The "second generation" farmers benefited, too, from a general improvement in farm prices that occurred in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Additionally, they moved on farms that had been worked for several years and thus had the advantage of not having to farm "new ground." Although there are no final records on what percentage of the "second generation" farmers bought their units, the former director of the Farmers Home Administration in Jackson County, W. A. Murrah, said that most of the "second generation" farmers did pay off their loans.<sup>54</sup> Records from the FHA

during the first few years after the project units were sold confirm that most of these "second generation" buyers were making progress toward purchasing their units.<sup>55</sup>

As for other aspects of the project, the community commissary was sold to a private buyer, as were other facilities on the project. The school was turned over to the Jackson County School System to be operated--this time without any federal funds. Government workers no longer organized community bands, or square dances, or arts and crafts projects. No longer did government photographers, music technicians, or drama production consultants, or newspaper reporters visit the community. There would be no more trips to Washington to perform for President and Mrs. Roosevelt. In fact, there was no more Skyline Farms Band, even though musicians still got together at people's homes and played on into the night. The cooperatives were abolished, or they simply dissolved due to a lack of leadership and participation.

In May of 1946 the hosiery mill at the project also was sold. Dexdale Hosiery Mills purchased the plant. Dexdale was the Pennsylvania company that had operated and managed the hosiery mill under a contract agreement with the FSA and the Skyline Industrial Company. Dexdale bought the hosiery mill, machinery, throwing equipment, furniture and other property, and 6.2 acres of land.<sup>56</sup> A FHA report stated that there was a \$369,676 recovery on the sale of the plant, which presumably was the sale price. The report further

noted that interest of \$125,383 had been paid on the original loan of \$490,270.<sup>57</sup> According to this report, the government had a total investment of \$615,653 at the hosiery mill, including the original loan and accumulated interest. The balance unpaid was \$120,593--the government's loss on the facility.<sup>58</sup>

Since the federal government actually had made the original loan to the Skyline Industrial Company, the federal government faced the legal question of whether it had the authority to sell the hosiery mill, or whether this could be done only by the Skyline Industrial Company. As noted, the government could find very few of the original stockholders in the Skyline Industrial Company who still lived in the area. Consequently, the FHA "absolved" the Skyline Industrial Company, based on the recommendation of the FHA regional attorney.<sup>59</sup> However, deed records show that when the sale to Dexdale occurred, representatives of the United States government and David Clay Paradise, representing the Skyline Industrial Company, signed the transaction papers. Paradise had been one of the original stockholders in the Skyline Industrial Company.<sup>60</sup> The Dexdale Company operated the facility for several years after buying the plant and then sold it. Since the late 1940s, the facility was operated by various textile companies, but as of the fall of 1991, the plant was closed.

The somewhat protracted ending to the Skyline Farms project was being repeated at other resettlement communities throughout the United States. By 1948 all the resettlement community projects, except for the greenbelt cities, had been liquidated.<sup>61</sup> In all, the federal government spent \$1,230,333 at Skyline Farms during the lifetime of the project.<sup>62</sup> Approximately one-third of that cost was incurred in constructing the project hosiery mill. In terms of money spent, the Skyline Farms project was one of the largest resettlement communities the government established during the 1930s and 1940s. Certainly, in terms of planning, imagination, and enthusiasm a great attempt at social and economic rehabilitation was made at the project. Yet the question persists as to what all the effort actually accomplished. The answer, like the project itself, has many dimensions and layers, and leads to conclusions that are at the same time praiseworthy and troubling.

#### Image Four: Leaving the Project

Virgil and Ventrice Brewer had heard the rumors that spread through the community. It was said the government was about to close the project and everybody would have to move. Mr. Brewer had gone with other project farmers to Huntsville to talk to U. S. Senator John Sparkman about what they had heard.<sup>1</sup> Senator Sparkman was polite and listened to them, Mr. Brewer later said, but he told them he did not know what was going to happen and that it was all out of his hands.<sup>2</sup> Some project participants were making plans to leave, or had already left, Mr. Brewer said. But the Brewers had lived in their house for nearly nine years. They had helped clear the land. The Brewers' children attended the community school. The family attended church nearby. They had, Mr. Brewer said, good neighbors who were he and his families' friends. The project was the Brewers' home and they did not want to leave.

Moreover, Mr. Brewer thought at first he would be able to homestead his land, and that his unit would then belong to his family.<sup>3</sup> This is what he said project officials had told the farmers at first.<sup>4</sup> When they were told that they would have to buy their units instead of homesteading them, the Brewers did all that project managers and officials requested of them. They planted the crops as they were told. Yet they could not make a profit from farming and had gone further into debt. Now their future was uncertain.

Finally, in late summer of 1944 the notice was mailed to them. The Brewers were ordered to move from their home and farm by January 1, 1945.<sup>5</sup> The Brewers left soon after receiving the notice. Before they left, Mr. Brewer said, government workers came to their house and took the farm equipment. Later, all the project equipment was sold at a massive public auction.

Mr. Brewer remembered the kindness of one government worker who came to their home and purposely overlooked the corn and hay that he had in his fields, so that it would not be confiscated.<sup>6</sup> This gave him cash to buy a few items when he moved.<sup>7</sup> "We didn't leave with much," Mr. Brewer said. "We had our beds, which had been made out here at the project, and we had our pressure cooker. Things like that."<sup>8</sup> With these few items the Brewers moved away from the mountain, leaving the Skyline Dream behind. Mr. Brewer found a job as a tenant farmer in the county, but soon he and his family were to leave farm life behind for good.

## Chapter 12

### The Skyline Dream: A Retrospective

The most important goal of the Skyline Farms project was to permit economically-deprived tenant farmers to become independent landowners. The tenants chosen for the project were offered the dream of owning their own home and farm. Not only were they to be landowners, but they were to live in a harmonious, planned community. Although there are many other levels at which Skyline Farms should be measured, the main factor in evaluating the project is how successful the project was in turning tenant farmers into self-sufficient landowners.

It is apparent from this study that the project was only minimally successful in this regard. Only one farmer of the 150-200 who were at the project obtained their house and land. From this vantage point, the conclusion is inescapable: the project failed.

Characteristically of American society, the farmers themselves were blamed for this failure. For example, the FSA Solicitor's Office in a report as the project was ending attempted to explain why so few of the farmers had obtained their units.<sup>1</sup> The Solicitors' wrote to Frank Hancock, FSA Administrator at the time, that "the farm plan for the Skyline Farms project did not develop to the extent planned."<sup>2</sup> The report explained that grain, potatoes, and sorghum were to be the farmers' cash crops and facilities had been developed for processing, curing and storing these crops.<sup>3</sup> The land, climate,



and market were all favorable for producing these cash crops, the report further explained. The problem, the report stated, was that "project families never produced crops in quantities sufficient to use these facilities to any extent."<sup>4</sup> The report concluded: "Families proved to be wage earners rather than farmers. This accounts in large measure for the heavy turnover of families during recent years."<sup>5</sup>

That the farmers were "wage earners rather than farmers" had become the official explanation as to why the project failed, at least according to this report. In a society that stresses individuality, blaming the farmers for their lack of success was a quick and easy explanation, one that served the additional purpose of removing responsibility away from the government planners to the farmers themselves.

No doubt, there were individual instances in which the farmers did not fully seize the opportunities given them. They were, after all, products of a tenant farm system and subculture which, as Johnson, Embree, and Alexander had explained, often took away initiative.<sup>6</sup> Yet it should be remembered that the project farmers were a select group, people who had been screened and evaluated in terms of their work habits and character. If indeed these farmers were "wage earners," as the Solicitor's report described them, then there was a flaw in the selection process, for these were individuals and families chosen because the RA/FSA felt they would succeed.

Quite simply, the farmers whose abilities were brought into question by the Solicitor's report were the same people the government chose for the project.

In assessing what did go wrong in converting the tenants to landowners, the original Rural Resettlement Division (RRD) farm plan for the project warrants closer analysis. As was noted, farmers at the project worked with a very small margin of error when it came to their financial balance at the end of a year. The following Farm and Home Management Plan devised by the RRD in 1936 shows just how narrow that margin was:

FARM AND HOME MANAGEMENT PLAN: SUMMARY

Resettlement Administration<sup>7</sup>

|                               |          |            |
|-------------------------------|----------|------------|
| Cash receipts from farm       | \$844.00 |            |
| Living from farm              | \$324.25 |            |
| Total receipts                |          | \$1,263.25 |
| Expenses for farm             | \$425.00 |            |
| Living for farm               | \$324.25 |            |
| Cash living expenses          | \$275.00 |            |
| Total expenses                |          | \$1,044.25 |
| Annual net income             |          | \$224.00   |
| Rehabilitation loan repayment |          | \$215.00   |
| on \$3,000                    |          |            |
| BALANCE                       |          | \$9.00     |

Based on this plan, the slightest error in the agricultural farm plan could result in a financial loss for the year. Definitely there were errors in the plan. There was a problem in regard to reliance on cotton as a key cash crop for the farmers. According to the farm plan, twelve acres of cotton on each farm would produce 2,700 pounds of cotton to be sold at a projected ten cents per pound. This would provide the typical farmer with \$270 in income, with the cotton seed bringing in another \$54. This projected income from cotton was thirty-nine percent of the total receipts that a farmer was expected to make each year.

Officials did not anticipate it would take as long as it did to prepare the "new ground" for cotton. Some cotton was produced by 1939. However, it was not until the early forties, some six years after the project had begun, that cotton was planted in substantial amounts, and even then never in amounts enough to warrant constructing and operating the cotton gin that had been planned. Even when planted, the cool mountain weather stunted the cotton, or caused the bolls to open late in the fall, resulting in frost damage. Cotton was never the money crop officials anticipated it would be.

Perhaps the shortfall in cotton could have been overcome by more reliance on potatoes as a cash crop. In the original plan, potatoes were to bring in \$300 per year for the farmers, thirty-six percent of the total yearly income.<sup>8</sup> Project farmers were more than "wage earners" when it came to raising potatoes. The farmers did

produce potatoes in large amounts, but the market price for potatoes was low up until 1943, the year that Congress ordered liquidation. From 1937 until 1942 potatoes averaged only \$1.08 per hundred pounds, increasing to \$2.55 only in 1943, the year in which the liquidation of Skyline Farms was being finalized.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps in time producing potatoes could have kept the farmers afloat financially, but by the time of the price increase, the farmers were badly in debt, and the end of the project was near.

In explaining why the project had not been successful, the FSA Solicitor's Office reported that grain, potatoes, and sorghum were to be the farmers' "cash crops."<sup>10</sup> There was no mention in that report that originally thirty-nine percent of the farmer's cash income was to come from cotton. Quite obviously, in 1945 the overall success of the project was being gauged on criteria that had changed since the beginning of Skyline Farms. Due to the dramatic changes in personnel and policy that had occurred in the FSA over the years, in 1945 probably few government officials remembered or were aware of what the original farm plan had been or how it was to be implemented. Based on this faulty or selective memory, government officials responsible for ending the project could attribute failure to the farmers themselves.

In actuality, at no time in American history have farmers received as much supervision, advice, and guidance as those at Skyline Farms. The farmers followed a plan prescribed to them. If

the plan did not work, whatever characteristics they had as individuals became secondary in regard to the success of the project. In looking back, it is apparent the agricultural plan for Skyline Farms was flawed, despite however well-intended, thorough, and imaginative project personnel and RA/FSA officials might have been in devising it.

There were further complications that created obstacles for the farmers in obtaining their units. One drawback was that the federal government was inexperienced in what essentially was social work. Prior to the 1930s, the federal government had not been involved in these type of services, and consequently workers knew little of the intricacies of social work, especially in regard to relating to people from a different subcultural background, such as the tenant farmers at Skyline Farms. For example, as strong a leader as he had been, Harry Ross, the first project manager, had been a steelmill supervisor prior to coming to Skyline Farms, and had not been trained to direct a resettlement community. Neither had such personnel as the farm specialists or construction foremen been trained as social workers. Yet daily they were expected to deal with what in many cases were social and personal problems the project participants were experiencing.

The inexperience with dealing with a unique subcultural group created further barriers, such as the obvious communication problems that developed. Many of the project participants had false illusions

and expectations about obtaining a home and farm. In the early days of the project, it does appear that many participants thought they would be permitted to homestead their unit with government assistance. The language used by RA and FSA officials contributed to these false expectations, for from the beginning Skyline Farms was referred to as a "homestead" project and participants were called "homesteaders" to the very end.

Some participants clearly believed they would be allowed to homestead their units, and it is evident it was never clarified to them exactly how they were to obtain their units. In the beginning, FERA, RA, and FSA officials themselves seemed not to understand how resettlement at Skyline Farms was to be accomplished. In fairness to these officials, resettlement was only a small part of the massive programs their agencies were regulating. Furthermore, there were layers of officials throughout each governmental agency and quite often they did not know what others were doing within the federal bureaucracy.

The different messages the officials sent confused the Skyline participants. For example, Virgil Brewer, an original farm participant, said that Harry Ross had told them they would be allowed to homestead their units and that work they did would be credited to this end. As noted, according to Brewer, Ross returned from a meeting with FSA officials and told them that plans had been changed.<sup>11</sup> Apparently, policy had been developed at the local level

which was not in keeping with federal directives. Doubtless, the communication problem at the project hampered the overall level of efficiency of project participants and officials. Additionally, this communication problem caused the participants to lose the cooperative spirit that seemed to so characterize the project during the first few years.

Better communication might have prevented factions from developing at Skyline Farms. As it was, an "us" and "them" attitude often existed at the project, with the sides splitting along management/supervisor and participant lines. Both factions commonly viewed the other through stereotypes. In the early days of the project Leonard Kirk, then working with Special Skills, wrote Charles Seeger he had discovered something at the project "that was not so pleasing."<sup>12</sup> Kirk said that the "salary workers" at the project had begun to speak of "our group" and referred to the "regular homesteaders" as "the other group."<sup>13</sup> He went on to say that the "salary workers" called the homesteaders "flat heads. . . colonists. . . and a number of other funny things."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, few of the "salary workers" or officials at the project had come from the tenant subcultural background. Or if they had, a way to disassociate themselves from such a degrading, impoverished background was to criticize those individuals who had not broken free of it. Criticism of the participants was a way of suggesting they were "not like them," that they were somehow different. In years to come, sometimes

those emerging from the tenant subculture would be highly critical of anything that was "country" or "rural," as they sought social recognition for their families by distancing themselves from their past. By denying any historical link between their present life and the farm tenancy system, they, too, were accepting that individuals were responsible for the degrading poverty that characterized Southern farm tenancy. The tenant farm system itself was not blamed.

Some Skyline Farms participants also had their negative stereotypes of project personnel, just as the personnel had stereotypes of them. Participants ridiculed the project managers for what they felt was their lack of knowledge about farming. Participants joked among themselves about how Harry Ross sent an assistant to buy two mules--a male and a female, so they could be bred. Then they would roar with laughter in the knowledge that mules, as hybrids of a donkey and horse, are sterile.<sup>15</sup> Such jokes conveyed the message that while the project officials might be educated, they did not have "common sense," like "we" do.

Despite their poverty, those of the farm tenant world were fiercely independent. They often described themselves as "poor but proud."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, they were a proud people who did not like being told what to do. Even as tenant farmers, they had been an independent group, often moving yearly from farm to farm. Often they moved for economic reasons, but sometimes they left because they had taken personal offense at something the landowner had said or done.



At Skyline Farms the tenants did not take well to what they thought were endless rules and regulations governing their lives. These regulations covered every aspect of their lives at the project, including their family life. Under the tenant system, at least their family life had been their own. Moreover, the knowledge that they were members of a group of people, farm tenants, who often were viewed negatively, caused them at times to be especially sensitive and defensive, resulting in their reading slights into directives which a supervisor might not have intended.

Doubtless, the participants' resentment was a contributing factor in the charges levied against Harry Ross that he had misused funds and labor at the project. FSA officials dismissed the charges as completely unsubstantiated. Nonetheless, that the participants would make such charges against the man most responsible for establishing the project reveals the extent of discord developed. Although certainly there were many instances of warm, respectful relations and activities between participants and personnel at Skyline Farms, all too often it seems that each side viewed the other as the enemy.

As noted, the project experience also reveals the difficulty in establishing a cooperative community in a competitive society. Participants and personnel often did not "work together." They after all were part of a society that encouraged individuality and sometimes even defiance of authority. When rules and regulations

established or how they might benefit all people. All too often, the participants interpreted the rules and regulations as further examples of intrusions on their individuality and as an insult to their pride.

Again in fairness to the project officials, social programs such as Skyline Farms were new on the American scene. There were few models to which personnel could turn for guidance. After all, social programs such as the resettlement communities had just begun in America at the federal level with the Roosevelt Administration. In the 1930s, what is known as social work today was a field in its infancy. Little was then known of the pitfalls of bureaucracies, or the hazards of total institutions, or the difficulty of communication between subcultural groups. Indeed, those of the tenant world had not been identified as a subculture with their own values, customs, traditions, and religious beliefs. Personnel at Skyline Farms approached the project without the benefit of these insights.

Further perspectives on why the project was no more successful than it was in permitting farmers to acquire their home and land is gained from a 1943 study. This study was conducted by the War Food Administration (WFA) to determine what should be done about the FSA, then under the authority of the War Food Administration in the Department of Agriculture. Independent consultants, led by John D. Black of Harvard University, conducted the study and concluded that the FSA should be modified, but not abolished. Among the problems

the consultants identified within the FSA were that: (1) many FSA borrowers had too large a loan debt; (2) some of the FSA "rehabilitation" farms were too small; and (3) many FSA county supervisors were not competent in farm management.<sup>17</sup> While concluding the FSA should be continued, the Black report did recommend the liquidation of the resettlement projects.<sup>18</sup>

A look at some of the other resettlement projects established in the 1930s provides further views on what happened at Skyline Farms. Although no comprehensive study of these resettlement communities has been written, there has been some analysis made of individual projects. Most studies of these projects reveal a story similar to that of Skyline Farms, with some exceptions.

One of the exceptions is Gee's Bend, which like Skyline Farms was begun by the FERA, then operated by the RA and the FSA. Gee's Bend, as noted, was a project for black tenant farmers in Wilcox County, along the Alabama River in Southwest Alabama. This project took place on the abandoned Pettway Plantation, where descendants of slaves had persevered through the years and had worked for various absentee landowners. The Depression of 1932 hit residents of the Gee's Bend community hard, especially after Gee's Bend residents lost most of their movable property in an estate settlement.<sup>19</sup> The economic plight of the people at Gee's Bend brought the attention of various relief organizations, the Red Cross at first, and then the FERA.

FERA officials decided to establish a farm community at Gee's Bend and bought some 12,000 acres of land for the project. The Gee's Bend project was developed in much the same way as Skyline Farms. Houses were built for families, but on one hundred acre farms instead of the standard forty acres at Skyline Farms. The families were equipped to farm and were given rehabilitation loans. Cooperatives were organized at Gee's Bend, as at Skyline Farms, and a community center was build, as was a commissary, health center, grammar school, and blacksmith shop.<sup>20</sup> However, no industrial factory, such as the Skyline hosiery mill, was built at Gee's Bend.

From available accounts of the project, Gee's Bend was much more successful in permitting farmers to buy their homes and land than those participants at Skyline Farms had been. In 1941 the FSA reported that ninety-seven of the one hundred families at Gee's Bend had bought their homes and the majority were ahead of schedule in paying off their farm land.<sup>21</sup>

Despite their similarities, there were some major differences between Alabama's only two New Deal farm community projects that may account for their different success rates. The most obvious difference is that Skyline Farms was for white tenants and Gee's Bend for black tenants, as in keeping with New Deal racial policy in the South. That one project was for whites and the other for blacks would appear to have little to do with the outcomes of the respective projects. However, Will Alexander RA/FSA director, was especially

interested in Gee's Bend and visited the project on one occasion.<sup>22</sup> Alexander's interest his desire to improve Southern race relations and the quality of life for blacks. Perhaps the special interest Alexander had in Gee's Bend contributed to its success, although this only can be speculated, and certainly Eleanor Roosevelt's interest in the Arthurdale project did not help it to succeed.

The Gee's Bend participants did have the advantage of farming rich, river-bottom land that was ideal for raising cotton. Unlike the farmers at Skyline Farms, they did not have to clear "new ground" on which to raise their crops. This made their farms more profitable, and they could begin farming immediately, rather than spending the first several years of their project clearing land. The Gee's Bend farms, too, were considerably larger than those at Skyline Farms, averaging some one hundred acres. This permitted the farmers to raise more crops, thus maximizing their efforts. It also put the Gee's Bend farmers in line with the trend toward operating larger farms.

Other factors which may have contributed to the success of Gee's Bend in comparison to Skyline Farms can only be speculated, at least within the boundaries of this analysis. One of these possible factors is that the internal social structure of the Gee's Bend community may have contributed to its overall success. Gee's Bend was a more unified community than Skyline Farms. Gee's Bend had existed as a community since the 1820s, when the first plantation was

established there. Many of the residents of Gee's Bend were related: in fact, most of the people there had the surname of Pettway, derived from the Pettway family, who had owned a plantation at Gee's Bend.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the homogeneous nature of the Gee's Bend community created a more harmonious, cooperative attitude at the project than existed among the participants at Skyline Farms. Whatever the reasons, the outcomes of the two projects in regard to home and farm ownership were not the same.

Gee's Bend is atypical of other resettlement community projects in the United States. As far as land ownership is concerned, the experiences of the Skyline Farms project participants was more common. Studies of these projects repeat a consistent story line: very few of the original farm families selected for the projects obtained their home and land.

The Penderlea Homesteads offers some striking comparisons with Skyline Farms. The Penderlea Homesteads, located in Pender County, N. C., was first operated by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, then taken over by the RA and FSA. Like Skyline Farms, it was classified as a resettlement farm community and consisted of 195 units, in contrast to 181 at the Cumberland Mountain project. Penderlea Homesteads was the first farm colony and the most expensive based on per unit costs.<sup>24</sup> Penderlea Homesteads participants occupied houses built for them on twenty-acre farms and were supervised by farm and home management specialists.<sup>25</sup> They were to

buy their units from money they made from farming. As at Skyline Farms, cooperatives were established, and to give the families of the farmers there more job opportunities, a factory was built with a \$750,000 FSA loan to the Penderlea Farms Homestead Association. Dexdale Hosiery Mills operated the factory. The factory made women's hosiery, as at Skyline Farms, and the facility itself was considered one of the best of its kind in the South.<sup>26</sup>

The similarities between Penderlea Homesteads and Skyline Farms do not end with their structure and organization. They, too, are similar in the problems that developed at each project. Farmers, for example, became confused over how exactly they would be permitted to purchase their units.<sup>27</sup> These farmers, who like those at Skyline Farms had been chosen from relief roles, became disillusioned because they began the project with such high expectations for obtaining their own home and farm.<sup>28</sup> Yet the farmers fell further and further in debt.<sup>29</sup> The cooperatives that were established were inactive and the farmers themselves felt they were not being allowed to participate in governing their community.<sup>30</sup> They felt that project officials violated their privacy with their detailed home and farm plans.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the hosiery mill itself, while creating jobs, began to lose money and Dexdale officials recommended the factory be liquidated.<sup>32</sup> In the end, the entire Penderlea Homesteads project was sold, with "very few" of the original homesteaders able to buy their units.<sup>33</sup>

Based on Paul Conkin's synthesis of the resettlement communities, it appears that Skyline Farms and the Penderlea Homesteads reflect the experiences of what happened at most of the projects. However, there is no record of the number or percentage of those families originally selected for these projects who obtained their units. Such an assessment would have to come from detailed case studies of each of the some forty farm community projects established by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, the FERA, the RA, and operated by the FSA during the 1930s and 1940s. This information is not available. Based on the studies that have been done, it can be concluded that very few of the original participants had their hopes of owning their own house and farm realized.

Yet the success of Skyline Farms and other similar projects cannot be measured solely in terms of the number of participants who purchased their units. Certainly, there are many other dimensions to consider in evaluating the projects' overall success. First, Skyline Farms should be placed in context of the era in which it began, which was during the peak of the Depression of the 1930s. The project, of course, was intended to make the participants self-sufficient, but at the same time another purpose simply was to help the participants survive these hard times. Conditions for Southern tenant farmers were bleak. Often these people were without a home, food, adequate clothing, or medical care. The Skyline Farms project at least did help some of those tenant farmers and their families endure the



social and economic hardships brought on by the Depression. People in need were provided with jobs, a house, food, and clothing. Importantly, for the first time many project participants received medical care through their medical association.

The Skyline Farms project was established to help people. Project officials, those with the FERA, or RA, or FSA, did not intend to make participants feel they had been betrayed, as many felt toward the end. The Skyline Farms project began as an imaginative, compassionate attempt to better the lives of individuals, and during the hard years of the Depression, project officials did accomplish this goal. This was no small accomplishment.

The Skyline Farms project had many other positive benefits. Many participants learned skills that they utilized for a life time. At the project, unemployed tenants learned to be carpenters, or painters, or truck drivers, and after they left they would use these skills to earn a living for themselves and their families. Even though most did not obtain their land, farmers at the project learned new agricultural techniques and methods they used in the years to come. Farmers also learned to utilize the cooperative marketing concept at Skyline Farms and other resettlement communities.<sup>34</sup> The federal government now provides grants to farmers to establish marketing cooperatives. The RA/FSA, then, led the way in introducing the cooperative concept to farmers, and the Skyline Farms participants were among the first to employ the idea.

Project participants benefited in other ways. Many members of project families took jobs at the hosiery mill. This increased the standard of living for project families. After the project ended, many of these people continued to work at the hosiery mill, or at a similar facility. Some of these workers obtained specialized skills or were trained to be supervisors. Their experience at Skyline Farms gave them a livelihood long after the project ended, if not on Cumberland Mountain, then at some other location.

No doubt, many children of the project benefited from the school that was built for them. For many of these children, this was the first time that the social and economic conditions of their lives had permitted them to attend school. Personnel at the school implemented progressive teaching techniques and the teachers were of high quality. The school gave the children an opportunity to use education to break out of the cycle of poverty. The positive effect of the educational aspect of the project had on those whose lives were touched by it cannot be measured simply in determining the number of families who purchased their units.

On yet another level, the project provided many of the participants with some rare experiences, such as when the Skyline Farms Band performed on the lawn of the White House for President and Mrs. Roosevelt. The project participants felt a great sense of pride in knowing their musicians were good enough to entertain the President of the United States.

Moreover, the Special Skills workers in music who came to Skyline Farms did not treat the musical heritage of the people at the project condescendingly. The Special Skills workers were ahead of their time in recognizing that differences among people are matters of tradition, style, and social experiences--not marks of inferiority. Such individuals as Bascom Lunsford, Alan Lomax, and Herbert Halpert helped preserve the heritage of the people. The recordings of the Skyline musicians that Lomax and Halpert made were placed in the U. S. Library of Congress, and in recent years were produced as a cassette tape.<sup>35</sup> The photographs made by Ben Shahn, Carl Mydans, and Arthur Rothstein, like the music, were placed in the U. S. Library of Congress and they also preserve the experiences and heritage of the people who lived and worked at Skyline Farms.<sup>36</sup>

There were still other accomplishments made at Skyline Farms. Participants at the project were in a sense pioneers. They helped clear the wilderness that in the 1930s was Cumberland Mountain. Their efforts under governmental supervision laid the foundation for the town of Skyline, a community which now exists at the site of the project. In the early 1990s the incorporated town of Skyline had some 800 residents, a population slightly less than had been at the project at its peak.

At Skyline a number of the project buildings still exist, such as the commissary, once operated as a cooperative, but now a privately-owned grocery store. Just across the street from the

commissary is the now-unoccupied manager's office, a small, stone building with the inscription "Cumberland Mountain Farms" carved in rock near the front door. Not far away is the school--the same one built after the fire of 1941 destroyed the original building. A child in the community now can complete all their primary and secondary education at the school--kindergarten through high school. Nearby is the hosiery mill, once owned by the Skyline Industrial Company, at least on paper, and operated and managed by personnel with the Dexdale Hosiery Mill. In 1991 the now privately-owned facility was not in operation, a victim of new technology and a recession in the textile industry.

Many of the project houses were torn down when Skyline Farms was liquidated. However, a number of the houses remain in the Skyline community. Many have been remodeled, but can be quickly identified by their style and the sheds and barn that stand behind them. Apple trees planted during the years of the project often grow adjacent to the houses, living remnants of the community's past.

There are, of course, newer buildings, businesses, and houses in the town of Skyline. The Skyline community has become somewhat of a bedroom community for residents who work in towns and cities in the area. By the 1990s there was very little farming done on Cumberland Mountain. A few cattle farms exist and feed crops, such as hay, are raised. However, residents of the mountain for the most part now earn their living in ways other than farming. In the 1990s the

small, self-sustaining family farm has become a thing of the past, as out-of-date in agriculture as the 1940s hosiery mill has become in the textile industry. Of course, Americans still pursue the dream of idyllic rural life and may even live on a small farm. Few, however, earn their living from farming.

The Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries provides some remarkable data on economic changes in the state since the era of Skyline Farms.<sup>37</sup> The agency reports that in 1940 the total state population was 2,832,961 and forty-one percent, or 1,343,080 people, lived on farms. By 1990 of the state's 4,284,700 residents, only two percent, or 85,594 people lived on farms. The actual number of farms dropped from 1940 to 1990 from 231,746 to 47,000, while average farm size increased from 83 to 226 acres. In 1940 some 19 million acres of the state's land was in farms, contrasted to 10 million acres in 1990.<sup>38</sup>

Although agriculture itself obviously declined in importance in the state's economy from 1940 to 1990, an even more evident change that occurred was that fewer and fewer of Alabama's people were needed on farms. This shift represents a watershed change in Alabama's economic, social, and political history, for farming and farm tenancy had been a way of life in the state. Although most Alabama residents today aren't involved in farming, many do have a parent or grandparent who was. In recent years such agencies as the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Alabama Folklore Society, and

the Alabama Humanities Foundation, and various state colleges and universities recognized the importance of the tenant subcultural lifestyle in Alabama's history and have sought to preserve the heritage of the system.

In the years after the Skyline Farms project was liquidated, the state of Alabama and the South continued to grapple with the rural poverty problem. Many ex-tenant farmers simply left Alabama and the South to find jobs in the Northern industrial states of Michigan, Illinois, or Ohio. For those ex-tenants who stayed behind, the state's economy did not provide for them much better than had the tenancy system. Alabama's poverty rate ranks near the bottom in the United States--ahead of only Mississippi, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Arkansas. In all, the Census Bureau estimates that nineteen percent of the state's residents live in poverty.<sup>39</sup> There have been some pockets of change in the state, such as in the high-tech city of Huntsville. However, Alabama remains a poor state, just as in the days when the FERA, RA, and FSA were conducting the Skyline Farms project.

After the project ended the Skyline Farms participants went on with their lives. For a while, they had been given a dream and told of a way to make it come true. Their dream was shattered, but the participants still had their lives to live, and they moved on to other things, leaving Skyline Farms behind them. In time the Skyline

Farms participants and their children could look back at their experiences with the knowledge that they had been a part of one of the most unique and perplexing social experiments of modern times.

### Image Five: Looking Back

It is the summer of 1991. Virgil and Ventrice Brewer are living in a small, well-kept house trailer in the town of Skyline. They live only a short distance from what was once the project commissary and is now a privately-owned store. They are close enough to the Skyline school to hear the voices of the children in the playground. Mr. Brewer, now 84, and Mrs. Brewer, 77, maintain active lives. They devotedly attend church each week. This summer, Mr. Brewer is helping his granddaughter raise a small garden. "I got in four rows of beans and planted a row of cucumbers yesterday," he says.<sup>1</sup> The Brewers' three surviving children live in the Skyline vicinity. One is a housewife. Another is a technician at a factory in the county. The other works for a municipality. They remain a close family.

Mr. Brewer "raised two crops" as a tenant farmer after leaving Skyline Farms. Then he and his family moved North for several years. At first, he found work at a feed mill in Louisville, Illinois. After the mill closed, he worked at a lumber company, then at a brick company in Riverdale, Illinois. Although the weather was cold, he liked it in the North "just fine," he says.<sup>2</sup> There were others from Jackson County living in Riverdale and nearby Harvey, and when he got homesick, he could visit them.



Later, the Brewers moved back to Cumberland Mountain. Mr. Brewer did construction work for a time, even traveling to Florida to work. Then in 1957 he was hired as the custodian at the Skyline School. Mr. Brewer worked at that job until 1969, when an injury he suffered while chopping wood blinded him in one eye, forcing him to retire. Now, Mr. Brewer says, his vision is poor in his other eye and he can see only lights and shapes.

The Brewers still have questions and concerns about why they were never permitted to obtain their house and farm at Skyline Farms. They believe that they were told one thing, and then the government changed plans on them. Still, they both feel the project was worthwhile. "I'm proud I was a part of it," Mr. Brewer says.<sup>3</sup> He adds that the times were hard, that it was impossible to find work, and that while at Skyline Farms at least he and his wife could provide for their children during those years. Mr. Brewer pauses, then serenely tells a visitor that while at the project, "I just did the best I could."<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

Notes to Pages 4-9

Preface and Acknowledgements

<sup>1</sup>Poverty Rate Fifth Worst," Birmingham Post-Herald, September 27, 1991, p. 1.)

<sup>2</sup>"Poverty Cycle Hard to Break," Birmingham Post-Herald, September 2, 1991, p. C-1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Image One: Moving to the Mountain

<sup>1</sup>Virgil and Ventrice Brewer, interview with author, Skyline, Alabama, May 13, 1990, December 3, 1990, and August 22, 1991. Telephone interview with Virgil and Ventrice Brewer and author, March 17, 1991.

Chapter 1 "The Collapse of American Agriculture and Farm Tenancy"

<sup>1</sup>President Franklin Roosevelt quoted in William Leuchtenburg, Editor, The New Deal: Documentary History of the United States, Columbia, S. C.: University of South Press, 1968, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn University, 100 Years: Alabama Crop, Livestock and Income Data, 1866-1966, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

Notes to Pages 9-13

<sup>3</sup>John Kirkendall, "The New Deal and Agriculture." In The New Deal, edited by John Braeman, Robert Bremner, and David Brody, p. 85. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1975.

<sup>4</sup>Basil Rauch, The History of the New Deal: 1933-1938. New York: Capricorn Books, 1963, pp. 100-103.

<sup>5</sup>Braeman, Bremner, and Brody, op. cit., pp. 94-97.

<sup>6</sup>Charles S. Johnson, Edwin Embree, and W. W. Alexander. The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy. Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup>The 1930 Census of Agriculture showed that the tenancy system was not confined solely to the South. There were, for example, 21,113 and 27,394 farms operated by tenants respectively in the Middle Atlantic states of New York and Pennsylvania, and there were 101,615 tenant-operated farms in Iowa and 92,482 in Michigan. See U. S., Bureau of Census, "Total Number of Farms," 1930 Census of Agriculture: Alabama, Folder 2, Box 8, LPR 53, John H. Bankhead Papers, State of Alabama, Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 4-5.

## Notes to Pages 13-19

<sup>11</sup>Tabulations from U. S., Bureau of Census, "Total Number of Farms, 1930 Census of Agriculture: Alabama, John H. Bankhead Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

<sup>12</sup>Carl Taylor, Rural Sociology, Revised Edition. New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1933, pp. 238-239.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>14</sup>In this context the concept of subculture refers to a group of individuals within the larger society with a unique and distinct lifestyle. These subcultural traits include differences in values, social customs, language, religious views, institutions, historical traditions, or basic patterns of living.

<sup>15</sup>Johnson, Embree, and Alexander, op. cit., pp. 21-23.

<sup>16</sup>Margaret Jarman Hagood, Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1939. See also Taylor, op. cit., pp. 274-276.

<sup>17</sup>Carl Taylor, Helen Wheeler, and E. L. Kirkpatrick, Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, Social Report No. 8. Washington, D. C.: U. S., Government Printing Office, 1938. Quoted in David Eugene Conrad, The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal, Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1965, p. 13.

Notes to Pages 20-25

<sup>18</sup>Conrad, The Forgotten Farmer, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup>James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Ballantine Books Edition, New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1966.

<sup>20</sup>William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, New York: Harper and Row, 1963, pp. 120-127.

Chapter 2: "Subsistence Homesteads and Cumberland Mountain"

<sup>1</sup>Arthur S. Link, American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890s, Volume II, Third Edition, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, p. 402

<sup>2</sup>Paul Conkin, Tomorrow A New World: The New Deal Community Program, Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959. p. 133.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-51.

<sup>7</sup>William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940, Harper Torchback Edition, New York: Harper and Row, 1963, p. 140.

Notes to Pages 26-30

<sup>8</sup>Information concerning Ross is found in Pat Jones, "FERA Project Brings Dawn of New Day," Birmingham Age-Herald, April 5, 1936, p. 2. File: "Jackson County," Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Al.

<sup>9</sup>The 1860 population of Jackson County showed 14,811 whites and 3,472 blacks. In 1930 the population was 33,281 whites and 3,600 black. Coburn Thomas, "An Economic and Social History of Jackson County," Unpublished Master's Thesis, Auburn Polytechnic Institute, August, 1938, Appendix B.

<sup>10</sup>File: "Cumberland Mountain Farms: Field Report and Final Budget," Box 44, Record Group 96, Project Records, Farmers Home Administration, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Jones, Birmingham Age-Herald, op. cit.; and Joyce M. Kennamer, "The Rise and Decline of Skyline Farms: Success or Failure," Unpublished Paper, Alabama A & M University, July, 1978.

<sup>13</sup>Others in the delegation included W. C. Selby, H. G. Graham, A. D. Kirby, John O'Neal, J. L. Staple, J. F. Proctor, J. C. Wall, and Jack Reid. "Quest in Montgomery," Jackson County Sentinel, December 6, 1934, Section 1, p. 1. Reprinted in Kennamer, Skyline Farms: Success or Failure, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

## Notes to Pages 31-35

<sup>14</sup>A good account of Cumberland Mountain at this time is Thomas, "An Economic and Social History of Jackson County," op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>15</sup>Kenamer, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup>"Farm Colony Assured in Jackson County, The Progressive Age, December 13, 1934. Contained in Kenamer, Skyline Farms, op. cit., pp. 10-14.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

## Chapter 3: "The Project and Controversy Begin"

<sup>1</sup>File "Acc I213," Box 41, RG 96, Project Records, Farmers Home Administration, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>"Skyline Farms," Farm Security Administration Report, Contained in Roy Stryker Papers, Correspondence: 1912-1972, Series I, 1924-38, Reel 1, Film Number 8521, p. 1, United States, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Madison Building, Washington, D. C. This document contains information explaining the pictures made by the Farm Security Administration photographs under Stryker's direction. The information is an excellent chronological summary of Skyline Farms through August of 1940.

## Notes to Pages 36-40

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, "An Economic and Social History of Jackson County," op. cit., pp. 122-124.

<sup>5</sup>"The Problem of Farm Tenancy," Statement Released by Secretary Henry A. Wallace at Hearings on the Bankhead Tenancy Bill, S.1800, March 5, 1935. Box 8, LPR 53, John H. Bankhead Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Taylor, Rural Sociology, p. 263.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Wallace, "The Problem of Farm Tenancy," op. cit., p.5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas, "An Economic and Social History of Jackson County," op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>14</sup>Stonewall Fairbanks, interview with author, Skyline, Al., June 30, 1981. Excerpt reprinted in Campbell and Coombs, "Skyline Farms, Appalachian Journal, Volume 10, Number 3, Spring, 1983, p. 246.

<sup>15</sup>Virgil and Ventrice Brewer, interview with author, Skyline, Al., May 13, 1990.



Notes to Pages 40-42

<sup>16</sup>Ibid

<sup>17</sup>Thomas, "An Economic and Social History of Jackson County,"  
p. 126.

<sup>18</sup>Virgil and Ventrice Brewer, interview with author, Skyline,  
Al. May 13, 1990.

<sup>19</sup>Leuchtenburg, Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, p. 140.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. See also, Bernard Sternsher, Rexford Tugwell and the  
New Deal, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1964, pp.  
264-270.

<sup>22</sup>Number of employees in Conkin, Tomorrow A New World, p. 155;  
number resettled in Arthur S. Link, American Epoch: A History of the  
United States Since the 1890's. Volume II. Third Edition. Alfred  
A. Knopf, 1967, p. 413.

<sup>23</sup>Conkin, Tomorrow A New World, p. 147.

<sup>24</sup>Tugwell indeed had written poetry. One of his poems, written  
as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, would be used by  
critics to show his radical bent. The poem included the lines: "I  
am sick of a nation's stench/I am sick of propertied czars/I shall  
roll up my sleeves--make America over!" Ibid., pp. 146-147.

Notes to Pages 43-46

<sup>25</sup>Rexford G. Tugwell, Thomas Munro, and Roy E. Stryker, American Economic Life, Third Edition, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935, p. 694.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 714.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 714.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 713.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 716.

<sup>30</sup>Conkin, Tomorrow A New World, p. 147.

<sup>31</sup>"Tugwell Tries Soviet Farming in Relief Plan," Newspaper Article, Specific Citation Unlisted, File: "Jackson County," Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Al. This appears to be a 1935 article that was nationally syndicated.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

Image Two: A New Home

<sup>1</sup>Virgil and Ventrice Brewer, interview with author, Skyline, Al., May 13, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Notes to Pages 47-50

Chapter 4: "The Community Takes Shape"

- 1 "Cumberland Mountain Farms: Outline of Plan and Procedure of Operation of the Cumberland Mountain Farms. Jackson County Rural Homesteading Project," Report, Contained in Roy Stryker Papers, Correspondence: 1912-1972, Series I, 1924-38, Reel 1, Film Number 8521, pp. 1-6, United States, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Madison Building, Washington, D. C.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Pat Jones, "FERA Project Brings Dawn Of New Day," Birmingham News, April, 5, 1936, p. 2.
- 8 Virgil and Ventrice Brewer, interview with author, Skyline, Al., May 13, 1990.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Pat Jones, "FERA Project Brings Dawn Of New Day," Birmingham News, April, 5, 1936, p. 2.
- 11 C. A. Moore, "The Cumberland Plateau," File: "Cumberland Mountain Farms," Box 43, RG 96, Project Records, Farmers Home Administration, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

## Notes to Pages 50-54

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>"Skyline Farms," Farm Security Administration Report, Contained in Roy Stryker Papers, Correspondence: 1912-1972, U. S., op. cit., p 4, Chapter Three, footnote three. Jones dates the RA take-over as October of 1935. Jones, "FERA Project Brings Dawn Of New Day, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup>Conkin, Appendix: Complete List of New Deal Communities, Tomorrow A New World, pp. 336-337.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 332-337.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 305-311.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-109.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 169-170.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 134; and "Skyline Farms," Farm Security Administration Report, Contained in Roy Stryker Papers, Correspondence: 1912-1972, op. cit., p 1, Chapter Three, footnote three.

<sup>23</sup>Conkin, Tomorrow A New World, pp. 110 and 336.

<sup>24</sup>Jones, "FERA Project Brings Dawn Of New Day," op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

## Notes to Pages 55-58

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Kennamer, "The Rise and Fall of Skyline Farms: Success or Failure?", op. cit., p. 16; and Jones, "FERA Project Brings Dawn Of New Day," op. cit.

<sup>30</sup>Kennamer, "The Rise and Fall of Skyline Farms," op. cit.

<sup>31</sup>Ms. Lucille Page, interview with author, Birmingham, Al., June 15, 1990.

<sup>32</sup>W. H. Kessler to Kendall Weisiger, Letter, March 14, 1936, p. 2, File: "Skyline Farms Development and Construction," Box 42, RG 96, Project Records, Farmers Home Administration, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Kessler, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>38</sup>Will Alexander to Kendall Weisiger, letter, March 23, 1936, File: "Skyline Farms Development and Construction," Box No. 42. RG 96, Project Records, Farmers Home Administration, National Archives, Washington, D. C.