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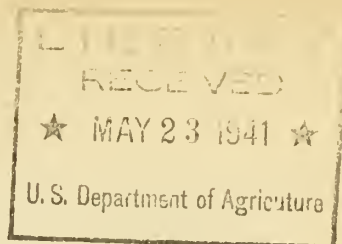
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DYESS FARMS, ARKANSAS

The First Experiment With A New Kind of Rural Community



During the depression in 1934, and the first six months of 1935, a total of 43 State Rural Rehabilitation Corporations, under the direction of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, began to help families on or near relief to become permanently self-supporting. The Corporations loaned the families the funds they needed to get a new start in farming operations and helped them plan the most economical way of working their farm. In a few instances, where the families were not able to find land suitable for farming, the Corporations developed small communities of new farmsteads. These communities offered the families good land, adequate housing, and a chance to develop and share in the benefit of cooperative activities. In all, 23 communities, providing for 2,100 families, were started by the State Rehabilitation Corporations.

Project Number One

The first and largest rural community developed under the FERA was Dyess Farms, located in Mississippi County, in the Delta area of north-eastern Arkansas. Cotton was the dominant crop in this part of the country. In 1930, 90 percent of the farms depended almost solely on cotton for their income, and the fall in cotton prices plus the Nation-wide depression struck hard at a large number of Mississippi County farm families. Nine out of every ten farmers in Mississippi County were either tenants or sharecroppers. They needed land to farm and credit to finance their farming operations, and the hard times made both very difficult to get. Dyess Farms was started to provide some of these families with a new start on good land. It also offered them the advantages of adequate credit, help in technical farm problems, and a chance to develop cooperative activities.

Location

The 15,144-acre tract selected in the spring of 1934 as the site for Dyess Farms was mainly unimproved land lying in the valley of the Tyronza River, about seven miles west of Bassett, Arkansas. The land was purchased by the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation from the local drainage district to which it had been forfeited for drainage taxes. Payment of State taxes, redemptions, and the purchase of the State title brought the cost of the land to an average of approximately \$6 an acre. This is less than the annual average rental cost of comparable land after development in the same area today. Cleared and developed land of comparable quality rents for \$8 to \$15 an acre, and sells for prices ranging from \$60 to \$100 an acre. Recent appraisals show the cleared land at Dyess to be worth from \$45 to \$75 an acre.

Several factors contribute to the value of the land. The soil in this area, a black loam, running from 40 to several hundred feet deep, has a record of more than a bale of cotton to the acre. The climate provides a seven and one-half months' growing period, free of frost.

The mean temperature is 59.8° and the region is not subject to severe droughts. In addition, the Dyess Farms tract has direct truck and rail shipping facilities to two large cities: Memphis, Tennessee is 60 miles south and St. Louis, Missouri is 200 miles north of the community.

Construction

Development work began on May 22, 1934. Approximately 2,000 men from the State's relief rolls were given full-time employment in clearing the land and building the 60 miles of community roads, the 90 miles of drainage ditches, and the bridges. The timber cut during land clearing was seasoned and later used in the construction of the houses.

On the 15,144 acres of community land, 500 homesteads were laid out--334 farms of 20 acres, 64 of 30 acres, and 102 of 40 acres. Only the home site was cleared by the development crews. The families are clearing the remainder of the land and are allowed fees for the work. On these farmsteads 500 frame, one-story farmhouses were erected. Of these, 61 were three-room, 233 four-room, and 206 were five-room structures.

Near the heart of the big tract a community center was built. Designed to supply the needs of a well-developed community, the center when completed contained a community building and library, a community store, post office, barber shop, service station, cotton gin, garage, small canning plant, ice house, warehouses, feed mill, and a small hospital. In addition, 40 residences, three-to five-rooms in size, were erected nearby for administrative and supervisory personnel.

A combination grade and high school was also located in the community center. To make attendance easier, three small grade schools were located in other sections of the community. Simply designed frame construction was used in erecting all of these buildings.

An accounting made in February 1936 showed the total construction and development cost at that time to be \$2,072,098. This included purchase and partial clearing of 15,144 acres of land; construction of more than 500 houses and outbuildings, community center with community building, store, hospital, and gin; construction of roads, bridges, and drainage ditches; installation of a water and sewer system and power lines at the community center, as well as streets and sidewalks at the center; and purchase of machinery and equipment.

Family Selection

During the two-year construction period the families who were to occupy the new homesteads were selected. Farming experience and the need for assistance were the main criteria. Many of the families arrived in the community in time to help with the construction of the project.

Changes In Management

In February 1936, the management of Dyess Farms passed from the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation to the Work Projects Administration. In December 1939, the Farm Security Administration--which already had charge of a number of projects started by the Resettlement Administration--assumed responsibility for the management of Dyess Farms.

Developments Under FSA

Under the supervision of the Farm Security Administration two programs are being carried out at Dyess: (1) A long-range program of reorganization; (2) a continuous program of farming and community activities.

First step being taken under the long-range program is the reorganization of the individual farm units. Experience has proved that many of the original 500 farmsteads were too small to support a family. Work is now under way to enlarge the farms by combining them and by bringing undeveloped land into cultivation. When reorganization is complete, the community will be divided into 300 farms averaging about 40 acres apiece. This will increase the total acres in cultivation from 9,600 to approximately 12,000 acres.

At the same time, a new cooperative association called Dyess Farms, Incorporated has been formed by the homesteaders with the aid of the Farm Security Administration. This association is completing arrangements to take title to the Dyess Farms property and with the aid of an \$372,820 loan from the Farm Security Administration is preparing to place the buildings on all 300 of the reorganized units in good repair; improve the drainage system, the roads, and the fences; and do the land-clearing and land-developing work necessary for the reorganization of the farms.

As in the past, the farms at Dyess when reorganized will be individually owned and operated. Originally, many of the Dyess farmers had contracted for the purchase of their farms. When the new development work is completed, new sales contracts, with selling price based on the improved producing capacity of the farm, will be entered into between Dyess Farms, Incorporated and each farm operator.

Meanwhile, as reorganization goes on, farming and community activities continue at Dyess. During the 1940 crop year, 261 families received short-term loans from Farm Security to carry on their farming operations; the remainder of the families financed their own operations or got credit from some other source. Many of the houses were unoccupied, but all cleared land was cultivated.

The 261 families aided by the FSA got loans totaling \$39,831, an average of \$345 per family. Like all families receiving FSA help the Dyess farmers made out, and agreed to follow, sound farm and home management plans. Included in these plans were provisions for home production of a large part of the family's food and feed supply, the

development of two or more crops yielding a cash income, and the adoption of sound soil-conservation practices.

By following this "live-at-home" plan the families not only supplied their table with fresh milk, meat, eggs, and vegetables, but also canned an average of 400 quarts of fruits and vegetables for winter use. They also raised or produced more than they needed of sweet and Irish potatoes, dried peas, sorghum, and meal.

While most of the families' farms had not yet been enlarged, many of them secured additional land by renting the unoccupied part of the farm. Total acres cultivated by the 261 families were as follows: 3,791 acres in cotton; 2,745 acres in corn; 566 acres in soy beans; 28 acres in sudan grass; 328 acres in grain sorghum; 217 acres in alfalfa; 395 acres in garden and truck; 270 acres in lespedeza; and 116 acres in oats. This was an average of 28 acres in cultivation per family. Livestock owned by the families totaled 459 mules, 314 cows, 989 hogs, and 647 chickens.

Results of 1940 Operation

In general, 1940 was the best crop year the homesteaders have had since the community was established. The cotton actually averaged more than one bale per acre. When fall came, with few exceptions, they were able to meet the payments due on their FSA loans.

During the year the families also developed or continued many forms of community activity. For instance, with the help of a \$6,000 FSA loan they organized the Dyess Cooperative Gin Association, leased the gin built by the old Corporation, and ginned all of their own cotton. Savings made by this Association will be returned to the members on a patronage dividend basis.

The Dyess Hospital and Health Association was also organized during 1940. Members of this Association receive adequate medical care at a cost within their ability to pay, which, during the past year, was approximately \$22 per family. Services of a registered nurse, two physicians, and the facilities of the community hospital are available. To help the families maintain these health facilities--the hospital is the only one available to families in that area--the Farm Security Administration granted 4,760 to the Association last year.

In addition early in 1941 the Dyess farmers formed the Dyess Cooperative Store Association, and with a \$5,000 loan from the FSA plans this year to lease and operate the community store.

Also included in the community organizations at Dyess Farms are eight Home Demonstration Clubs with 157 members and four Parent-Teacher Associations. The Dyess school enrollment is 1,100, with 600 pupils being transported daily in three modern buses. All of the schools have "A" ratings and are governed by the local school district.

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