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VALLEY
REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

MARIST

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Tel: 845-575-3052

Fax: 845-575-3176

E-mail: hrvi@marist.edu

Web: www.hudsonrivervalley.org

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From the Editors

As we began assembling this issue, another colleague mentioned that Eleanor had once visited his grandparents, where his grandfather had been stationed in Japan. Eleanor mentioned them by name in her June 19, 1953 “My Day” column. “FUKOAKA, Japan...went to the Consul General, Mr. Zurhellen’s house. Mr. and Mrs. Zurhellen very kindly invited us to spend the night and it was a joy to see such a happy American family, four boys and a baby girl, all learning to be good Americans but at the same time all learning to speak Japanese in the most painless way. ...On the way up we had a glimpse of Fuji again, just the top floating in the clouds, and now we are catching up on mail which was awaiting us in Tokyo.”



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Contributors

JoAnne Myers has been on the faculty of Marist College for twenty-three years, where she teaches Political Science and Women's Studies. She received her AB from Skidmore College and her Masters and Ph.D. from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She currently is Chair of the Board of the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill.

Susan P. Curnan is an Associate Professor and the Director of the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. She is the author of numerous articles on management and education. Her scholarship and practice is grounded in the promotion of social justice and well-being for children, youth, and families.

Frank Futral is Curator at Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites in Hyde Park, New York. He has organized two exhibitions on Val-Kill Industries and is currently writing a book on that topic.

Marilee Hall is a retired teacher and resides in an original Arthurdale home. She has been actively involved in the community since the 50th anniversary of the homesteading of Arthurdale in 1984. She is the founder and editor of the Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. (AHI) quarterly newsletter. She presently serves on the executive board for AHI.

Thalia M. Mulvihill is Associate Professor in the Higher Education and Social Foundations of Education programs at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where she also serves as Associate Director of the Adult, Higher and Community Education Doctoral Program. Her manuscript *The Promise of Educational Communities in Nineteenth Century America: Communal Notions at Work in Emma Hart Willard's Educational Philosophy* (forthcoming) won the Dixon Ryan Fox Manuscript Prize for the best book manuscript on New York State History from the New York State Historical Association.



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Eleanor lobbied for electricity, appliances, and bathrooms in all the homes. Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Department of the Interior, complained to FDR about the money being spent in Arthurdale, stating the project worried him more than any other in his department. With all the amenities being provided to the homesteaders, Ickes asked, how one would be able to tell the rich from the poor? Eleanor Roosevelt replied that in matters of simple dignity and decency, one should not be able to tell the rich from the poor. Ickes continued to complain to the President, to which FDR replied, “My Missus, unlike most women, hasn’t any sense about money at all.”

Arthurdale: First New Deal Planned Community

Marilee Hall

It was 1933 when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Scott's Run area near Morgantown, West Virginia, to see first hand the deplorable conditions of coal miners. She came at the urging of the American Friends Service Committee. The Depression, combined with miners' efforts to unionize, meant the situation at Scott's Run was volatile.

"I remember Scott's Run as a dark place; train soot and coal dust covered everything," recalled Glenna Williams, daughter of an original Arthurdale homesteader. "Many people lived in shanties, some worse than others. It was dark, dismal. We were never hungry, but many were. I'll never forget the coal companies evicting unemployed people. Their furniture was thrown out of their houses onto the ground between the road and the railroad tracks."

Mrs. Roosevelt was so overwhelmed by conditions at Scott's Run that she returned to Washington and asked her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to address this explosive issue by relocating these impoverished people. Mrs. Roosevelt felt that if only given the space and opportunity to succeed, the disadvantaged would prove themselves.

According to Glenna Williams, Mrs. Roosevelt worked closely with Clarence Pickett to "foster the creation of Arthurdale"—the nation's first New Deal subsistence homestead. Pickett was a Quaker and was involved in the popular back-to-the-land movement of the 1930s. Like Mrs. Roosevelt, he envisioned transplanting miners to a rural, healthful community. Together they persuaded federal officials to purchase their dream—over 1,000 acres of farmland in rural Preston County, West Virginia—and thus Arthurdale was born. It was named after the Richard Arthur family, from whom the land was bought.

Through the perseverance of Mrs. Roosevelt, unemployed workers were hired and began work immediately. Land was cleared, roads were built, and a drainage system was installed. On her frequent visits, Mrs. Roosevelt sometimes walked through the muddy construction sites to personally keep an eye on her pet project.



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In 1880, agriculture dominated the Scott's Run area, with farmers comprising sixty percent of the population. However, by the mid-1920s, coal operations had sprung up along the hollow. By that time, miners made up sixty-three percent of the population and farming only represented twenty percent.



COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

In November 1933, Louis Howe ordered the first fifty houses from the E. F. Hodgson Company of Dover, Massachusetts. The Hodgson Company was one of the first in the country to market prefabricated homes. His 1920 catalog stated, “thousands of people in every climate of the globe...are today living, sleeping, playing, and working in Hodgson Portable Houses.”

Until houses were built, workers used the Arthur mansion as a place to eat and sleep. Later, the mansion was torn down and the Arthurdale Inn was erected on its site.

The first fifty homes, called Hodgson houses, were hastily erected. The prefabricated structures didn't fit the foundations, so alterations had to be made. The press had a field day concerning this mistake. Since it was the first of its kind, Arthurdale was constantly under attack from the media and government.

The problems were corrected and the families moved into their dream homes in the summer of 1934. Williams described this experience as going from the "black and white of Scott's Run to the technicolor of Arthurdale."

The second seventy-five homes, called Wagner houses, were completed in 1935. The last group of houses were constructed from locally quarried stone. Eventually, 165 homesteads were built and occupied. Homesteads varied in size from three to five acres. Each had a barn, hog shed, chicken coop, root cellar, and smokehouse. Special alterations were made for teacher houses, the doctor's house and clinic, and the project manager's house. All homes had electricity and indoor plumbing.

To be a real community, houses weren't enough. The Center Complex was built with space for offices, crafts, small businesses, recreation, and fellowship. Until the school buildings were completed, the Center served as a nursery school and high school. The Arthur mansion also was used as a school during the first year. Dances, plays, music festivals, meetings, and non-denominational church services also were held at the Center.

Mrs. Roosevelt knew the importance of health care to a community's success; nurses and a doctor were employed. A clinic was opened in one of the houses. Then in 1935, the core of the community was completed with the construction of six school buildings. The schools were the answer to the future of Arthurdale. Mrs. Roosevelt personally picked progressive educator Elsie Clapp to head them. Both Clapp and Mrs. Roosevelt hoped the schools would stand as an example for the rest of the country.

According to Glenna Williams, school was an integral part of the new community. It was a "living lab" and a learning-by-doing experience for both the students and community. Mrs. Roosevelt had so much faith in this school that she gave the earnings from her "My Day" news column to it.

Elsie Clapp left Arthurdale in 1936. Gradually funding dwindled and the schools became part of the Preston County School System. However, those early years of innovative teaching methods proved to be very successful in redirecting the lives of students and their families. Annabelle Mayor, daughter of an original



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While in Scott's Run, Eleanor Roosevelt met an employed minor who showed her his weekly pay envelope. Inside was \$1, on which he was to feed and clothe his children.

In the miner's home, she "noticed a bowl on the table filled with scraps, the kind that you might give to a dog, and I saw children, evidently looking for their noon-day meal, take a handful out of that bowl and go out munching. That was all they had to eat." The meeting had a profound effect on the First Lady, who used stories like this one to solicit donations from Washington socialites to help the starving families.



COURTESY FRD LIBRARY

Eleanor Roosevelt enjoyed visiting the homesteads to meet the families who lived in Arthurdale. Her visit with the DeGoyler family was documented in the national magazine *Woman's Day*. Clarence worked in the furniture factory and made most of the furniture in their home, including the table seen here, which seated the entire thirteen member family. The First Lady found the home "in immaculate order and smelling of freshly baked bread."

homesteader, remembered: “if anyone needed some type of help, they always received it. We all felt a part of each other’s lives and the life of the community. The school made this possible.”

“I have so many good memories,” said Mayor. “It was wonderful to dig clay from the earth and to watch someone make pottery from it, or see a tree felled and watch it eventually become a beautiful piece of furniture. I never knew, before I came to Arthurdale, that these things could be done.”

As time passed, adequate industry to support Arthurdale residents never materialized. Federal planners realized that farming was a supplemental vocation. They felt that industry was needed to keep Arthurdale self-sustaining. Several industries were started but were not profitable. Industry related to World War II saved Arthurdale, but after the war, homesteaders had to look elsewhere for



COURTESY THOMAS AND LORETTA DAVIS

The First Lady enjoyed visiting Arthurdale each year to see how the homesteaders were progressing with the creation of their new community and to praise their successes. As well as being a cheerleader for the community, she took great concern for the welfare of the families. During World War II, when she visited Arthurdale for a high-school graduation, Eleanor Roosevelt heard that Lee Davis, son of homesteaders Frank and Annabel Davis, was missing in action. She immediately set out to find the whereabouts of the soldier. Within three days of returning to Washington, D.C., she sent a telegram informing the Davis family that Lee was a prisoner of war. The First Lady continually sent Red Cross care package items to be forwarded to Lee, who afterwards said the packages helped him immensely.

The Davis family is pictured in 1945.

employment. Then in 1947, the government sold all the remaining property to private owners.

The social experiment ended, but the Arthurdale community didn't. Thanks to a "lift up" and not a "hand out," the community thrives seventy-five years after it was homesteaded. The dream of a better life that Mrs. Roosevelt envisioned became a reality.



PHOTO COURTESY FDR LIBRARY

Eleanor Roosevelt handing out Arthurdale High School diplomas, May 27, 1939.



PHOTO COURTESY FDR LIBRARY

Arthurdale Gym-Silman Manufacturing Army-Navy Celebration,
Arthurdale Gymnasium, 1945.



Homesteader descendants viewing old photographs.
(From left to right): James McNelis, Edna Day, Gabrielle and Terry Day.

Remembering a Great Lady

No one had better say a negative word about First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the community of Arthurdale, even though she has been dead for forty-seven years. Why? Because too many people in the community still remember and honor her.

“I can remember Mrs. Roosevelt coming [to Arthurdale],” said resident Richard “Dick” Myers. “But I did not realize how special her visits were. I just thought she visited every community.”

Emery Shuman, a homesteader’s son, said, “When Eleanor was in the crowd, she was one of the crowd. When she was here, we always had to do the ‘Virginia Reel’ for her. That was her favorite dance. I got to be her partner. It was always the last dance, and it was for Eleanor.”

“At the Christmas parties they had every year at the gym, we received gifts from Mrs. Roosevelt,” stated Eloise McNair, a homesteader descendant. “My sister Betty still has a doll, and I have some hankies she gave us. I also recall a play gas station with cars that my brothers received.”

“I remember when my mom went out in the yard to greet Mrs. Roosevelt’s motorcade on one of her visits to Arthurdale. Later Mom was very upset because she saw a newsreel of herself standing in the yard with her apron on,” stated Edna Day, another homesteader’s daughter.



Hay Wagon Tour of Arthurdale at the seventieth anniversary celebration.

Neva Davis, an original homesteader, chuckled as she recalled the time her son Jack was pictured in all the local newspapers being hugged by Mrs. Roosevelt because he had said to her, “I know you’re far away from home, so why don’t you come to my house for lunch?”

Mary Lou Reber and Genevieve Cartwright were young girls selling “buddy poppies” at the Arthurdale School. Guess who stopped by and made a purchase? How many First Ladies do you know of who visit a school and ask what you need and then buy it using their own money? That is what Eleanor did when she came to Arthurdale.

“Eleanor Roosevelt was a wonderful lady who had love and compassion for others,” said Christobel “Kitty” (Price) Pfizenmeire, a homesteader descendant. “I thank her for helping to provide a place for my parents to live and a place where we could grow in love and peace.” She continued, “One memory I have of the Roosevelts was one time they came by in a convertible when we lived on F-Road and I was raising the flag and they slowed down and saluted as they went by. That was a thrill I will never forget!”

One humorous memory Anne Valjean “Honey” (Work) Smith, the daughter of Arthurdale’s project manager, had about Mrs. Roosevelt was that she liked to drive around the homestead in her convertible. A Colonel Howe was always her companion. “One day as they were leaving my parent’s house, Colonel Howe was



**Natasha White (left) and Patty Cooper,
re-enactors at the New Deal Festival, Arthurdale.**

fumbling in the car for his glasses. Mrs. Roosevelt blurted out at him, ‘They’re on your head, you fool!’”

Original homesteader Lova McNair reminisced about Eleanor Roosevelt’s many kindnesses.

She was a very caring person. She was interested in the health and education of the kids. When a child was sick, she would personally go see them and would revisit later to see if they were better. Because of her, the clinic was started and a dentist was brought in. I know Mrs. Roosevelt thought education was important, too, because she would personally visit each classroom and make a few passing remarks to kids and teachers.

Original homesteader Bertie Swick, recalled a visit by Eleanor Roosevelt and two other ladies only two months after moving into her Arthurdale home. They came to inspect the house and furniture. The ladies asked Bertie if she had any children. Bertie chuckled in relating the incident because, she said, “The ladies thought I didn’t have any kids because there wasn’t any crayon marks on the walls!”

Edson McClain was one of fifty-six coal miners killed in the Christopher No. 3 Mine at Osage, West Virginia. He didn’t come home to his wife and two daughters, but the caring Mrs. Roosevelt did. Shortly after McClain’s death, the First

Lady visited his widow, Gertrude, and daughters Gloria Dean and Donna. At the time, the girls didn't know their mother was pregnant. Mrs. Roosevelt broke the news to them. The girls overheard Mrs. Roosevelt ask their mother if she needed clothes for the new baby. Donna spoke up, proclaiming, "I'm no baby!" To this, Mrs. Roosevelt replied, "I know, I mean for the new baby your mommy's having." When baby sister Edson Arlene was born, she had her first picture taken wearing the blue dress given as a present from the First Lady.

As the project manager's wife, Cecelia Work became a good friend of Mrs. Roosevelt. "She was the dearest woman I ever knew. She always thought about others."

Work often prepared lunch for Mrs. Roosevelt and her guests. Weather permitting, she served it on the large front porch of her home that overlooks Arthurdale. In preparation for Mrs. Roosevelt's arrival each spring, Mrs. Work cut dogwood branches from the trees lining her driveway and placed them on the living room fireplace mantel. "Mrs. Roosevelt loved dogwood bloom," Work noted.

"Restoring Yesterday for Tomorrow"

Stemming from the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the homesteading of Arthurdale, Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. (AHI) was a grassroots organization started to preserve the Arthurdale story and keep its dream alive. Mrs. Roosevelt wanted a community of cooperative doers. Arthurdale still is. Many descendants of homesteaders have gone on to be prestigious and viable citizens with roots embedded in their heritage.

Arthurdale Heritage ensures that Mrs. Roosevelt's "pet" project continues. Through the efforts of this non-profit group, the community, and friends, the entire community was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The American Association for State and Local History honored Arthurdale Heritage by presenting it with the internationally prestigious Corey Award for Volunteerism.

Through nickel and dime contributions, the Center Complex was purchased by AHI and is debt-free. Later, as the state and nation started recognizing Arthurdale and its unique history, grants were awarded to the organization. With these, as well as personal donations, a homestead, three original school buildings, and adjoining property were added to its holdings. AHI is presently acquiring another homestead bordering property it currently owns.

Educational programming, lectures, classes focusing on different genres, and museum acquisitions help preserve Arthurdale's unique story for future generations. An endowment has been established with interest proceeds earmarked for maintenance and salaries to insure the longevity of AHI's goals.

Thanks to Mrs. Roosevelt's dream, the original homesteaders' hard work, and the formation of Arthurdale Heritage to protect the dream, Arthurdale remains a viable community today. It is now the seventy-fifth anniversary of the homesteading of Arthurdale. Let's celebrate together by remembering the past, enjoying the present, and dreaming for a bright future.

Glenna Williams, AHI's first president, was a visionary just like Eleanor Roosevelt. Williams said, "I have a dream to see Arthurdale stand as a monument to the fulfillment of self-worth and community pride. The government gave us a chance. WE made it work! I'd like Arthurdale to always remind people of that."

Arthurdale

By *Glenna Williams*

Built of dreams by dreamers

A symbol of hope to a nation in despair

A new beginning for some unemployed, stranded coal mining families

A picture of tranquility with small houses and farm buildings along winding roads sprinkled over the rolling landscape of fields and wooded areas

A feeling of warmth and security after long days of hard work rewarded by harvest with jars of fruit and vegetables on the cellar shelves; potatoes in bins; cabbage turned into kraut and stored in stone jars; hams and bacon hanging in the smokehouse; and corn in the crib and hay in stacks to feed the chickens and a cow which would provide eggs, milk, cream, butter and cheese
Hunger is banished

Opportunities to learn new skills and try new ideas

Progressive education (learning by doing) for adults as well as children

Health care for all with a doctor, nurse, and infirmary

A sense of expectancy—meeting people who really cared and having expectations for the families

People like Eleanor Roosevelt, Clarence Pickett, and John Dewey, who encouraged each person to do their best

People learning to laugh, trust, play, and sing again

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