

## COMMENTARY

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# The debate over 'make-work'

In the midst of Great Depression, most were grateful for FDR's employment programs

Franklin Roosevelt inaugurated the New Deal in March 1933. Unemployment had risen to around 13 million. The price of cotton, this area's staple, was at an all-time low.

By 1934 federal attempts to revive the economy were visible in York, Lancaster and Chester counties. There were numerous newly established federal agencies but the main ones that directly affected employment were: WPA (Works Progress Administration), PWA (Public Works Administration) and CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps).

Choosing one month — October 1934 — the impact of federal employment on the local economy is evident. On Oct. 5, it was announced by the Department of Interior that 50,000 acres of farm land in the watershed area of Fishing Creek in York County was to be a part of a soil erosion project.

The allotment was \$150,000 for establishing terraces and reforesting worn out land. In less than a week soil erosion experts had met with 225 farmers and drawn up a plan of action.

A.F. Ruff, the project head, set up an office in the Citizens Bank Building in Rock Hill and

hired "telephone girls." Agricultural workers began mapping each farm (this included the first aerial photographing in American history). Notes were made of soil type in each field and how badly gullied. After conferences with farmers, a plan was laid out. W. L. Poe's farm was the first to be listed in the records.

Within four days, five "terracing men" were on the scene. They had taken a 10-week course in Spartanburg so they could direct farmers and farm laborers who were to operate the trucks, tractors and other equipment needed to carry out the project. The Barron Motor Company on East White Street was rented to store the equipment and barbed wire for the project.

Meantime, the National Reemployment Service had hired men to build a new bridge across Sugar Creek between Fort Mill and the Lancaster-Charlotte highway. Concrete and creosote timber replaced a 17-year-old all-timber bridge.

Rock Hill's sewerage ran in an open ditch to the Catawba River. Federal money was used to lay a sewer line 7 miles long. For the first time, Emmett Scott School was to have indoor toilets and connect with the Rock Hill sewer system.

The Rock Hill sewer project is a good example of the work of the PWA. Federal money paid private contractors (in this case, Blythe Bros. of Charlotte) to carry out a project that would improve the lives of citizens. It was not an outright gift to the local government. Rock Hill would eventually pay back the

\$263,000 the sewer project cost but at low interest rates. Again, all of the workers would be drawn from the rolls of the National Reemployment Service.

Not everyone liked the idea of "work relief" or "make-work," as some called it. Oddly, there were those who argued in favor of government charity or "the dole" rather than government employment of the unemployed. They believed the dole would be less costly to the federal budget with less overhead cost in the long run.

Those who favored work relief argued that it was better for morale and the projects were really needed. Besides, it was believed that men with jobs were more likely to live with their families and support them. Some thought that it was alright to provide jobs for men but drew the line at "make-work" for women and were also likely to protest government jobs designed to allow college students to work and remain in school. Some thought that assistance to the needy was not a function of government at all.

But most of the people were grateful for government assistance. And, except for bringing in kudzu, the soil erosion programs, including the CCC camps, were the most popular of all government projects.

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*Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.*



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