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Work Begins Today: Quaker Volunteers in Depression-Era Kentucky, 1933

by *Edmund F. Wehrle*

In the summer of the watershed year of 1933, a group of young Quaker volunteers, members of the Home Service Division of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), embarked on a mission in a small mining camp in the eastern coal region of Kentucky. Previous groups of Quakers had worked in the area, but their primary concern had been relief. In 1933, with the federal government's taking over immediate relief efforts, the Quakers felt freer to look for more permanent forms of aid. Their goal was to reconstruct some semblance of community in the devastated coal region, stressing communal cooperation and "Quaker techniques," and perhaps ultimately to organize a colonization project which would return the miners to a more stable farming life.

The Friends sent to the community of Hemphill in Letcher County recorded for posterity what they saw, felt, and thought that season in Kentucky. They left a remarkable journal of two hundred pages of daily entries kept over the summer.¹ Beginning the mission with radical concepts but nebulous plans, the Quakers' ideals were challenged by stubborn poverty, a new optimism that the government might serve as the agent of change in the coal fields, and the Quakers' own doubts about how far their mission might be taken. While the Quakers were genuinely concerned and respectful of those whom they hoped to help, a certain, perhaps inevitable, cultural gap was also present, hindering the Quakers' embrace of more radical reforms in favor of smaller gains, such as organizing clubs and teams for the town. In the end, the concessions made by the

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Photographs accompanying this essay are from the American Friends Service Committee Collection of the Library of Congress.

¹The American Friends Service Work Camp Diary is housed in the Manuscript Room of the Library of Congress. All subsequent quotes in the text, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the AFSC diary.

Quakers are typical of reform movements in the United States, where ideals have often collided with entrenched reality, forcing compromise.

The Quakers were sent to Hemphill by the American Friends Service Committee, an organization headquartered in Philadelphia and begun in response to the tremendous need for relief overseas generated by the First World War. With the advent of the Great Depression, the AFSC redirected its efforts to the domestic scene.

Centering its relief efforts in the coal fields of West Virginia and Kentucky, the AFSC came to recognize that victims of the Depression needed not only immediate relief but also assistance in rebuilding their lives. One idea with great appeal was to give the unemployed land to farm. In many ways this colonization concept had roots in both the Quaker and American reform traditions. In colonial Philadelphia Quakers established a "Bettering House," where the poor could work and contribute to their own upkeep.² Elements of the "Bettering House" approach were later seen in Jane Addams's concept of the "settlement house," which offered a community center and community outreach. In the early twentieth century, non-Quaker progressive groups set up a number of "settlement schools" in the Appalachian region, supposedly combining the education of the outside world with an appreciation for local folkways.³ In all cases such projects had some local success but never achieved their larger aims of spreading their ideals to the outside world.

The AFSC sought to create a sort of "settlement house" situation in a remote corner of Letcher County in southeastern Kentucky. There, Quaker volunteers were to work with the people living in and around a mining camp called Hemphill.

²Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (Boston, 1979), 327.

³David Whisnant, *All that is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill, 1983). Whisnant provides a comprehensive study of several Appalachian settlement schools and reform efforts of the first half of the twentieth century from a critical perspective, attacking what he sees as "systematic cultural intervention." James S. Greene, "Progressives in the Kentucky Mountains: the Formative Years of the Pine Mountain Settlement School, 1913-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1983), examines in detail one such settlement school located in a neighboring county to Letcher.

While the Quakers considered the locals to be the descendants of "mountain people" who had lived in isolated, egalitarian havens until lured out of the hills by northern industrialists, preindustrial Kentucky was more complex. Recent scholarship has revealed pre-coal southeastern Kentucky to have had a subsistence-based economy, containing capitalist features such as household commerce and a middle class.⁴ The tendency to romanticize the rural backgrounds of the miners certainly played a role in the AFSC interest in a colonization project which promised to return miners to their "mythical" rural roots.

In the early twentieth century the infusion of capital from northern corporations interested in the soft coal and a population that could be put to work without the threat of unionization did, however, disrupt the local mountain economies. Mines were dug, farmers moved into mine shafts, and corporation towns were built up around the mines, exhibiting all the classic characteristics of company towns. Camp towns were often named for corporation executives, and town doctors, teachers, clerks, accountants, and police were all on the company payroll. By the 1930s, thirty such towns had been established in Letcher County.⁵

At first, things went well for the companies investing in Kentucky. World War I brought with it a coal boom and opened up attractive markets for American coal overseas. But in 1927, predating the Depression by two years, the bottom fell out of the soft-coal industry, and a situation that one scholar has called the "catastrophe in coal" set in. When the Depression hit the entire nation, things became even worse. Between 1929 and 1931, the total output of bituminous coal fell from 535 to 310 million tons. Wages of miners who managed to keep their jobs fell along with the hours they were allowed to work. Reinhold Niebuhr estimated that the average miner during this period worked one and a half days a

⁴Mary Beth Pudup, "Land Before Coal: Class and Regional Development in Southeastern Kentucky" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1987).

⁵James P. Johnson, "Theories of Labor Union Development and the United Mine Workers, 1932-33," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 73 (1975): 165.

week, earning a salary of five dollars per week, barely enough for one man to survive.⁶

Under these circumstances, starvation became a very real problem in the mining areas. The Quakers first came on the scene to deal with the enormous relief crisis. AFSC Secretary Clarence Pickett testified before Congress that volunteers in his organization were concentrating simply on keeping the children of these depressed areas fed. Distributing food through public schools, the Quakers found between 20 and 90 percent of children underweight. Along with the Red Cross, the Friends were virtually the only source of relief in these hard-hit areas. To emphasize his policy of reliance on personal initiative, President Herbert Hoover, himself a Quaker, donated twenty-five hundred dollars to the AFSC during the winter of 1932.⁷

From the Quaker group's description of Hemphill, it appears fairly typical of Letcher County. The mining camp consisted of about sixty single-story houses, but only twenty-six families lived in the camp at the time the Friends arrived. A few miles from the town was an encampment called Parson's Camp, where people evicted from the mining camp had settled. Although no figure is given, it appears that around thirty families lived in this "derelict place" of "miserable shacks." The Friends encountered an African-American who was thought to live in Parson's Camp. At one time there had been enough African-Americans in the mining camp to allow for a separate "negro" pool hall, but by the time the Quakers arrived in the town, there was only one black in the camp. The Friends described the serious poverty they witnessed. The town and mines of Hemphill were the property of the Elkhorn Coal Company of New York City, which, in 1930, had been forced to cut wages and trim the miners back to two days a week. Earlier groups of Quaker volunteers were stationed in the area to provide relief during the worst of the Depression. The situation remained bad until the mines reopened on a part-time schedule, just a few weeks before the newly dis-

⁶Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston, 1960), 358-60.

⁷*New York Times*, February 25, 1932.



In the summer of 1933, the Letcher County community of Hemphill "consisted of about sixty single-story houses, but only twenty-six families lived in the camp at the time the Friends arrived."

patched AFSC Quaker volunteers arrived in the summer of 1933.

With the reopening of the mines, the company store, which had been closed for several months, was also reopened. This was a cause for much celebration in the community. Although the prices there averaged around 25 percent higher than at the A&P in Neon, the journey of a mile and a half each way still constituted a strain for many of the residents.

Overall, the Friends found the residents of Hemphill to be a disjointed and rather sad group of people: "physical contiguity does not make a community." They noted how "old mountaineers . . . once owners now mostly renters of patches of corn land, and lately miners" lived just outside the mining camp with "immigrants, itinerant miners, respectables and ruffians." While the Quakers were probably correct that poverty and economic dislocation had rendered Hemphill dysfunctional, their perspective as Quakers, with their faith's emphasis on close-knit, cooperative community life, clearly colored their critical evaluation, which might have been equally disapproving of wealthy bankers in New York.

The Quaker mission to Hemphill actually began with a four-day conference for summer volunteers in the Home Service division of the AFSC, just outside of Philadelphia. The purpose of the conference was "to develop attitudes and approaches to problems of human relationships, rather than to learn technical skill." Each day began with a religious service followed by talks and "vigorous discussion." Professors at Haverford, Amherst, and Swarthmore colleges spoke to the groups. Ultimately, the Friends assigned to Hemphill viewed the conference as a search for an alternative to "industrial society, which is full of injustice and conflict." The Quakers saw the current alternatives brewing up across the country as marred by violence. What they felt directed toward was a new order based on nonviolent love and mutual cooperation. A rejection of the complications of industry and capitalism, hardly limited to the Quakers in 1933, was clearly a component of this imagined new order. But other than these general radically aimed ideas, nothing in the way of concrete plans was established. Still, the Quakers wrote from Hemphill that they "took



Two of the AFSC Friends visit a family at Parson's Camp, a collection of shacks outside the company town. The shacks were owned by a local family and rented out to unemployed miners for five dollars a month. If the tenants proved unable to pay rent, they were expected to work for their keep.

seriously" their "idealistic, innovative if not too well-defined mission."

After the conference, the Hemphill group journeyed to southeastern Kentucky to begin work. In the group were three women and five men. All were well educated, and included graduates of Oxford and Harvard, as well as a medical student at George Washington University. A Quaker couple already lived in the area and was in charge of distributing relief. They made arrangements for the newcomers to occupy two company houses in Hemphill. Upon arrival, however, the Quakers were dismayed to find no furniture in the cottages. After making arrangements to borrow a double bed and rent some jail cots, the Quakers bravely began the first entry of their daily journal: "Work begins today."

The Quakers moved immediately to introduce themselves and their yet-undefined mission to the community. A meeting was held at the town's recreation hall to present the Friends to the community. The Quakers began by engaging the audience of two hundred in some song singing. As the hall grew hotter, company officials made several speeches that seemed to bore the audience. When it was their turn to speak, the Quakers tried to make their point quickly and succinctly. One of their members got up and said simply that "we [have] come to live among [you] and be part of [you], in hopes that together we might be able to do some things that might make life a little brighter." Although unsure of how or what would be made brighter, the crowd seemed appreciative.

The Quakers' first efforts were modest, but immediately and vigorously initiated. The men went around finding local boys to organize a baseball team. The women began visiting homes and gathering up members for a sewing group.

The reopening of the mines and new governmental efforts at relief were supposed to have eased the burden enough for the Quakers to concentrate their efforts beyond relief. But as the Friends toured Parson's Camp, just outside Hemphill, they realized that there was still a pressing need for basic help and that it would have to be a large part of their mission. They saw chickens running through small unfurnished shacks where people lived. Jars used for toilets remained uncovered. A sick baby recovering from measles was left on a bundle of rags which was covered by dirt and flies. Nearby, a sewer discharged into a marsh, which trickled into a creek from which people drank. The conditions were so bad that it led some of the Friends to question "whether recreational work has much value here—whether the need is not for economic education, birth control and a doctor and sanitation." The company did employ two doctors, but the miners had two dollars a week deducted from their wages to pay the physicians. And the miners were still charged for medical services. For instance, there was a twenty-dollar charge for delivering babies.

So the Friends were forced to engage in some relief work, putting aside any immediate plans to reorganize the commu-



"In the Quaker group were three women and five men. All were well educated, and included graduates of Oxford and Harvard, as well as a medical student at George Washington University." Five of the eight Quaker volunteers pose outside their cottage: (*l. to r.*) Jo Walder Abraham, Herbert Abraham, Bob Wilson, Alice Gillette, and Al Stanton.

nity radically. Instead, children were weighed, cod liver oil distributed to rickety babies, and friends of the Friends contacted for old clothes.

Although there was a town nurse in addition to the doctors, the community turned to the Quakers, especially the women, when someone became ill. One particularly traumatic event occurred when the women were summoned to the home of Foster Potter. The Quakers had already heard

about the Potter family's reputation for violence, but they went quickly when called. In the Potters' virtually unfurnished shack, they found a baby very ill with the flux. They instructed Mrs. Potter to feed the child nothing and to boil all water. When they came back later in the day, the baby was near death. This same day was election day in town. All the men of the area were at the elections, getting drunk. The Friends searched for and found Foster Potter to bring him back to his dying child. After he had seen the baby, Potter offered to share some whiskey with the Quakers. Although normally very understanding of the locals, the Quakers reacted with genuine shock to Potter's offer of whiskey, saying, "After an hour of searching for the drunken father of a dying child that these men's thoughts should turn first to their whisky was the depth of indecency." This rare outburst reflects something of the frustration felt by the Quakers, who were confronting both their own desire to reorganize the community and what they saw as a sometimes counterproductive local culture.

Although the government and other sources had supposedly taken over relief efforts, a frequently heard complaint in their exchanges with Hemphill residents decried inequities in the distribution of relief. The Friends drew up a report for their superiors on the problem. The distribution of government funds through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) grants were the most controversial. The money was apparently distributed through coal company officials, or company "pimps" as they were frequently called. A company official named Mr. Riley was in charge of both Red Cross distribution and RFC funds. Accusations had Riley using RFC money to buy up clothes that the company store had been unable to sell and then distributing the goods. Men in favor with the company were given relief while others were "left to starve." Riley was also in charge of public works projects sponsored by RFC funds. Complaints were heard from several sources that all the work was done on company property and included cleaning company-owned houses and planting gardens in the homes of company officials. Several men also charged that they were ordered to build a road on

company property exactly sixteen feet wide so that it could be sold to the state.

The company had kept a charity fund supported by withholding one dollar a month from miner paychecks. But the fund had been depleted by the time the Depression hit. The Quakers were able to look at the charity fund statement, to which the miners had never been given access, and determined that 47 percent of the fund was used on materials other than charity. Although their report did include these and other accusations, the Quakers never came down completely against the company. At the end of the report, they concluded "it must be remembered that a hungry man is going to complain about the relief administration no matter how fair it is."

This corruptly organized relief system forced the Friends to spend more of their time on relief than they would have preferred. At the same time the promise of governmental aid distributed fairly in the future siphoned off interest in more radical reforms among both the Quakers and the community. Yet the realization of their "innovative if not too well defined" mission remained a prime concern for the Quakers, who constantly discussed among themselves their goal of uniting the community in a spirit of nonviolent cooperation. They hoped that their modest initial work of starting clubs and teams might lead to something bigger, as yet undefined.

From virtually the moment they arrived, the Quaker men began organizing the young boys of Hemphill into a baseball team. They quickly found that the world of sports often runs hand and hand with the world of violence. Spirited youths of Hemphill and nearby Fleming, where the Quakers also expended some of their efforts, created an ongoing problem. At the baseball games, rock-throwing, fighting, and swearing were constant. A game between the Hemphill and Fleming teams was broken up by a fight. Then, as the Quakers drove away with some of their players, someone threw a rock and smashed their windshield. Violence, as many had pointed out, seemed endemic to these mountain areas. The Quakers encountered a young man with fourteen stitches in his arm who had been shot by someone described as a "fellow just mad." Rumors also circulated about a policeman who went



The Quaker volunteers were assigned to this small miner's cottage, which was run-down and without furniture. The Friends were forced to borrow a double bed and rent some cots for their stay.

on an off-duty shooting spree, merely "because he liked it."

Instances of social conflict, and especially violence, were of particular concern to the Friends. They had come to Hemphill to show an alternative to violence. They were eager to display for the community their "Quaker techniques" of rational understanding and rechanneling of aggression. These "techniques" were applied to fights on the baseball diamond and, more dramatically, during domestic disputes. Once, when the Quaker men were called upon to intervene in the case of a local man who threatened to kill his wife, they lured him away, telling him he was wanted to play guitar for an audience in nearby Neon. When the would-be performer reached the neighboring town, the Quakers had the sheriff put the man in jail to cool off.

In trying to offer the youth of Hemphill and surrounding areas an alternative to these troubles, the Quakers organized several interest groups. A 4-H club proved exceedingly popular, as did an organization for young adults, whose members voted to call their group the "Whip-poor-will Valley Club." They planned picnics and outings and debated about a proposed dance, which some members feared would be marred by drunkenness and by opposition from the town's preachers.

The most popular group was a sewing club for the town's

women. Meetings soon became almost too crowded to be functional. In addition to sewing, the Quaker women tried to emphasize hygiene and good health. A demonstration on the preparation of raw vegetables offered the chance to emphasize that vegetables should be cooked in water rather than grease. Efforts to organize women and the community's youth proved more successful than Quaker efforts with the men, largely because the men were again working in the mines, accepting as much overtime as they could after years of accumulating debt to the company. Nevertheless, a men's discussion group was started. On one particular evening one of the Friends, who was originally English himself, gave a talk on English mining unions. As he spoke, more and more men gathered until a crowd of almost fifty was present, having grown from just a few.

In true Quaker tradition, the Quakers spent much time discussing their mission. Opinions often differed. Some urged a more radical approach. They considered organizing a boycott of the only recently reopened company store. The Quaker men tried to join the miner's union and wanted to go into the mines as workers to gain a closer understanding of the men. These ideas were put aside in favor of a more subtle approach. The small social projects, the majority of the group decided, did have some value, while the risks of more radical approaches threatened their modest gains.

One of the factors keeping the Quakers from pursuing a tougher course toward the company was the cooperative and cordial spirit of the operators. While the Friends were more than familiar with the complaints against the company, they could not complain about their own treatment by the operators. The company gave them full use of the camp's facilities and offered one of the company homes to serve as a permanent clubhouse and library for the community. With the exception of the operators' refusal to allow the Quaker women to tour the mines, on the grounds that the miners would refuse to work with women around, the Friends had excellent relations with the company. The Quakers were clearly seen by the company as a beneficial, moderating influence on the community.

While the Quakers had achieved a certain understanding with the company officials, perhaps based on their mutual middle-class status, the relationship between the company and its workers was in a major state of upheaval. Much of the change described by the Quakers was rooted in the federal government's new activist approach to labor relations. With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his dramatic first one hundred days in office, word went out that the government was to play a much more active role in the affairs of the country. Already, by the summer of 1933, the New Deal had made enough of a difference that nationally the Quakers were scaling back their relief operations, although stubborn pockets of serious poverty persisted, as in Hemphill.

Yet beyond the government's help with relief, the National Recovery Act, and in particular its Section 7a, was having a stunning impact on worker morale and unionization. For at least a brief moment, miners seemed to sense that after years of struggle a tremendous breakthrough had occurred that promised a brighter future.

Attempts to organize eastern Kentucky miners dated back to the late nineteenth century, sometimes with periods of success. But no union had ever established a permanent foothold in the area. Throughout the 1920s, John L. Lewis, president of the UMW, kept a "paper" organization in place in Kentucky waiting for an opportunity to move in. One factor intimidating the union was the willingness of both their rank-and-file members and operators alike to resort to violence. UMW organizers were well aware that in early 1931, the Kentucky National Guard armory in Barbourville had been raided by hungry miners for its machine guns. An attempt was nevertheless made in 1931 to organize striking miners in Harlan County. The situation turned violent very quickly, and the UMW felt compelled to cut its losses and abandon Harlan in the middle of the strike, when the violence of the entrenched situation began taking lives.⁸

⁸Joe Daniel Carr, "Labor Conflict in the Eastern Kentucky Coal Fields," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 47 (1973): 179-83. See especially Henry C. Mayer, "Glimpses of Union Activity Among Coal Miners in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 86 (1988): 216-29.

Humiliated by the Harlan experience and with only seventy-five thousand dollars left in his organization's treasury, Lewis bet all his remaining funds on one last organizing drive which began in late 1932. His gamble paid off brilliantly. Over the course of roughly eight months, UMW membership quadrupled. The fact that Lewis played a hand in drafting the provision of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) for legal protection of collective bargaining seemed to convince miners that it was now safe to join the union.⁹

So the time during which the Quakers were in Hemphill was a time of feverish organization. Driving around the area, the Quakers noticed after their arrival a union meeting of several hundred strong. The Quakers mentioned that forty Hemphill miners had apparently driven to the meeting together in a truck. Speaking with someone from Hemphill, the Quakers were informed early in their stay that the union had only developed in the past two weeks but already had enrolled 90 percent of the local miners. Nevertheless, this same individual expressed some concern that the union might "sell out" the workers, adding that it always did. A Presbyterian minister also expressed indignation at the "wickedness of union organizers from New York" who would come into camp, collect dues, stir up trouble, and then leave the miners to face strikes and bloodshed alone.

A somewhat clearer picture of union activities in Hemphill came when the Quakers met a miner named Mr. Bostain, who claimed to have been active in union organizing for thirty years. He declared, "I've been turned out, scabbed out, all over the country, and now the union is respectable." According to Bostain, the Elkhorn mines had once been 100 percent organized, but the company's vigorous opposition broke the union. However, with the recent passage of the NIRA, Bostain was almost ecstatic about the future. He believed that with the NIRA the company would have to collect dues for the union, claiming it would be forced to help under the new act. To Bostain, this was a fundamental shift: "You see, the capitalists, they've been running everything and these last few years

⁹Johnson, "Theories of Labor Union Development," 150-58.

they been keeping us down." But now with the NIRA, every union goal seemed within reach.

An interesting revelation came out of the conversation with Bostain: he had heard very little of what had recently gone on in nearby Harlan County. Bostain claimed that the company had managed to keep out copies of the *Cincinnati Post* newspaper which had printed details of the Harlan situation. Bostain knew that "private detectives or thugs" ruled the county, but he knew very little else. While the efforts of Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos had brought Harlan to the attention of the rest of the country, apparently news had barely trickled through to the next county. Harlan County was actually close enough for the Quakers to make a day trip and tour the Everts mining camp where trouble had occurred just a year and a half before. But that day, the Quakers found nothing unusual, just a "small pleasant town."

The Quakers also had the chance to speak with the president of the local union, a Mr. Starans. This official took a somewhat harder line than Bostain, insisting that the union wished to cooperate but "the operators will never make the first move." The president complained that the company store and scrip were exploitative. He pointed to miners' being required to push carts, which he labeled a "killing job even for a short distance." The operators, he claimed, were "organized to quote the same prices regardless of wages." While the union might actually be helpful in suggesting ways to improve efficiency, the operators were not interested. Still, Starans admitted to the Quakers that his pugnacious approach was "largely a pose to keep the men united."

By the time the Quakers arrived, the operators of Hemphill's Elkhorn Coal Company had already filed their code with the NIRA. The code would have allowed the men to organize as they saw fit. According to Bostain, the operators had reluctantly allowed the formation of the union. While there were some reports that the company was actively fighting union organizing, apparently no attempt had been made to form a company union.

While there was relative calm in Hemphill, a strike had developed closeby in Dorton at the Blackwood Coal Company



The Elkhorn Coal Corporation, operating out of its Wall Street offices, owned virtually the entire town of Hemphill and employed all its residents, many of whom worked in mine shafts such as this.

Mines. The Quakers encountered a man who claimed to be one of thirty miners fired by Blackwood for union membership. Always on the lookout for conflict, the Quakers decided to visit Dorton. They arrived with the strike in its tenth day. The Blackwood mine was apparently owned by one man, a Mr. Wright, who had no tolerance for unions. Wright had begun to fire union members and expressed his intention to be rid of all union influence in sixty days. In retaliation a strike was called. Of about seventy miners working for Wright, sixty-eight had gone on strike; the strikers had suffered only three defections. Wright had offered to take the fired miners back but only with demotions. So the strike continued, and eviction notices had been served to the strikers.

On the day the Quakers visited, they found about sixty men and a few women had gathered on the school steps. Several speakers addressed the group, impressing the Quakers with their "earnestness and fairness." The speakers pressed for solidarity and urged the men not to scab. Later, the Quakers were again impressed when they spoke with a union

organizer who told them that a priority of the union was to avoid violence and that in this endeavor drinking was discouraged in the strikers' camp.

While the Blackwood Coal Company seemed well out of step with the times, Hemphill's Elkhorn Company showed some evidence of accepting what appeared to be the new spirit of cooperation. They had acknowledged unionization in their company, and they were eager to cooperate with the Quakers. When the union gave only one day's notice that they would not work one Saturday so that they could hold a union meeting, the company refused to pay scrip to the men who did not work. Exactly what withholding the scrip constituted is unclear, but the union was very offended. Still, after the decision had been made, one of the Quakers was in the Elkhorn Company offices and overheard an operator saying that the union should have been consulted before the decision was made. So there is evidence the company saw the union as a legitimate force rather than just as an unlawful intrusion.

The Quakers attributed much of the raised hopes and massive union activity of the summer to the influence of the NIRA. In a report on the NIRA prepared for Clarence Pickett, the Quakers credited the new legislation with bringing in the unions, saying "the effect has been to bring back the morale of the workers in a way which nothing else could have. They now feel they have a channel of power . . . a new grasp on life." Already, the Quakers reported, miners were looking to Washington "with the same dependence" they had formerly felt for their employers.

As some scholars have pointed out, in developing their programs the New Dealers placed particular emphasis on the "psychological impact of the policies and programs."¹⁰ Along with specific programs for the unemployed, the NIRA seems to have served an important psychological function. Already political benefits of the NIRA were being felt. Hemphill had been a Republican stronghold. Yet in the summer of 1933, President Roosevelt's picture was proudly hung in the new

¹⁰William Bremer, "Along the 'American Way': The New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed," *Journal of American History* 65 (1975): 637.

clubhouse. Bostain admitted to the Quakers that he had not voted for Roosevelt, "didn't think he was fit for the job— but now I do. Similarly about Miss [Frances] Perkins."

Still there appears to have been a real tendency to expect more from the NIRA than it was designed to deliver. To someone like Bostain, unemployment was no longer a factor. Under the new contract the union, Bostain claimed, "won't let them [the mines] close again." But the NIRA had been sloppily composed. Enforcement proved difficult, and those companies to which section 7a applied were often able to form company unions to circumvent requirements. Formation of a National Labor Board proved of little help. Within two years, the NIRA had been declared unconstitutional in the *Schechter* decision (1935) in the United States Supreme Court. Harlan coal companies almost immediately fired all union members working in their mines. Some of the NIRA's powers were replaced with the Guffey-Snyder Act, but it too was later declared unconstitutional. By 1939, labor violence had again become a fact of life in the coal fields of eastern Kentucky.¹¹

The tremendous optimism that was felt by the Quakers in 1933 failed to develop into anything concrete. The tantalizing prospect of a new order of corporate cooperation among business, government, and labor never truly took hold. But for a brief moment the unions perhaps caught a new vision of themselves as legitimate brokers within the capitalist system. These new expectations and the atmosphere of hope they engendered certainly helped quell the threat of violence that was very real in 1933. Beyond this, it turned miners away from more radical means and ends, protecting the capitalist system in that difficult hour.

In spite of the almost euphoric atmosphere surrounding the NIRA and the union boom, the Quakers were not prepared to embrace fully the union movement, although they were clearly sympathetic. While debating their mission among themselves, the possibility of virtually merging their efforts with those of the union was taken up, but again radical alternatives were checked in favor of smaller, more manageable

¹¹Carr, "Labor Conflict in the Eastern Kentucky Coal Fields," 186.

gains. The Quakers did not doubt that union growth would do some good for the community, but they also knew that this would involve a continuing reliance on capitalist industry, a system about which the Quakers had serious reservations. The Quaker interest in some sort of colonization or rehabilitation project, essentially rejecting modern industrialism, further separated the Quakers from the goals of the union movement.

From the beginning of their mission the Quakers had been urged by their superiors at the American Friends Service Committee to investigate the possibility of a colonization or rehabilitation project for the people of Hemphill. The president of the Service Committee, Clarence Pickett, while organizing relief to the depressed coal regions, had become intrigued by the idea of turning unemployed miners back to their ancestors' profession of farming as he watched the devastation wreaked by the Great Depression. By 1933, colonization projects were already being sponsored by the Quakers in Wales, where miners were being provided with land, garden tools, and seed.

Before the Hemphill mission had been organized, Quakers working relief in coal-mining communities had organized some small rehabilitation efforts, such as setting up a former cobbler with leather and a bench and then having him make shoes for children of the community. Elsewhere furniture was made, quilts sewn and sold, and roads repaired.¹² These efforts soon developed into plans for a wholesale colonization project.

Pickett stayed in close contact with the Quakers in Hemphill, asking them to make inquiries into possible sites and to stay alert for possible leaders for the colonizing project. Bob Shoonmaker, one of the Quakers with experience in agricultural science, investigated soil types and consulted Univer-

¹²New York *Times*, April 3, 1932. Malcolm Ross, a *Times* reporter, spent much of 1932 in the depressed coal-mining regions where the Quakers were at work. His fascinating reports, while occasionally condescending to the locals, offer an invaluable record because of the scarcity of other coverage of eastern Kentucky. During this period the Cincinnati *Enquirer* and the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, for example, carried virtually no information about Letcher County.

sity of Kentucky experts on how such a project might be organized. Before the Quakers arrived, apparently an offer of one thousand acres at six dollars per acre had been made to a Quaker couple doing relief work in the area. The offer was passed on to Pickett in Philadelphia, but the AFSC had no money for such a large investment.

While Shoonmaker and the other Friends followed their instructions from Philadelphia, they began to realize that the colonization project offered too many problems beyond obvious concerns about funding to warrant much of their time. They realized that hill country was not suitable for large-scale agriculture. A real effort would require moving people to another location with no guarantee of success. Rather than erasing what little semblance of community existed in Hemphill, the Quakers ultimately chose to build on it, deciding that their final contribution would be the more modest clubs and community council.

While the Quakers of Hemphill put aside the colonization idea as a pipe dream of dubious wisdom, Clarence Pickett clung to the idea. His plans for rehabilitation projects caught the eye of Roosevelt administration officials, and a few years later he went to work for Rexford Tugwell in the Farm Resettlement Administration. There, Pickett helped organize several "greenbelt" communities funded by public money, while planning his own community, which was realized in the late thirties as the "Penncraft" community in Pennsylvania. None of these communities had much permanent success, perhaps confirming the Hemphill group's reservations about such projects.

Ultimately, the Quaker volunteers in Hemphill embraced neither the radical union nor colonization approach. Instead, they chose to consolidate their more modest gains. Along these lines the Quakers saw much evidence of success: the clubs they formed had grown crowded, and the children in the community had reached the "pleasing point of arranging and playing their own games by themselves." The Quakers had also become quite popular in the community, at least by their own account. But all this would mean little to the Quakers if it did not last beyond the summer.

It was the company's gift of the clubhouse that offered the possibility that the summer's good work might have a permanent effect. The clubhouse, the Quakers decided, would be the centerpiece of their lasting contribution. Elections would be held in each of the clubs to find officers to carry on the work after the Quakers had left. In addition, the Quakers resolved to organize a community council, operating out of the clubhouse, which would serve to unite and mobilize the community. Concern was expressed among the Friends that the council would simply become a puppet of the company. Some argued that the council should be organized in cooperation with the union. Ultimately, once again a moderate course was charted, and it was decided to trust the people and form an independent community council. In the company of fifty people that August, officers of the council were elected and rules drawn up. To the obvious delight of the Quakers, at a reception in the newly established clubhouse after the elections, a local woman pointed to a picture of President Roosevelt on the wall and said, "The New Deal for us is this here Club House."

The Quakers made every effort to keep in touch with the community after they left. What they learned in their subsequent contacts led them to believe that they had made an impact. In a follow-up article written in a Quaker magazine one year after the mission, one of the Friends reported that the sewing and youth clubs had met all winter, "with no swearing and a scripture reading at each meeting." The author also took delight in recounting a community Christmas celebration held at the clubhouse, in which old made-over clothes and toys were distributed along with corn husk dolls, candy, nuts, and oranges. The Quakers were more than willing to take credit for the happy scene. "All of this happened because the people of our camp learned something last summer about how to work and live together," they wrote. "No AFSC workers are needed now: the women sew every week without quarreling, the children no longer steal the play equipment, the people are learning to occupy their time with reading."

The Friends arrived in Hemphill in the midst of the Great Depression with radical plans in the back of their minds. The

destitute condition of Hemphill forced the would-be reformers to spend much of their time on basic relief. At the same time a tremendous wave of optimism, generated for the most part by the NIRA pro-union provisions, also detracted from any perceived need for radical reorganization of Hemphill society. Finally, the Quakers themselves appeared unsure of the more far-reaching elements of their mission. The Friends' shift from radical aims toward the more realistic goals of town residents' cooperation between themselves and with the local company ultimately mirrors the course the country was taking, especially with the NIRA. Rejecting revolution, the New Deal sought to tinker with the system and put forth programs to encourage cooperation and equity. In the end the Hemphill woman who proclaimed the Friends a part of the New Deal for her community was insightful. Like the New Deal, the most powerful contribution the Quakers made was not fundamental change but a gift of hope in a desperate hour.