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## BACK TO THE LAND: THE WOODLAKE COMMUNITY, 1933-1943

by *Michael G. Wade*

The Woodlake Community is part of the back-to-the-land tradition in the United States. Originating as a philanthropic effort to restore cut-over East Texas timber land to productivity in the 1920s, Woodlake in 1933 became a project of the Texas Relief Administration, whose goal was to construct a self-sufficient rural community for the resettlement of urban relief families. As such, it became the New Deal's first rural rehabilitation community and it demonstrated in microcosm many of the problems that ultimately proved fatal to the New Deal community program.

The Woodlake story has its origins in the East Texas timber boom that lasted from roughly 1875 to 1925. The mining of this region's great forests produced timber barons and many thousands of acres of cut-over land no longer able to support the thousands of persons attracted by the lumbering bonanza. The experience of Trinity County is perhaps representative.

In 1881, the Sabine branch of the International and Great Northern Railroad was extended through Trinity County, providing the transport facilities necessary to exploit that county's vast expanses of pine timber. Late in 1881, John Martin Thompson and Henry Tucker began the land purchases that ultimately endowed the Thompson and Tucker Lumber Company with 12,000 acres of prime timber land. Their operation centered around a lumber boom town which was christened Willard. A mill was erected and began production in May, 1882, eventually processing 13,000 feet of lumber a day. In October, 1882, a successor mill began processing 45,000 feet a day. By 1909, the company's milling capacity peaked at 100,000 feet per day. By 1911, the Willard mill had exhausted the surrounding forests and the site was abandoned. Willard's 1200 inhabitants, like so many others in Trinity County, lapsed into depression conditions as rail service was curtailed and property values plummeted.<sup>1</sup>

J. Lewis Thompson, one of John Martin Thompson's seven sons and the president of Thompson and Tucker since 1902, retained the family home and the 12,000 acres. However, Thompson moved to Houston where he pursued banking interests and supported proposals to create a state forestry commission. Thompson volunteered for army service during World War I. Before embarkation, he deeded the land in Trinity County to his wife, Helen Kerr Thompson.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Thompson, daughter of pioneer Texas horticulturist John S. Kerr, began to spend her time there and became painfully aware of the depressed economy of Trinity County. Determined to make her property a profitable investment, Helen Thompson set out to create a model farming operation. She had learned from her father the importance of crop diversification and secured advice from Texas A&M on rebuilding the soil.<sup>7</sup> A confident, independent woman, Mrs. Thompson managed the operation herself, aided by tenant farmers who were given the opportunity to buy their own farms on easy terms. Her use of organic fertilizers and green manures calls to mind Louis Bromfield's *Pleasant Valley*, the conservationist classic on the restoration of Bromfield's worn-out ancestral farm in Ohio.

Mrs. Thompson named the farm "Woodlake" for the scenic lake that had supplied the mill with water. She preached the dictum "a crop for every month of the year" and expected her tenants to practice it. A professional accountant kept her supplied with detailed reports on the farm's progress. Her leadership combined with Lewis Thompson's money to make a somewhat expensive success of the venture. By the late 1920s, twenty-nine farms were operational on the Thompson property, raising corn, cotton, tomatoes and chickens, with the energetic and strong-willed Mrs. Thompson the unifying force.<sup>8</sup>

The Depression struck Woodlake a serious blow by weakening J. Lewis Thompson's financial position and reducing agricultural prices. The Woodlake farmers were forced to subsistence level, but held together as Helen Thompson began in 1932 to seek outside financial support. After several unsuccessful efforts to enlist aid, Mrs. Thompson appealed to Texas relief administrator Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, and convinced him that Woodlake could be expanded into a workable relief project.<sup>9</sup>

Thompson and W. L. Dickey subsequently sold about 3,200 and 1,000 acres, respectively of their cut-over holdings to the Texas Rural Communities Project.<sup>10</sup> Dallas architect David Williams was then enlisted to design a rural community and supervise its building. Williams, father of indigenous architecture in Texas, had already contemplated rural-industrial communities for the unemployed in Dallas. Between 1916 and 1921, he had constructed prefabricated housing for Mexican oilfield workers in the Tampico back country and envisioned a nationwide rural community program. His job was to draw plans for modern, low-cost housing and to lay out streets, fields, parks and a community building. The objective was to create an attractive, comfortable living environment that combined space for subsistence gardening with as many city conveniences as possible. Westbrook was impressed with Williams' community building experience in Mexico and Dallas and gave him great

liberty in organizing an efficient but inexpensive pattern for a rural community.

Born on the West Texas panhandle frontier in 1890, Williams observed throughout his lifetime the waning of the frontier's influence on American life. It troubled him. Williams thought many domestic problems were related to the passing of the frontier and the emergence of industrialism. To Williams, the frontier connoted simplicity, adventure and opportunity. Unsettled land afforded freedom of action and offered eventual security to those who would work for it. Williams recognized that freedom was a two-edged sword. Freedom often became license as pioneers ravaged the landscape, denuding it of its timber, its soil and its game. The exhaustion of the frontier rendered such profligacy increasingly difficult but also diminished opportunities to satisfy the pioneering instinct which remained strong and required an outlet that the cities were unable to satisfy. Williams thought the United States was faced with a serious imbalance of population created by the dense concentration of people in cities. Like many planners of the 1930s, Williams assumed that there was a widespread demand from the people to return to the land.<sup>7</sup>

Williams believed that urban overpopulation resulted from the pervasive appeal of the machine in its glamorous big city setting:

The Machines called the men from the land—beckoning as sirens called men from the sea. The men came with the simple hand tools of their fathers to serve the Machines and to make more Machines until the Machines rose up and whipped the men.<sup>8</sup>

In the cities, millions lost their skills with native hand tools as they grew accustomed to the productivity of the machines which provided comforts yet filled the country full of unnecessary ugly things which made loud noises and screamed at them from every corner.<sup>10</sup> When technological advances rendered entire classes of jobs obsolete, workers were left stranded without jobs and without saleable skills in an economy increasingly unable to absorb the available work force. The depression magnified the problem. Industry, even under government pressure, was not hiring the jobless and could never employ most of them. The prospect was that these people would become permanent public charges, trapped with their families in urban slums.

Williams argued that the slum situation was debilitating, destructive and dangerous. Urban low-income families had to live under conditions that tended to fragment the family structure so vital to national stability. Efforts at self-expression were stifled and too often the dissatisfaction of the poor surfaced in crime statistics. Low income families suffered from deficiencies of sunlight and pure air and got overdoses of noise,

dirt and noxious fumes. The physical and intellectual development of children in this environment was frequently retarded and damaged beyond repair. There were other weaknesses as well. The task of supplying congested centers with necessary goods and services was expensive and wasteful. Further concentrations of population and industry in one section of the country were vulnerable points of attack in cases of war.<sup>11</sup> Williams saw in a mass housing program an opportunity to replace slums with decent low-income housing, to relocate surplus urban population in planned communities and to provide millions of jobs for those currently on relief.

The general plan which Williams conceived followed to an extent the European pattern of the farm-village. It consisted of a compact central community composed of houses situated on three-acre plots which were to be used for vegetable, fruit and small livestock production.<sup>12</sup> The community was surrounded by farm land. William's plans specified two groups of fifty houses each located on opposite sides of State Highway 106. A wide avenue connected the sections and there were tree-lined main streets in each segment. The church, school, trading post and other community buildings were located in a central area adjacent to a 255-acre park and the housing. Each fifty house section comprised 150 acres and was adjoined by one of the two 600 acre fields. Distance between homes was minimized by locating them near property lines. This fostered neighborliness while providing adequate garden space. Completing the community plan were the small farms belonging to Helen Thompson's former tenants.<sup>13</sup> The plan reflected a conscious effort to make rural life more attractive while minimizing the cost.

The key to economy in the Woodlake housing project lay in Williams's requirement that the homes be indigenous to the area. Native architectural forms, in addition to their aesthetic value, would make maximum use of available local resources and would contain in their design the built-in comfort factors characteristic of a Williams home. The comfort features meant for the homesteaders a minimum outlay for heating and cooling. Williams designed two basic houses with floor plans that could be easily altered in order to provide variety in the houses. The first was a log cabin designed to be built on wooded land and the second was a frame house which was to be built on cleared land. Both logs and timber were procured by clearing the settler's land of second growth pine. A study of Texas farm houses had shown that some 65% lacked running water, screens, sanitary facilities and electricity. The Woodlake houses would include all of these features plus pine panelling.<sup>14</sup>

The plans were completed in December 1933 and construction

began in January of 1934. Because the Texas Relief Commission was not legally able to borrow money for such a project, Texas Rural Communities, Incorporated, was organized to be the legal governing body for all funding and construction.<sup>15</sup> The homes were constructed by their future residents and by Civil Works Administration labor crews. Part of Williams's plan was to utilize the skills that the prospective homesteaders had gained from urban industrial work. Williams standardized the construction insofar as was possible to simplify the skills required for work crews. Williams found the CWA crews inefficient, a factor which resulted in an eventual cost overrun of 12% over the appraised value of the homes. Since relief labor was allowed to work only four or five days a month, new relief crews had to be broken in each week.<sup>16</sup> Williams offset this bureaucratic inefficiency somewhat by setting up a centrally located mill on the site for prefabrication of all materials. He donated much of the necessary tools and equipment for the mill, which produced housing components easily erected by unskilled relief workers. The procedure minimized the need for supervisory personnel and was basically the same technique which Williams had successfully employed when building low-cost housing in Mexico. With this machinery, a sturdy, well-oriented and ventilated five room frame house with modern conveniences cost approximately \$1,500. The total cost of a unit, *i.e.*, land, house, outbuildings, stock and equipment, averaged just over \$2,000. This did not include the cost of the community center or utilities, which were to be amortized by service charges, fees, tolls, or taxes according to the facility involved. If charged proportionately to the family units, those facilities would have run the cost somewhat over \$3,000.<sup>17</sup> The construction plan also made for speed; the one hundred houses and community facilities were ready for occupancy by June 1, 1934.

The key to the Woodlake system was to be cooperation. Community facilities were basically designed to achieve economic efficiencies to alleviate the drudgery of rural life, and to foster a sense of community. In the 1930s, cooperation was thought to have assured the success of many frontier communities and thus it seemed reasonable that it would be useful in a modern frontier situation. The 1930s version, however, institutionalized cooperation whereas it had occurred spontaneously on the frontier.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, cooperation appeared to offer many advantages.

The community-owned farms, for example, afforded economics of scale unattainable by the individual small farmer. The size of the farms enabled great savings in work, stock, machinery, farm implements, and cropping supervision. Crop control would also be easier in a community which had to develop commercial crops that would not cause established farmers to complain of government competition. Coopera-

tion meant marketing advantages as well. The cooperative mass production of eggs enabled the community to secure a contract with the Texas Oil Company for eggs at thirty-three cents a dozen year round, even in the glutted summer market. This arrangement assured a small but steady income which would be necessary to the success of Woodlake.<sup>19</sup>

The community facilities were designed to bring urban amenities to the country. There was a large park containing two lakes, a bath house, and a pavilion of native stone. The community center was built of stone and logs and provided a site for social and cultural events. The trading post, water system and cold storage plant provided services at a reasonable rate. The cost for cold storage was \$1.25 per month while electricity was furnished at 8¢ per kilowatt hour with a minimum outlay of \$2.40 per house per month. The prices at the post were generally the same as those prevailing in neighboring communities with some items priced higher.<sup>20</sup> These expenses, while reasonable, still required cash which the colonists were chronically short of once the jobs associated with construction of Woodlake were completed. To minimize expenses and maximize food self-sufficiency, there was a food processing plant at the work center. Woodlake residents put up some 47,500 cans of tomatoes and large quantities of other food in the summer and fall of 1934. Sufficient feed was stored to carry both work stock and dairy cows through the winter. The dairy supplied the community's milk needs and provided additional outside income.<sup>21</sup>

Woodlake's educational system reflected Williams's and Westbrook's belief in progressive education. The ten-room schoolhouse contained classrooms for the children and highly functional workshops for the adults. There were school gardens and the farm and dairy were considered extensions of the classrooms. The children learned not only reading, writing and arithmetic, but also conservation, cooperation and crafts. Children and adults alike could come to appreciate their regional heritage and develop skills by learning indigenous arts and crafts. Exhibit cases were built into the walls so that the community could gradually make a natural history museum for their section of the state and display small exhibits of handicrafts. Williams expected that youngsters in the community could be quickly developed to do most of this creative work.<sup>22</sup> They would be taught by unemployed craftsmen who abounded in Houston and Dallas. Community members could spend their time in shops sewing, weaving and working with leather, metal or wood; such activities might provide extra income for the residents. Williams's plan called for the making of native Texas furniture out of local hardwoods; much of the community's furniture was built at the site. Woodlake craftsmen later secured a contract to build furniture for the Hockaday School in Dallas. Williams expected that this

and other craft ventures would help develop community pride. Even household skills received attention; housewives had school come to them in the form of trained home economists who visited regularly.<sup>33</sup> Williams in essence wove into his design the John Dewey precept that the school be an organic part of the community by conceiving of the entire community as a school.

With regard to Woodlake and other Federal Emergency Relief Administration rural colonies, Williams had emphasized at the outset that the communities were experimental in nature and certainly no panacea. The construction period was attended by glowing optimism as settlers got cash for their labors and the prospect of a new home in the near future. There were, of course, delays and problems, but by and large the FERA communities were erected with greater speed and economy than those built by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. More serious problems began to surface as the communities were occupied and the task of making the projects economically and socially viable began. Woodlake was the first community to be occupied and the problems experienced there closely approximated the difficulties that would confound subsequent FERA communities.

Cooperation on a broad scale was essential to the success of the FERA communities. Unlike the subsistence homesteads communities, which proposed to rely for income entirely on an expected decentralization of industry, the rural rehabilitation communities were to have an additional economic base. Income was to be derived from cooperative farming, from cooperative processing and from crafts operations. For example, the two community farms at Woodlake were to produce most of the \$60,000 annual income required to keep the venture operating.<sup>34</sup> The Woodlake and subsequent experiences demonstrated not so much the value of cooperation as the folk adage about old dogs learning new tricks. Conservative local sponsors, who were primarily interested in jobs and money for their regions, often perceived in the cooperative approach a threat to the local status quo. The colonists, despite careful selection<sup>35</sup> and briefing processes never fully understood the cooperative concept and were generally unable to make an effective transition from urban to rural life.

At Woodlake, over three hundred strangers had been brought together with no tradition or heritage to give the community strength. Too often before such cohesion could develop, community problems became insurmountable and radical changes resulted. The problems grew out of misunderstandings, personality conflicts and human nature in general. Williams and Westbrook had hoped that cooperation would provide greater freedom for individual expression. In fact, an excess of individuality threatened to wreck Woodlake and sister projects. The



planners had assumed that the individual three-acre plots at Woodlake would provide sufficient opportunity for the erstwhile agrarians to express their economic individualism. Such was not the case. Those who truly wanted to farm demanded more land and resented it when cooperative field work took them from their own small plots. Even the twenty acre farmsteads at Dyess, Arkansas, did not satisfy real farmers. Those who were not farmers at heart grew more discontented as the sun grew hotter.

All community jobs were assigned the same rate of pay regardless of difficulty and those toiling in the fields were jealous of those working in the cool dairy. The farm manager at Woodlake, a salaried employee whose work assignments took precedence over all other obligations, became the focal point of the residents' general and growing antipathy toward government supervision.<sup>26</sup> At the famous Matanuska project in Palmer, Alaska, local business interests attempted, sometimes with success, to procure non-competitive financial relationships through political influence.<sup>27</sup> In many communities, the superintendents were charged with inefficiency and there were complaints about bureaucratic delays. There was some truth in the charges. Williams himself attributed the delays and demoralization at Pine Mountain, Georgia, to the deficiencies and non-cooperation of the project manager.<sup>28</sup> In many cases, however, the complaints indicated the intractability of the relief clients themselves.

Several studies of the New Deal communities have noted the role that settler psychology played in the community difficulties. The colonists' relief and unemployment experiences had altered their self-concepts and they were often highly suspicious and uncooperative. At Woodlake, Helen Thompson was accused of trying to profit from the project. With "slow-downs," Woodlakers showed their displeasure with field work, but worried about their lack of cash and mounting debts while complaining about the barter system. They failed to understand that most rural families saw little cash during the depression. To rectify their money shortage and to make management aware of their suffering, clients withheld eggs from the cooperative. They traded them for boot-leg whiskey or sold them in neighboring towns for higher prices.<sup>29</sup> Partly because settlers could not own their respective plots immediately and partly because their commitment to the community was superficial, there were numerous defections. Colonists at Woodlake sneaked off to go job hunting in Houston and defaulted on their agreements if they found satisfactory work.

In addition, there were broader political problems. Commercial farmers and manufacturers, particularly southern furniture manufacturers, complained to Congress that they were the victims of government

subsidized competition. Many conservative rural politicians resented the focus on tenants and sharecroppers, apparently feeling that their socio-economic system could not withstand scrutiny. At any rate, the cooperative structure had, by 1936, become the focal point for a wide variety of dissatisfactions with the FERA community program. Indeed, opposition to the entire New Deal community effort was mounting.

On June 30, 1936, all FERA communities save three were transferred to the Resettlement Administration, which proceeded to reorganize them according to its own philosophy. The individual fates of the communities varied. Woodlake was reorganized into small individual farms operated by new families with farming experience. Then, in 1937, Woodlake was transferred along with all former RA and FERA communities to the Farm Security Administration, today the Farmer's Home Administration. With this change, several families moved away, leaving a number of vacant houses for use by the National Youth Administration.

An NYA Community Work and Guidance Center for boys was instituted and a work training program was established for out-of-school, out-of-work youth. The brainchild of David Williams, who had become Assistant Administrator for the NYA in August, 1936, the Community Work and Guidance Centers were among the most successful of the New Deal's social programs. At Woodlake, young men from neighboring counties received job counseling and vocational training in groups of fifty to one hundred. The various programs were locally administered and made extensive use of community resources.

In 1943, the federal government moved to sever its connection with the New Deal communities, as mounting Congressional pressures forced an auction of all government-held community properties. Many families bought their farms but numerous Woodlake homes were purchased by outsiders and removed from the project. In addition, Woodlake proved attractive to a number of couples retiring from city jobs. The overall result was a reduction in population and the Woodlake School was consolidated with Groveton. In the early 1950s the school facilities were sold to the Texas General Baptist Convention for use as a summer youth camp.<sup>22</sup> The land was turned into pastures and today only scant evidence remains that the Woodlake community ever existed. Most of the other communities suffered roughly similar fates, and auction receipts did not in any instance approach expenditures.

Though Woodlake and similar projects operated at a loss and largely failed to establish permanent communities, there were some bright spots. Regardless of its final disposition, Woodlake provided jobs, large sums of spendable money, and taxable assets where few had previously existed. Williams's little towns were an integral part of

Roosevelt's pump-priming strategy; they generated a great deal of optimism and excitement in a dark and dreary period. Since relief labor was used in construction and because colonists were automatically removed from relief rolls, much of the money expended on communities would have been spent anyway. Paul Conkin noted that the communities represented more tangible and lasting accomplishments than most other relief expenditures.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Woodlake represents an approach to human-oriented, low-cost housing whose full value remains to be explored. The area and site planning done at Woodlake and sister projects was years ahead of any such work being done in the United States in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Flora G. Bowles, *A History of Trinity County, Texas, 1837 to 1928*. Groveton, Texas: Groveton Independent School, 1966, 46. The author wishes to thank Mr. Bob Bowman of Lufkin who generously provided the above material.

<sup>2</sup>Bowles, *History of Trinity County*, 109.

<sup>3</sup>James T. Booker, "The Woodlake Cooperative Community: A New Deal Experiment in Rural Living for the Unemployed," (M.A. Thesis, Texas A&M University, College Station, 1976), 17, 24.

<sup>4</sup>Bowles, *History of Trinity County*, 109-110; Booker, "The Woodlake Cooperative Community," 27.

<sup>5</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 40-42.

<sup>6</sup>Edna Mae Dean, "Texas Rural Communities in Trinity County," supplement to *A History of Trinity County, Texas, 1827 to 1928*, 126.

<sup>7</sup>David R. Williams, "Native Rural Architecture of the United States," Lawrence Westbrook Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup>David R. Williams, "33 Points About Rural Industrial Communities," David R. Williams Papers, Box 29, Southwestern Archives and Manuscripts Collection (SAMC), Lafayette, Louisiana, 38.

<sup>9</sup>Williams, "Native Rural Architecture," 3.

<sup>10</sup>Williams, "Native Rural Architecture," 4.

<sup>11</sup>Williams, "33 Points," p. 38. Williams probably derived this idea from his close association with Lawrence Westbrook. See also David R. Williams, "History of Rural Rehabilitation," July, 1936, Williams Papers, Box 29d, SAMC.

<sup>12</sup>David Williams to S. R. Fuller, 19 August 1935, Williams Papers, Box 33c, SAMC.

<sup>13</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 71.

<sup>14</sup>"Rural-Industrial Community Project, No. 1," *Architectural Record* 77 (January 1935), 12.

<sup>15</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 62.

<sup>16</sup>Williams to Fuller, 19 August 1935.

<sup>17</sup>Williams to Fuller, 19 August 1935. Much higher figures are cited in the appendix of Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959. These result from adding to the per unit cost subsequent debts and defaults.

<sup>18</sup>For further development of this idea, see Mody C. Boatwright, "The Myth of Frontier Individualism," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 22 (June 1942), 14-32. See also Curtis P. Nettels, "Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Deal," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 17 (March 1934), 257-265. For a classic statement on cooperation in nature, see Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (New York, 1918).

<sup>19</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 72.

<sup>20</sup>David R. Williams, "Report on Woodlake Community," 25 December 1934, Williams Papers, Box 33c, SAMC.

<sup>21</sup>Williams to Fuller, 19 August 1935.

<sup>22</sup>Williams, "Native Rural Architecture," 6.

<sup>23</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 69; Dean, "Texas Rural Communities," 127.

<sup>24</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 77.

<sup>25</sup>Although settler selection was administered by state and local agencies, many inquiries and appeals for relief were mailed directly to FERA officials. Many described their problems in great detail. See, for example, John A. Simon to Lawrence Westbrook, 11 April 1934, Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Old General Subject Series, Administrative Correspondence File, Record Group 69, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

<sup>26</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 102.

<sup>27</sup>Michael G. Wade, "David Reichard Williams: Avante-Garde Architect and Community Planner, 1890-1962," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, 1978), 296-297. Whether this occurred in Trinity County is not known. An oral history project involving surviving members of the project might provide this information.

<sup>28</sup>David Williams to Gay Shepperson, Georgia Emergency Relief Administration, 26 March 1936, Williams Papers, Box 29i, SAMC.

<sup>29</sup>Booker, "Woodlake Cooperative Community," 103.

<sup>30</sup>Dean, "Texas Rural Communities," 127-128.

<sup>31</sup>Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 331.

<sup>32</sup>O'Neil Ford to the Jury of Fellows, American Institute of Architects, 24 December 1959, Williams Papers, Box 14c, SAMC.