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Robert S. Weddle

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DEPRESSION TIMES IN RAYBURN COUNTRY: SOME ASPECTS OF THE NEW DEAL

by Robert S. Weddle

The Great Depression years of 1929-1932, in the assessment of Congressman Sam Rayburn, constituted "the most serious, far-reaching and dangerous crisis that ever threatened this country... We stood upon the verge of disaster."¹ Grim facts emphasize the truth of this rhetoric when it was uttered prior to World War II. In the years immediately following the market crash of 1929, fourteen million breadwinners, with twice as many dependents, were out of work. The thirty-three million persons engaged in agriculture were selling the fruits of their labor below production cost. Thus, seventy-five million Americans had virtually no buying power.² The nation's business structure, as well as the livelihood of millions of poverty-stricken families, was threatened.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt, in accepting the Democratic Party's nomination for president in 1932, pledged a "new deal for the American people," the country was ready for a reshuffling of the cards. Rayburn's Fourth Congressional District, comprising five North Texas counties wedged between the Cross Timbers and the East Texas Timberlands, was a case in point.³ A predominantly rural area in a state that was approaching an even balance between rural and urban populations, it had a preponderance of poor sharecroppers who had reached the end of their rope. Most lived in unpainted box houses without a telephone or electricity, on dirt roads that turned to quagmires when it rained. In essence, the twentieth century was passing them by.

The principal cash crop in this area was cotton. Nearly everything else that was grown, with the exception of wheat in some areas, went to feed the livestock used to make the crop. Almost ninety-five percent of Rockwall County's farm income, for example, was from cotton. Fannin County, with some seventy percent of its farms operated by tenants, had almost 344,000 acres in cropland, two-thirds of it in cotton.⁴ With an average yield of one-third bale per acre, farmers of this region contributed to the overproduction that lay at the roots of the Great Depression. The nation's economy literally was choked by surpluses of both raw materials and manufactured goods.

In Rayburn's judgment, "Franklin Roosevelt just hit the Presidency about the right time." When he took office on March 4, 1933, he "had a program and he had faith and confidence in the American people." There would never be anything to compare with the first 100 days of the Roosevelt Administration, Rayburn said. Because of the Depression and general panic the country over, "legislation had to be passed and passed quickly."⁵

The measures enacted sought three objectives: relief, recovery, and reform. The primary concern of the hundred-day emergency session of Congress, begun just five days after Roosevelt's inauguration, was relief. A significant means to that end was the restoration of hope. One of the most amazing aspects of the New Deal was the lightning swiftness with which legislation was passed and implemented. Equally amazing was the people's overwhelming and unified response when the president called for their personal involvement.

It would be hard to find an area in which the people rallied with more striking unanimity than in Fannin County, which, as Rayburn's home county, is chosen as the primary focus of this study. Even the bank closing decreed by Roosevelt immediately after taking office was greeted by stoicism, as reflected in a story told by Rayburn. A farm woman in his district, he related, came to the bank to withdraw funds. When told she could not because the president had closed the banks, she replied, "I guess Mr. Roosevelt knows best. He is trying to do something for us."⁶

The "something" that he was doing was far headier than the 3.2 percent beer that became legal on March 22, before repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. Right behind the beer bill came creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, then a measure authorizing half a billion dollars in direct federal grants to the states for relief. Public works were authorized in the National Industrial Recovery Act. On May 12, the Agricultural Adjustment Act became law.⁷

Relief funds from the state's block grant quickly became available in the Fourth Texas District. Luther Crawford, administrator in Fannin County for the Texas Relief Commission, received authorization early in May 1933 to enlist young men from impoverished families to work in government reforestation projects. With a county quota of eighty-four, he had "more than enough" applications by the end of the month. By June 3, thirty-four young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five had been sent to the Forest Service camp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for assignment in the Western states. Like those enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps, they were paid \$30 per month, with food, clothing, and medical services provided. All but \$5 of each man's monthly wage was sent home to his family.⁸

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration offered the unemployed two days' work a week on public projects, and for some that evidently was enough. A farmer who came to town looking for cotton choppers found few who wanted to work for the going wage of seventy-five cents or a dollar per day. Some, it appeared, preferred the two days of relief employment to steady work in the cotton patch.⁹ Farmers soon were poking jibes at the men on relief, whom they accused of getting pay for leaning on their shovel handles.

Passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, with vast implications

for the cotton farmer, brought swift action in the Fourth District. Under its authority, early in June Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, put together a plan for diverting ten million acres from cotton production to other crops. To accomplish this, with seventy percent of the nation's cotton already planted, farmers must plow up part of their growing crop.¹⁰

Machinery to administer the program in Fannin County was assembled immediately. The Texas Agricultural Extension Service named John R. Spivey, Bonham High School vocational agriculture teacher and Chamber of Commerce secretary, as acting county agricultural agent to head the adjustment committee until the new agent, V.J. Young, arrived in mid-July. Spivey attended a regional school at Mount Pleasant to learn the procedure and called a farmers' meeting to explain the program, and another meeting to organize community committees. Bonham Chamber of Commerce directors, meanwhile, greased the wheels for a countywide campaign to acquaint the farmers with the program. Reid Spivey, Sr. and Dick Saunders were chosen to enlist speakers who would carry the message to the rural communities. The 600-member County Home Demonstration Club Council, endorsing the acreage-reduction plan, volunteered clerical work. Judge S.F. Leslie's office and the Chamber of Commerce were designated information centers.¹¹

As speakers began covering the county, they found most farmers enthusiastic and ready to sign contracts, "with little if any objection." When the sign-up was completed in mid-July, 4,269 Fannin County farmers had contracted to turn under 49,700 acres, for which cash payments totaled \$574,049. The plows started on July 25. On September 18, Sam Friday became the first farmer to receive a check — \$240 for plowing up twelve acres.¹²

The Bonham merchants and professional persons who had worked so diligently to put the program over saw in it the prospect of collecting past-due bills from the county's debt-ridden farmers. While the idea of plowing up a growing crop was anathema to many farmers, most recognized that the banker and the merchant had to be paid; they could not afford to pass up the immediate cash benefits.

To finance production curtailment, Secretary Wallace's plan called for a processing tax, levied on textile mills, amounting to about four cents per pound. For wheat-acreage reduction, the milling companies faced a tax of twenty-eight to thirty cents per bushel on milled grain — a matter of importance in Grayson County, where wheat was grown and milled. It was estimated that "Sherman mills" would be taxed \$1.8 million. While the tax amounted to \$1.36 per barrel of flour, the price of flour to the consumer was raised by \$1.50. In 1936 the United States Supreme Court ruled the tax unconstitutional and ordered \$200 million refunded to the cotton and wheat processors. The processors, however, were less eager

to reduce prices because of the refund than they had been to raise them to pay for the tax.¹³

The surplus-reduction program, meanwhile, had been broadened. First came the slaughter of four million pigs weighing less than 100 pounds and another million sows about to farrow. The meat that was usable was turned over to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for distribution to the needy. Secretary Wallace extended his processing tax to meat packers to cover the cost. During August--October, 1933, hogs moved to market centers from Fort Worth to Chicago. Some of the animals were from Fannin County. As expected, the plan raised hog prices; so much, in fact, that the Bonham daily — somewhat after the fact — declared that it had not worked out very well for the farmer, because “the farmers, along with the rest of us, have to pay dearly if he eats [*sic*] meat.”¹⁴

After the pig slaughter came the cow killing. The FERA allocated half a million dollars to purchase 20,000 or more cutter cows from Texas farmers. The cattle were to be slaughtered in the area where purchased and the meat processed at approved canneries staffed from the unemployment rolls. Such was the plan announced late in 1933. When actually implemented almost a year later, scores of cattle were slaughtered on the spot and left for the farmer to dispose of, while only the young stock were processed into beef. In the Ivanhoe-Telephone area, cattle from neighboring farms were gathered at a ranch owned by Sheriff Pude Chaffin and his deputy Waymond Johnson, where they were corralled and separated. The young stock, about a hundred head in all, was purchased for six cents per pound and driven some twenty miles to the railroad holding pens in Bonham, for eventual slaughter in an approved facility. The rest were shot, dragged to the river bank, and left for the wild animals and buzzards. Salvage of the meat was forbidden, an aspect of the program that even yet provokes sighs from those who recall the widespread poverty and hunger of the time. Such a prohibition, however, was not strictly enforced. After the government men were gone, some family heads who had witnessed the slaughter went to the river bank in the night and cut hindquarters from the dead cows as a buffer against starvation.¹⁵

The programs to reduce farm surpluses bore results, but they kept running into complications, such as the law of supply and demand. Hog prices went up following the killing of pigs and sows in 1933 — good for the farmer who had pigs to sell but bad for those who had to buy pork. Following the plow-up, the price of cotton climbed gradually until 1937, when an unexpectedly large crop tipped the balance. Some bitter lessons were learned: when the price began to rise, foreign cotton growers increased their production; the world surplus became largely the burden of the United States; and the American share of the foreign market dropped from forty percent to fifteen percent.¹⁶

Until the late 1940s, cotton was a way of life in Rayburn country. It is no more. Many factors too complex to be treated adequately here

entered into the agricultural reform that followed. Apart from the declining world market, they included World War II, the rise of synthetics, and population shifts due to multiple causes. The small tenant farmer who raised cotton became a displaced person. It is not so much that he was forced off the farm by his landlord but that the system under which he operated had become economically untenable for both landlord and tenant. Today, a cotton field is a rare sight in Fannin County, with scarcely 1,000 acres grown, where once there was 150,000 to 200,000. There were twenty-five to thirty gins in the county in the 1930s, but in 1990 there was only one.¹⁷ Other crops, notably wheat and grain sorghum, are grown on some of the former cotton land, but much of it has been turned back to grass.

The cotton plow-up campaign was followed closely in the feverish summer and fall of 1933 by an organized effort to win support for the National Industrial Recovery Act. Public solicitation raised expenses for Judge Leslie, a close Rayburn associate, to accompany a Grayson County delegation to a hearing in Washington on the proposed Red River dam — a concern that received Rayburn's staunch support until construction of the Denison dam began in 1939. Other individuals and delegations, attuned to the congressman's sound advice, journeyed to Dallas and Austin in furtherance of various bids for federal assistance. Chamber committees scurried about, altering their petitions and purposes to fit amorphous government priorities. One objective was channel dredging on the North Sulphur River and Bois d'arc Creek to improve drainage and reduce the threat of mosquito-borne malaria.

The promise of a state park on condition that the local people provide a 500-acre site sparked a Bonham city charter-change election to enable transfer of city lake property to the state and the purchase of additional land. The vote in September favored the plan, 307 to twenty-three — testimony to the local newspaper's editorial leadership.¹⁸ With indications that the CCC would build the park, a search had to be made for a site for the camp.

In all such dealings, the Bonham *Daily Favorite*, of which H.A. McDougal and Ashley Evans were publisher and editor, was a strong supporter. McDougal, in fact, was president of the Bonham Chamber of Commerce. The newspaper diligently reported daily happenings on local, state, and national levels and offered interpretation of complicated issues — albeit with a liberal sprinkling of editorial opinion in the news columns.

Project planning to access government aid pressed forward throughout the Fourth District. The East Texas Chamber of Commerce sponsored a conference in Paris on how political subdivisions might carry out public projects under the National Recovery Act. "As the National Recovery Bill now stands," expostulated the *Daily Favorite*, "practically every kind of public project will be eligible."¹⁹ In one manner or another, under one New Deal measure or another, nearly every kind was. On the heels of the Paris meeting, H.A. Glass, Bonham school superintendent and chairman

of the Chamber of Commerce's new projects committee, put his group to work. Subcommittees sought funding from the Public Works Administration for school improvements and extension of the city's water and sewer lines. Out of the effort came remodeling at the high school to provide more classrooms and expanded library facilities and construction of an auditorium-gymnasium, completed in 1938 at a contract figure of \$57,595.²⁰

Across the country, meanwhile, the states were voting on prohibition repeal. With Texas' vote scheduled for August 26, 1933, Nat Lovelace of Bonham circulated a petition for a local-option election the same day. Similar referenda were called in three of Grayson County's four precincts. Near Ivanhoe in north Fannin County, a community noted in the 1980s for its winery, the sheriff's booze-hating deputy seized a still and eight gallons of moonshine whiskey. In mid-July, 3.2 percent beer went on sale in Oklahoma. Texans heading for the nearest watering hole jammed the Red River bridge north of Denison in a manner likened to the Sooner land rush of 1889. Off-premise dispensers north of the river were surrounded by automobiles filled with beer-guzzling Texans, drowning their Depression blues in the suds. When the election was held, Grayson and Kaufman counties voted wet, while Fannin, Hunt, Collin, and Rockwall chose to remain dry. The sale of beer became legal in Texas, on a local-option basis, on September 14.²¹

Things were moving fast now, the Bonham daily observed: "...there are opportunities for the communities that are able to see far enough ahead to get them before the other fellow does." With Texas allotted more than \$24 million in federal highway funds, the Fourth District was ready to claim its share. The new Highway 5 (now U.S. 82), already well underway when Roosevelt took office, would link Bonham and Sherman and enable Bonham motorists to drive all the way to Dallas on paved roads. Committees were formed to work on other projects to link Bonham and Trenton and to connect Telephone and Ravenna in north Fannin County with State Highway 78, soon to extend from Bonham to the Red River. The federal highway program, designed to relieve unemployment, limited each man to thirty hours work per week. The usual road-building machinery gave way to picks and shovels, that more men might be employed.²²

At the suggestion of Dr. Tom Spies, Fannin County native and nationally acclaimed nutritionist, Rayburn put forth a plan for canning projects to benefit both the producer and the needy. Canneries, supervised by Mrs. Nevil Felty and Miss Edith Wasson, were established at Bailey and Bonham to process meats and vegetables from area farms and gardens on shares. The projects' share was distributed to needy families. As a side benefit, "scores" of women were given thirty hours employment per week at forty cents an hour. The RFC funded equipment for the projects, which were taken over by the short-lived Civil Works Administration. The

Chamber of Commerce provided a building for the Bonham project, while gas and electric companies provided utilities free of charge.²³ The projects seem to have ended, however, when Roosevelt terminated the CWA early in 1934.

The government's activism also extended to upgrading sanitary facilities for rural homes. The RFC funded the Texas State Health Department for such a project. Labor to dig pit toilets was provided for property owners willing to spend \$1 to \$3 for materials. A State Health Department representative came to Fannin County to supervise the installation and offer public demonstrations. Some sixty persons witnessed the first event at Windom. Thence, the crew proceeded to Allen's Chapel, Whiteshed, and Savage.²⁴

The extent to which the government was involving itself in the lives and thought processes of the people stands out in the campaign to implement the NRA. Directed by General Hugh Johnson — “a gruff, pugnacious, martinet” — the NRA sought to negotiate codes governing the operation of various industries, affecting hours, wages, prices, working conditions, and competitive practices. Johnson instigated a nationwide campaign, urging each employer and each householder to pledge support. Upon returning the signed pledge card to the local post office, the householder or business proprietor would receive the NRA “membership” insignia — a blue eagle with the legend, “We Do Our Part” — and license to display it in home or business.²⁵

The Bonham newspaper, in communicating the appeal to “every employer,” carried a banner headline on page one proclaiming, “WE ARE ALL BACKING PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S NEW DEAL.” The local Chamber of Commerce endorsed the National Recovery Act; so did the Retail Merchants Association. The Retail Grocers Association not only gave its endorsement but planned to carry the campaign to crossroads country stores throughout the county. Automobile repairmen formed an organization “to formulate a code of fair competition and submit it to the proper authorities for ratification.” “This is the greatest campaign ever put on in the United States since the World War,” the newspaper trumpeted, “and it is equally or even more important that it be carried out in the minutist detail.” Next day, a sketch of Roosevelt surrounded by a cheering throng with a backdrop of the flag — doubtless reproduced from a mat sent out by Johnson's office — centered the front page. The caption: “Everybody is Yelling for President Roosevelt and They Believe His Policy Will Restore Prosperity.” Merchants paid for a full-page signature ad proclaiming their support of the NRA.²⁶

The Blue Eagle NRA insignia suddenly appeared everywhere: in store windows and newspaper ads, on automobile windshields and the narrow glass panes of board shanties at the edge of the cotton fields. It was everyone's badge of respectability in the New Deal effort to restore the country to economic soundness. Failure to display it, General Johnson

implied, would be as onerous as refusing to salute the flag in wartime; for a business to have it removed for failure to comply with the NRA code would mean loss of both clientele and social standing.

Response to the mail campaign notwithstanding, Johnson wanted more. In late August a chamber-sponsored organization was formed "for the purpose of carrying out the NRA code" in Fannin County. Albert Taylor, Bonham postmaster, was named general chairman, with Will Nevill as general and Mrs. Travis Lipscomb as lieutenant general; and so on, down through colonels, majors, captains, and lieutenants. Their job was to call on all businesses not already displaying the Blue Eagle and persuade them to mount the NRA bandwagon. Every housewife in the Bonham trade area who had not signed a consumer card would be contacted and urged to do so. The pledge: "I will co-operate in re-employment by supporting and patronizing employers and workers who are members of N.R.A." The campaign workers' job also encompassed the hearing of complaints; if matters could not be adjusted on the spot, "a Federal man" was to be called to make the adjustment. In Bonham, the campaign began with the assignment of block workers. The county home demonstration agent — Miss Minnie Eldridge, a cousin of Congressman Rayburn — was responsible for taking the drive to the rural areas. Workers were assigned for each rural community. More than 300 were involved.²⁷ Their message was reinforced on September 18, when the first-class postage rate went up a penny and the new three-cent, NRA stamp, replete with the eagle, was issued.

Rational judgments are not apt to be made when the house is on fire. Had there been time for solemn reflection, the people might have raised questions as to how such tactics squared with the American tradition. A few, in fact, did. Texas Attorney General James V. Allred warned that the price-fixing feature of NRA was in violation of both state and federal anti-trust laws. Ultimately, the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision on May 27, 1935, declared the National Recovery Act unconstitutional because it granted legislative powers to the executive branch. Yet the NRA, which had given jobs to two million workers and checked deflation, left a lasting legacy in the minimum wage and the abolishment of child labor.²⁸

In August 1933, it was estimated that FERA had distributed unemployment funds to ten to twenty percent of Fannin County's unemployed. By August 15 the funds were exhausted. In November, the biggest employment program yet came to the county. Luther Crawford was authorized by the new Civil Works Administration to put to work all the able-bodied on the relief rolls, thirty hours per week, thirty cents per hour — three times the going rate for farm labor. On the appointed day, 928 men (of about 1,000 on the roles) reported at the various county towns. They were to work on city streets and water lines, county roads, and school grounds. Each man brought his own hand tools to use instead of the usual machinery to make the work last longer. A warning was

sounded that each was expected to contribute a day's work for a day's pay; contrary to previous practices, supervisors had the authority to terminate shirkers.²⁹

Such admonitions, however, did not end the widespread image of the relief worker as a chronic shirker, which persisted from the earlier FERA and CWA to the later Works Progress Administration. Farmers, resentful that the government had tripled the customary wage for field hands, were especially derisive. They pictured the relief worker as a loafer who was paid out of all proportion to his worth. The farmer made jokes about the relievers, who occasionally turned the tables. There was a story, for example, of a farmer on his way to town in his wagon who gave a ride to a stranger. As the wagon lumbered along, a terrapin was seen crossing the road. "You know what that reminds me of?" the farmer queried. "Nope," replied his passenger. "WPA worker," said the farmer, unaware that he was delivering a personal insult. Silence prevailed until a jackrabbit jumped in front of the wagon and took off at a run across an adjacent field. "Know what that reminds me of?" asked the rider. "Nope," said the farmer. Stranger: "Farmer going after his plow-up check."³⁰

While the CWA put men to work on public projects, a banner headline on October 4, 1933, heralded success of Bonham's state park quest. Another on the thirteenth announced that the CCC camp would be located on East Fourth Street (since renamed Sam Rayburn Drive, for the man who made it all possible) on property owned by Lonnie Fuller. Ten days later, the army awarded a contract for \$10,270 for building nine frame buildings, including a half a dozen 20 x 112-foot barracks to house 200 men, with but thirty days allowed for completion. The army took possession on November 28. Construction contract was let and work begun, meanwhile, for a CCC camp in neighboring Grayson County for building Loy Lake Park. The park facilities in Grayson and Fannin counties, said the Bonham paper, would become a "very attractive" recreation area.³¹

The prophesy was fulfilled, not so much by Bonham State Park and the Grayson County facility as by the Denison dam, completed in 1944 to impound more than five million acre-feet of water in Lake Texoma. The multipurpose project provided flood control and hydroelectric power, as well as recreation, with the side benefit of 11,000 acres set aside in Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge, where migrating waterfowl could feed and rest.³²

CCC camps such as those located at Bonham, Honey Grove, Sherman, and Farmersville, offered dual benefits: employment of young men from needy families plus the projects they carried out. At the Bonham State Park site northeast of town, the 200 men from the local camp constructed the dam to impound a sixty-five-acre lake. They quarried native limestone and cut it into blocks with two-man crosscut saws to build a bathhouse, concession stand, and pavillion. The relief benefits for the participants and their families were attested by Jesse Nowlin, fatherless since

age twelve and at sixteen virtually the only means of support for his mother and two younger children. Nowlin, who died on September 13, 1990, recalled fudging on his age to join the CCC. His previous relief job under CWA, "busting rocks" on the streets of Leonard, was being phased out; the family's situation was desperate. "We were dirt poor, I can tell you," Nowlin said. "The President came to the rescue [with the CCC]. I was so proud of that job!"³³

Nowlin remained with the company through its transfer in November 1936, to Randall County, Texas, where it constructed facilities for Palo Duro Canyon State Park. He, like a great number of other young men, made a swift transition from Depression times to wartime. Enlisting in the Marine Corps, he was among the defenders of Wake Island in the early days of World War II and, after the island fell, spent almost four years in a Japanese prison camp.

The Public Works Administration, which paid for the construction of Denison Dam, supported various other permanent improvements throughout the Fourth District. The City of Sherman affords a good example of how federal funds from the PWA were accessed to provide needed civic improvements. Having purchased the unfinished auditorium of the defunct Kidd-Key College, through Rayburn's auspices the city obtained a \$55,000 PWA grant to finish the building as a city hall and municipal auditorium. An additional \$65,000 was approved in 1937 for waterworks improvements. Grayson County obtained assistance for erecting a new courthouse, including jail, replacing one that had been burned down by a lynch mob.³⁴

More complex and less noticeable in its results was the Resettlement Administration, which sought to move impoverished farmers from sub-marginal land and give them a fresh start on more productive soil. One of its aims also was to help tenant farmers become landowners. A token effort in this regard was made in the Nunnelee Community, located a few miles northwest of Bonham. The government bought the Allen ranch, comprising 1000 acres or so, and divided it into farm tracts of a little more than 100 acres each. On each tract a frame house was built. Through the Farm Security Administration, low-interest, long-term loans were made available for qualifying farmers to purchase them.³⁵

A. W. Jones, a sharecropper who had been moving every two or three years, acquired one of these tracts as the second owner in 1945, through FSA. His widow was still living on the property, in the original house, in 1990. At first, she recalls, it had no bathroom and no closets, and the only water supply was an above-ground cistern tank that caught water off the roof; but for the Joneses it was their first real home. The farm made them a living, and they were able to pay off the note. "There were good years and bad," says Mrs. Jones. "Without it, I guess we'd have gone on moving every two or three years."³⁶

Brought together in the Resettlement Administration in 1937 were a land-utilization program begun in 1934 under the FERA and the USDA land-policy section. Nationwide, more than nine million acres of misused land were purchased by the government at an average cost of \$4.85 per acre. This land was restored to range, forestry, and other conservation uses. Under this program, what became the Caddo National Grasslands was established in 1935 on 17,729 acres in Fannin County, most of it (13,135 acres) in the Bois d'arc unit in the badly eroded northeast sector. With relief labor, two lakes — Coffee Mill and Davy Crockett, 750 acres and 400 acres — were built on the Bois d'arc unit. The lakes were stocked with fish and the area restocked with whitetail deer and permitted for grazing. Administered by the Resettlement Administration for the first two years, the grasslands were put under the Soil Conservation Service in 1938, then transferred to the USDA Forest Service in 1953.³⁷

Additionally, the Lake Fannin unit adjacent to the Red River north of Bonham, contains 2,026 acres and a forty-eight-acre lake; the Ladonia unit contains 2,668 acres in small, scattered tracts along the North Sulphur River in southeastern Fannin County. While Lake Fannin, like lakes Coffee Mill and Crockett, is accessible for fishing, the lodge and cabins built and furnished by the Works Progress Administration are in a poor state of repair and have been sealed off from public use. The grasslands, like the parks built by the CCC and Lake Texoma, enhance the potential of Rayburn country as a recreation area but are not widely used.³⁸

The local Forest Service office overseeing the Caddo National Grasslands occupies a building in Bonham with three agricultural agencies born of the New Deal: the Soil Conservation Service, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, and the Farmers Home Administration, successors to the Triple A and Farm Security Administration. The SCS, made a permanent agency in 1935, soon was operating in most counties, offering technical assistance and funding for terracing, pond building, and growing of soil-building crops. It changed the face of the land, largely for the better. In two Fannin County watershed programs, dams on small tributaries of Caney and Pilot Grove creeks have tamed the floods that previously were the bane of bottomland farmers. SCS personnel have developed conservation plans with 1600 landowners, encompassing 300,000 of the county's 575,000 acres.³⁹ In sum, the agency has performed a vital role, conserving the nation's basic natural resource, in spite of shifting political winds and government initiatives that tend to dilute its original purpose.

The SCS still provides the engineering work for farm ponds, terraces, and waterways funded on a cost-share basis by ASCS. The ASCS also has charge of the commodity loan program for wheat, grain sorghum, corn, oats, and upland cotton, as well as the subsidy program for those farmers who are willing to curtail acreage when required and abide by other government restrictions. Farmers are not required to participate in

the ASCS program. About thirty percent of those in Fannin County do not. Choosing not to be fettered by the government rules, they reap none of the benefits but enjoy more freedom in the management of their own affairs.⁴⁰ It was loss of this freedom that a *Daily Favorite* editorial warned in 1937 — after the newspaper had changed hands: “If the cotton farmer wants the government to pay him fifteen cents a pound for cotton he should be ready to surrender his right to manage his own farm and let a government bureau manage it for him... .”⁴¹

The Farmers Home Administration’s original purpose was to administer farm operating and farm housing loans. This role has been broadened to include funding rental housing in cities up to 20,000 population, including a project in Bonham. It makes loans for development of community facilities for public use in rural areas, for low-rent housing for domestic farm laborers, and for water and waste disposal in towns up to 10,000 population. And under the “FmHA Wellness Program” it issues leaflets advising farmers to “Take Control of the Stress in Your Life.”⁴²

The New Deal programs that helped the farmer most were those that enabled him to help himself. They were also the work in which Congressman Rayburn, who co-authored five major bills of the New Deal, took the greatest pride: the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 and legislation creating farm-to-market roads.⁴³ Utility companies had been unwilling to assume the financial burden of extending power lines into thinly populated rural areas. Rayburn recognized that farm families, isolated on mud roads without electricity, were the forgotten people of the twentieth century. They washed their clothes on a rubboard, with water drawn from a well or cistern with rope and bucket; milked cows and cut wood by hand, and cooked over a wood fire, with coal-oil lamps and lanterns the only means of illumination.

In all the United States in the mid-1930s, only three percent of farm families were served by electricity. In Rayburn’s district, almost none was. Rayburn at last managed to get Texas Power & Light Company to extend its line one mile to his own farm but found the rate so high it was not feasible to use an electric stove. Rayburn teamed with Senator George Norris of Nebraska, father of the Tennessee Valley Authority, to introduce the REA bill on his fifty-fourth birthday, January 6, 1936. It was simple in its concept: farmers would join in nonprofit cooperatives to build and maintain rural power lines with money lent by the Rural Electrification Administration, which would be repaid from operating proceeds.⁴⁴

The Fannin County Rural Electric Cooperative, organized at the C.B. Reed farm, located half a mile east of Trenton, in October 1937, obtained a loan of \$100,000 to run the first 100 miles of line. In the 1980s, the Coop had 1000 miles of line, serving all parts of the county and small areas of Hunt, Collin, and Grayson counties. Reed, a dairyman and registered Jersey breeder, was a member of the Coop’s first board. He

helped route the lines, then build them. "It was just a religion with us," recalls Kate Reed Estes, his daughter, who still lives on the Reed farm. On his own farm, Reed ran lines to the barn and put light fixtures all around the place. Then came the joyous occasion when the lights were turned on in July 1938, "We turned on every light ... on the farm," says Mrs. Estes, "and got in the car and rode up and down the highway to see how it looked lighted up."⁴⁵

"Mr. Sam," if not the man who hung the moon, was certainly the one who hung the electric lights. The legislation he sponsored or wrote, Mrs. Estes claims, "touched more people for good than any other man in American history outside Thomas Jefferson. When you look at all the legislation that helped everybody, the rural roads, REA, you can't imagine how it is to be out here [in the country with modern conveniences]. It was five degrees above zero the other morning. We'd nearly freeze to death, the water would freeze up. Trying to draw water out of the well and trying to water stock and all like that. I sat here in this house with it nice and warm with electric heat, electric lights and television, all my water running and my sewer working and everything, in that sort of weather. I still never fail to say, 'Thank you, Mr. Sam,' because it's just been wonderful to see the changes that have been made in how you live on a farm ... You know, he was just next to the President and the Lord around here."⁴⁶

Such a glowing appraisal notwithstanding, critics of the New Deal epoch, which lasted from Roosevelt's 1933 inauguration until Hitler's Germany marched into Poland on September 1, 1939, often regard it as a mixed bag of tricks. While the activist government during that time accomplished much, they say, it failed at what it set out to do: put the nation back to work. The New Deal concomitants are often seen as deficit spending, inflation, and proliferation of special-interest groups.⁴⁷ Whether or not such an assessment is just, it must be recognized that the New Deal altered the federal government and its relation to the people. It changed people's expectations of their government and transformed the role of political subdivisions, which began looking to "the Feds" to erect their public buildings and schools, maintain their roads, and improve their water systems.

Any adequate appraisal of the New Deal should consider its objectives of relief, recovery, and reform. Unquestionably, in the Fourth Congressional District as elsewhere, relief provided by New Deal agencies such as FERA, CWA, WPA, and CCC often stood between destitute families and starvation. The Farm Credit Administration, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, and the Federal Housing Administration saved farms and homes from foreclosure. Each of these relief agencies contributed to a broader objective, which may be considered as President Roosevelt's hallmark: the restoration of hope. Recovery, however, did not automatically spring from relief. Critics are wont to claim that it took

World War II to bring the nation out of the Depression.

Certainly the New Deal achieved reform; whether it was good or bad depends on one's political leanings. The issue is still being debated, chiefly between those who espouse government activism and those who hold that the best government governs least. Partisan lines are drawn between Democrats and Republicans and between liberals and conservatives in both parties. In the altered relationship between citizenry and government, the people's raised expectations constituted an invitation for more government involvement in their lives; they came to look to the political process, rather than to themselves, for the solution to their problems.

In truth, nearly everyone, in one way or another, whether to his liking or not, is a beneficiary of New Deal reforms. Depression children who owe their college education to a job provided by the National Youth Administration now find their retirement years made easier by a Social Security check. Their financial stability is safeguarded by banking and security laws that Sam Rayburn, out of concern for the common citizen, helped to steer through Congress.

The New Deal, in any case, compiled an impressive record for implementing an emergency program quickly. The achievement of the first 100 days of the Roosevelt Administration is especially remarkable in the light of the nation's more recent political history. The proliferation of bureaucracy, which attended the New Deal and forms a part of its legacy, may itself militate against such rapid-fire problem-solving in the future.

The face of the area comprising Rayburn's Fourth Congressional District is much changed from both the New Deal's reforms and its various work projects that were designed primarily to relieve unemployment. The landscape itself is altered, though it is often difficult to draw the line between changes resulting from the New Deal and those influenced by other factors. With cotton and the small family farm went much of the population in the rural counties. Where there were 41,000 people in Fannin County in 1940, today there are slightly less than 25,000 — roughly equivalent to the farm population then or the total county population in 1880.⁴⁶ Rural electrification and good roads, if they could have stemmed the outflow in any circumstance, came too late to do so. The small farmer, whose miserable lot the New Deal sought to mitigate, is gone forever. While he has passed unmourned, he may yet be missed, for he and his farmstead were models of self-sufficiency the likes of which may never be seen again.

NOTES

¹Sam Rayburn speech to Congress, May 26, 1936, quoted in H.G. Dulaney and Edward Hake Phillips, compilers and editors, *Speak, Mr. Speaker* (Bonham, Texa, 1978), p. 40.

²Sam Rayburn speech to Milk Dealers Association, Summer, 1937, quoted in *ibid.*, p.48.

¹Five counties — Collin, Fannin, Grayson, Hunt, and Rains — made up the district until 1934, when Kaufman and Rockwall were added. See Anthony Champagne, *Congressman Sam Rayburn* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1984), p. 3, and map. p. 5.

²E.H. Templin, J.W. Huckabee, Jr., and I.C. Mowery, *Soil Survey: Fannin County, Texas* (n.p.: U.S. Department of Agriculture and Texas Agricultural Extension Service, 1946), pp. 12, 14, 15.

³Dulaney and Phillips, ed., *Speak, Mr. Speaker*, pp. 48, 50.

⁴Alfred Steinberg, *Sam Rayburn: A Biography* (New York, 1975), p. 109.

⁵William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, 1963), pp. 51-53.

⁶Bonham *Daily Favorite*, May 20, 29; June 3, 1933.

⁷*Ibid.*, June 5, 1933.

⁸*Ibid.*, May 13, 19, 27; June 3, 6, 1933.

⁹*Ibid.*, June 22, 24, 26, 27, 1933.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, June 28, 29; July 10, 11, 13, 14, 20, 25; Sept. 18, 1933.

¹¹*Ibid.*, July 10, 1933; Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 170-171.

¹²Bonham *Daily Favorite*, May 30, June 5, 7, 10, 17, 21; July 14, 19; Aug. 10, 11, 1933.

¹³*Ibid.*, Nov. 9, 1933; Ruth Shrivner, "The cattle drive," in *ibid.*, Sept. 21, 1937; Bill Scrivner to R.S.W., interview, Oct. 13, 1989.

¹⁴"United States Cotton Problem," Sept. 10, 1937, typescript in Rayburn papers, Sam Rayburn Library. Origin of this paper is not known, but Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, in an address entitled "Charting the Course for Cotton," given at a farmers' meeting in Memphis, Tennessee on Oct. 1, 1937 (copy in Rayburn Papers), used rhetoric that is strikingly similar.

¹⁵Jessie Rodriguez, Jr., ASCS, to R.S.W., interview, Bonham, Texas, Sept. 6, 1989.

¹⁶Bonham *Daily Favorite*, May 30; June 5, 7, 10, 16, 20; Aug. 10; Sept. 6, 1933.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, June 10, 1933.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, June 17, 19, 1933; Board Minute Book, Bonham ISD.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, June 29; July 5, 13; Aug. 28, 1933.

²⁰*Ibid.*, June 24, Sept. 10, Oct. 28, 1933. Concerning later efforts for farm-to-market roads, see these 1937 letters, all in Rayburn Papers, Sam Rayburn Library: Sam Rayburn to Gus Thomasson, May 1; Thomasson to Rayburn, May 5; Rayburn to Judge J.E. Spies, May 8; and Spies to Rayburn, May 12.

²¹MacPhelan Reese to R.W.S., conversation, Bonham, Texas, Aug. 1, 1989. Bonham *Daily Favorite*, Aug. 21; Oct. 11, 17; Nov. 14, 22, 1933.

²²*Ibid.*, Nov. 1, 1933.

²³Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 64, 65.

²⁴Bonham *Daily Favorite*, July 15, 28, 29, 31; Aug. 23, 1933.

²⁵*Ibid.*, Aug. 25, 26, 29; Sept. 8, 1933.

²⁶For more detailed analysis see Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 65, 144-145.

²⁷Bonham *Daily Favorite*, Aug. 12, 15; Nov. 14, 16, 1933.

²⁸Story quoted from memory; origin unknown.

²⁹Bonham *Daily Favorite*, Oct. 4, 13, 23; Nov. 28, 1933.

³⁰For steps leading to approval of the Denison Dam project, and Rayburn's part in it, see Dorothy R. Hudgeons, "His Word, His Bond: Sam Rayburn, Southerner, and Grayson County, Texas" (Master's Thesis, Texas Woman's University, 1985), pp. 61-62.

³¹Jesse E. Nowlin to R.S.W., interview, Bonham, Texas, Aug. 29, 1989.

³⁴Mayor H.G. Tuck and commissioners to Sam Rayburn, July 14, 1937; G.H. Wilcox to Public Works Administration, Aug. 19, 1937; Tuck to Rayburn, Aug. 25, 1937; E.K. Burtle to Rayburn, Dec. 22, 1937, all in Rayburn Papers, Sam Rayburn Library. See also Hudgeons, "His Word, His Bond," p. 61.

³⁵Anna Mae Dodson to R.S.W., interview, Aug. 23, 1989.

³⁶Mrs. A.W. Jones to R.S.W., interview, Aug. 1 and 2, 1989.

³⁷"The Land Acquisition Program of the Resettlement Administration," "The Land Utilization Program," and "Land Development Program: Agricultural Land Use Adjustment Projects," unsigned typescripts, Rayburn Papers, Sam Rayburn Library; USDA Forest Service, *Final Environmental Statement and Unit Plan: Caddo National Grassland, National Forests in Texas* (1975), pp. 3-4.

³⁸John Andey, USDA Forest Service, to R.S.W., interview, Bonham, Texas, Sept. 6, 1989.

³⁹Michael N. Smith, SCS, to R.S.W., interview, Bonham, Texas, Sept. 6, 1989.

⁴⁰Rodriguez to R.S.W.

⁴¹Bonham *Daily Favorite*, Aug. 12, 1937.

⁴²Leaflets from the literature rack in the Bonham FmHA office.

⁴³D.B. Hardeman and Donald C. Bacon, *Rayburn: A Biography* (Austin, 1987), p. 201.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

⁴⁵Bonham *Daily Favorite*, Rayburn Centennial Edition, Jan. 5, 1982; Kate Reed Estes, interview with Anthony Champagne, undated transcript in Sam Rayburn Library.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷John Gunther, *Roosevelt in Retrospect* (New York, 1950), p. 290.

⁴⁸Templin, *et al.*, *Soil Survey*, p. 11.