AN APPRAISAL OF RESSETLEMENT

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In trying to make an appraisal of the activities of an organization such as the Resettlement Administration, there are two types of persons unfit for the job (1) the person who is associated with the organization, and (2) the person who is not! The first may not see any defects or is unable to get a proper perspective, or if he does, he is not free to express his opinion; the second, because of the youth of the organization he can get so little documentary evidence nor can he always interpret data even if he can get them. Furthermore, he often has little opportunity to observe the work being done at first hand, or perhaps in only one section of the country. In the case of the Resettlement Administration the task is made more difficult because it has been reorganized several times and rumors are that it is now on the point of another drastic remodeling and shifting of functions. Not enough time has elapsed to permit a mature judging of the results.

It is with these limitations in mind that this paper is offered and with the willingness to stand corrected on matters of fact and interpretation. However, it will be limited to just one phase of the work of the Resettlement Administration, namely, the resettlement or relocation of settlers now on submarginal land or now living in situations where they cause high costs for public services. In fact it is really an appraisal of the resettlement activities of the federal government including some phases which preceded the work of the Resettlement Administration per se.

The demand for resettlement is not new. Economists favored the public participation in the redistribution of population for many years, especially because many of the isolated settlers were in this situation and were not responsible for it. Settlement in later years was not a laissez faire movement. Much of it was publicly stimulated and fostered. Settlers can with much fairness point to the federal policies of disposing of the public domain, the tax supported immigration and reclamation policies both state and federal, as factors in bringing them onto submarginal land and leaving them stranded. There is ample justification for a public policy of helping to relocate the victims of our former land policies.

1 This paper was read at the Twenty-seventh Annual Meeting of the American Farm Economic Association, Chicago, Illinois, December 30, 1936.
An Appraisal of Resettlement

At the National Conference on Land Utilization held in Chicago November, 1931, a number of papers dealt with the problem, particularly that of Dr. Gray. He advocated an extension policy of informing settlers of the futility of remaining on submarginal land and of helping them find employment elsewhere. "In some cases," he said, "evacuation of sparsely settled areas may have to be effected by public acquisition of some or all of the occupied holdings through exchange or purchase, with a view of economizing public expenditures." Mention should also be made of the fact that during Hoover's administration a proposal was made to set up demonstration settlement projects in the South to be sponsored by the Reclamation Service. The bill providing for these projects passed in the Senate but was lost in the House.

In the Franklin Roosevelt Administration the Subsistence Homesteads movement opened the door for a few demonstration projects dealing with the resettlement of stranded rural people. As stated in Circular I of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads of the Department of the Interior (November 15, 1933) these projects were set up for the "reorganization of disorganized rural communities" and the "movement of population from submarginal dry farming lands in the West."

One of these projects was the Forest Farm Homesteads project proposed for Wisconsin. A local corporation was set up in December of 1933 and functioned for a few months in 1934 when it was liquidated by the mandate of the Secretary of the Interior. The local corporation stated its program as "the relocation of isolated settlers to more favorable locations in northern Wisconsin." These locations were to be accessible to federal forests where settlers were practically guaranteed 100 to 150 days of work in these forests. It was hoped that state, county and even private forests might later adopt this plan. However, it was made known at once that these homesteads would be offered only to families residing in isolated locations within federal forest purchase areas, or within the restricted districts of the zoned counties, and only settlers capable of working in the forests would be accepted.

The purpose of going into details concerning this still-born project is to point out (1) that it was not a land purchase program but specifically a program aimed at the "relocation of isolated settlers to land of good agricultural quality in already established agricultural communities as far as possible";

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that it was to be carried out by a local corporation manned by a local board of directors (with two from Washington, however) employing local labor and planning to use local materials for the modest houses; (3) that the program was definitely synchronized with the zoning movement and local land policies. The fact that it was restricted to zoned counties no doubt speeded up the desire of other counties to zone. Only two or three counties had zoned their lands when the policies were announced. It was realized from the start that it was not a complete relocation program since the selection of forest farm workers was restricted as stated above, but it was hoped that other programs would be initiated to take care of non-eligible, non-conforming users. (4) Since the homesteaders were assured a definite income plus "subsistence" in the form of fuel, shelter and a large part of their food, this became the basis for determining the maximum charge the settler could carry and amortize his holding in 20 years. Although tempted to make the places models with all the modern gadgets, the corporation decided to cut the cloth to suit the paying power of the wearer.

While plans were being formulated, investigators were sent into 23 northern counties who got in touch with almost 3,000 isolated settlers. The schedules so obtained were to be used in the selection of the homesteaders, but they also gave us a volume of information as to the social and economic conditions surrounding these settlers. The publicity given to the project and the visit of the enumerators roused the entire north. There was no difficulty in finding families willing to move to one of these homesteads. The requests to be relocated and the stories back of these requests were pitiful. Yet it pleased an all-wise Secretary of the Interior to liquidate the corporation before it could begin the real work, centralize authority in Washington and dash the hopes of hundreds of families.

It should be said, however, that the idea of the forest farm homesteads has been incorporated in a federal project in Bayfield county, where 40 homesteads are now being built under the direction of the Federal Forest Service in cooperation with the Resettlement Administration.

A similar drama was enacted in North Carolina. Here 4,500 acres were bought by a local corporation, hundreds of acres cleared, roads put in, some houses built, 700 applications received, 71 settlers recommended for acceptance, and 54 had accepted; in fact some were camping outside of the project ready to move on when this corporation was also liquidated in June of
1934. All this work was accomplished between December 20, 1933 and June 1, 1934. After that the project was dormant; finally the Resettlement Administration took it over. Information from North Carolina indicates that if the project had remained in the hands of the original corporation 300 families would have been resettled in 12 months after the project was started. It is now almost three years since the project was started and last fall only a dozen or so families had actually been placed. However, it is expected that more rapid progress will be made from now on.

These two examples indicate that people can be resettled with considerable speed with proper organization and programs. Furthermore, the liquidated projects left behind them a legacy of disappointed hopes under which later resettlement organizations had to operate.

However, later land programs shifted the emphasis to the purchase of submarginal land. This was hailed as a possible substitute for the crop reduction program, but several papers at the meeting of the Farm Economic Association in 1933 pointed out that to affect even 10 per cent of the production of farm crops, almost one-half of the farmers would have to leave the land. Yet the same idea crops out in a statement of the Administrator of Resettlement in 1936: "So long as millions of acres of submarginal land continue to be cultivated, producing crops under what are worse than sweat-shop conditions of life and labor, the farmers of America's rich acres will continue to be bothered with a problem of surplus."

In the second place the purchase program was advocated as an antidote to bringing more land into use by reclamation at a time when other government agencies were paying farmers to keep land out of production. The paradox of spending public money to bring new acres under the plow and then spend some more of the taxpayers' money to offset the additional surplus when no spending would accomplish the same result, was also pointed out three years ago. Nevertheless, the statement re-appears in Resettlement Administration Publication Number 1 in 1935,—that it is the President's established plan to take 10 acres of marginal land out of present production for every acre that is brought into cultivation by reclamation and irrigation projects. It goes on to say that the President had approved projects which would add 100,000 acres of new land and therefore the retirement of a million acres was called for. Stuart Chase also makes this statement except that he attributes it to Secretary

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Ickes and speaks of it as a new policy for coordinated land use.  
Perhaps it was never intended to take these announcements seriously, but if they are to be taken at face value the policy needs clarification. (1) Is the purchase of land to offset new acres in addition to the other program or identical with it? (2) If it is to keep production in balance the purchase of cut-over or other idle land not now under the plow will not accomplish the purpose. (3) It seems as if 100,000 acres is an understatement of the acreage to be matched. The National Resources Committee Report on Regional Planning of the Pacific Northwest places the area of irrigable land under the Grand Coulee project of 1,200,000 acres. Granting that this will be accomplished over a period of many years, still the policy calls for the retirement of marginal land on the 10 to 1 basis of an area approximately equal to all the harvested crops of the three Pacific states.

At the meeting of the Farm Economic Association a year ago it was charged that the program of the Resettlement Administration instead of concerning itself with the "resettlement of destitute or low income families" was aimed primarily at correcting the misuse of land. "Millions of acres were optioned on which no one ever tried to farm, or ever would attempt to farm." Since the land so purchased was turned over to other government agencies these departments have used the Resettlement Administration as a means of getting land for their purposes. There seems to have been no major changes in this policy. In fact the Administrator himself said in March 1936, "Land utilization is usually mentioned as the first of the activities because of its long time importance. . . . Plans have been made to purchase more than 9 million acres of land that is not adapted to its present use. . . . This land will be converted into forest areas, grazing land, game preserves, parks, and other beneficial land uses." Later he adds that rural resettlement has for its purposes the transferring of farm families "to other locations where it will be possible to succeed in agricultural operations."

One gains the same impression from the press releases of the Resettlement Administration. Correspondence from New York State Conservation officials stressed the fact that they had turned over to them some 60,000 acres for state reforestation and game management, purchased by the Administration, but nothing was said about relocation of farmers. Even granting that this may

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4 Rich Land, Poor Land, p. 305.
6 Extension Service Review, March 1936, p. 36.
have been an oversight, the omission seems significant. In Connecticut some 10,000 acres are being purchased and only about 10 people are being relocated.

In the second place even the purchase program has not proceeded with expediency because the title approving machinery had to operate with the same technique as if the government were buying post office sites. As much as 2 years has elapsed before "some of the checks came through." However, this has been remedied and now the work can be "speeded up." A late bulletin entitled "What the Resettlement Administration has Done" states that 9,100,000 acres of substandard land have been purchased to remove it from crop farming.

Allowance must also be made for the fact that land retirement and relocation of people are long time projects and should be carried out with deliberation and upon facts based on research. Many observers feel that the latter is highly important. However, the Resettlement Administration operates on executive orders and is not supported by specific legislation from Congress, as Dr. Gray pointed out to us last year. The whole administration is working under the limitations of an emergency relief program, a sort of day-to-day existence. There was constant change in personnel and with the change came changes in policies. I personally want to bear testimony to the courage and the hard work of the people in the Administration in Washington, the regional offices and the field. It is not the purpose of this paper to blame individuals or departments although the question might be raised if these facts were realized a year ago why the Administrator did so little to correct them. In fact in his article in Fortune he defends the type of organization under which he was operating. "An old agency," he says, "cannot be counted on to do something new. But a new agency, staffed partly with personnel drawn from civil service can accomplish wonders." I shall let Paul W. Ward of the Nation characterize his accomplishments as the head of Resettlement, "As a man of action he proved to be a fumbler, and for more than a year the RA was a scene of administrative turmoil that defied the descriptive powers of pen, brush or camera."

The tragedy is not only that people who expected to be helped were disappointed, but also that the Federal Government "lost face" because of these disappointments. Promises were made to

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9 The Nation, November 28, 1936, p. 623.
families, to officials of town and county governments, and private plans and public policies were based upon these promises. When these promises were not fulfilled it made little difference to them that the failure was due to the reorganization of the Administration, the "replanning" by the experts in Washington, or the petty bickerings of officials sparring for personal prestige. All they know is that they were promised bread and were handed a stone.

However, the resettlement of families is still a part of the land use program. In fact it is often pointed out as the driving force behind the purchases of land even though the latter is placed first. "Lacking a rural zoning program in all states but one it was found necessary for administrative reasons to block up areas, where farms are scattered, and purchase the intervening tracts," said Dr. Gray last year.10 Definitely delimited areas were set up, 208 in number, within which all the land is purchased whether it has settlers on it or not. Settlers who are bought out are dealt with in several ways. (1) They may take their money and move to the city or elsewhere. This plan was criticized last year because there is no assurance that when the settler has spent his money he will not come back for relief. It is as effective as any other device for getting the settler out of the purchase area but does not solve the human problem. (2) He selects another farm in a good farming area perhaps with the guidance of the Resettlement Administration. (3) He is definitely helped to relocate in a better farming area. This is called the "infiltration method." (4) The transplanting of a group of farmers into a planned community. This fourth form received much attention in the two earlier publications of the Resettlement Administration. Much was made of the cooperative features and the supplementary manufacturing and processing plants. In the second publication it was proposed to give the homesteader only a house and plot for growing things for home use. The rest of the land is to be owned by the community corporation. Recently less has been published on these model colonies and the cooperative feature is not so much in the foreground.11

Nevertheless, the more recent publication quoted above states that "86 projects are being set up where about 10,000 farm families will have new economic, social, and educational opportunities."12 It is not clear whether these are planned communities or infiltration settlements. It is also reported that more

12 "What the Resettlement Administration Has Done." November 1936.
than 4,000 rural homes are now under construction and that 2,143 farm families are already occupying homes built by the Resettlement Administration.

Earlier in the pamphlet one reads of 19 rural resettlement projects as completed and 2,695 rural homes built and construction going on in 44 additional rural community projects. These figures are also ambiguous; they do not seem to include those relocated on already established farms on which no new buildings had to be constructed.

A demonstration tenant project is also under way for the resettlement of 1,000 selected tenant families in 10 southern states. The purpose is to offer tenants a chance to own a farm. It is not clear from this statement how much is accomplishment and how much is still promise. All of which emphasizes what was said before that there are very few data on which to appraise the work of the Resettlement Administration, and what little there is is vague and subject to several interpretations.

A statement in a publication of the Administration that "these farmers are poor, not because they have suddenly become shiftless and lazy but because their farms simply cannot be farmed at a profit," indicates that the magnitude and nature of the task of relocating all settlers within a given tract was not appreciated. When it comes to resettling an entire community it will be found that there is not only submarginal land but there are also submarginal people. An analysis of the date on 140 nonconforming land users living in the restricted districts of one northern Wisconsin county indicated that only 30 were in a physical condition, had the ability to farm and had the finances to be trusted on a commercial farm with 20-30 years time to amortize their obligations. A similar number had the age, experience and physique to be considered eligible for a forest farm homestead project. The same situation was encountered in Minnesota in the Lake of the Woods resettlement project. Quoting from a report on this project:

"Some of the settlers were good farmers, some industrious but untrained as farmers, others shiftless or lazy, some even lawbreakers. Some owned their land and had their taxes paid, some held title to their farms but had reduced their equities by borrowing and some were so far back in taxes that they had no equity. Some were homesteaders who had not improved their claims, some were renters, while others were mere squatters who had moved onto the land of absentee owners without any right, or onto

18 "Resettlement Administration," 1936, p. 11.
government land with uncertain rights or none. Some lived by stealing timber from the land of nonresidents or of the state.

"About a fifth of the settlers are able to care for themselves without assistance from the Resettlement Administration, taking their equity in cash and making their own arrangements for resettling near the Forest Area, or moving away from the county. About a third of them are unfit to farm, being aged, widowed, or in ill health. This leaves about half who can farm and desire to do so, but who need assistance in securing land and equipment, and often subsistence while beginning development of their new farms. Most of those unfit to farm were already permanent relief cases. So with them the problem is to arrange for their resettlement in the same county as no other county is willing to accept them as new settlers. Some of these have a small equity from the land they held in the Forest Area, and this equity is conserved and used for their support, while their care must be made as light a burden as possible on the county. For this reason they are located either in or near the villages, the cost of their land and buildings being kept low and the title to the land retained by the county."

These illustrations indicate that it is comparatively easy to set up a colonization area and from a long list of possible clients select the cream. It is another job to plan for the future of the lame, the halt and the blind that may live in a given area, whether it is a resettlement project area or the restricted districts of a zoned county.

Herein lies the danger of any "demonstration project." It can only demonstrate the possibilities of resettlement of settlers of a specific grade and under a given set of conditions. Furthermore, there is always the temptation to select the right people to make the demonstration a success and omit those who might not "fit in." If the demonstration tenant projects are for selected tenants they may not throw much light on the problem of solving the sharecropper situation.

The orders from Washington also call for the equipping of the houses with all modern conveniences surpassing those to be found in thousands of farm homes in our better farming areas, and yet expect the settlers to pay for them. This would be a task for good farmers on good land, to say nothing of fair farmers on second grade land as is often the case of projects located on the edges of the submarginal areas. As stated above, this was not the

14 R. M. Pinckney, "Resettlement in Northern Minnesota," Mimeographed.
plan of the Forest Farm Homesteads Corporation, nor is it the plan of the project being carried out on the Lake of the Woods project. Mr. Pinckney states: "In all cases it is planned to give the client the best possible chance to meet his amortized payments as they become due so as finally to own his farm free of debt. It is held that this is sufficient reason for eliminating some of the refinements in equipment and surroundings that will be desirable when they can be provided out of income, but which other settlers already in these communities cannot afford for themselves. It should be recognized that to provide these resettlement clients with facilities that their older neighbors do not have may prove a handicap to them both because of the cost they must repay and because the settlers already there may look upon them as an unduly favored class rather than as self respecting workers."¹⁵

It should be said of this project that it was set up under a State Rehabilitation Corporation under the old FERA and functions under the original set-up, although the management has been transferred to the Resettlement Administration. Its success is therefore due not so much because of the RA but in spite of the RA.

Dr. Gray stated last year that public acquisition alone cannot correct and prevent maladjustments; besides to purchase all misused land would be an impossible task for federal and state governments. The National Resources Board recommends the retirement of 75 million acres from arable farming or 8 times the area of the 208 projects, and 25 times as many families would have to be relocated as are being bought out under present plans. He suggests zoning as specially adapted to undeveloped areas with scattered settlement, high governmental costs and where nonconforming users can be assisted in relocating through public acquisition programs. The reason for setting up purchase areas, he says, is because all the states but one lacked a rural zoning program.¹⁶ However, the same rigid program of purchase areas was set up in Wisconsin as in the other states even though it offered an excellent opportunity to coordinate the resettlement program with zoning by relocating the nonconforming land users.

In Wisconsin there are now practically five million acres of land closed to agriculture in 23 zoned counties. The official lists of nonconforming users of 22 counties for which such lists are available indicate that there are 1,898 families now living in the

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¹⁵ R. M. Pinckney, op. cit.
¹⁶ Gray, op. cit.
restricted districts, i.e., the forestry and recreation zones. Many of them are isolated and are the cause of excessive public expenditures. Zoning does not cure this situation; it merely prevents future costs. To relieve the counties of these burdens and to salvage the settlers themselves, relocation is necessary. It should be emphasized that relocation of nonconforming users is even more urgent than the resettlement of ordinary isolated settlers. The latter can always live in the hope that others might move in and help form a community. The nonconforming user has no such hope. The ordinance forbids further settlement. Zoning "freezes" the population pattern and the stranded settler tends to become more and more isolated. In one case a town refused to build a road for two settlers, saying the area was zoned and they could not afford to spend $500 for two families. In this case the town helped to relocate them in an unrestricted district.  

Some planners also feel strongly that for the safety of zoning itself all nonconforming uses should be abated. There is always a threat of violation of the ordinance if nonconforming users are permitted to stay.

It is necessary to buy less than 2,000 farms and about 200,000 acres of land to remove agriculture from 5,000,000 acres of northern Wisconsin land, more than half of the area purchased under Resettlement. However, it is not necessary that all of the 2,000 nonconforming users should be relocated. Some live near the edge of the districts and do not cause any more expense than their neighbors across the line in the unrestricted district. Other farmers live near resort owners and constitute a fair sized community. To remove the farmers would merely increase the isolation for the rest. Probably not more than 800 cases are critical from the standpoint of their own welfare, the cost of public services, and the safety of the zoning movement. Many of these nonconforming users expected to be resettled ever since the Forest Farm Homesteads were proposed. Now they are threatening to have the boundaries of the zones changed unless they are bought out. One such case is becoming critical and we have hopes that the purchase can be made through the Forest Service. Other counties have relocated settlers with their own meager resources.

Resettlement officials are aware of the need of coordination of zoning and resettlement. In fact the Administrator himself commented on the Wisconsin zoning and Texas Wind Erosion acts

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as "essentially neighborhood laws for mutual protection. The Federal Government with its Soil Conservation Service and Resettlement Administration merely follow along and attempt to help." In a later publication he speaks of a more intelligent method of handling tax delinquent land, rural zoning, the guidance of private settlement and supervision of credit as technique which in time should replace federal purchase as the most effective and economical way of correcting abuses. In spite of this there has been no attempt to adjust the Resettlement program so that the nonconforming users might be relocated, except where they also live in a regular area. I can understand the reluctance to buy land in restricted districts whose existence depends upon the action of a county board elected by popular vote for one year and highly responsive to local pressure. The ordinance can be rescinded or amended and the districts changed without much trouble. There is no guarantee, at least in some counties, that the ordinance will be enforced, neither has the constitutionality of rural zoning been established in the courts. It is still an experiment, but so is the Resettlement Administration. It does not have to buy out any one unless it is satisfied that it is a deserving case and it can set up restrictions and conditions under which it will function in any county. If this were done it would strengthen instead of weaken the faith in zoning and stiffen the backbone of those who are charged with its administration.

Instead of buying all in a given area, whether or not they are high cost settlers or on the worst land, if these 800 worthy cases could be relocated the problem would be attacked from the human instead of the land angle. Suppose the Federal Government had a few scattered tracts on its hands which could not be made a part of a federal forest or a game preserve. What of it? The United States now holds remnants of the public domain in the Lake States and it doesn’t seem to worry anybody. By zoning first the door is closed to future settlement. There is no need to buy all the land in the restricted districts. Through the Forest Crop Law, trading of land and relocation of settlers, the land can be directed into the uses permitted within the district. Relocation must be carried out in cooperation with the local bodies involved in zoning and planning.

Undoubtedly a new realignment of the functions of the Resettlement Administration is in the offing. This should offer the op-

20 Rexford G. Tugwell, "Down to Earth" Current History, July 1936, p. 34.
portunity to set it up under congressional action and under the Department of Agriculture with whom it has been cooperating. It must be put on a long time basis divorced from all other purposes except the resettlement of people on submarginal land or those settlers which are causing excessive public costs, as the first objective and the retirement of the land from agriculture as the second. Wherever a state zoning program is in operation the resettlement and land purchase program should be synchronized with it to the extent that stability of the program is guaranteed to the Resettlement Administration. Decentralization of authority and of responsibility must definitely be a part of the reorganization of the Administration, not because this is a question of states’ rights but because the nature of the job demands it. There is still too much direction from Washington and too little adjusting of the program to local needs, institutions and conditions. In some cases there is also too little cooperation with state agencies in research and in carrying out the programs. It is impossible to build rural communities, lay out farms or even build houses by long distance control. Whenever such jobs are done by the people with their feet on the ground, literally and figuratively speaking, the job will be done by simply going ahead and doing it.

DISCUSSION BY C. H. HAMMAR

Like Professor Wehrwein, my contact with the Resettlement Administration is that of an outsider. I may therefore be able to contribute to the discussion only disappointingly. I want to state at the outset that my feeling toward the work of resettlement is sympathetic and any critical remarks that I will make should be interpreted in that light. The great objective of the Resettlement Administration is to shift the attitude toward rural land settlement from an essentially exuberant and uncritical to a critical stage. While there is abundant need for effort in this respect, I believe there is further need to look at the methods, techniques, and implementation of this program particularly now that it seems to be moving in as a permanent part of our governmental set-up.

One of the questions that has posed itself to me from the beginning and that I have never found adequately answered is: Just where among the many federal agencies does the Resettlement Administration fit in? It seems to me that some of the problems raised in Dr. Wehrwein’s paper arise from a failure to distinguish clearly the answer to this question.

The niche that resettlement must occupy appears to me to be a narrow one. In its rehabilitation aspects it must fit in above the relief program but below that of the Farm Credit Administration. There appears to be some room for constructive work here, but it is a legitimate question to ask whether the whole field might not be less confusingly covered by extending relief upward a little and farm credit downward a little and thus