

Introduction: An Attempt to Revisit the 1930s

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I

On the third of June, 1984, more than two hundred men and women from all over the United States came to a small town called Roosevelt, which is located in central New Jersey, southeast of Hightstown and about 18 miles east of Trenton. They participated in a reunion party at a schoolhouse standing at the center of the town to remember their childhood there. Bernarda Shahn, widow of the artist Ben Shahn, was one of the participants (Ben Shahn died in Roosevelt on March 14, 1969). The party was held in the library of the schoolhouse, on the wall of which the participants found, as they had seen in their childhood, a 55-foot mural painted by Ben Shahn. The fresco showed immigrants arriving from Europe, entering factories and joining unions. In a corner of the mural was a portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In addition to the portrait, in front of the schoolhouse was the sculpture of the Roosevelt Memorial. *The New York Times* reporter Lisa Belkin described this meeting as follows:

Nearly 50 years ago, 200 unemployed Jewish garment workers—most of them from New York's Lower East side—each scraped together \$500 and

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brought their families here for a federally sponsored experiment in communal living.

For that price each family was allowed to live in a single story boxlike house, join a food cooperative and work in the fields during the summer and a nearby garment factory in the winter.

More than 200 children of those settlers held their first town reunion today in the schoolhouse they had once attended. They said they found only traces of the past in the present.¹

The town of Roosevelt was originally called Jersey Homesteads. The building of Jersey Homesteads was planned in 1933 by Benjamin Brown, an idealistic social planner, as a new colony for the Jewish needleworkers in New York City under the Great Depression to settle. The actual construction began in May 1934 as a federalized program controlled by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, Public Works Administration, one of the New Deal agencies headed by Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior. Empowered and funded by Section 208 of the National Industrial Recovery Act, from 1933 to 1935 the Division of Subsistence Homesteads developed about fifty such homesteads projects throughout the nation. Section 208 defined the objective of these projects as "to provide for aiding the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers," in other words, to resettle the unemployed or poor families both in cities and in rural areas.² The Jersey Homesteads program was one of those projects. It had a distinguishing trait, however, in that the Jersey Homesteads was the community to be settled by a comparatively homogeneous population with strong religious ties. As mentioned in the above report of *The New York Times*, the two hundred unemployed Jewish garment workers in New York City had applied for the planned Jersey Homesteads resettlement in 1933, each paying 500 dollars to join in the communal project. The money went to the original sponsors, including Brown. The settlers were almost all of foreign extraction, emigrating mainly from Eastern Europe. And, they were all the members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

It took, however, about three years for the town to be completed far behind schedule, due to several disagreements and controversies between the original sponsors, the garments unions and the federal agencies. When all the homes for the settlers were finished in early 1937, the final construction was under the control of the Resettlement Administration's Construction Division, a New Deal agency headed by

Rexford G. Tugwell, an Assistant Secretary of the Agriculture. In all, the federal government provided about \$500,000 for the construction of this town.³

Paul Conkin, the only scholar who has ever examined the history of Jersey Homesteads in detail, vividly describes the situation of the early town in his work of 1959. “The first moving day at Jersey Homesteads was on July 10, 1936, when seven families arrived after dark.” The fifty-mile trip from New York City was delayed by a bridge that was out of commission and by the loss of three trucks in heavy traffic. However, by July 1936, “the first seven of the flat-roofed bungalows were occupied.” And later, most of the other 193 homes were completed by January 1937. “As finally completed, the town section of Jersey Homesteads contained 200 white, concrete-block homes of from five to seven rooms, located on small homestead plots of approximately one acre.” “The homes, although not beautiful from the outside, included modern baths, oil furnaces which air-conditioned the homes in summer, and electric refrigerators. Each homestead had a combination garage and workshop.” “The town contained the garment factory, a modern sewage disposal plant, a water tank and water lines, a town hall, which also contained a day nursery and library, a combination elementary school and community building, a cooperative store and butcher shop, a clothing store, a tearoom, and a medical clinic.”⁴

I visited this town on August 30, 1987, to see with my own eyes what it was in the late 1980s. Surrounded by the forests and farms, the town was still small—with a population of about 850 people. And there were only about 300 more homes than those originally built by the Resettlement Administration. Most of these homes had changed little in appearance since they were first built in the 1930s, for they were still the same white one-story boxlike concrete houses. These houses were so different from what we normally see in most American small towns that one could immediately feel this town’s unique history. The homes were arranged within two residential areas. The north-south running Road 571 divided the town into two almost perfectly shaped half circles. The county road was also the town’s main street. At the center of the town were the schoolhouse and post office, which had many visitors. Also, there was one synagogue called Roosevelt Jewish Center; and even though the Jewish population was smaller than the Christian population in the 1980s, there was still no Christian church. Finally, the 100 feet by 220 feet garment factory, which was at the west

side of the town, seemed no longer in operation.

Again, according to Conkin, the early Jersey Homesteads in the 1930s was also a true community with a cohesive, socially active citizenry. During the time, the federal government held the titles of all concrete-block homes in the town, and the homesteaders rented their homes from the federal government for about \$12 to \$16 a month. But, on the other hand, the settlers organized their own cooperative association to operate the garment factory, which was completed in 1936, and the other ninety-seven homesteaders also formed an agricultural association. In order to make the homesteads economically self-sufficient, the original sponsors planned that about one-fourth of the homesteaders were to work the farms and service the stores, and that the others were to work in the factory. Thus, both through their strong desire to begin life anew in a new colony, and through their actual cooperative arrangements, early homesteaders developed a close bond of kinship. Conkin states:

In the community everyone knew everyone else, and house doors were never locked. Numerous social organizations were quickly organized. . . . There was a dramatic club, a junior league, a sewing circle, a baseball club, and a regular cultural evening. In spite of the lack of steady employment, none of the homesteaders wanted to return to New York City. When economic necessity forced homesteaders to move, they always mourned the loss of friends and the pleasant social life. Jersey Homesteads, as much as any other New Deal community, was a well-defined social organism, with a character and a soul all its own.⁵

Now, more than fifty years have passed since the birth of Jersey Homesteads in the 1930s. The cooperative association organized to operate the garment factory collapsed as early as 1939 because of poor management, and yet the factory continued to operate but under private ownership. The farms, on which the settlers expected to earn cash profits by mainly raising the flowers, were also auctioned off in 1940, so the agricultural cooperative also collapsed. And the control of the federal properties in Jersey Homesteads was transferred first from the Resettlement Administration to the Farm Security Administration and, later, to the Public Housing Authority, which finally liquidated most of the federal investments in Jersey Homesteads by selling the homes to residents and others just after the end of the Second World War. After liquidation, the homesteaders decided to change the name of the town from Jersey Homesteads to Roosevelt, New Jersey. Thus,

the name of Jersey Homesteads, as well as an experiment specific to the 1930s America of making a new cooperative community for a small number of people to resettle, disappeared from the map.

Let us go back to the reunion held on June 3, 1984, at the schoolhouse in Roosevelt. Many former residents as well as the present ones said that the town had changed in many aspects from what it was in the 1930s. *The New York Times* reporter Belkin notes:

The population of the town is still less than 900, though most are now commuters rather than needleworkers and farmers. Although the original houses still stand, most have been modernized and expanded, and now sell for about \$60,000. The garment factory closed long ago, but 50 families still run a food cooperative. The town is not as Jewish nor as liberal as it was at the start. And, the returning children say, the old sense of purpose is missing.

“My father was a hat blocker and a specialist,” said Goldie Grushka Rabinowitz, who moved to the town when she was 9 years old and moved away when she was 16, “We were poor, but we never knew we were poor. We felt we were an intellectual elite.” “There was a spirit, an excitement that couldn’t have lasted forever,” she continued. “Roosevelt is still special. But it’s not as special. . . .”

“There was a moral code that was never spelled out, but as kids we understood it,” said Helen Topal Barth, who moved to Roosevelt in 1936 when she was 3, left to get married in 1951 and returned in 1960 to raise her three children. “There isn’t the sense of being an example to the world. . . .”

But Frieda Anish, a former school board member who has lived in Roosevelt for 36 years, had a different view: “My feeling always was that Roosevelt was a microcosm of the country. Now the country’s changing, so Roosevelt has to change. But it’s still like a small town. I’ll never live anywhere else.”⁶

II

The twenty-fifth annual convention of the Japanese Association for American Studies was held on March 29th and 30th, 1991, at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. The program included a session entitled “Revisit to the 1930s,” with papers presented by Professors Eiichi Akimoto, Fumiaki Kubo, and Reiko Maekawa. We are very proud that the three speakers are also contributing articles on the 1930s to this issue of *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*. Also, Professors Yugo Suzuki and Yoko Yasuhara, who were not speakers there, con-

tributed articles to this issue independently of the session.

Let me make a brief comment on the reason why a session featuring “Revisit to the 1930s” was planned for the 25th annual convention of 1991. In 1967, at the first convention of the Japanese Association for American Studies, there was a session on the 1930s. A quarter century has passed since the first convention, which was one reason why we planned another session on the 1930s for the 1991 convention and named it “Revisit to the 1930s.” However, the passing of time was not the only reason that we again paid attention to this decade. Recently some Japanese scholars have published remarkable works on New Deal policies and American society in the 1930s. These works were so stimulating that we decided to take up the 1930s again as one of the main subjects to be discussed at the 25th annual convention. Fortunately, two of those scholars who have recently published studies on this era participated in the convention: Eiichi Akimoto wrote his book called *Nyu Diru to Amerika Shihonshugi* [The New Deal and American Capitalism] in 1989; and Fumiaki Kubo also published *Nyu Diru to Amerika Minshusei* [The New Deal and the American Democratic Politics] in 1988.⁷

While Akimoto, an economic historian, and Kubo, a political scientist, do not necessarily agree with each other in their understandings and estimates of the New Deal policies, their works exemplify an important tendency in recent Japanese scholarship on the American political thought and economic history in the 1930s. Particularly important is their efforts to see the 1930s America from a comparative perspective. This is to say, they argue that in order to understand America in the 1930s it must be seen within the context of the changes that were taking place throughout the world in the 1930s—which was the turning point of the 20th century world history. Akimoto emphasized the perspective that, even though the 1930s suffered under the Great Depression, the various social movements and thoughts in the 1930s must be considered within the current of the mass-consumer society which had been developing in the United States since the beginning of the 20th century. Kubo also argued that the New Deal ideology was far more diverse than previously perceived. Kubo pointed out that the ideas of Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture in the 1930s, should be analyzed in relationship to the contemporary political thoughts in several European nations, especially the trends in Sweden toward expanding the social welfare system.

Needless to say, the 1930s was a decade of worldwide economic crisis. Many people in the world, as my short history of Jersey Homesteads suggested, were compelled to change their lives in a variety of ways. Thus, the 1930s was also an era of so important political and social changes that we could be permitted to think of the decade as the period in which our modern society took form. Now, fifty years after the era, we are again in a time of crisis. There are dramatic challenges to the basic political and social values of the 20th century. Many societies face great changes, or even a possibility of collapse. The forces behind these changes are the rapid transitions in the technology and international relations. So, it is very natural that we should go back to the 1930s to clarify our own thoughts and to see our era in a historical perspective. The past residents of Jersey Homesteads might join in the reunion party not only to recall their childhood there but also to compare their present lives with their youth. There is no doubt that the 1930s was such an interesting decade that it deserves not only a visit but many more revisits.

I would like to thank Prof. Marius B. Jansen at Princeton University, without whom this essay would have been impossible. It was with his advice that I got interested in the town of Roosevelt.

¹ Lisa Belkin, "Reunion: Commune is Recalled," *New York Times*, June 4, 1984, section B, p. 2.

² *U. S. Statutes at Large*, Vol. 48, p. 25.

³ Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266; *New York Times*, July 11, 1936, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

⁶ Belkin, *op.cit.*, section B, p. 2.

⁷ Eiichi Akimoto, *Nyu Diru to Amerika Shihonshugi* [The New Deal and American Capitalism] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1989); Fumiaki Kubo, *Nyu Diru to Amerika Minshusei* [The New Deal and the American Democratic Politics] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1988).