

**Constructing Ideal Families in Ideal Communities:
The Case of Arthurdale, West Virginia**

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I

Localized communities are often considered natural venues for reshaping the institutional environments within which work and family commitments are negotiated. Structural lags between families' realities and maladaptive employment policies are generally seen as the result of broad historical shifts between agrarian to industrial and urbanized and thence to postindustrial modes of production (Moen and Yu 2000). But the political and cultural sources of the institutional inertia that results from such shifts are often difficult to address at such broad levels of analysis. Researchers and policy writers thus often turn to localized communal entities, from city block organizations to cosmopolitan municipalities, as more manageable public realms in which to study, develop, test and adapt policies and institutions that will serve families adapting to the changing conditions of working life (Becker and Hofmeister 2000, Poarch 1998, Perrin 1998, Burns 2000).

But while local communities may seem perfect arenas in which to legislate and organize new work-family arrangements, the history of American communal experimentation in this area provides a number of cautionary tales (Brenner and Haaken 2000). As Alida Brill has demonstrated in the case of Lakewood, Ca., a planned community offering "a utopian vision of family and work life" evolved in time into a dystopia of frustrated expectations (Brill 1996: 98). As is typical of communal experimentation, Lakewood's residents suffered from a static vision of perfection unable to adapt to its changing circumstances.

Such cases of failed utopian planning may appear exotic and marginally applicable to larger questions of work-family policy. But such communal experiments often demonstrate the power of what Stuart Aitken calls "family fantasies," those mythic visions of ideal family life woven deeply into the fabric of everyday life (Aitken 1998: ch. 2). In the context of utopian experimentation, such fantasies can often model potent alternatives to prevailing family practices and institutions (Hayden 1984, 1981). Alternatively, attempts to realize family fantasies often foreground the myths and rituals of family life that underwrite these prevailing practices and their institutional supports. But revolutionary or conservative, utopian experiments serve their host societies by revealing the contours of possibility for institutional change. They isolate and offer for view possible ideals for motivating (or resisting) such change, and how these ideals may endure over time, even long past their apparent uses for adapting to changing realities.

II

This working paper presents my own ongoing research into the history of one such planned community: Arthurdale, West Virginia. Arthurdale was the pilot project in a series of experimental resettlement colonies developed by the federal government in the 1930s devoted to finding comprehensive solutions to economic and social crises of the Depression. The heart of the plan at Arthurdale and its sister colonies was a vision of integrated family and work life that would in turn form the basis of a cooperative "community idea (Wilson 1935: 273)."

This integrated vision of community, work and family carried both ideological and mythic commitments that served important cultural and political interests for New Dealers during the Depression. Ideological interests in demonstrating collective, cooperative community values were fused, at times uneasily, with mythic ideals of self-sufficient households embodied in

the figure of the ruggedly independent yeoman pioneer. Arthurdale was thus designed to demonstrate a “new pattern” of “dignified, wholesome, abundant living” to bring a generation of American families out of the Depression (Wilson 1934a: 84). The experiment at Arthurdale lasted only a few years. In many ways, the family fantasies enacted there in the 1930s endured beyond the government’s involvement at Arthurdale. In the past two decades at Arthurdale, however, a variety of stressors threatening the integrity of family and community life at Arthurdale have caused the distinctly mythic elements of family life at Arthurdale to resurface. The town has constructed a “living history” museum of its past that employs the myth of the homesteading family as a collective emblem of its enduring community life. In many ways, the museum effort has been a testament to the strength of community sentiment and organization at Arthurdale. But it also reveals how the community has mortgaged itself to a maladaptive family fantasy, one that nonetheless continues to bear important meanings for the growing numbers of visitors to Arthurdale’s “living” homestead.¹

Myth and ideology in the “subsistence homesteads idea”

I

The integrated vision of family, work and community planned at Arthurdale was a version of what Richard Slotkin terms a “myth-ideological system.” As Slotkin explains, “The continual social and cultural turmoil of modern societies creates a dialectic between myth and ideology - between the system of symbolizing stories that sustains, invokes, and carries traditional values and world views, and the rapidly-changing body of arguments generated by rising and falling classes and institutions - as they respond to the shifting relations of the modern political economy (Slotkin 1981: 610 - 611).”

The welter of mythic and ideological strands that underlay Arthurdale’s planning finds its clearest and most coherent outline in the writings of M.L. Wilson, an agrarian economist who was chosen as the first head of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in 1933.² This small agency had been created by Executive Order 6209 in June of that year to carry out the provisions of section 208 of Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act. Section 208 allocated \$25 million of the massive NIRA budget “to provide for aiding in the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers . . . for making loans for and otherwise aiding in the purchase of subsistence homesteads” (Lord and Johnstone 1942: 38).

Nowhere does the terse mandate of Section 208 define “subsistence homesteads.” Wilson’s first task was thus to define the term. To do so, he had to synthesize the agendas and motivations of a varied group of reformers who were parties to the planning effort. For while even the origin of the term is unclear, the legislation that created federal subsistence homesteads reflected a wide-spread and growing popular interest in somehow combining three long term reform goals - industrial decentralization, worker resettlement, and subsistence farming - into a single program of relief. Even before the Depression, Henry Ford had advocated something similar in his 1926 volume *Today and Tomorrow* (Ford 1926). During the deepening crisis, a mounting “back-to-the-land” movement saw several municipalities experimenting with worker resettlement on unused lands. As Governor of New York, FDR himself had expressed a keen interest in the idea; as President, he lobbied directly for Section 208, and followed its implementation closely.³

Wilson thus wrote for a cadre of reformers when he declared in early 1934 that the subsistence homesteads his Division was planning were to represent above all “a balance between urban and rural life . . . which will offer the crowning advantages of both . . . in a new structure of civilization” (Lord and Johnstone 1942: 43) Wilson had set his agency’s goals beyond immediate relief, though it remained a central goal.

The basic agenda he and his colleagues set was to develop a series of “demonstrational” colonies around the country that would model different variations on the themes of decentralization, resettlement and subsistence farming (Lord and Johnstone 1942: 42). At each colony, up to a few hundred destitute families would be provided with generous financing on new homes with land enough to maintain a modest system of household farming. In addition, these “homesteads” would be collected around either existing or relocated light industry in order to maintain “homesteaders” in a cash economy. Families to be resettled would need to come with a certain minimum income in order to insure their ability to pay back the loans they received to build and furnish their homesteads. As Wilson later noted, it was intended as “a middle-class movement for selected people, not the top, not the dregs” but simply down on their luck (Lord 1941: 695).

This basic planning framework provided the ground on which ideologies of community and myths of the homesteading family came into play together. To begin with, the new “community idea” to be instituted at each colony was an amalgamation of longstanding reformist agendas that had found a new currency in the social and economic crises of the Depression. The central theme of the subsistence homesteads community idea was “cooperation.” As James Holt has observed, “during the early years of the New Deal, “cooperation” was the Roosevelt administration’s watchword (Holt, 1975: 33).” In the most general sense, the word expressed New Dealers’ desire to reduce self-interest and generate compromise among the many constituencies affected by New Deal planning.

In the context of the subsistence homesteads, it referred specifically to plans for creating Populist-era style cooperative associations among homesteaders such that they might band together as economic and social units, i.e. communities. The rural/agrarian bent of the subsistence homesteads community idea was also the outgrowth of an anti-urban sentiment inherited from Progressive-era Country Life reformers (Bowers 1974). Wilson and many of his planning colleagues saw urban overcrowding as the root of a growing competitive individualism that contributed to the worsening crises of the business cycle (Shi 1985, McElvaine 1984). But, in his characteristically grand style, Wilson linked these concepts of cooperation with larger and more ambitious political and social agendas: “Co-operation will be the basis of our future society if we are to maintain our individual freedom and not bow to the force of a dictator. I believe that the subsistence homesteads community can well serve as a cradle for a new growth of the co-operative attitude” (Wilson, 1934b: 171 - 172). FDR himself seemed to invoke this new community idea in describing the political essence of his New Deal as a “spirit of neighborliness (Holt, 1975: 35).”

The mythic elements of the subsistence homesteads idea that were conjoined with the “community idea” also served the demands of the New Deal political economy, but in a less directly political way. A glance at much of the public rhetoric of the New Deal reveals a strong reliance on the figure of the “pioneer” with “New Frontiers” to explore.⁴ As Richard Slotkin argues, the narrative structures built around the mythic figures of the pioneer and the yeoman homesteader differ in important ways (Slotkin 1981). But both served, as myths do, to mediate deep tensions in American culture as it responded, through the New Deal, to the

glaring realities of an economic and social breakdown during the Depression. In brief, myths of pioneering and homesteading allowed Americans to maintain their faith in entrepreneurial ingenuity and independence while serving to introduce the new frontier of a regulatory welfare state then being blazed by New Dealers.⁵

Families in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads were officially termed “homesteaders,” but they also were referred to frequently in press releases and journalistic commentary as “pioneers.” But this was not empty phraseology. Like their ideological commitments to cooperation and community, Wilson and his colleagues devised elaborate institutions whereby these primary mythic metaphors would be extended into families’ daily lives. Further, much thought and energy went into combining homesteaders’ cooperative institutions with their roles as pioneers.

The basis of this mediation between ideologies of cooperative community and myths of homesteading was what Wilson called the resettled families’ “cultural inheritances, folkways and traditions” (Wilson 1935: 273). These fundamental folkways, according to Wilson’s 1934 article on “How New Deal Agencies Are Affecting Family Life,” had been weakened by decades of industrialization and urbanization. One of Wilson’s most far-reaching goals for the subsistence homesteads colonies was that they would provide venues for families to reinvigorate these traditions. But it could only be done communally, through a process of collective renewal of forgotten patterns of life. Thus would the cooperative attitude support each family as they independently pursued the economic, social and cultural fundamentals of 20th century homesteading. In sum, Wilson saw himself and his colleagues re-opening the Turnerian frontier, and thus saving American democratic traditions from the evident excesses of capital.

Arthur Dale and “pioneer study”

Given the myths operative within the subsistence homesteads planning, it makes perfect sense that the pilot colony of the program be located in Appalachia.⁶ By the 1930s, the eastern mountains had long served as the nation’s cultural attic, the “world we have lost” to many nostalgic for America’s pioneers and their rough-hewn but honest and practical ways (Pudup, Billings and Waller 1995: 13). The ground was fertile for experimentation with mythic American “cultural inheritances” and in fact long-used to cultural repair workers. It also had some of the most severely disadvantaged of the nation’s “industrial populations,” the colonies target groups.

I

In all, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads planned and built four colonies in Appalachia.⁷ They were intended at the outset to target unemployed coal miners stranded by capital flight that had begun even before New York markets collapsed in 1929. Arthurdale itself came to be through a series of events that began with Lorena Hickock's visit to the coalfields of Scotts Run, near Morgantown in northern West Virginia in 1933. She reported on the pestilent, squalid conditions in the camps to her friend Eleanor Roosevelt, who went to see for herself later that summer. Soon afterward, the First Lady tapped M.L. Wilson's new Division of Subsistence Homesteads to begin their first resettlement project for Scotts Run's miners and their families. She remained committed to the project, and pundits began referring to Arthurdale as the First Lady's "pet project," a charge she cheerfully accepted (Haid 1975: 268).

Through the fall, winter and spring of 1933 - 34, the new community took shape.⁸ With help from personnel drafted from West Virginia University and an American Friends Service Committee rehabilitation effort already underway at Scotts Run, the first fifty families had been selected for the project by February, 1934. Nearly all of these families came from Scotts Run, though a few had been chosen from mills, mines and farms closer to the site of the new town, on the Arthur farm in Preston County, about fifteen miles east of Morgantown. Families were selected for inclusion based on a variety of criteria. Though most were un- and under-employed when selected, they generally had a few hundred dollars in savings. Selection committees sought heads of households with different manual skills, including carpentry, metalsmithing, and crafts abilities, as well as farming experience. And they sought younger families with children and with good reputations with neighbors and bosses.

Finally, the entire population of Arthurdale was white, and nearly all were native born.⁹ The camps of Scotts Run had large African-American and immigrant populations. Many among these groups had made applications to the project's selection committees, according to some reports, at the behest of the First Lady, who nominally oversaw selection. She in fact desired an integrated community, an early signal of her developing role as the New Deal's consciousness on race matters. But strong opposition to integrating the community came from other quarters. On-site managers cited the extra-cost of building separate facilities for blacks, local newspapers voiced opposition to rehabilitating any but native whites, and some homesteaders themselves formally declared their opposition to integrating the community. Other subsistence homesteads colonies for blacks were then being planned, one nearby in Monongalia County. But only one of these projects was ever developed, and only a few years later.

The Division of Subsistence Homesteads subsequently adopted public policies stating that homesteaders would be selected with a view to keeping colonies culturally "homogeneous," within the limits of prevailing local community standards (Ghirardo 1989: 174). But while this policy only became official after Arthurdale, the subsistence homesteads idea would seem to have ordained it from the outset. As Arthurdale developed, it became clear that its homogeneous Scotch-Irish makeup provided a key element in its design as an experiment in community and family education through "cultural inheritance, folkways and traditions."

II

By June, 1934 the first fifty families were moving into their new homes. Over the next year and a half, another one hundred and ten homes would be built. Beyond the homesteads, the town also had a center complex of buildings, including administrative offices, a Center Hall that had been converted from an old country church, and facilities for the town's cooperatives, including a general store, barbershop, tea room, canning facilities, health care clinic, weaving room and furniture factory. There was an experimental farm run by agricultural extension agents from West Virginia University, and various outbuildings that supported the collective agricultural activities of the new homesteaders. The Center Hall and the old Arthur mansion served as temporary schoolrooms until a new school building was completed in 1936.

Families' daily lives at Arthurdale revolved around these structures in a pattern that was devised by on-site management to offer as many opportunities as possible to reproduce what Eleanor Roosevelt herself celebrated as the "community spirit" of "early pioneers" (Perlstein, 1996: 628). Virtually every aspect of homesteaders' lives was designed as part of a grand pedagogy in which the ideology of community and the myth of pioneer homesteading would be fused. Mrs. Roosevelt gathered around her a group of influential friends and reformers who "placed education at the core of their work. Arthurdale's dispossessed miners, Eleanor Roosevelt told a resettlement conference, "must be taught to live"" (Perlstein, 1996: 629).

In most ways, daily work at Arthurdale was largely cooperative but distinctly gendered. Husbands, wives and children did often share the work of the farming, which often included tending to livestock and chickens in addition to planting vegetable gardens and small stands of potatoes, corn and wheat. But domestic labors were strictly wives' domain. Male county agricultural extension agents guided husbands in their new roles as farmers, and female home demonstration agents coached wives in interior decorating and labor saving strategies for kitchen management and housecleaning.

These familial divisions of labor were extended into the community's cooperative labors. Men participated in the collective agricultural labors of the experimental farm, and often came together to help one another on projects around their individual homesteads. Women were gathered into a canning cooperative, and enlisted in a school lunch making program. Further, Arthurdale's cooperative cottage crafts industries were strictly gendered. The male Mountaineer Craftsmen's Cooperative Association, which had first been established at Scotts Run by the Friends Service Committee, provided many homesteaders' main cash income through the 1930s. The Mountaineer Craftsmen's Coop was one of many small furniture-making concerns that sprouted up in Appalachia during the late 1920s and early 1930s to feed an interest in urban areas in "traditional" Appalachian crafts. Arthurdale's women were enlisted in weaving classes where they produced traditional textiles for the town's cooperative crafts store.

As Jane Becker has argued, the label "traditional" takes on a charged meaning when applied to much of this work. What had "traditionally" been considered products of leisure became commodified through such ventures as the Arthurdale crafts shop, and the logic of commodity capital began to take over the means of their production. The Mountaineer Craftsmen's furniture was produced with industrial means and for wages, two conditions that seem not to jibe at first with the notion of traditional as applied here. To be sure, industrial labor had always been an integral part of the plan for homesteaders' employment at Arthurdale. But mediating industrial employment with mythic notions of tradition served not

only to commodify the latter. It also served to suture industrial employment into the space between home, work and community Arthurdale's planners wanted presumably to collapse as part of the overall structure of the project (Becker 1998).

Such "pioneer study" reached its fullest expression in the planning for Arthurdale's schools (Perlstein 1996: 632). To further the general pedagogical aims of the project, Mrs. Roosevelt and a committee of educators that included John Dewey tapped Elsie Ripley Clapp as Arthurdale's first principal of schools and "community manager." Clapp had been a student and assistant of Dewey's at Columbia, and had gone on to found an experimental rural school near Louisville, Kentucky. At Arthurdale, Clapp set about devising a program of education that would implement a classic model of Deweyan active learning and make it "function socially," as Dewey himself wrote of her experiment (Clapp 1939: viii). In her proposal for the school, Clapp wrote that "*The curriculum . . . should not be hampered by traditional and formal courses of study*" but that "*The community activities will constitute the laboratory through which the children will get their educative experiences . . . Lifelike problems will constitute the curriculum material, rather than the conventional school subjects*" (Clapp 1939: 73 - 74; emphases in original).

Arthurdale's children mimicked their parents' activities. First graders "farmed on the homestead," second graders built their own "Village of Arthurdale," and fourth graders went "pioneering in West Virginia" (Clapp 1939: 125 - 150). Enfolding school activities within the life of the town would immerse the children within the cooperative atmosphere of the project, already a model of twentieth-century pioneering. And insofar as the entire project was as Eleanor Roosevelt had indicated, a school for living, all homesteaders were in effect her pupils. Thus, as Director of Community Activities, Clapp oversaw the project's adult cultural programming - folk singing, dramatic productions, and handicraft work - intended to reawaken them to their fundamentally pragmatic "homogeneous Scotch-Irish" culture (Clapp 1939: 218). It was at both junctures - between children and their community and adults and their culture - that Clapp's pedagogic apparatus was designed to intercede. For, as Clapp wrote, "although they know a great many things about [their culture], the meaning of what they know is not clear to them" (Clapp 1939, 125). Clapp's task at Arthurdale consisted in forging a viable community out of the shards of past traditions that had nearly succumbed to the mines. But while the industrial economy had its place at Arthurdale, it was limned with homesteaders' cultural inheritances of yesteryear. Nowhere were the social and economic "folkways" of industrial capitalism directly critiqued; rather, they were simply meant to be fused and thus neutralized with more wholesome traditions. (Stack 1995: 126; see Perlstein 1996: 37).

At the same time, Clapp did intend to forge progressive community institutions as part of the collective life at Arthurdale. The pragmatic nature of their cultural forebears would be put to new use in the cooperative healthcare, well baby and school lunch programs Clapp devised for Arthurdale's families. Many had come from the mines with health and hygiene problems. And here Clapp was more direct in confronting the legacy of her charges' time as an "industrial population." Clapp and her colleagues at Arthurdale did not address directly the complex causes of homesteaders' ills. But they did offer progressive means for treating their conditions, orienting their plans consistently to helping homesteaders achieve the chief good of "the abundant life" (Haid, 1975: 176).

III

The fantasy of family life played out at Arthurdale thus adopted longstanding ideals of self-sufficient household production that collapsed the boundaries between work and home and extended them into an ideal of a culturally homogeneous community. As I have argued, this elaborate fantasy was shaped in many ways as a response to larger trends in Depression-era society and more specifically to the New Deal and its political agenda. But such a view does not diminish planners' sincere desires to come to the aid of families and communities in severe distress. Rather, it reveals how ideologies of community and myths of family together shaped the more immediate aims (from the planners' point of view) of relief and reform.

As I will show further, the family fantasy created at Arthurdale was able in many ways to survive. But the entirety of the experiment at Arthurdale only lasted a few years. My foregoing summary of the plans laid at Arthurdale began to unravel by early 1936. In January of that year, homesteaders voted to seek accreditation for their schools from Preston County, wanting a "regular" education for their children (Conkin 1976[1959]: 248). While Clapp had eschewed "traditional and formal" methods of schooling in favor of homesteaders' own putative traditions, they preferred to stay in line with prevailing practices, fearing their children would not find roles and skills adaptable to the world outside Arthurdale. Clapp soon left the project. Her health education programs were maintained for a time, though cultural education was soon phased out. A number of homesteaders regretted her leaving, though few missed the paternalism of her ideas and methods.

While these changes were taking place, Arthurdale's managers were busy trying to find regular industrial employment for the homesteaders. But through the 1930s, little steady work was available beyond subsistence farming and the crafts cooperatives, which could not employ the town's entire population. The trouble here was in part due to Congressional opposition to a proposal to make Post Office lock boxes at Arthurdale. After much debate, the plan was scuttled when certain key House members, who objected to the "nationalization of industry" (and the New Deal in general), blocked funding (Conkin 1976[1959]: 117). With this blow, and the continuing Depression, wage work was not abundant at Arthurdale until the war effort arrived in the form of a contract to make practice targets for fighter pilots in 1943.

The government had already begun selling off its property at Arthurdale in 1942. A majority of homesteads went to their original residents. A number were bought by families and individuals not directly connected with the original project, many having been vacated by homesteaders looking for work.¹⁰ The liquidation took five years, and was completed in 1947 with the sale of portions of the central complex of buildings to local residents.

IV

In important ways, the underlying pattern of work, family and community originally designed for Arthurdale survived into the decades after the government liquidated its stake. Families remained close knit as many of the original plots were subdivided to make space for new houses as homesteaders' children began their own families. New families also moved in, and land that had been reserved for new building was soon developed. Over the next three decades, the number of homes at Arthurdale had more than doubled from its original one hundred and sixty homesteads.

Though land became increasingly scarce, many families continued to farm and garden on a modest scale. At the same time, beginning in the early 1950s, industrialist J.W. Ruby

opened three factories near Arthurdale, allowing many of Arthurdale's families to find employment in local manufactories. This pattern of family stability, attachment to the land, and local work supported the ongoing development of Arthurdale's collective culture, i.e. its local community.

The Arthurdale school, completed in 1936, just as Clapp's cultural education program ended, became the town's main public building. The non-denominational community church begun by homesteaders in 1934 met there for more than two decades. But in a major milestone for the entire community, a new church was finally built on old project land with help from the Presbyterian Council. The Community Presbyterian Church of Arthurdale was dedicated in 1960. Eleanor Roosevelt, who continued to make periodic visits there, dedicated the church at what was her final appearance at Arthurdale. She took that opportunity to declare the entire experiment "a great success."¹¹

Most homesteaders no doubt agreed with her. They were proud of their accomplishment in "making good" on the government's investment in them. They had established a solid middle-class stability for themselves and their families, with home ownership, respectable educational opportunities for their children, and stable community life. And the memory of the mines and dirt-poor farms from which many had come, though rarely invoked, doubtless contributed to their pride in having established and maintained their families' security.¹²

Arthurdale: The Dream Then and Now

Over the decades since the government pullout, Arthurdale's maturing homesteaders and their children quietly negotiated something like their own version of the original family fantasy first planned at Arthurdale. But a series of events and communal developments that coalesced in the mid-1980s galvanized efforts among aging homesteaders and their descendents to make a more public avowal of their success in realizing the full fruits of M.L. Wilson's "middle-class movement." The recent culmination of these efforts has been the enshrinement of the myth of the homesteading family at Arthurdale in a ritualized re-enactment of the original family fantasy first scripted there in the 1930s. And, as I will conclude by showing, the myth of the homesteading family continues to bear directly on the structure of community at Arthurdale, though in distinctly altered ways.¹³

V

The issue of the town's success was in fact a nagging question for Arthurdale's residents from the very start of the project in 1933. Beginning in the summer of that year, just as they moved into their new homes, Arthurdale's homesteaders bore constant scrutiny from a stream of visiting journalists, bureaucrats, academics, public officials and merely curious (and sometimes jealous) tourists, all eager to pick apart the New Deal's vaunted "Utopia Unlimited" (Conkin 1976[1959]: 176). The town received a good deal of press, local and national, much of it very unflattering. Many New Deal critics used the town as an occasion to point to the Roosevelt Administration's tendencies toward overspending, poor planning, coddling of the unemployed, and even socialistic tendencies (Conkin 1976[1959]: 249). And many colorful accounts of bungled and extravagant planning at Arthurdale survived into the mentions the town received in early histories of New Deal social programs.

Homesteaders took notice of much of this criticism, and occasionally bristled at suggestions that the experiment had been a failure. But most weathered their town's reputation as a boondoggle quietly. They remained grateful to the project's planners, and to none more than Eleanor Roosevelt herself, but they accounted their stability and security as largely their own doing, and not a matter of mere planning, much less wasteful spending.

At any event, for decades little was made there of the town's storied past. Modest decennary commemorations of the town's founding were held, and the former First Lady did occasionally visit, though more as a family friend than as a public figure. But even privately, families did not dwell on their rise from destitute origins, the circumstances of their coming to Arthurdale, or their participation in a notorious New Deal social engineering experiment. Arthurdale's schools did not have any special programs devoted to the project's history. Long after the government left, the town's residents were content within their quiet anonymity.

VI

However, over the last two decades, this anonymity has steadily given way to homesteaders' and their descendents' growing need to make public witness of their "unique heritage."¹⁴ Beginning in 1984, Arthurdale began to reconstruct itself as a venue for the enactment of family fantasies, in the name of their community.

In that year, the Arthurdale's Women's Club planned a "gala event" to commemorate the town's fiftieth anniversary under the heading "Arthurdale: The Dream Then and Now." They pulled together a reunion of the town's surviving "originals" and their descendents, marking the occasion with a parade, speeches by Eleanor Roosevelt's son Eliot and Senator Jennings Randolph (who had supported Arthurdale as a new Congressman in the 1930s) and a dramatic reading of documents from Arthurdale's archives, housed mainly at West Virginia University in Morgantown (Williams and Rockenstein 1984).

By all accounts the event was a great success, and the sequel supplies the proof. While the idea for a reunion had been initiated by a few, highly motivated members of the Women's Club, it galvanized a community-wide grass-roots effort to establish more permanent and public recognition of the town's success. The Women's Club members used momentum from the event to draft local support among various public officials and civic leaders to establish the board for Arthurdale Heritage, Incorporated, a non-profit dedicated to buying back and preserving and restoring historic Arthurdale properties. They began a long and persistent drive for donations of money and in-kind labor to purchase and restore the

town's center complex of buildings, which had long fallen into disuse and disrepair. Finally in 1989, they held a mortgage burning for the last of these properties, and also celebrated their attainment of Historic District status from the National Register of Historic Places. Over the next seven years, Arthurdale Heritage continued to solicit donations, mostly from old homesteaders and their families, and gained increasing numbers of grants to finish restoration of the entire town center complex in 1996.

Within the restored buildings, Arthurdale Heritage maintains a museum of its origins with items donated over the years by homesteaders and their descendents. In the 1990s, the organization developed an interpretive strategy that relied heavily on "living historical" means of presenting the town's origins. The museum's board (made up of a combination of second generation homesteaders, academic advisers and newcomers to Arthurdale) developed costumed interpretations of life at Arthurdale during the 1930s. But unlike most living histories, the characters portrayed do not represent actual historical persons (except for occasional visits by Eleanor Roosevelt, as portrayed by a bookseller from Charleston, West Virginia). They were given fictional identities, lest they misrepresent the lives of anyone still living or close in others' memories.

This strategy of interpreting Arthurdale's past culminated most recently in the latest addition to the properties preserved and restored by Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. In 1998 they obtained the original house and lands of homestead E-15 (its address), one of the few that had had only minor alterations done. Restoration was complete within a year, and the house was furnished entirely in 1930s period style with donations from local families. A garden plot was dug, and animals moved into the old barn. At a ribbon cutting in the summer of 1999, its new "homesteader" couple, Jacob and Anna Born, took up residences there. As with previous living history presentations at Arthurdale, the "Borns" were fictitious personae, pastiches of many old homesteaders' stories. These identities were given to a couple who lived in the restored homestead rent-free in exchange for their weekends, when they donned overalls and gingham to portray the Borns to visitors. They also maintained E - 15 as a working homestead, he tending garden and the small menagerie, she canning and leading tours. Unmarried and childless, they occasionally borrowed a neighbor's little girl to portray their daughter "Betty" in order to complete the requisite homesteader family unit.¹⁵

VII

The culmination of Arthurdale's preservation and commemoration of itself has thus resulted in a ritual representation of the family fantasy devised for and in many ways lived by its original families. That these rituals take the form of one of West Virginia's more sophisticated and well-regarded living history museums attests more to the capacious cultural dimensions of that display medium than the mercenary intentions of Arthurdale Heritage, Inc.¹⁶ At no point in their long efforts were the creators of Arthurdale's museum spurred by profits or other such gain. The nearly two decades that the effort has endured has been sustained largely by the voluntarism of the town's residents, homesteaders, their children, and newcomers all contributing their money, time and a broad base of skills to the success of the museum. Among homesteaders, who began and led the early effort, the primary motivation was foremost a desire "to tell our own story, the way we lived it," in the words of Glenna Williams, a teen at Arthurdale in the 1930s and the universally acknowledged leader of the effort.¹⁷

But what lies behind and within this desire to re-stage a composite version of that story, in other words, the myth of the family, in the name of "the community"? A series of causes, more and less proximate, may be cited. To begin with, the simple milestone of Arthurdale's fiftieth anniversary seems to have been the most proximate catalyst for the ongoing commemorative activities. But the energy generated within this event itself has a variety of sources. By many accounts, aging homesteaders and their children had long harbored fond memories of the conviviality on the project in the 1930s. According to Mrs. Williams informed opinion, "Nobody ever forgot the day they arrived here. It was like coming from a world of black and white to one in technicolor."¹⁸ Though few apparently lingered on such events in family stories, the memories were amplified on the event of their reunion and explicit recognition of the chance they'd received to make themselves and their families anew fifty years previous.

The leadership of a few dedicated individuals cannot be discounted among factors that led to Arthurdale Heritage's success. In addition to Glenna Williams, to whom "you can't say no" as Arthurdalians are fond of saying, other leaders of the Women's Club were able to focus the powerful diffuse sentiments of pride and gratitude roused by the fiftieth reunion.¹⁹ Directing people's attention toward restoring the center complex motivated quite a few who were embarrassed by their appearance. Near ruin and standing on the main through road past the town, their restoration was seen as an important signal of the community's ongoing vitality.²⁰

Behind this desire to renew the community's image, however, I think lay another decisive factor, though one no one among those involved typically cite. In the early 1980s, the last of J.W. Ruby's factories near the town was closed. By no means did this devastate the town economically. But it left a large gap in employment opportunities in the local area, which many had to fill by traveling further to work. The close work-home-community life that had been maintained at Arthurdale beyond the government's pullout began to unravel just as the town was becoming a memory, with the second generation aging and their parents passing away. The pattern of life allowed to endure at Arthurdale for almost forty years was unraveling, which stressed familial identities that had been formed around this pattern.

VIII

There was thus a confluence of factors that spurred and enabled the production of what I have termed a ritual re-enactment of myths of family, work and community at Arthurdale. The preceding discussion spells out the most important factors motivating homesteaders, their children and long-time residents of Arthurdale to produce a collective memorial to their passing way of life. But while Arthurdale Heritage was devoted in the first instance to ritually preserving memories of Arthurdale's own collective pattern of life, the living history there is increasingly attuned to the broader significance of the homesteading myth. Certainly the performances at E - 15 bypass the claims of history even as they plug into the still vital image of familial solidity and security that so many Americans continue to fantasize about.

As John Gillis notes in his MARIAL working paper entitled "Our Virtual Families: Toward a Cultural Understanding of Modern Family Life," families today are increasingly fragmented, torn apart by the institutional demands of modern life. Like an array of distinctly non-familial organizations, however, the family itself constructs a virtual image of "The Family" to which it offers allegiance, often to the detriment of bonds between its members. This virtual family itself, the modern emblem par excellence of stability and security (invoked by organizations as various as political parties and corporate conglomerates), resembles more often than not a version of the fantasy at Arthurdale, i.e. the intact, self-sufficient homesteading family.

This is to say that Arthurdale, both in the 1930s and today, has served as a collective version of Gillis' virtual family. While Gillis concentrates his attention on the intra-familial consequences of this virtual image of family life, Arthurdale presents the power of the myth as it operates in the collective space between families, i.e. "community." For Gillis, the virtual family constantly threatens the possibility of actual family members forging real emotional bonds by offering an imagined but unthreatened and unthreatening facsimile of such ties.

At Arthurdale, there are analogous complaints that its virtual, mythic ideal of family has distracted residents from the real demands of community life. One past president of Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. strove during her tenure to institute cooperative child and elder care in the town's restored buildings, i.e. real community structures. Her ideas, as she argued, were as historically accurate as anything presented at E - 15. But while Arthurdale itself had been organized as a cooperative community, it was such in support of a myth of the family. This is not to say that Arthurdale stopped being a community in erecting E - 15. But its vitality as such has been enlisted in the service of a virtual image of stability and security, rather than into new institutions that might promise real benefits for its future families. The power of such collective representations should never be underestimated. But the will to create new images of the family that may gain collective assent and support is not the less important for that.

Notes

¹ This is an updated version of a paper delivered under the title *Ideal Families in Ideal Communities: Engineered and Performed Family Life on New Deal Community Projects*. It presents a similar thesis, but more recent findings at Arthurdale. My findings there will be incorporated into my dissertation on Arthurdale and another New Deal community, Aberdeen Gardens, near Newport News, Virginia.

The general thesis regarding myth and ideology on the early New Deal subsistence homesteads colonies holds for all thirty-three communities developed by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. Commemorative house museums similar to the one I will describe at Arthurdale have been built at Aberdeen Gardens and a third subsistence homesteads colony, the Cumberland Homesteads, near Crossville, Tennessee. My dissertation will compare the nuances of differences in the histories and motivations behind these commemorative projects. My thanks to everyone at the Emory MARIAL Center for their collegial support during my time there, and to the Sloan Foundation for supporting this research.

² The entire story of Arthurdale's planning would take into account other, and arguably deeper tensions and mediations it involved between visions of government and the role and scope of public policy at a crucial juncture in the development of a modern regulatory state in the U.S. Arguably, these tensions in political philosophy underlying the planning for Arthurdale contributed most to the ultimate failure of the experiment there. But while they provide a crucial context for understanding the town's entire development, I will be focusing here on myths of family and ideologies of community.

³

The information in this and the preceding paragraph is summarized from Russell Lord and Paul Johnstone. 1942. *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and Paul Conkin, 1976 [1959]. *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal community program*. New York: Da Capo Press.

⁴

New Frontiers is the title of Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace's volume of 1934, in which he advocates for something much like the subsistence homesteads (Wallace 1934).⁵

Paul Conkin has aptly summarized the underlying structure of the subsistence homesteads as a mediation between federalist Hamiltonian centralized planning and intentions to revive quasi-independent Jeffersonian agrarian republicanism. Both, of course, were central to the work of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. If anything, the centralizing tendencies in New Deal community planning became more and more apparent in later agencies' administrative structures, particularly in the Resettlement Administration under Rexford Tugwell.

⁶ Ralph Borsodi, a noted back-to-the-lander, had already begun his own self-help homesteading project near Dayton, Ohio, and received the first loan from the Subsistence Homesteads Division. But Arthurdale was the first actual colony planned from the ground up by the Division.⁷

The others were at Tygart Valley, near Elkins, West Virginia; Cumberland Homesteads, near Crossville, Tennessee; and Westmoreland Homesteads, near Greensburg, Pennsylvania.⁸

Most of the details of Arthurdale's history, except where otherwise noted, can be found in Haid 1975.⁹

There were a handful of families that were first-generation immigrants, a fact their descendants today hasten to point out when the subject of Arthurdale's segregation is raised (Author's interview with Jennifer Bonnette, Arthurdale, West Virginia, March, 2002).¹⁰

I have found no records of any departures for other reasons than seeking work elsewhere. It is entirely possible that some families left for other reasons, including dissatisfaction with the project as a whole, but I have found no documents to support such findings.

¹¹ Author's interview with Glenna Williams, Arthurdale, West Virginia, February, 2002.

¹² Author' interview with Glenna Williams, Arthurdale, West Virginia, February, 2002.

¹³ The following is based on a review of documents in the Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. archive, their quarterly newsletter, *Restoring Yesterday for Tomorrow*, and interviews with a number of residents at Arthurdale and others connected with the town's preservation efforts.

¹⁴ This is a phrase used in a program flier for Arthurdale's fiftieth anniversary celebration, which I discuss directly.

¹⁵ A young man whose tenure will end shortly replaced this couple after a year. That they were not married bothered a number of Arthurdale's older residents, who objected that this was not true to the historical reality of the town's founding, when all residents were married. They overlook the fact that the "Borns" themselves never existed, but this is but one example of the ways that Arthurdale's living history is inextricably linked, at least in the first instance,

with an entire ethic that proceeds out of the family fantasy so many homesteaders actually lived there for decades.

¹⁶ Diane Barthel has coined the term “Staged Symbolic Community” for such cultural displays as the one at Arthurdale. Her volume on Historic Preservation does an admirable job of explicating the general utopian significance of presentations of living history in the U.S. from Colonial Williamsburg to today. It may be noted here that Arthurdale and Colonial Williamsburg were in fact founded within a year of each other in the 1930s. This historical connection suggests the deep cultural significance of the rise of staged agrarian utopias during the Depression, and their continuing significance as popular bearers of myths of agrarian simplicity today, as Barthel argues.

¹⁷ Author’s interview with Glenna Williams, Arthurdale, West Virginia, February, 2002.
¹⁸

Author’s interview with Glenna Williams, Arthurdale, West Virginia, February, 2002.
¹⁹

Author’s interview with Deanna Hornyak, Charleston, West Virginia, March, 2002.

²⁰ Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. which drew in a broad base of civic and official public support for the preservation effort, focused on gaining Historic District status. Initially this drew some dissent from local residents who feared that it would amount to incorporation by other means. Independence in property matters is still a prized good at Arthurdale. But most opposition on these grounds was muted and passive. And gaining Historic District status became a very popular idea when it appeared to be the best way to halt an out-of-state company’s plan to do exploratory drilling for oil near the edge of the original site. With this, the preservation effort gained strength.

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