

The Voice of New Mexico's Rural Electric Cooperatives

enchantment

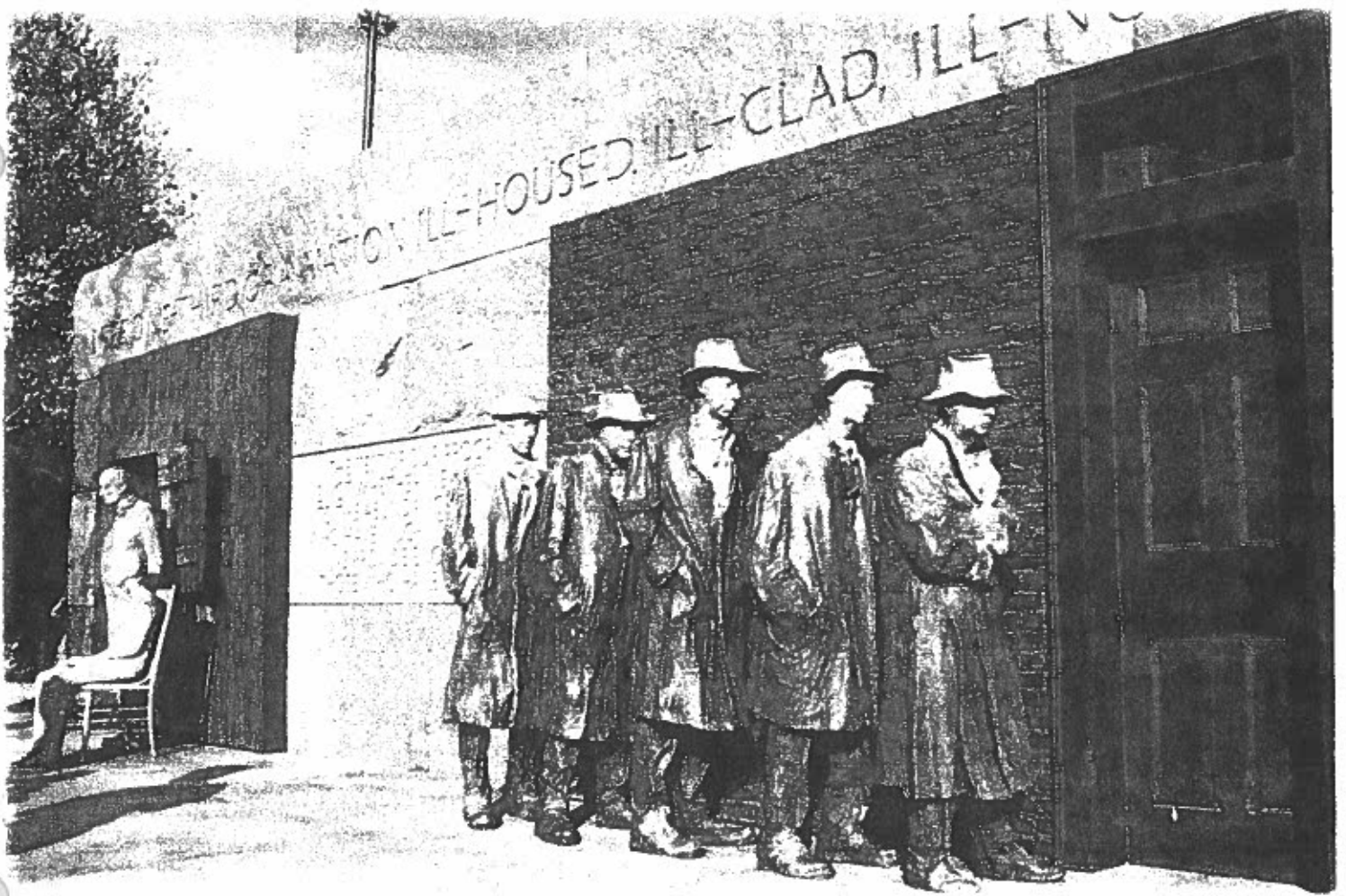
Kit Carson Electric Edition

Where are the jobs?

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MARCH, 2003

VOLUME 55, NO. 3



One out of every four workers was out of work. Many of the people who had jobs didn't earn enough to pay their bills. Soup kitchens struggled to feed the hungry. And a man in a wheelchair said he could put the nation back to work.

The nation believed him and elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt president by a landslide. He was inaugurated on March 4, 1933; called Congress into emergency session on March 9; signed the Emergency Conservation Work Act on March 31; and eight days later—and only 37 days after the inauguration, the first person enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps. The goal was to employ one-quarter of a million young men, twice as many as in the regular army itself.

For the next eight years, until World War II began and able-bodied men left for the military, CCC volunteers worked on public lands across the nation. While the CCC alone could not solve the nation's unemployment problems, it gave

Where Are the Jobs?

by Don Begley

much-needed work to over 3.5 million people during its short life.

Seventy years later, rural America still needs jobs. Unfortunately, the percentage of people who live in rural areas has dropped significantly since 1933: three out of every four Americans live in cities today while the split was almost 50/50 in 1930. (Forty percent of New Mexicans still live in rural areas but the split was three-to-one in 1930. In the 1790 census, 94% of America lived in rural areas.)

The shift from farm to city changed the nation's attitude towards rural areas. Popular

culture may romanticize living "close to the land" but people who work on rural economic development say they frequently cannot get their voices heard in the halls of government and business.

Carol Miller, executive director of the Frontier Education Center, knows the frustration first-hand. She's spent her career working on rural health issues, both as a government employee and as a community advocate. She says there is a growing attitude that if a person chooses to live in a rural area, they should put up with missing services and limited economic opportunities. She says, "If you don't have a certain number of people, you don't exist."

She cites Welfare to Work as an example. A community cannot qualify for job training funds under this federal program unless it can create at least 25 jobs. Miller says that's an unrealistic goal in many small communities, which means they cannot qualify for federal help. Headstart is another example of a federal program that smaller communities cannot use because they are too small or have too few children for the program.

"[A] focus on frontier is necessary because our smallest and most isolated communities face extreme hardships . . . It is the only national organization dedicated to the smallest and most geographically isolated communities in the United States... ."

www.frontierus.org



That doesn't mean rural communities cannot attract larger employers.

Rural Payday, an alliance of New Mexico communities that was developed in 1997 by Senator Pete Domenici has helped bring several call centers to the state creating 3,000 new jobs in the process. (The most recent success was the Penncro call center in Taos, which was profiled in the February 2002 issue of *enchantment*.) Governor Bill Richardson announced during his State of the State message that bringing jobs to rural New Mexico would be a top priority of his administration. And, the two leaders have joined forces in an effort they call Jobs First to increase quality jobs in the state. On February 19, they held a news conference in Santa Fe to announce an advertising campaign to attract companies to the state.

It's all part of a growing awareness that the nature of rural communities is changing rapidly. Just America's population has shifted to cities, rural people have changed jobs. Rural families no longer depend on farming and ranching to make a living; 90% of rural workers have non-farm jobs according to the Rural Policy Research Institute. Only 6.3% of rural Americans live on farms and 90% of their income comes from non-farm sources.

Unfortunately, says Miller, most rural people have low-paying, service sector jobs that offer minimal benefits like health insurance. She thinks America needs to "rebuild its consciousness about frontier communities" so there is greater understanding of the needs of rural America.

"Rural people pay for everything themselves • that other people take for granted," she explains. At the same time, she adds, "Nobody ever asks rural people what they would do [to develop their communities.]"

Photos: Opposite page, Depression era conditions are depicted in "the Rural Couple" and "Breadline" by George Seagal at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC. The quotation reads, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." Above right, Carol Miller in her office at the Frontier Education Center. Photos Don Begley. Right, the Camp Lemon CCC camp in Brandon, Illinois. Photo, courtesy Cliff Hammond.

Grassroots-based growth is critical to Miller. She expects federal and state budgets to be tight for the foreseeable future and says rural communities have to look for new ways to grow.

"We have to find the things that are regulatory or statutory [changes] that don't cost [new] money," she says. Then, rural communities will have a better chance to fund their projects.

That means leveling the playing field between rural and urban communities, she says. "We don't want more money [from the government];" she says, "we just want fair rules."

She cites a recent effort to improve health services in Tierra Amarilla as an example of how the rules aren't fair today. Thousands of visitors go through the area each year to enjoy the scenery and ride the Cumbres & Toltec Railroad. Many of them have health problems during their visits and strain local resources. However, federal regulations don't give small communities credit for the impact of tourists, so local citizens have to fund the health services on their own.


Santa Rosa faced a similar dilemma when it fought to save its hospital. Even though the com-

munity provides medical services for travelers on Interstate 40, the federal government wouldn't count them in its formula for funding hospitals.

"One of the biggest impacts on frontier communities is tourism," she says, "but federal programs won't let you count a transitory population

That's what drove Roosevelt to create the CCC during those harsh times so many years ago. He told Congress he wanted no new funds for the CCC; he just wanted to give ordinary folks an opportunity to work.

"The overwhelming majority of unemployed Americans, who are now walking the streets and receiving private or public relief, would infinitely prefer to work," he told Congress. "[The CCC] is not a panacea for all the unemployment but it is an essential step in this emergency."

There are no panaceas for rural job growth today, either. 

Turn to page 19 for more information on the 70th anniversary celebration of the Civilian Conservation Corps

