

Theme: Aftermath of Homesteading Act

Location: Kootenai NWR, Idaho

Reference: Speulda, Lou Ann, 1999, *Barn Remodeling and Headquarters Complex Evaluation Project*.

Kootenai NWR, Idaho – a result of homesteading in marginal lands, required another government program in the 1930s to move people to more productive lands. The Resettlement Administration worked to either move homesteaders to better farmland, or simply cashed them out, and converted the claims back to public lands. At Kootenai NWR, the reverse happened and the homesteaders were moved to farms created by the government.

At the Kootenai NWR headquarters complex, in Boundary County, Idaho there are seven main buildings, including a Gothic arch barn that was originally part of a farm built in 1939-1940 by the Farm Security Administration's Rural Resettlement Project. Known as the Boundary Farms Project, 37 farm units were created or augmented by the governmental program to move destitute farmers into more productive agricultural areas. The Boundary Farms project was one of only a few projects and operated until about 1945 when the program was closed. Subsequently, the farm was sold to private individuals and eventually transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1964.

Boundary Farm Project

The Kootenai River valley was chosen and “[T]he government carved 37 farms out of riverine pasture and timbered hill country. Residents of this project specialized in dairying. Each family received roughly 100 acres of loamy, riverine land for growing hay, oats, and wheat. Unfortunately, spring floods regularly ravaged these fertile farms” (Cannon 1996:3). The families were chosen from many different counties in Idaho; seven families were chosen from Boundary County.

The Boundary Farm project in Idaho was not the largest, encompassing about 8,104 acres, but was the most expensive to operate with a cost per farm estimated at \$21,393 (Cannon 1996:79). The extra cost associated with the Boundary Farms was caused by expenditures for community facilities including roads, canals, dikes, and bridges. The Kootenai River was difficult to control and caused considerable flood damage to the new farms. The government expended funds to repair the dikes almost annually. Because of the costs involved in the program and other political reasons the Farm Security Administration was closed in 1945 and its main functions reorganized under the Farmer's Home Administration. Many farmers chose to purchase their farms from the government and continued to operate while others sold out because of the poor returns and problems with flooding.

“During 1939 and 1940 new homes, barns, and chicken coops were built and water wells were dug. Northern Lights brought in electrical power in 1940, telephones came in the 1950s. Each family bought horses, dairy cattle, chickens, machinery, fencing material, seed, fertilizer and furniture” (Peterson 1987:97). The standard farm consisted of one or two Gothic Arch or Gambrel barns with four-pane sash windows. The placement and size of doors varied. The barns were not large, but utilized a standard plan and locally milled lumber. Houses were 1-story, gable-end, with windows usually arranged in pairs. A small monitor roof chicken house, a shed roof wood storage building, and a silo completed the plan. On farms that already had buildings the Farm Security Administration provided the plans and possibly the materials for constructing the barns and chicken coops. The most noteworthy building type is the Gothic Arch barns that still dot the valley.

The Kootenai NWR headquarters is located within the Boundary Farms Program of the Farm Security Administration. This unique program created a community of dairy farms in 1940 along the West Side Road. Evidence of this program is tied to the architecture which followed uniform design plans. The clearest association to the program is the Gothic arch and gambrel roof barns. Most of the houses have been altered, and the secondary utilitarian buildings such as chicken coops and wood sheds have been

modified or removed. The barns are distributed along the valley at each farm headquarters and evoke a sense of the regulation and attempts to “normalize” the resettlement of destitute families from all over the west. The government’s architectural designs inserted a bucolic dairying landscape in the broad Kootenai River valley. But, this plan was subverted by the uncontrollable natural conditions of high water flooding, a short growing season, and extreme winter temperatures.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The Kootenai NWR Gothic-arch barn retains its form, most of its original materials, and original placement. And, when the refuge barn is compared to other barns on the West Side Road that were built by the Boundary Farm Program, the magnitude and linkage with that Depression-era program is clearly defined. The Gothic arch barn has been determined eligible to the NRHP, based on criteria a and c, at the local level of significance, because of its close association with the Farm Security Administration’s Boundary Farms Program. The Boundary Farms was one of only 12 projects in the west where the government purchased land, built water control structures, provided plans for farm buildings and resettled farmers to the area. The government provided the plans for the Gothic arch barns along the West Side Valley Road and in an enclave on the East Side Road. The architectural style is not elaborate, but was designed for a dairy operation. The plans for a chicken coop, house, and sheds were also uniform and simple. The government’s architectural designs inserted a bucolic dairying landscape in the broad Kootenai River valley. But, this plan was subverted by the uncontrollable natural conditions of high water flooding, a short growing season, cold winter temperatures.



Aerial view of Kootenai NWR headquarters, 1960s.



Rehabilitated barn used for outdoor education classroom.