



---

Ralph Borsodi and the Agrarian Response to Modern America

Author(s): William H. Issel

Source: *Agricultural History*, Apr., 1967, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1967), pp. 155-166

Published by: Agricultural History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3739870>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Agricultural History Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Agricultural History*

JSTOR

RALPH BORSODI AND  
THE AGRARIAN RESPONSE TO  
MODERN AMERICA

In a democratic society such as our own, in which social well-being and economic prosperity are to be achieved without any denial of the principle of individual freedom—without any denial of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—the population must consist mainly of families living in the country and owning their own homesteads.<sup>1</sup>

Although reminiscent of Jefferson, this passage was written by Ralph Borsodi, a twentieth-century agrarian decentralist. In 1920, a time when America was moving to the city, Borsodi moved to the country, and his experience as a modern homesteader became the basis for his personal campaign to re-educate Americans and reform America according to his version of agrarian idealism. Like the Southern Agrarians, the Distributists, and the New Humanists, Borsodi wrote books and articles in which he attacked industrialism as a perversion of technology and natural resources, condemned urbanization as a denial of basic values, and advocated an economically decentralized social order.<sup>2</sup> In his writings Borsodi developed a plan for decentralization through self-sufficient suburban homesteads; he proved the plan to his own satisfaction on his seven-acre farm near New York City, and he challenged those who wanted “security, satisfying work, and independ-

WILLIAM H. ISSEL is a graduate student in American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned an M.A. in History at San Francisco State College.

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Borsodi, “A Plan for Rural Life,” *Agriculture in Modern Life*, ed. O. E. Baker, et al. (New York, 1939), 191–192. I am grateful to John L. Shover of San Francisco State College and Joel H. Silbey of Cornell University for critical reading of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Borsodi belonged to the tradition of “moral” agrarianism that was being displaced by “economic” agrarianism; Clifford B. Anderson discusses the differences in his “The Metamorphosis of American Agrarian Idealism in the 1920’s and 1930’s,” *Agricultural History*, XXXV (October 1961), 182–188. The ideas of the Southern Agrarians can be examined in *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand* (New York, 1930), and in Idus A. Newby, “The Southern Agrarians: A View after Thirty Years,” *Agricultural History*, XXXVII (July 1963), 143–155. See Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, *Who Owns America* (New York, 1936), for the Distributist position. Those unfamiliar with the New Humanists will find a good introduction in William Van O’Connor, *An Age of Criticism, 1900–1950* (Chicago, 1952).

ence" to follow his example. The Great Depression gave Borsodi a wider audience than he would have had in a culture of prosperity, and his reputation as a successful subsistence homesteader earned him a measure of influence in the back-to-the-land movement and the subsistence homestead program of the early New Deal.<sup>3</sup>

Borsodi was born in New York City in 1888. His father, William, appears to have been active both in the Single Tax movement and in Bolton Hall's "Little Lander" movement. Ralph was educated in private schools and became a consulting economist in 1908. Following his father's example, he became active in the Single Tax movement and was chairman of the New York State Committee of the Single Tax Party.<sup>4</sup> Thus, by 1918, Borsodi had become something of a dissenter. His advocacy of agrarianism and decentralization, however, grew not out of his family background and associations but out of his practical knowledge of subsistence farming. Between 1920 and 1927, Borsodi made himself an expert on modern homesteading on his farm in Rockland County, New York.<sup>5</sup> For a man who had spent his first thirty years in Manhattan, the experience was profound.<sup>6</sup> "That shift from urban to rural life," he later wrote, "led me to question the validity of the whole pattern of life to which America, the industrial nations of Europe, and now the whole world, is devoting itself."<sup>7</sup>

In the process of questioning the "whole pattern" of American life, Borsodi decided that suburban homesteading was a viable alternative to urban industrial life. He had found that he could lower his family's cost of living by "domestic production," and he analyzed his discovery in *National Advertising versus Prosperity* (New York, 1923) and *The Distribution Age* (New York, 1927). The combined costs of advertising and distribution, he argued, resulted in a twenty- to thirty-percent difference between the cost of home production and factory production.<sup>8</sup> Reasoning that home production was not only less expensive but that it also contributed to the maintenance of the family as an institution, Borsodi concluded that the good life was to be had only in a decentralized society of economically self-sufficient homesteads. Not content to restrict his observations to "the humdrum

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive description and analysis of the New Deal rural life experiments, see Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, 1959). Conkin credits Borsodi with being "one of the most influential agrarians or distributists . . ." (26).

<sup>4</sup> *Who's Who in America, 1952-53*, p. 253. For William Borsodi's views, see his letter to Bolton Hall published as an introduction to the latter's *A Little Land and a Living* (New York, 1908). Ralph Borsodi's Single Tax views can be examined in his "New York Singletax Convention," *The Public, A Journal of Democracy*, XXI (August 1918), 991-992, and "Land Tenure," *American Review*, VII (October 1936), 556-563.

<sup>5</sup> Borsodi, *Flight from the City* (New York, 1933), 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> As an economist, Borsodi specialized in marketing and distribution and was a consultant to large firms like Macy's. His work on double entry bookkeeping was published in 1922 (*The New Accounting* [New York, 1922]).

<sup>7</sup> Borsodi, *Education and Living* (Suffern, New York, 1948), vi.

<sup>8</sup> Borsodi, *Flight*, 10-19. See also Borsodi, *National Advertising versus Prosperity* (New York, 1923), and *The Distribution Age* (New York, 1927).

practicality of economics,” Borsodi expanded the ideas gleaned from his homestead experience into a philosophic statement which, he felt, was necessary “because philosophers generally seem to forget that the acquisition of food, clothing and shelter is prerequisite to the pursuit of the good, the true and the beautiful.”<sup>9</sup>

The central theme of Borsodi’s social philosophy was essentially negative: modern America was unnatural and ugly. According to Borsodi, industrialism and urbanization made difficult, if not impossible, the realization of “the comfort and understanding essential if mankind is to achieve an adequate destiny.”<sup>10</sup> He argued that comfort, understanding, and “an adequate destiny” could be realized only on self-sufficient homes away from the city, for city life hardened the individual against beauty and humanity.

It is a civilization of noise, smoke, smells, and crowds—of people content to live amidst the throbbing of its machines; the smoke and smells of its factories; the crowds and discomforts of the cities of which it proudly boasts.<sup>11</sup>

The “ugly” civilization, which deadened sensitivity on a personal level and destroyed human values on a social level, was the product of a destructive process that had accompanied the transfer of the machine from the workshop to the mill and the factory.

It is the factory, not the machine, which destroys both the natural beauty and the natural wealth of man’s environment; which fills country and city with hideous factories and squalid slums, and which consumes forests, coal, iron and oil with a prodigality which will make posterity look back upon us as barbarians.<sup>12</sup>

Factory production had no social usefulness, for, according to Borsodi’s analysis, the directors—concerned with survival in a profit-making system—produced nonessential goods and sacrificed quality and craftsmanship for quantity and uniformity.<sup>13</sup> The qualitative deterioration of consumer goods was only one way, however, in which the factory threatened American life. More serious were the social and cultural systematization and standardization which, argued Borsodi, were corollaries of industrialization: “those who are capable of creative work in the arts and the professions are forced to conform to repetitive cycles because the factory leaves open no fields in which they may exercise their talents and live.”<sup>14</sup> Borsodi refused to accept “the democratic dogma that the individual, no matter how gifted, must be subordinate to the welfare of the mass.” Such a dogma, he argued, was

<sup>9</sup> Borsodi, *This Ugly Civilization* (New York, 1929), Preface.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–199.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

inevitable in an industrial civilization, and would lead to "the destruction of any really desirable way of life for all of the race."<sup>15</sup>

If these long-range implications of a "factory dominated civilization" disturbed Borsodi, the more immediate dangers to life in America disturbed him even more. Inevitable in a centralized economic system, these dangers threatened both industrial workers and farmers. Mass unemployment, for example, was a condition of existence in an economy dependent upon rationalized and integrated mass production industries. Such dependence was inimical to a democratic society, because industrial workers might lose faith in "the social system which subjects them to such treatment."<sup>16</sup> Government intervention merely aggravated the problem; economic planners could not cope with "the inherent insecurity of industrial production," because they accepted the necessity of centralization. Furthermore, government planning meant bureaucracy, and bureaucracy meant even more dependence on a centralized social order.<sup>17</sup>

An industrial order characterized by centralization and bureaucracy meant periodic unemployment and systematic dependence for the industrial worker. For the farmer, it meant a baffling paradox of poverty amidst surplus. Borsodi saw the immediate cause of this agricultural dilemma in the farmer's unfavorable ratio of distribution to production costs, as well as in his poor bargaining position in the world market. These factors, however, were secondary, and the root of the problem lay in the American farmer's acceptance of commercial agriculture. Agriculture, argued Borsodi, was an art and a way of life, and "it is no more possible to treat agriculture as a business (without utter disregard of its intrinsic nature) than to treat art or religion in that manner."<sup>18</sup> By mechanizing production, the farmer had used machinery to his disadvantage, for large-scale cultivation not only increased his dependence on a cash crop, but it also placed him at the mercy of the commodity speculators serving the industrial system.<sup>19</sup> The farmer, like the industrial worker, the professional person, the intellectual, and the artist, was caught in a web of interdependence that could only be broken by an "industrial counter-revolution."<sup>20</sup>

Borsodi's plan for social reform in general, like his plan for agriculture, involved the decentralization of American economic and social life. The first step was to escape from the oppressive environment of the city.

When we take the place in which we dwell away from the country, deprive ourselves of fresh air and sunlight, green grass and trees—we deprive ourselves of what is an ele-

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Borsodi, "The Fallacy of Mass Production," *Review of Reviews*, XCV (April 1937), 57-58, and "Decentralization," *Free America*, II (January 1938), 3-4, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Borsodi, *Flight*, 122, 132-142.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 139. See also Borsodi, "Democracy, Plutocracy, Bureaucracy," *Free America*, III (August 1939), 10-12.

<sup>18</sup> Borsodi, "Plan," 189. See also Borsodi, *This Ugly Civilization*, 310-339.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 191, 200, 208, and Borsodi, "Produce Exchanges should be Cooperative," *Cooperation*, XVIII (December 1932), 226-227.

<sup>20</sup> Borsodi, "Plan," 207.

mental need of mankind; the inner discipline that comes from communion with the land.<sup>21</sup>

This return to nature was the first step, but only the first step; one should especially beware of becoming just another commercial farmer. Country life, in and of itself, therefore, was entirely inadequate, for Borsodi envisaged life on homesteads which, like those of "the pioneer farmer," would be "little affected by the rise and fall of the prices in volatile produce markets."<sup>22</sup> Drawing on his store of homestead experience, Borsodi proposed production for use rather than for the market, machinery for onerous chores rather than for cultivation, and investment for security and independence rather than for speculation.

The blueprint for Borsodi's plan for social reconstruction had appeared in his book, *This Ugly Civilization* (New York, 1929). Written during the prosperous 1920's, the book reflected Borsodi's relative lack of concern with the society as a whole. He sought supporters from an intellectual elite who would withdraw from the ugly civilization, leaving its cities and factories to "the natural born robots of the nation." This elite would not save society from the "indignity of a mechanized dark age," but they would save themselves.<sup>23</sup> Borsodi's elitist point of view was clearly stated in a defense of his book written for the *New Republic* shortly before the stock market crash.

There are only three things we can do: accept our factory-dominated life and suffer spiritual frustration; fight it and crucify ourselves in trying to reorganize it; or make ourselves as independent of it as we can. Economic independence on a homestead of our own may not assure our making significant contributions in art, science, and philosophy, but it would at least furnish society with a pattern of superior living at the same time that it relieved us of the insecurity and the insignificant labors which are inescapable concomitants of our present system of production and distribution.<sup>24</sup>

When the Great Depression expelled millions of Americans from the industrial order, jobless and homeless refugees by the thousands made their flights from the city. Borsodi met this back-to-the-land movement in Dayton, Ohio. Like many American cities, Dayton began to feel the full weight of the Depression in the fall of 1931. In an attempt to aid destitute families while maintaining the self-help philosophy, the Council of Social Agencies (a coalition of private welfare groups) organized relief recipients into "Production Units." By making many of their basic needs, the families in the units were supposed to take some of the pressure off the city's limited resources.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Borsodi, "A Civilization of Factories, or a Civilization of Homes?" *The New Republic*, LIX (July 31, 1929), 281-283.

<sup>22</sup> Borsodi, *This Ugly Civilization*, 275.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 261, and Borsodi, "Borsodi Replies," *The New Republic*, LX (October 23, 1929), 266-268.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>25</sup> Borsodi, "Subsistence Homesteads, President Roosevelt's New Land and Population



The production units, however, were unable to serve their ultimate purpose of removing the participating families from the relief rolls, and the council needed help to solve this problem.

The sponsors of the production units, the Unit Committee of the council, appointed Borsodi as adviser to the production units, and Borsodi recommended moving the families to subsistence homesteads which could be set up in the rural areas around Dayton.<sup>26</sup> Plans were laid for some thirty to forty homestead colonies or units; each unit would support a number of unemployed families on three-acre plots. There, through a combination of farming, handicraft production, and wages when possible, the families would become self-supporting again.<sup>27</sup>

The plans for the Dayton homestead colonies reflected their mixed parentage in the social problems of Depression-torn Dayton and Borsodi's anti-industrial agrarian decentralism. The system of land tenure stemmed from Borsodi's Single Tax sentiments. The homestead unit as a whole owned the land and leased the individual plots in return for an annual ground rent, but the homesteader would own all improvements.<sup>28</sup> The recruits for the homesteads, however, were not chosen for their interest in homesteading as a way of life for escaping from the ugly civilization. Drawn from Dayton's relief rolls, they would continue to work in the city, and many complained against Borsodi's leadership of the project.<sup>29</sup> Borsodi's philosophy, however, produced the emphasis on handicrafts (like weaving), and the concern with home production reflected his belief in the superiority of family industry over factory industry.<sup>30</sup> Borsodi was also convinced that the underlying objective of the project was "to change the homesteaders' notions of the good life and their ways of securing the necessities and satisfactions of life."<sup>31</sup> Finally, Borsodi's philosophy implied financial independence and administrative autonomy, whereas the Dayton colonies were, by their very nature as depression measures with a public responsibility, dependent on whatever capital they could get.

All these contradictions were inherent in the Dayton experiment from the very beginning, but it was the last that was to drive Borsodi from his connection with the back-to-the-land movement at Dayton. The story is worth telling in some detail, both because it illuminates the difficulties Borsodi encountered in adapting his agrarian philosophy to a public program and because it sheds some light on one of the early New Deal's social experiments, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads of the Department of the Interior.

---

Policy," *Survey Graphic*, XXIII (January 1934), 11-14, 48. See also Borsodi, "Dayton, Ohio, Makes Social History," *Nation*, CXXXVI (April 19, 1933), 447-448.

<sup>26</sup> Borsodi, "Subsistence Homesteads," 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* See also "Homesteading Comes A-Cropper in Dayton," *Architectural Forum*, LXI (August 1934), 142-144.

<sup>28</sup> Borsodi, "Subsistence Homesteads," 13-14.

<sup>29</sup> "Homesteading Comes A-Cropper," 142.

<sup>30</sup> Borsodi, "Dayton," 448.

<sup>31</sup> Borsodi, "Subsistence Homesteads," 48.

Early in 1932, the Unit Committee had raised \$8,000 for the purchase of the first homestead colony; this money was raised locally.<sup>32</sup> The 160-acre farm, a few miles west of Dayton, was divided into thirty-five 3-acre plots, and the rest of the land was allocated to community pasture, woodlot, commons, and public roads. The Unit Committee prepared the colony for its new residents, but soon discovered they would need more funds in order to continue. They turned to the New Deal for help.<sup>33</sup> Section 208 of the National Industrial Recovery Act Title II had allocated \$25 million to the President "for making loans for and otherwise aiding in the purchase of subsistence homesteads."<sup>34</sup> Roosevelt turned over the money to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes in an Executive Order of July 21, 1933, and Ickes chose Milburn L. Wilson to direct the new agency, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, that was to administer the money.<sup>35</sup> Borsodi, in his capacity as homestead expert, had been invited to make recommendations about how the Division should use its funds, and since he was now consultant to the Unit Committee it was natural for him to suggest that the Dayton colonies receive a loan.<sup>36</sup> For several reasons, Borsodi's request proved agreeable to the Division. The project had already begun, it had the backing of the local community, and it was directed by a man who had proven his abilities in homesteading. Furthermore, Wilson was sympathetic to Borsodi's agrarian decentralist philosophy and his belief in the educational value of homesteading.<sup>37</sup> When the Governor of Ohio asked Secretary Ickes in August to consider granting a loan to the Dayton project, Wilson was already studying the matter.<sup>38</sup> After a favorable report, a \$50,000 loan, the first granted by the Division, was contracted for on September 29, 1933.<sup>39</sup> Originally made by the Unit Committee of the Council of Social Agencies and the United States of America, the loan was assigned to the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation in April 1934.<sup>40</sup>

In the fall of 1932 the first homesteaders moved onto Homestead Unit Number One. Lacking permanent shelter, they lived in tents, chicken houses, and old farm buildings, and construction started on the new houses the following spring. By the time the loan was granted, two houses had been completed, and by June 1934 seven houses were up and twenty families of homesteaders were living on the colony.<sup>41</sup> The Dayton project thus appeared to be moving ahead in mid-1934, but the surface indications of success hid

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Borsodi, *Education and Living*, vii.

<sup>34</sup> *U.S. Stats.*, XLVII, part I, 205-206, quoted in Conkin, *Tomorrow*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>36</sup> Borsodi, "Introduction," to the second printing of *Flight from the City*, xx. Dated January 1935, this introduction was written after Borsodi left the Dayton project and does not appear in the first printing of the book.

<sup>37</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow*, 96-97, 99, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Harold L. Ickes to Hon. George White, September 5, 1933, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives, Record Group 48 (hereafter cited as NA, RG 48).

<sup>39</sup> M.L. Wilson to Ickes, April 11, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Wilson to Ickes, March 6, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> "Homesteading Comes A-Cropper," 142.



difficulties between Borsodi and the Dayton community and between Borsodi and the federal government that threatened the success of the project as a whole.

In Dayton, several factors made for trouble. The homesteaders lost most of their personal property in a fire the first winter, and some of the families, disgusted with the temporary shelter, complained of delays in construction which they blamed on Borsodi. Homesteaders, perhaps unsympathetic with his philosophy, complained that Borsodi was arbitrary and autocratic as an adviser, and farmers near the homestead complained that the Council of Social Agencies was bringing slum dwellers into the country with no consideration for the original residents.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the most bitter opposition came from a property owners' association incensed over the plan to build a homestead unit for Negroes.<sup>43</sup> Finally, at least two of the Dayton newspapers opposed Borsodi's policies and philosophy as well as his leadership.<sup>44</sup>

The problems at Dayton, though serious, might have been resolved in the course of time by Borsodi had the differences with the Division of Subsistence Homesteads not led to his resignation in July 1934. These difficulties stemmed from the disparities between Borsodi's philosophy and plan for Dayton and the changing policies and personnel in the Division. As Paul K. Conkin has so clearly shown, the life of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, though short, was not happy. The clash of ideals and personalities that hastened its demise are highlighted in the story of Borsodi's retreat from social reform at Dayton.<sup>45</sup>

When Borsodi had gone to Washington to offer his ideas for a federal program on homesteads, he had suggested that the new agency support homesteads indirectly by loaning money to local corporations (*private* local corporations like the Unit Committee at Dayton) and by subsidizing educational programs in the state universities. Direct participation by the federal agency, clearly contrary to his decentralist philosophy, was anathema to Borsodi.<sup>46</sup> M. L. Wilson also believed in local autonomy, and the initial policy of the Division—a Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation would make loans to local subsidiary corporations, and the local corporations would carry out the local functions of the Division—provided for a decentralized administrative structure similar to the one recommended by Borsodi.<sup>47</sup> Local autonomy, though, however much an asset from the point of view of Wilson and Borsodi, was found lacking by the government accountants and by Secretary Ickes; by January 1934 the decentralized arrangement was under fire, and on May 12 Ickes abolished control by the local corporations and

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> J.S. Hawkes, William C. Milloway, Bryan Cooper to Borsodi, April 2, 1934, NA, RG 48. The letter bears the stamp "Noted by the Secretary of the Interior."

<sup>44</sup> Edward O. Keator to Ickes, May 5, 1934, *ibid.*; Ickes to N.M. Stanley, May 1, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> On the problems within the division and between the division and Ickes, see Conkin, *Tomorrow*, 120–130; also Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, The First Thousand Days, 1933–1936* (New York, 1954), 152, 154, 205, 206, 218–219.

<sup>46</sup> Borsodi, "Introduction," xx.

<sup>47</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow*, 97, 106–107.

federalized the subsistence homesteads program.<sup>48</sup> The change of policy did not affect Homestead Unit Number One at Dayton, because the Dayton colony was controlled by the Unit Committee. The Dayton colony was not a subsidiary government corporation chartered by the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation; it was, instead, an independent private corporation. The Dayton Unit Number One had received a straight loan for \$50,000, and it could not be federalized like all the other Division of Subsistence Homesteads' projects.<sup>49</sup>

While the federalization order would not affect the first Dayton homestead unit, it could affect four other colonies that were being planned by the Unit Committee. These new colonies had been approved as a project by the Division early in March 1934, and Wilson asked Ickes on April 11 for permission to set up the new colonies like the first one—as an independent private corporation, the Unit Committee should be granted a straight loan of \$309,000 for the purchase of 600 acres.<sup>50</sup> By this time, however, word of the controversies in Dayton had reached Secretary Ickes in the form of complaints about the Negro homestead, and Ickes, always anxious to avoid scandals, ordered an investigation of the first unit and froze the loans for the new homesteads.<sup>51</sup> The Unit Committee, unable to secure the loans, could not complete their purchase for the four new homesteads. The investigation dragged on into May, the federalizing order went out on May 12, and by the time the investigation was completed and Ickes read the report, the new policy had been in force almost a month. Meanwhile, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads' personnel encouraged the Unit Committee to take options on the land for the new homesteads, and the committee continued to expect a straight loan if the investigation proved favorable.<sup>52</sup> Thus, when Ickes finally decided on June 4 to release the funds, but only if the new homesteads were operated on a federal basis, Borsodi was convinced Dayton had been deceived and withdrew the loan application. Charles E. Pynchon, who had replaced Wilson as director of the Division, accepted the withdrawal, but only on the condition that all further obligations on the part of the government for homestead units 2, 3, 4, and 5 were cancelled.<sup>53</sup>

Anxious to continue with the four new homesteads, Borsodi applied personally on June 15 to Harry Hopkins for a substitute loan from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.<sup>54</sup> Ickes had suggested the possibility that “another government administration may be able to provide the

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 118–120.

<sup>49</sup> Charles E. Pynchon to Unit Committee of the Council of Social Agencies, June 5, 1934, NA, RG 48; Pynchon to Ebert K. Burlew, June 6, 1934, *ibid.*; Pynchon to Ickes, June 9, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Wilson to Ickes, April 11, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Philip M. Glick to Ickes, May 24, 1934, *ibid.*; Glick to S.H. Thal, May 24, 1934, *ibid.*; Ickes to Robert J. Bulkley, U.S. Senate, May 28, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Glick to Ickes, May 24, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Pynchon to Unit Committee, June 5, 1934, *ibid.*; Memorandum from Pynchon to Burlew, June 6, 1934, *ibid.*; memorandum from Burlew to Ickes, June 6, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Borsodi to Pynchon, June 15, 1934, *ibid.*

Unit Committee with financial assistance under the terms which they demand.”<sup>55</sup> Borsodi mistakenly concluded that the Secretary would therefore have no objections to an FERA loan.<sup>56</sup> In a letter to Hopkins on June 23, Ickes made his position more clear by remarking that

it seems to me that there is a question of policy involved in the proposition of one branch of the Government permitting an applicant to withdraw an application because of reasonable conditions that are objected to and then allow that same application to be filed with another branch of the government.<sup>57</sup>

Pynchon telegraphed the Secretary’s decision against the substitute loan to Borsodi on June 23, and on the next day, Borsodi and the Unit Committee decided to bring a suit against the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation for breach of contract.<sup>58</sup> Borsodi could not convince the Unit Committee to go through with the suit, however, for the committee decided to go ahead with the new projects on a federal basis and withdrew the suit. Borsodi resigned a week later on July 10. Then, in September, the Unit Committee and the individual homesteaders on Unit One (the original colony) petitioned the Division of Subsistence Homesteads to federalize all the projects.<sup>59</sup> The Dayton homestead experiment continued as a federal project with little success, and by the time the Division was transferred to the Resettlement Administration in May 1935, the project had gone bankrupt.<sup>60</sup>

Borsodi’s resignation from the Dayton project ended his association with the back-to-the-land movement and with the New Deal homestead programs; he became pessimistic about the chances that political programs could facilitate social reform leading to decentralization.<sup>61</sup> He turned again to the task of winning a small following of sensitive individuals by making his own homestead a “pattern of superior living” and by continuing to write about his version of the good life. “Homesteading,” he wrote in January 1935, “involves not a problem in building houses, but a problem in the education of adults to a new way of living,” and he began to emphasize the educational aspects of his program more directly.<sup>62</sup>

Convinced that “the idea which lay at the heart of what I had tried to do at Dayton was too important to be lost,” Borsodi began a “School of Living” designed to provide a “research and experimental sociological laboratory” to “demonstrate how productive and self-sufficient living may redress the insecurities of our industrialized and urbanized society.”<sup>63</sup> Lo-

<sup>55</sup> Ickes to Bulkeley and Simeon D. Fess, June 14, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Borsodi to Pynchon, June 15, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Ickes to Hopkins, June 23, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Pynchon to Ickes, June 25, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Memorandum from Pynchon to Ickes, July 14, 1934, *ibid.*; memorandum from Pynchon to Ickes, September 13, 1934, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Memorandum from Louis Glavis to Burlaw, January 22, 1935, *ibid.*; memorandum from Pynchon to Burlaw, January 28, 1935, *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Borsodi, “Introduction,” xxiii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Borsodi, *Education and Living*, viii; see also Borsodi, “Wanted: A School of Living,”

cated at the Borsodi homestead at Suffern, New York, the school was supported by an impressive group of sponsors and proved so successful that Borsodi was forced to erect a separate building in 1937. The school building had space for resident students, demonstration gardens, loom rooms, and experimental kitchens and laundries.<sup>64</sup> In addition to the classes for homesteaders and the research on home production, the school published a series of "How to Economize" booklets consisting of advice based on its own research. The school was fortunate in having a large staff and a generous budget, and by the time the war cut short his experiments, Borsodi had proved, at least to his own satisfaction, that decentralization had "scientific validity."<sup>65</sup> He resigned as director of the school in 1941 and began work on his 700-page *Education and Living* (Suffern, N.Y., 1948).<sup>66</sup>

In addition to his work as director of the School of Living, Borsodi helped to start *Free America*. This organ supported the Borsodi homestead movement, the Southern Agrarians, the Distributists as represented by Herbert Agar, the Consumer Co-operative movement, the Catholic Rural Life Conference, a few Protestant rural life organizations, and the Single Tax Movement.<sup>67</sup> The magazine—which lasted for ten years from January 1937 to January 1947—was designed "to further many of the separate proposals of each of these movements, but with special emphasis on the process of integration."<sup>68</sup> Borsodi wrote a column entitled "Homestead Notes" and contributed several articles; he was also a member of the editorial board, as were Herbert Agar, Bertram B. Fowler, Katherine Gauss Johnson, Chard Powers Smith, and Chauncey Stillman.

Although he emphasized the educational aspects of his agrarian decentralism after his severance with the Dayton project, Borsodi continued to promote homestead projects as president of the Independence Foundation in New York. Combining his Single Tax ideas, his agrarian decentralist philosophy, his emphasis on education, and his desire to show his critics that families with a small income could afford to become homesteaders, the Independence Foundation was a nonprofit corporation organized in 1935 to provide capital for land purchases, to cut the cost of taxes, interest, amortization and other fees, and to provide more examples of successful suburban homesteads.<sup>69</sup> The Independence Foundation chartered four property-own-

---

*Progressive Education*, XII (January 1935), 20–23, and "Homestead Notes," *Free America*, I (September 1937), 14–15. For more detailed descriptions of the School of Living, see John Chamberlain, "Borsodi and the Chesterbelloc," *The New Republic*, CII (January 1, 1940), 13–16; Edward Skillin, Jr., "Homework that pays; whats, whys and wherefores at the Borsodi School of Living," *Commonweal*, XXXIV (September 5, 1941), 465–469; and George Weller, "America's First School of Living," *Free America*, II (July 1938), 7–9.

<sup>64</sup> Borsodi, "Homestead Notes," 14; *Education and Living*, viii.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, italics in original; also E. Jerome Ellison, "Homes that self-help built," *Forum*, CI (April 1939), 204–207.

<sup>66</sup> *Free America*, V (May 1941), 7; Borsodi, *Education and Living*, x.

<sup>67</sup> Herbert Agar, "Dedication," *Free America*, I (January 1937), 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> That Borsodi's program lacked relevance to lower-income groups was a point that he never seemed able to resolve. Unfortunately, he too often made claims that exaggerated his program's viability. Calling him a "push-button prophet" and his proposals "a dan-

ing associations between 1935 and 1940; close enough to New York City for commuting but distant enough for clean air, the associations bought tracts in New York and New Jersey. The foundation raised its capital through sales of five percent certificates. They then made loans to the associations for land purchases and the associations subdivided the tracts and granted indentures to the association members, for which the members paid a monthly assessment. After down payments of about ten percent for construction, the homesteaders on the individual plots took long-term building loans from the foundation, and their homes were constructed by one of the building guilds the foundation had chartered. By the time the war intervened, the foundation had become a modest success: fourteen homes were occupied, twelve were under construction, and twenty or more were in the planning stage.<sup>70</sup>

The success of the Independence Foundation homesteads was a tribute to Borsodi's ability to modify his earlier, more doctrinaire insistence that homesteading was possible only for an elite of "quality minded" escapees from what he saw as the squalor of urban industrial life. Nevertheless, the new projects were essentially exclusive suburban developments for middle- and upper-class commuters and were evidence that Borsodi had come to realize that his homesteads could be a viable alternative to only a tiny fraction of Americans. Despite his awareness of the limited practical relevance of his philosophy, Borsodi never wavered from it as an ideal. It is this that places him in the tradition of the agrarian decentralists and the New Humanists rather than in the tradition of M. L. Wilson and the New Deal. For the historian, Ralph Borsodi's ideals are a testimony to the agrarian response to modern America.

---

gerous and even dishonest piece of propaganda," Borsodi's critics had taken him to task for presenting his homesteads as the solution to the problems of the depression. They demonstrated that both a steady middle-class income and a healthy industrial system were required to support the plans he outlined. See Malcolm Cowley, "Homesteads, Inc.," *The New Republic*, LXXVII (November 29, 1933), 77-78, Catherine Bauer, "The Swiss Family Borsodi," *Nation*, CXXXVII (October 25, 1933), 489-491, and Rexford G. Tugwell's review of *This Ugly Civilization*, in *Saturday Review of Literature*, VI (June 21, 1930), 1143.

<sup>70</sup> Ralph Borsodi, "Homestead Notes," *Free America*, for the following issues: I (December 1937), 10; II (April 1938), 10; II (September 1938), 13; II (November 1938), 13; and III (June 1939), 17. See also Chamberlain, "Borsodi," 15-16; Ellison, "Homes," 204-207; and "Design for Living," *Fortune*, XVIII (October 1938), 12, 18.