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**Robert Carriker**. *Urban Farming in the West: A New Deal Experiment in Subsistence Homesteads.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. Illustrations. xii + 238 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2820-2.

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While the title of Robert Carriker's compact volume on the New Deal's four western (located in California, Arizona, and Washington) subsistence homesteads is *Urban Farming in the West*, the concepts of "urban" and "farming" hide just off-stage. The actual content of the book suggests alternative titles like "Thousands of Miles from Washington DC: Bureaucratic Delays in the Experimental New Deal" or "Power and Personalities: The Politics of a Relatively Small [but intellectually interesting] New Deal Program." Much of the book is about politics, and the tension between the local and the federal in implementing a lesser-known, though quite interesting, aspect of the New Deal.

But the book is motivated first by an interesting idea with an interesting history: subsistence homesteading as a New Deal response to the Great Depression. The idea of subsistence homesteading can be seen in broader perspective as part of the responses to mass unemployment that were at least suspicious of, and sometimes hostile to, urban economies and specialization in production. At the root of the appeal of the idea of subsistence homesteading was the reality that in the mid-1930s the average American household spent 30-40 percent of their income on food. For most industrial workers in urban areas, the vast majority of that food was produced by other people and acquired by spending money people had earned by working in industrial or white collar jobs. Apartments, and even small detached dwellings, in American cities lacked the land required for a household to produce a substantial amount of their own food. Although the shift to urban living and purchased food was one most Americans had made by the 1930s, it was a shift largely made in the two generations before the Great Depression. With the wage income of many Americans smaller or less secure during the Great Depression, diverse voices in academia, government, and the wider public questioned whether the trade-off of high wages to purchase food produced by others was worth it.

The idea of subsistence homesteading was that families would live near the city in a house surrounded by enough cultivable land to grow a mix of vegetables and perhaps keep a cow. They would devote some time to the farm, but also keep a person engaged in industrial or white collar wage work. Embedded in this vision of a new type of suburban community were a range of assumptions, including a husband who worked, a wife who did not spend much time in the paid labor market, and workers who would be able to drive to their main paid employment. Stated like this, the assumptions of subsistence homesteading were opposed to high density urban living and opposed to the growing involvement of women in formal paid work. But these assumptions were urban in a way, and certainly suburban. As implemented in the New Deal, the practice of subsistence homesteading also incorporated the idea that homesteading would work best when the homesteaders were surrounded by a community of like-minded neighbors doing the same thing. This was the urban, or at least suburban, part of the vision of subsistence homesteading, because the households would share some resources and create a cluster of dwellings that on its own was a walkable enclave. Consistent with widely accepted planning and zoning ideas of the time, residences were to be separated spatially from businesses. Thus, the concept of subsistence homesteading mixed ideals that were plausibly conservative and American with others that were sometimes derided as "socialism." Moreover, the moniker "subsistence" did the ideals no favor. While it was etymologically correct to call a household that produced most of its own food a "subsistence" homestead, the popular understanding of subsistence then and now was that subsistence was barely scraping by: a lifestyle far below the "American standard of living."

That the idea of subsistence homesteading was both nostalgic and idealistic, individualistic and communitarian, and complex in the true sense of the word does not damn it in and of itself. Unpacked to their con-

stituent parts many ideas appear to lack coherence. The diverse motivations for supporting the idea of subsistence homesteading gave it influential supporters in the Roosevelt administration. The complexity and untested assumptions guaranteed it also a diversity of opposition. Perhaps the most important political fact was that both Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt were sympathetic. They pushed gently for its inclusion in a range of projects funded by the "experimental New Deal." Milburn Wilson at the Works Progress Administration (WPA) guided the projects forward in Washington. As with any history of New Deal initiatives, the inter- and intra-agency tensions and disputes are well documented by the surviving primary sources and form an important part of Carriker's introduction to the general history of the subsistence homesteading project.

Carriker's book concentrates on the progress of four subsistence farming projects near Longview (WA), Phoenix (AZ), and Los Angeles (CA). Derived from a dissertation, the book treats these as case studies, and they are covered in distinct chapters after an introduction to the program as a whole. Despite the inherent emphasis on space and place in this history, there are no maps of the locations of the projects. These would have been helpful in better understanding the suburban or exurban context of the homesteading projects, by showing how they were located in relation to retail and employment centers, and more generally locations the reader may be more familiar with than El Monte, San Fernando, or Long View. The book gives a sense of place through photos of the houses and some of the residents. But the photos are not uniformly well integrated with the text, with some photos merely captioned and not discussed in the body of the book. Carriker writes concisely, and in general this makes the topic accessible to a wider audience. But sometimes important background details are omitted in pursuit of brevity: it is never made clear, for example, why a central figure in the Arizona project, Congresswoman Isabella Greenway, came into the House of Representatives in a special election.

Carriker is bullish on the overall success of the western subsistence homestead projects, with the Longview project perhaps the most successful. All of the western projects were established without major problems, and attracted and retained residents. A procedural evaluation would have found little to criticize. Many, if inevitably not all, of the residents were happy, and later recalled the projects fondly. But as with so many New Deal projects, the question of success is related to expectations. The New Deal combined projects to which the administration committed significant resources and political energy, including massive infrastructure spending and employment projects. But it also included experimental projects, like subsistence homesteading, on which twenty-five million dollars were spent. While this is a significant amount of money (even over several years), it ranks among the smaller WPA projects (see http://crookedtimber.org/2009/01/03/visualizing-wpa-expenditures/). For twenty-five million dollars, thirty-four small neighborhoods of subsistence homesteads were established, directly benefiting perhaps twenty thousand people who lived in them during the 1930s. Clearly this was not a program that remade American neighborhoods directly, as the WPA and Public Works Administration rebuilt and built anew American infrastructure. Subsistence homesteading was a demonstration project that sought to model a new kind of suburban living.

But when Americans moved to the suburbs in large numbers after World War II, subsistence homesteading was not a model that many followed. The "Great Recession" of 2008 forward has also stimulated a renewed interest in urban and suburban agriculture. The current urban agriculture revival has uncovered, around the country, that suburbs and central cities alike passed quite a different vision of suburban land use into their zoning ordinances. Until just last year it was technically illegal in Minneapolis to have a raised-bed vegetable garden in your front yard. The (largely uncontroversial) debate on repealing this ordinance showed that Minneapolis was not exceptional in this policy. Keeping poultry even on a small scale is against ordinances in many American suburbs, even where lot sizes make smell or noise theoretical concerns at best. Thus, judged against the development of the American suburbs in the postwar era, the subsistence homestead projects failed to make a large impact on American land use law or eating practices.

Like so many worthy books, what this book does well is rescue an intellectual moment from the benign neglect of history. The history of the American suburbs and the American diet are often troped as a tragedy of post-World War II conformity and mass production. But there were other visions of how to organize life on the city fringe. Carriker reminds us that the suburbs were debated, and there were exceptions to the model of lawns instead of gardens that proliferated after World War II. As urban agriculture continues its modern revival, Carriker's book is also a useful reminder that little is really new here. Even if not a majority of the population, there is still a sizeable constituency for a lifestyle that combines the city with the ability to produce some of one's own food.

Touching on a range of issues in American history, Carriker's book deserves attention from a range of quarters, including historians of nutrition, the city, and the New Deal.

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