

## Homes from hayfields<sup>1</sup>

Thousands of wartime  
workers spurred a '40s  
housing boom

**Forced to sleep in crowded  
boarding houses and even  
chicken coops, workers at the  
Radford Army Ammunition  
Plant gladly occupied fresh,  
new subdivisions.**

FAIRLAWN – After four months of sharing a 20-foot trailer with two children, her husband and his sister, Margaret Hughes' modest new house seemed like a palace.

It didn't matter to her that the square frame dwellings strung along the raw dirt road were virtually identical. They were fresh and new, and their indoor plumbing meant she wouldn't have to haul water from a pump or use an outhouse anymore.

Best of all, the house was hers. Today, 57 years later, it is still the place she calls home.

In 1941, the Hughes family and thousands of others joined an unprecedented wave of immigrants into the New River Valley. The new Radford Army Ammunition Plant and the Depression-ending work it offered were the magnet that drew thousands of workers from across the region and beyond.

Initially, jobs at the Radford arsenal were more plentiful than places to house employees and their families. Workers lived wherever they could, in boarding houses, barns, even converted chicken coops.

For Palmer and Margaret Hughes, who came from Kentucky, home from January to June 1941 was a small trailer parked at the present-day site of Prices Fork Elementary School in Montgomery County.

Their deliverance from such an existence was the little house in Fairlawn, a sprawling new housing subdivision built for arsenal workers.

Elsewhere across the New River Valley, other housing developments sprang up like dandelions in 1941 and 1942. Some, like Fairlawn, were built by private developers who obtained government permission to use vital building materials otherwise reserved for industries preparing for World War II.

Other subdivisions were assembled by new government agencies that had assumed a much greater role in the everyday lives of Americans during the New Deal era.

Sunset Village, a group of simple houses built on farmland south of Radford; was just such a government project. To illustrate the effect of these new,

inexpensive houses, the Farm Security Administration assigned staff photographers to document life there.

The images of domestic contentment they recorded in 1941 are part of a historic collection of documentary photographs that are little known and rarely viewed.

### **A blue-collar world**

War came and went, along with workers at the “powder plant.” Yet, many former migrants remained to raise families. And the arsenal houses still stand, too, the hearth stones of the New River Valley’s blue-collar soul.

“That was a very trying time for everybody,” Rose Burnett said of the 1930s smothering Depression years. A West Virginia native, she was living in Bluefield with her husband and three children in 1940.

When word came of a large new industrial plant under construction near Radford, Burnett persuaded her husband to investigate a job there.

In seven months, a cornfield beside the New River was converted into a sprawling plant to produce powder for military weapons. At its height, the plant employed 22,000 workers in round-the-clock shifts. Jobs were to be had for the asking.

Yet, the area soon overflowed with workers. “No one of this or

any past generation has ever lived in a world where so much has taken place as has transpired in the past twelve months,” stated an editorial in the Radford News-Journal newspaper.

With all national energies focused on the approaching global conflict, the tumult generated by the new Radford plant was soon recognized as counterproductive. The story was much the same at defense-related sites across America.

Gas rationing limited commuting to work. Workers were less efficient when they had to rough it; they became homesick or rowdy away from their families. And boom towns like Radford were turned upside down.

The response was a government program that built new defense worker subdivisions like Sunset Village in Radford and MacGill Village in Pulaski. Construction materials were also made available by federal regulatory agencies for privately built housing developments such as Fairlawn and Airport Acres in Blacksburg.

Within a designated 14-mile radius of the Radford arsenal, new subdivisions quickly appeared in a sparsely populated area previously dominated by farms and orchards.

There was no precedent for this kind of new community or the lifestyle they would foster.

A new house on Polk Street in the new Radford development called Monroe Terrace enabled Rose Burnett to rejoin her husband, who had a managerial job at the arsenal.

"We came in style, rode the train from Bluefield," said Burnett, now 88 and still a Monroe Terrace resident. She recalls yanking the tar paper off the new wooden floors of her first house with the same pleasure as opening a wrapped present.

"We were lucky to get it," she said.

#### **Four rooms - \$25**

The Hugheses were among the first families to occupy Fairlawn, where houses were being built and sold like a shuffling deck of cards. As a scale mechanic at the powder plant, her husband made \$35 per week.

They picked out a lot and made a \$195 downpayment. The four-room house with a basement, attic, one bath, a refrigerator and stove cost the family \$25 monthly for the next 15 years.

Margaret Hughes, 86, recalled that she was allowed to vary the look of her mass-produced new house only by selecting the wallpaper and lighting fixtures.

Once in such a lavish new dwelling, the Hugheses and other recently housed arsenal workers sent for family members. Come

join us and work at the arsenal, they said, and their summonses set off a new wave of immigration.

Betty Jo Everett recalled her first look at the new Airport Acres subdivision – the freshly painted houses and the bare dirt lots. Two maple saplings came with each house and over the past half-century have grown into substantial canopies.

The house that Everett, her mother, two brothers and a sister occupied in 1944 was reasonably priced. It was uniquely accessible for her mother, one of the arsenal's early female employees, who Everett recalls would come home from production line work scented by ether.

Most of these subdivisions were built to reflect the workplace strata of the arsenal. Houses in Sunset Village, Fairlawn, Airport Acres, Monroe Terrace and the barracks-style MacGill Village were intended for production or lower-level white collar employees.

The larger, two-story dwellings at Radford Village and the two Staff Villages, located near the Radford powder plant and the New River Ordnance Works or "bag-loading plant" at Dublin, were for upper-level managers and executives.

The subdivision covenants strictly limited their occupants to members of the Caucasian race, a common discrimination of the Jim

Crow era. Only non-whites who worked as domestic servants were allowed to live there.

Beyond that, occupants of the new houses embraced a new community of great solidarity and support.

### **A melting pot**

"There were people from everywhere. We were like one big happy family," Burnett said. "We knew everybody, played cards, picnicked. It was a good place to raise children."

Everett, as a teen-ager, was in great demand around Airport Acres as a baby sitter. "I knew who lived in every house," she said.

The new communities created their own institutions. Families held living-room prayer meetings before Fairlawn Baptist church was founded in 1946. Fairlawn children first attended school in a two-room tar paper school house, then moved on to a flood-prone church basement, Hughes recalled.

Many original occupants moved away over the years as employment levels at the arsenal fluctuated. However, some of the first families – such as Hugheses, Burnetts and Everetts – remained.

Betty Jo Everett's life has been closely bound up with the arsenal and Airport Acres. She worked there and met her husband, Mills, an arsenal chemist in 1951. A son works at the arsenal today.

Everett lived in the subdivision from 1944-48, she moved back in 1957. She's lived in her present house on Rose Avenue since 1964.

New residents and growing families have liberally renovated the original houses to suit their tastes and requirements with an extra room, a new porch or an additional story.

"I'd say they'll last another 50 years," Mills Everett said. "They're just good houses."

In 1991, Parks Lanier, a Radford University English professor and Fairlawn resident, had his students conduct oral history interviews and write a history of Fairlawn. That led to a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

Mostly, however, the arsenal subdivisions and their residents have become too ingrained in the fabric of New River Valley life to be considered as exceptional.

"This is the homeplace," Rose Burnett said of her Monroe Terrace house. "I wouldn't take anything for the friends I've made here."

<sup>1</sup>Article written by Robert Freis  
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