

# Growing up on Penderlea

*New Deal grows a farm community out of swampy southeastern North Carolina*

*By Renee Gannon*

In 1933, the Great Depression had hit every sector of the economy, and Franklin Roosevelt, in his first term as President, knew the country needed to get back to work. Roosevelt persuaded Congress, as part of his New Deal, to pass the National Industry Recovery Act of 1933. This led to the formation of the Subsistence Homesteads Division within the Department of Interior. Its purpose: to create communities that will fuel the economy and put people back to work.

These “resettlement” towns would focus on helping farmers and industrial workers by moving families to homestead farming communities and planned mill towns.

Penderlea, in northwestern Pender County, N.C., became the first homestead farm project in the United States. The government held the community’s hand from 1934 until 1943, when the government bowed out as landlords and allowed homesteaders to buy their farms as well as adjacent non-occupied land.

Many federal officials deemed the “experimental agricultural community” a failure, but those who worked and lived on Penderlea called it a success that still thrives today.

Ann Southerland Cottle remembers the cold, rainy winter day her family moved onto Penderlea. The Southerland family traveled from neighboring Duplin County to the homestead project in 1941, bringing along clothes, furniture, the family mule and Jersey cow named “Boots.”

“I was four years old with chickenpox. Mother and Daddy were afraid this would prevent our move,” remembers Cottle. “My father carried me into the house and told me to push a wall switch. I did and a light came on in the kitchen. I pushed again and it went off. I was amazed for we had never seen electric lights before.”

What made Penderlea work, says Cottle, is that it was a small town made up of “outsiders who grew a community that welcomed all.”



*Ellery Logan Rogers, Sr., plows a field with his sons Ted (middle) and Logan, Jr. (far right), along with “Dolly” the mule.*

## Building Penderlea

Wilmington businessman Hugh MacRae knew a thing or two about building farming communities. Since 1903, he had recruited immigrants to work the farm colonies of Castle Hayne and Saint Helena. In 1906, MacRae purchased the 10,000-acre Wilson tract in Pender County for \$12 an acre, with an eye on developing another farm town.

When the Resettlement Act passed, MacRae stood ready with plans for his Wilson Tract: Penderlea, a homesteading community.

MacRae sold the government 4,500 acres of the swampy timberland for \$6.50 an acre, losing money on his investment. Workers began clearing the land and digging ditches in 1934, when a Civilian Conservation Corps workforce moved into a makeshift camp at a nearby abandoned sawmill. Readyng the land proved difficult. CCC dug 15 canals and more than 100 miles of ditches to drain the land. According to Cottle, more than 1,000

men worked in the muck at the peak of land preparation and construction.

Cottle adds that these canals and ditches still drain the water today, keeping the Penderlea area from flooding when tropical systems move across the region.

The plan called for 152 farms on 10- to 20-acre tracts, with each farm consisting of a four- to six-room house with indoor plumbing and electricity, barn, chicken coop, wash/smoke house, corn crib and a hog house. MacRae owned Tidewater Power & Light (acquired in 1952 by Carolina Power & Light) and would provide electricity to the initial project. The government also purchased an additional 6,000 acres from MacRae for another 152 homesteads, but the project was never completed. Four County EMC still provides electricity to the homes that were built in this Penderlea extension.

The town would have a school with an auditorium, gymnasium, library, cafeteria, shop building, home economics building and lodging for teachers. Other

community buildings included a vegetable grading shed, potato storage house, cannery, grist and feed mills, cooperative general store, social building, furniture factory and a textile mill. The idea was to build everything needed for a self-sustaining community.

In March 1934, the first homesteaders were Sutton and Katie Bell and their son. Bruno and Jo Van Bavel and their daughter and son arrived shortly after. One problem: the homesteaders were homeless—the land had been cleared but the houses did not exist. Movable, two-room tar paper shacks on “sled” runners served as a “mobile homes” for each family, and jobs at the project gardens and cannery provided an income while their homes were built.

## Life on Penderlea

The homesteaders who came to Penderlea beginning in 1934 were farmers, but the government also needed them to be carpenters, plumbers, roofers, laborers, tractor mechanics, blasters, electricians, painters and bricklayers. Hourly wages ran from \$1.10 for plumbers to 60 cents for blasters and 15 cents for cannery workers. Homesteaders worked alongside the civilian crews to build Penderlea. The wages, along with selling crops once farms were running, helped pay the homesteaders’ \$60 annual rent.

The government advertised across the country for homesteaders willing to relocate to southeastern North Carolina. Most families ultimately came from the eastern part of the state, with a few moving in from the mountains.

But not just any family could resettle here. Homesteaders had to be white, married with children or children on the way, and had to be Protestant.



One of the first homesteaders, Bruno Van Bavel with daughter Peggy (right) and son Buren.

Families had to submit letters of recommendation from their pastor and from the county Extension agent. A federal agent would visit families for interviews and to see if they were poor enough to qualify. A ledger book had to be kept for a year that contained every piece of the family’s financial information: if eggs were sold for 5 cents each, it was marked down; if you bought a hairnet for a penny, mark it.

The entire family also had to pass a medical physical provided by a government physician in Burgaw.

The effort families went through paid off. For those who could endure the hard work and long hours, a better life awaited. Homes with indoor plumbing and electricity were a rarity in rural America. These utilities were standard features of each Penderlea home built.

Along with utilities, the first 10 homes featured a cathedral ceiling, tongue-and-groove pine paneling and oak hardwood floors in the living room, plastered walls, a bathroom split into two rooms on opposite sides of the hall, two bedrooms with a shaving port in the master bedroom, a screened porch, small kitchen and a tiny dining area. These 1,000–1,400-square-foot homes cost \$1,700 to build.

The rest of the homes were built from six different, smaller and less-expensive designs that featured two to four bedrooms in 1,000–1,200 square feet.

The sustainable community provided almost everything needed from available resources. The timber cleared for farming found its way to the furniture mill and became construction material, paneling, furniture, cabinets, doors and the kitchen table. Truck crops such as beans, squash, cucumber, corn, strawberries and blueberries not only sold at

market but also went to the cannery to help feed newly arriving homesteaders. And feed sacks were a valuable commodity for homemakers who made clothes and curtains out of the colorful, patterned sacks.

“I would ride on the wagon to the mill with my Daddy to pick out the feed sacks I wanted for my clothes... we all were,” says Cottle. “Penderlea was a wonderful place to grow up because



Penderlea Homestead Museum

we were all the same. We did not have money, but we were rich in love, food and shelter. We children had everything we needed, we just didn’t realize at the time how hard it was on our parents.”

## Penderlea today

The guardhouse that led onto the homestead project is now part of the Penderlea Museum. The museum, located in one of the first 10 homes built, is filled with items donated by families who lived throughout the area.

The award-winning Penderlea School continues to educate children from Penderlea and surrounding communities.

Cottle supervised the overwhelming task of a school reunion for the graduating classes 1938–1975. After almost two years of searching for former students, the reunion welcomed more than 500 people back from across the country to the Penderlea School in June 2006, with every class represented.

The community next hopes to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Eleanor Roosevelt’s June 11, 1937, visit to Penderlea. Many say the resettlement towns were her pet projects. That summer day visit was a proud moment for the community. Cottle says that the homestead’s farm manager, C.R. Dillard, drove a truck in front of the First Lady’s car and sprayed the road with water to prevent dust from blowing onto Mrs. Roosevelt. The First Lady spent the day in Penderlea, talking with homesteaders and even dancing with a lucky few.

“There is so much history here,” says Cottle. “It’s more than the history of just another town. This is still a great community, more than just a government experiment.”

Some information for this article was taken from “The Roots of Penderlea,” by Ann S. Cottle.

## To learn more

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