Norvelt

One of my favorite things about Western Pennsylvania is that there is always another story to be told. This particular tale came by way of a conversation with my friend, Bonnie DiCarlo, as we chatted about where we grew up. Bonnie told me that she spent the summers in Calumet and United, “coal patch” towns in Westmoreland County where her grandparents lived. “Right next to Norvelt,” she said. I commented that Norvelt was an unusual name, and Bonnie explained that the moniker was taken from the last syllables of Eleanor Roosevelt, one of America’s most famous First Ladies. That sounded like a story. Within a few days, Bonnie and I set off to see Norvelt, a planned community created in 1936 and an example of the government’s effort to lift people from poverty into the middle class.

The community, hugging the gentle crests of rolling farmland, is close to the former Connellsville coke and coal seams, one of the largest in the world, where thousands of miners lived and worked. During the Depression, the area fell on hard times due to overproduction and shrinking markets, leaving workers unemployed. The American Friends Service Committee, and one man in particular, Clarence Pickett, saw that the usual relief efforts were not working, and encouraged the workers to find new ways to earn a living, such as creating co-op factories to make chairs and shoes. He also encouraged them to raise their own vegetables to stave off starvation, but their lands were in hardscrabble coal fields.

When Franklin Roosevelt heard of Pickett’s work, he sought him out and asked for his help in creating a federal plan to give these men and their families “a hand up.” The result was the passing of a bill under the National Recovery Act, with an expenditure of $25 million, to purchase land and build communities of subsistence homesteads, including four in this area: Westmoreland Homesteads, which became Norvelt, two West Virginian communities, and one in Tennessee.

Pickett became the administrator of the project, and enlisted hundreds of Quaker volunteers to help. In Norvelt, 250 homes were built with the assistance of the volunteers and the people who would live in the homes. Though more than 1,000 applied for the homes, only 250 families were chosen based on need and suitability for being part of a community.

For it was indeed a community. Its members worked together to create a cooperative farm, a community center, a trade and business center, gave instruction on canning, gardening, personal hygiene, and carpentry, and provided child care for each other.

Eleanor Roosevelt took an active role in the effort as the homes were being built.
She insisted, over objections of politicians including her husband, that the homes should have indoor plumbing, central heating, and electricity. She believed that the workers deserved to be treated with dignity. After the homes were completed in 1936, Eleanor Roosevelt came for a visit, and drove her own car throughout the community to meet with the residents. The community, in appreciation of her interest and efforts, decided to change its name from Westmoreland Homesteads to Norvelt.

Eleanor Roosevelt also insisted on providing art and music for the residents of Norvelt, and the Works Progress Administration hired Richard Hay Kenah, an unemployed artist from New Brighton, to teach art and help to put out a newspaper, The Homestead Informer. Kenah created a mural depicting life in Norvelt, segments of which can be found hanging in nearby Hoffer’s Funeral Home.

The houses, designed in a Cape Cod style by local architect Paul Bartholomew, had four to six rooms, and were set on plots ranging from two to seven acres to allow space for gardening. Each home had a graceful grape arbor reaching from the house to a one-car garage, and a chicken coop. The homes (all inhabited today except for one that was demolished) sit back from gracefully curved roads that echo the gently rolling hills of the land. Shade trees, now fully mature, line the streets.

Sue Hoffer, a longtime resident of the area and a member of the family who owns the Hoffer Funeral Home, lives in one of the houses with her husband Hilary. She invited Bonnie and me to see her home. The Hoffers have made some improvements, including a small addition and some new siding, but she pointed with pride to the original kitchen cabinets. “I would never get the workmanship today, that these cabinets have,” she said, pointing out the one-inch thick doors on the cupboards. They have also kept the original claw foot bathtub, and enjoy using it.

The funding for these homesteads ended in the 1940s, but many of the residents of this pleasant community are third and fourth generation homesteaders, a testimony to the original intent of Clarence Pickett, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the others who believed that with a “hand up,” people can rise from poverty and have a better life.

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