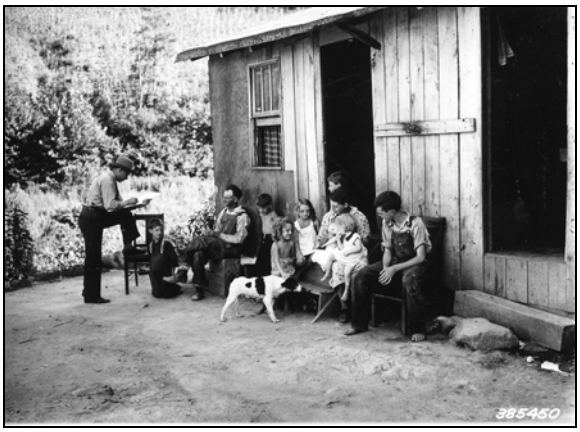
Part 3 of the Historical Snapshots Installments

Forest Service Works with landowners in the Wake of the Depression –

The Forest Service focused land acquisition on lands suitable for timber production in the early years. Generally these were abandoned farm lands or woodlands in poor condition needing extensive rehabilitation. However many early land acquisitions included marginal farmland or homesteads.

The Forest Service also had a social services role in the early days. This was during and immediately following the Great Depression and times were still very hard in southern Indiana. The agency worked out agreements with the counties to care for "demented, very aged, and totally incapacitated persons," who were living on the land without suitable means of support. The agency was directed, where possible, to allow farm families to maintain a reasonable livelihood under a special use permit. Though many structures were dismantled after land was acquired, others were improved so the family's living conditions could be improved.

Special use permits for Forest Service land were authorized in the early days for a myriad of purposes including hay fields, permission to raise chickens, cultivation of a garden not to exceed one acre, and for a water supply. Rangers were granted permission to waive fees if farm tenants were financially unable to make payments.



8/5/1939 District Ranger contacts family living on the national forest.

However, a special use manual from the early 1940s cautions: "Encourage permittees to be self-sufficient… avoid creating the impression in the mind of the permittee that he is a ward of the government." For this reason, the agency encouraged charging a modest fee or having the permittee agree to do labor for the government in lieu of waiving the permit fee.

5/14/1942 New house constructed for the John Senn family, shown seated on their front porch. Mr. Senn also shown feeding his chickens in their new chicken house. The farm was a special use. The present home and improvements were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps using salvaged materials.

Barns and homes located on Forest Service land could be improved at government expense, although the permittee was encouraged to do the work, with the understanding that the buildings belonged to the government. The rule of thumb was that the buildings had to be put in weather tight condition for not more than $1,000 and be on an all-weather road or not more than 1/8th mile off a good road. The Civilian Conservation Corps crew was often called on to help rehabilitate these buildings.

In the late 1930's there were an estimated 5,300 families who lived on land within the four purchase units and 1,100 of them would ultimately become tenants of the Forest Service.

Pasture permits were prevalent. Farmers could work with the Forest Service and County Agent to develop a plan to pasture livestock on adjacent national forest lands. The farmer had to prove that he had adequate supply of feed for the livestock through the winter or funds to purchase such feed, a plan to improve the pasture, and was required to build a fence around the pastured land. No open grazing was allowed. Only 2 head of cattle or 5 head of sheep per 10 acres were allowed on the pasture between May 1 and October 31. Hogs were only permitted if the farmer also had a residential permit and a hog lot was not to exceed one acre. There was no charge for up to three brood sows or fattening hogs.

Permanent farm areas for cultivation could be established with input from the County Agent and a soil expert from the Soil Conservation Service. These areas had to be at least 20 acres of level to gently rolling, un-gullied land within a half mile of the farmer's residence. The Forest Service was advised to find families for the cultivation or pasture permits who "were of the highest type… with the ability to make a decent living on a farm." These early special use manuals advised the Forest Service , that these permits were only temporary until better locations could be found for these families.

Examples of early permits from the late 1930's and early 1940's show families with annual incomes of $500-600, and similar estimated net worth. Many had debts of $200 or more and 6-8 dependents. The notes show the families had nowhere else to live but agreed to take care of their cabin and garden and do the necessary upkeep. The recommended rent for 5 acres and a garden plot for a family whose home was located on national forest land was $2-10/year depending on the condition of the buildings.

October, 1947. Forest Supervisor and Ranger inspecting corn crop on Luther Smith special use permit near the White River.

Notes on these early permits show that residents sold all or part of their land to the government because they needed the money but had nowhere to go. They requested permission to continue to farm the land to make a viable living and many offered to help the government with fire protection, and improvement of the land.