

Roosevelt Borough celebrates humble, hopeful beginnings through 75th anniversary

Published: Monday, May 28, 2012, 7:00 AM Updated: Monday, May 28, 2012, 9:11 AM

By [Lisa Rose/The Star-Ledger](#)

ROOSEVELT — During the dark, desperate days of the Great Depression, the government selected Central Jersey as the site of a bold, unprecedented experiment in stimulus spending.



A mural painted by Benjamin Shahn hangs in the lobby of the Roosevelt Public School in the Borough of Roosevelt, NJ. The mural depicts Jewish garment workers relocating to the town founded in 1937 as the Borough of Jersey Homesteads.

With the jobless rate hovering near 25 percent, dozens of emergency anti-poverty initiatives were introduced through various New Deal agencies.

The government built a Utopian agricultural colony specifically for jobless Jewish garment center workers from New York.

Incorporated on May 29, 1937, the settlement was like an American kibbutz, the country's first and only secular Jewish commune funded by Uncle Sam.

The Resettlement Administration invested more than \$1 million to transform a rustic two-mile chunk of Millstone Township into a prefabricated Shangri-La for empowered Jewish workers.

"It was a pretty risky proposition," says Michael Ticktin, the town historian. "The government just announced that they were putting this project here. Nobody asked Millstone for permission to build this colony."

The borough, which will celebrate its 75th anniversary tomorrow, is no longer a farming cooperative but most of its original architecture has been preserved. The entire municipality with a statue of the community's namesake, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and secluded grove of trees is nationally recognized as a historic place.

"Roosevelt is an emblem of a time when individualism and equality were in balance. It was an idealistic place where every member of the community was equally important. I think today's society is out of balance. We're a country obsessed with celebrities and we've stopped caring about community," said Michael Rockland, a Rutgers professor and co-author of the book, "The Jews of New Jersey: A Pictorial History."



Jody Somers/For The Star-Ledger Michael Ticktin of Roosevelt, the municipal historian of the Borough of Roosevelt, right with Ben Johnson, also of Roosevelt and a local historian, as they talk next to the Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial.

The borough is a sliver of pure 1930s Americana, untouched by land developers, chain retailers and other purveyors of suburban sprawl. Several of the 800-plus residents have family ties to the original settlers.

"We have a strong nucleus of people who are very concerned and dedicated to the community," said Ticktin. "The physical character of the community hasn't changed to an extraordinary extent."

Originally named Jersey Homesteads, the burg is beloved even though it failed to deliver on its promise of economic prosperity. Its garment factory went bust within two years.

"There were problems with the wholesalers because they were instructed by the union not to purchase garments made in Roosevelt," said Ticktin. "David Dubinsky, who was president of the International Ladies Garment Workers union, felt that the factory in New Jersey was what they termed 'a runaway shop' that shipped jobs out of New York. He felt like he had no control over the factory because it was too far from the city. The workers actually went on strike at one point, even though they owned the factory and there was no upper management to protest. They went on strike against themselves, picketing their own company."

Meanwhile, crops wilted in the fields because there was a shortage of green thumbs within the community. The former city dwellers didn't till the soil enthusiastically.

While the concept of the town was an expensive failed experiment, the majority of families didn't pack up and leave after the government abandoned the project.

Roosevelt native, Helen Barth, 79, said people embraced the communal lifestyle and wound up purchasing the concrete cottages when they were auctioned off. Barth's parents paid \$4,500 for their square-shaped abode on a half-acre of land.

"Even though all of us were poor, we felt very rich because we had so much going for us culturally. We had camp and theater and Yiddish cultural evenings," said Barth, widow of the town's longtime mayor, Leon Barth.

Two of the original settlers were communists, according to Barth, while everyone else had moderate political views. Still, there was tension in Jersey when the urban Jewish workers settled in rural Roosevelt. At the time, many area stores posted signs reading "No Hebrews."

Folks in neighboring municipalities, like Upper Freehold and West Windsor, feared members of the Roosevelt collective were spreading socialist propaganda. They also objected to the fact that taxpayer money was spent to create a colony restricted to one ethnic group. After the first couple of years, non-Jews began streaming into the borough.

"It was an enormous clash of cultures," says Ticktin. "Hightstown was very segregated. Certain stores wouldn't serve customers from Jersey Homesteads. They had a movie theater where Jews and blacks had to sit upstairs in the balcony."

Barth acknowledges Roosevelt residents faced rampant anti-Semitism but she still looks back on the past with a sense of nostalgia. She remembers meeting her husband, Leon in Hightstown.



Jody Somers/For The Star-Ledger Michael Ticktin of Roosevelt, the municipal historian of the Borough of Roosevelt, walks past a row of grave markers decorated with the Star of David.

"My family didn't have a car so I was standing on the hitching corner, a place where people from Roosevelt would wait to hitch a ride back home," says Barth. "Leon stopped for me and my friend. I thought, 'He's cute.' My friend on the outside by the window and I managed to sit next to him. That was the beginning of our 60-year marriage."

The community was close-knit, Barth says, but there were still passionate debates during raucous town council meetings.

"Oh, they used to have fights," says Barth. "People yelled and screamed at each other because they disagreed on how something should be done. It was loud and emotional and yet when it was finished, people went home and played cards together. I attended a council meeting two months ago for the first time in a very long time and I was stunned. The mayor was addressed as madam Mayor. It was so calm and polite and no one interrupted. I was like, 'Is this Roosevelt?'"

Barth's husband, who served multiple terms as mayor and ran the architectural lab at Princeton University, died last year at the age of 82.

"When it came time for burial, at first I thought about burying him in a traditional shroud," Barth says. "But then I thought twice and we buried him in a tee-shirt. One of my children gave him a shirt that said, 'I came, I sawed, I fixed it,' with a picture of a hammer and a saw. That's how he lived his life. If he saw something that needed doing, he did it."