

South Carolina and the New Deal. *By Jack Irby Hayes Jr.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000. 306 pp. Photographs. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 1-570-03399-4.

Reviewed by Stephen West

South Carolina and the New Deal is a modest but useful work. Although it breaks little new ground interpretively, this book—based on the author’s 1972 dissertation at the University of South Carolina—provides a clearly written, relatively short account of federal policy and its impact on one state in the American South, a region beset by structural poverty and an economic downturn that began well before the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. In slightly over 200 pages of text, Hayes surveys public works and other relief programs; economic policy regarding industry and agriculture; the politics of the New Deal era; and its significance for race relations.

In 1933, one of the most immediate tasks for New Deal officials was to provide aid to the unemployed; by the fall, 23 percent of South Carolina residents were in families on relief, about double the national average. Hayes devotes three of his eleven chapters to the multitude of New Deal relief efforts, focusing especially on work programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress and Public Works Administrations. Hayes’s emphasis is less on the recipients of relief than on the administration of these programs and how they “changed the face of the Palmetto State” (p. 71) through the construction of roads and highways, public buildings, and the massive Santee-Cooper hydroelectric project.

Hayes devotes two chapters to New Deal industrial policy and focuses especially on the cotton textile industry, which employed half of all nonagricultural workers in South Carolina. Squeezed by falling profit margins and a tendency to overproduction during the 1920s, textile manufacturers seized the opportunity for self-regulation under the National Recovery Administration, attempting to set limits on output and to shore up prices. Cotton-mill workers, for their part, looked to the NRA to bolster wages, remedy the “stretch-out” (as they called employers’ attempts to increase workloads), and protect an organizing drive by the United Textile Workers. These clashing expectations set the stage for the three-week, nationwide General Textile Strike of September 1934. Hayes

effectively narrates developments in South Carolina, though his account tends to focus more on employers and New Deal officials than workers, thereby diminishing some of the drama of a strike that mobilized perhaps 40,000 workers in the state and led to the killing of seven strikers. His discussion of industry might have benefited from more attention to the labor policies of the later New Deal, and especially the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which southern employers forcefully opposed for its setting of minimum wages and maximum working hours.

Agricultural policy loomed large in the New Deal's importance for predominantly rural South Carolina. Historians have long argued that the New Deal helped undermine the system of sharecropping and tenant farming in the cotton South, as landlords responded to federal crop reduction programs—under the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 and subsequent laws—by expelling tenants and croppers and shifting to the use of hired labor. In contrast, Hayes argues that “the idea of a revolution in agriculture seems to have more validity for other Southern states than for South Carolina” (p. 198), pointing to the persistence of cotton as the state's main cash crop and the limited mechanization of agriculture. Hayes does not, however, explore why New Deal policy might have had a different impact in South Carolina, and in some respects developments there were not so clearly different from those elsewhere in the cotton South. Hayes notes, but says little about, the 25 percent decline in the number of tenants and sharecroppers in the state during the 1930s, and he does not discuss the use of hired labor.

Hayes sounds familiar themes in his discussion of politics and race relations in South Carolina during the New Deal. As he usefully demonstrates, the South may have been a one-party region during the 1930s, but white Democrats were not of one mind on the issues of the day. In South Carolina, the spectrum of Democratic politics ranged from the obstreperous conservatism and white supremacy of U.S. Senator Ellison D. “Cotton Ed” Smith to the pro-labor, pro-New Deal stance of Olin Johnston, the former “mill boy” who won election as governor in 1934 with the support of a core constituency of white mill workers. For African-Americans, Hayes writes, the New Deal was a “mixed blessing” (p. 158). Even as New Deal programs like the WPA practiced discrimination, and the AAA contributed to the displacement of black sharecroppers, many black Southerners took inspiration from the racial liberalism of some northern Democrats. In

South Carolina, as elsewhere, the 1930s saw a resurgence of the NAACP and of black organizing against disfranchisement and lynching, which in turn helped prepare the way for civil rights victories after World War II.

These findings are not likely to surprise most historians. The same is true of Hayes's general conclusions that the New Deal was "basically conservative" (p. xv) in operating through local political and economic elites and that it failed to "restore agricultural and industrial prosperity" (p. xii). If readers find these interpretations familiar, they will nonetheless find value in this book for its careful charting of the administration of New Deal policy in one southern state.

Stephen West is assistant professor of history at the Catholic University of America. He is currently working on a social and economic history of upstate South Carolina during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.