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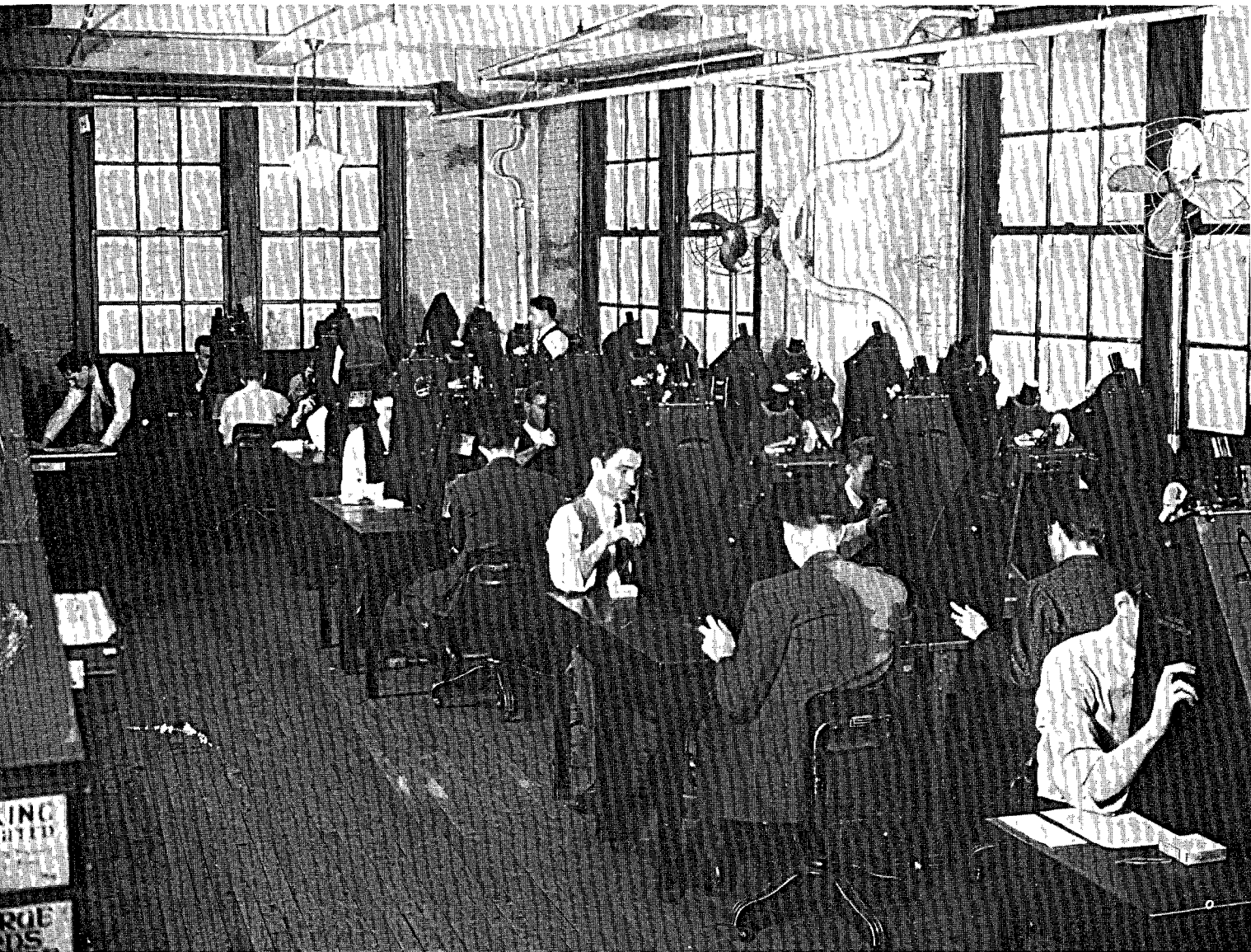


Oasis

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Employees talk about what it was like to work
for Social Security in the beginning.

WERE THEY THE GOOD



OLD DAYS?

JACK BENNY and Social Security have something in common this year. Both are celebrating their 39th birthdays.

What was it like to work for Social Security in its infancy? To find out, OASIS talked with a few "pioneers," and we'll take a look at what they had to say shortly.

But first, a few basic facts are in order. The Social Security Act was signed by President Roosevelt on August 14, 1935. On August 23, he appointed a three-man Social Security Board to oversee the administration of the entire Act. The Bureau of Federal Old-Age Benefits was set up to administer Title II (Old-Age Insurance).

To get started we had to borrow personnel, space, and equipment from other agencies. Congress didn't appropriate any money for Social Security Board operations until February 1936. The appropriation was for \$1 million and was to be used during the remainder of the fiscal year. And it wasn't just for Old-Age Benefits operations. It had to be spread among such other programs as Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation.

Today, that amount would last SSA about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a day. Expenditures for salaries and expenses for the first half of fiscal year 1974 totaled \$612 million. Of course, on June 30, 1936, the Bureau of Federal Old-Age Benefits had only 53 employees on duty. By December 1936, that figure had grown to over 2,500. The total number of full-time, permanent employees now stands at about 71,500.

The very early days of the Bureau were planning days. The big job was to get ready for January 1, 1937—the effective date of the Social Security Act. Before then, employers had to be registered so they could start reporting their employees' wages, social security numbers issued



OPPOSITE PAGE: The Candler Building, borne of the Accounting Operations Division (forerunner of BDP) for many years, did not provide what could be termed a perfect working environment. Note the fans and antiquated lighting fixture. TOP: A 3-member Social Security Board provided direction for the Public Assistance, Unemployment Compensation, and Federal Old-Age Benefits programs from 1935 until 1946. In the photo are Board members Arthur Altmeyer (Chairman), Ellen Woodward, and George Bigge. ABOVE: The first Social Security field office, equipped with "hand-me-downs," was located in the old Post Office Building in Austin, Texas. LEFT: In the days before we had a sophisticated public affairs program, posters provided one of the main ways to spread information on social security. This one, created by a student, was a winner in a Social Security-sponsored contest.

to employees, and the machinery set in motion for the installation of our wage recordkeeping operations and for the payment of lump-sum claims. The Post Office Department helped with the job of issuing social security numbers and registering employers until May 1937.

Decisions also had to be made as to where district offices should be situated. By December 1936, the locations of 100 offices had been announced—one-twelfth the number of branch and district offices now in existence.

The first field office opened on October 14, 1936, in Austin, Texas. Fred Rogers, now retired, was district manager. The office was located on the ground floor of the old Post Office Building at Sixth and Colorado Streets. When Fred first visited the space provided for the DO, he found a musty interior and equipment which consisted solely of some dilapidated desks and chairs left behind by the Post Office when it moved to its new building.

"Three people visited the office on opening day," said Fred, who was the only staff member at the time. "There were two reporters and Congressman James Buchanan, Chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations. . . . He, not I, held the press interview on the opening of the first social security office in the country. As for photographs, according to instructions, I delayed any and all publicity."

According to Fred, everything that was published during those very early days was in this vein: "Austin will be the location of one of the Texas field offices of the Social Security Board, whose primary work will be to cooperate with the Post Office officials in the work of registration."

The DO's had to make extensive employer contacts (estimates from various people interviewed run as high as 50 contacts a day) and answer the telephones, which rang all day. At the time, the program had received a 'lot of adverse publicity (one of the program's opponents claimed that all citizens would soon be required to wear tags containing

their social security numbers), and the public was concerned.

Bill Cole recalls that when the Jackson, Tenn., office opened in 1937 there were only 3 employees (himself and two others). At that time, there were basically 3 types of jobs in the field—manager, field assistant and claims clerk. The field assistant is the forerunner of today's social security rep, while the claims clerk eventually became today's claims rep.

The field assistant traveled, took lump-sum claims, gave public information talks, talked with employers about their responsibilities under the program, and did many other things today's social security reps do. Unlike today's claims rep, however, the claims clerk job was basically clerical in nature.

Considering the economic situation at the time, social security employees were well-paid. For instance, a field office manager hired at grade CAF-3 made \$1,620 a year. Compared to today's salaries, that's not a particularly impressive sum. In fact, a district manager in the first step of grade GS-13 makes over \$100 more than that every month!

Originally, field offices just took claims and transmitted them to central office for adjudication and payment. But by May 1942, they were doing the entire job of computing benefits, designating payees, and determining entitlement.

Bill Cole, incidentally, is the only living district manager in the nation who opened an office in 1937 and who continuously served as its manager until 1974. Bill retired from his position in Jackson in May. He recalled that when the 3-member Jackson DO opened, it was equipped with borrowed furniture and was housed in two rooms on the second floor of the Post Office Building. Today, that office is located in a new building and has 30 employees serving some 60,000 beneficiaries residing in the area.

In the early days of social security, the field offices were supervised by regional representatives for the Bureau of Federal Old-Age Benefits. There were 12 of them. The regional reps, who reported directly to a

Social Security Board regional director, had the final say on most matters arising in the field offices. On all but certain routine questions, communications between the field and headquarters passed over the regional rep's desk.

As Joe Tighe, Regional Representative, DOO, Philadelphia, remembers his early experiences in the RO, "It was entirely different than it is today. We were pretty self-sufficient. There was no overlap among bureaus. It was much nicer, much easier . . . you might say much sweeter, less complicated than today."

Joe, incidentally, joined Social Security in 1936 as a district manager in Camden, N.J. He says he "operated out of an orange crate" during his first few weeks on the job. Shortly thereafter he held the dual job of district manager and assistant regional rep in Philadelphia. By 1941, he had become Regional Rep, Philadelphia.

Among the other things Joe remembers was World War II's effect on Social Security. "The war had pretty near disastrous effects on our operations," he commented. "We lost 370 employees to the Armed Forces from Region III (the old Philadelphia Region) alone, and we only had 1,700 employees to begin with. Those that were left worked lots of over-time—frequently 7 days a week. Then, when the war was over, we had to put the returning veterans back to 'work.'"

As mentioned previously, the field offices did no adjudicative work in the early days. After taking the claims, they forwarded them to the Claims Division in Washington, D.C. Everything now performed by the Bureau of Retirement and Survivors Insurance (and its program centers), as well as the adjudication and authorization work now done in the field, was handled there.

Milt Freedman, Assistant Bureau Director, Quality Appraisal, BRSI, joined the Claims Division just as it was gearing up to handle workloads created by the 1939 amendments. These changes in the law established benefit payments for dependents and survivors of wage

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earners and moved the date of paying monthly old-age benefits from January 1942 to January 1940.

Looking back, Milt stated: "These were trying yet exciting times for young people in Washington. Roosevelt, with his New Deal agencies, transformed Washington from a sleepy little town to a booming, overcrowded metropolis. In fact, it was so crowded there was no office building available for us.

"Apartment buildings were commandeered for Government use, and they put us in the Potomac Park Apartments. Some of us had our offices in living rooms, bedrooms, dining rooms, even kitchens. They took out the stoves and sinks, but left the pipes. There were no central rest-rooms like our buildings have today-just individual bathrooms.

"Our building was in the Foggy Bottom area where the Department of State now stands," said Milt. He recalled that many social security people had lived in the Boulevard Apartments, which were demolished to make way for the State Department building. "There were tears in the eyes of many of us the day we watched that building destroyed. But soon we were intrigued with the construction of the new building. That whole area was swampy, and we watched as they sank concrete pilings, frequently hitting quicksand.

"We were in the Potomac Park Apartments until about 1941 when we moved to an office building at 1825 H Street. The apartments were cozy, but it was good to get back into a real business atmosphere again," commented Milt.

"To process claims, we used a very rudimentary claims manual and the 48-page 1939 Social Security Act. Just compare that with today's voluminous claims manual, regulations, and the over 1,200-page Social Security Law. For further reference, each of us kept our own library of General Counsel opinions. Incidentally, to work as adjudicators or reviewers in the Claims Division, we had to have law degrees."

Continuing, he said, "We operated very informally-almost like they do in today's program center modules."

Organizationally, the Claims Division was split into 4 units-one handled New York-New England claims; another Philadelphia and the South; one, Chicago and the Midwest; and still another the West Coast. There were also several service components-one providing legal references for the staff; another which handled complicated coverage issues, etc.

In 1942, the Claims Division was decentralized-its service components became part of the headquarters organization which is now BRSI and the claims processing units' work went to area offices (forerunners of today's program centers) in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco.

The New Orleans office was replaced in 1946 with offices in Birmingham and Kansas City.

William Ray, who is now Assistant Director of Operations (Payment Process), Southeastern Program Center, was an adjudicator-reviewer in New Orleans.

Bill says the space and equipment were poor compared to today's standards. "In fact, the space had been used as an auto display room and repair shop before we took over." The building was located on St. Charles Street, and among Bill's pleasant memories of his time there are the Mardi Gras parades that snaked their way past the office. He said that the building was frequently kept open in the evening so employees and their families could view the festivities from the second floor.

Another social security component which was scheduled for decentralization was the Accounting Operations Division (forerunner of BDP), which was charged with the job of setting up and maintaining the complex system of wage records the new program would require. Originally, its records were divided into 12 regions to parallel the field set-up. Plans were made to actually transfer these records out to the regions. In the meantime, they were housed-on a "temporary basis"-in the Candler Building in downtown Baltimore. The decentralization was never accomplished, and Candler became a

fixture in SSA history.

Candler, located on the Baltimore waterfront, was chosen because it was near Washington and it had sufficient floor strength and space to handle the enormous weight and volume of files we would need to keep. In addition, it was fireproof and could be occupied on a short term rental agreement. Although adequate in some respects, it was lacking in others.

“When you look at the excellent lighting we have at the Woodlawn complex, it is almost impossible to remember how bad the original lighting was in the Candler Building,” said Isidor “Murph” Cohen, formerly an administrative specialist in BDP. Murph, who is now retired, said Candler’s lights were replaced with newer fixtures over the years, “but they never did come up to Woodlawn’s good quality of lighting.”

He continued: “Those of you who have a telephone on your desk will probably find it hard to believe that there was only one phone in the Candler Building, and that was on the south side of the seventh floor. Those of us who had to use the telephone had to wait our turn, with the personnel office having first priority. I remember once having to wait 5 hours to use the phone.”

Both Murph and Jane Stevens mentioned the social life at Candler. There were only about 2,000 people working in accounting operations in 1937 as compared to the over 11,500 in BDP now. Everyone knew everyone else. The Employees’ Activities Association sponsored musicals, boat rides, dances, and other affairs. “I thought Baltimore was really a lively town because they allowed ladies to bowl with the men’s Social Security leagues,” said Jane.

Isidor commented on this, too, saying: “There were twelve teams, ten composed entirely of men, the other two of women. The two ladies’ teams finished at the bottom but they contained the best sports I have ever met.”

Jane is now a disability claims examiner (she conducts quality reviews of disability decisions made by

State Agencies in the SSI program) in the Dallas Regional Office. She went to work in the Candler Building in 1938 as a keypunch operator.

Some of Jane’s other memories are of the War years. “In 1942, they sent 10 women, including me, to the IBM school in Endicott, N.Y., to learn how to supervise IBM machine units. When we returned to Baltimore, we replaced men supervisors who left to serve in the Armed Forces.”

The War years were difficult ones for accounting operations as they were for all social security components. Those who worked in the personnel office have vivid memories of the problems involved in staffing the agency.

“We were able to get permission from the Civil Service Commission to recruit outside Baltimore,” pointed out Esther Sholl (Ret.), Chief of OA’s Employment Branch, “but it was a Priority #5, which meant we had a choice of what was left over after all defense agencies made their selections. And the jobs we offered weren’t particularly attractive. For the most part, they were Grade 1 positions on the night shift. Those applying had to take a test as well as pay their own transportation to Baltimore once appointed. Other agencies were offering Grades 3 and 4 day shift work and weren’t requiring a test.”

When the War started, 66 percent of the work force was male. When it ended, there were 66 percent women.

As the years rolled by, Social Security and its responsibilities grew. Legislation created new programs--disability, Black Lung, Medicare, and SSI-for the agency to administer, and the existing ones were expanded. New components were formed both at headquarters and in the field.

And like the memories included in this article, the simple organization of the 1930’s-field offices to take lump-sum claims, 12 regional reps to oversee the offices’ operations, and a relatively small group of people at a central location to process the claims and provide overall direction-came to exist only in the minds of those who were a part of it. □

THEY’RE
GETTING
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UNION
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