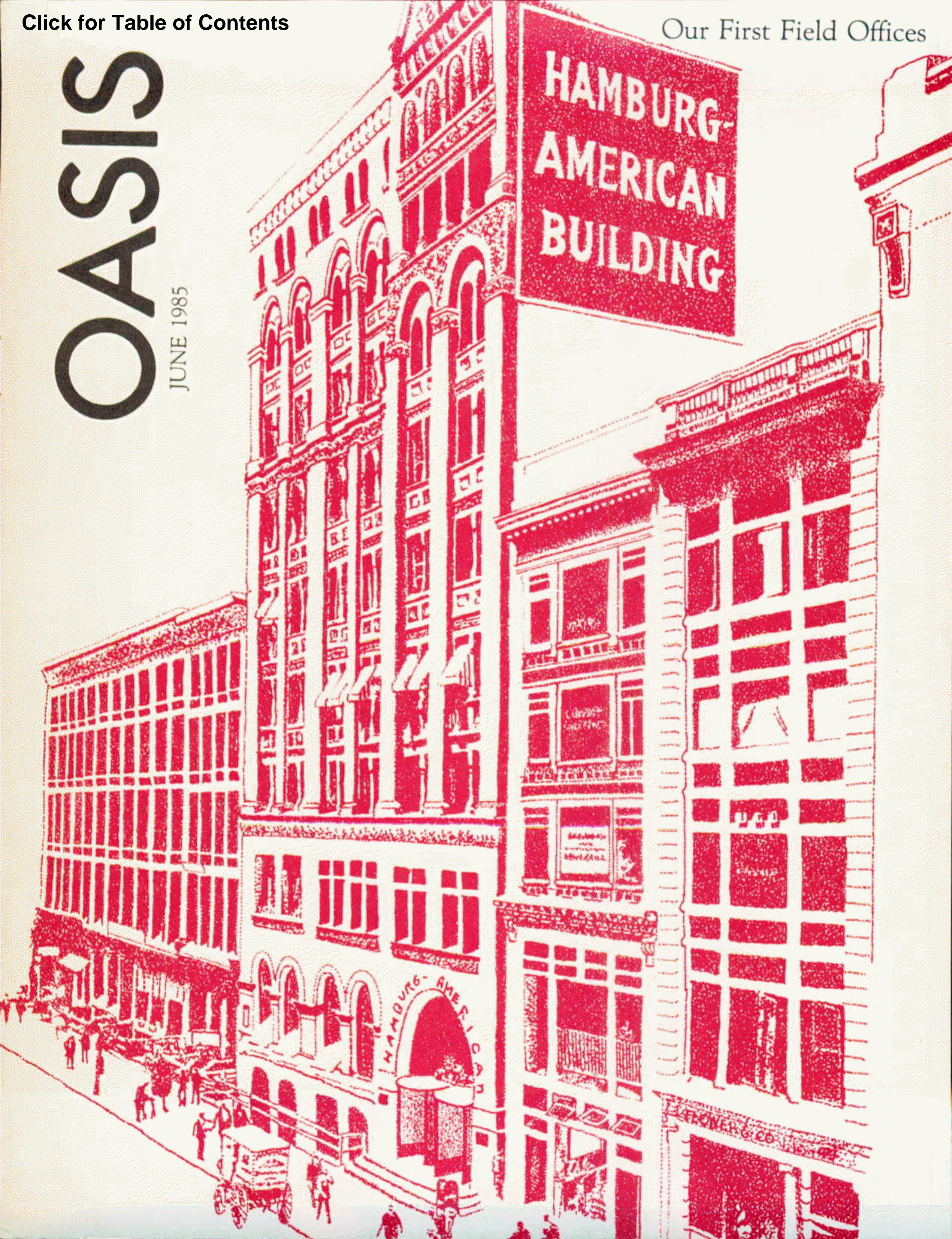


OASIS

JUNE 1985



Where Our Roots Were Planted

What was it like to open and operate the forerunners of today's modern district and branch offices? Some people who were there remember.

The ink was barely dry on the Social Security Act of 1935 when planning got under way for the field offices to take the new program to the public.

"Regardless of the construction of the Act . . . there remains the obvious fact that its administration, particularly *in the field*, will either make or defeat the entire program."

This statement was made by E.J. McCormack, Chairman of the Field Organization Committee established by the Social Security Board in 1935. And later that year he went on to launch studies of the factors affecting the location of field offices, such as population density, industrial concentration, transportation facilities, location of cooperating agencies and availability of space.

Original plans called for opening approximately 400 field offices gradually. First to open was Austin, Tex., on October 14, 1936. By January 1, 1937, 74 had opened, and as of January 1, 1939, there were 323. By January 17, 1940, 446 were in operation.

As the Social Security Board reported to Congress in the late '30s, "The opening of those offices was timed to accord with the development of the program and with progress in obtaining appropriate personnel after registers had been established by the Civil Service Commission. . . . Whenever possible, residents were selected to serve in a given locality. . . ."

"The importance of the field office as an

effective administrative agent for the Social Security Board-and especially for the successful administration of Federal old-age insurance-is evident. As the insurance program reaches out to affect directly an increasing proportion of the population, the field office should develop into an important factor in the social consciousness of the community."

Today, district and branch offices are good neighbors in more than 1,300 communities across the Nation, and the programs they administer touch the lives of most Americans.

What was it like to open and operate the forerunners of today's modern field facility? To find out, OASIS did some research on the first ones in each of the present 10 regions (there were 12 regions and 2 territories in the early days). Our thanks to the district and regional office people who helped us with interviews and historical data.

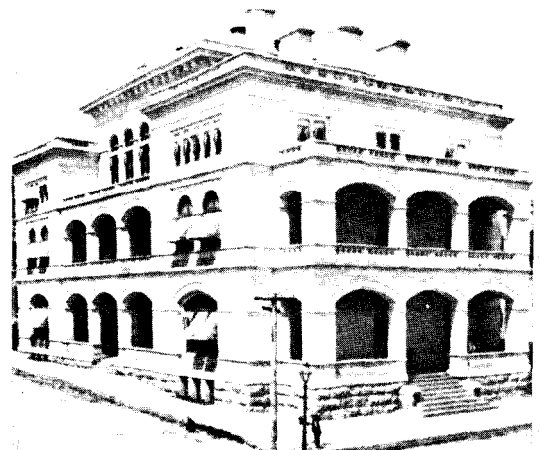
Number One

Fred Rogers (now deceased) had the distinction of opening the Austin office almost 2 weeks ahead of any others. When he visited the space provided for the DO, he found a musty interior and equipment that consisted solely of some dilapidated desks and chairs left behind by the Post Office when it moved to a new building.

"Three people visited the office on opening day, October 14, 1936," Fred said in a 1974 interview. "There were two reporters



Two of our early claimants.



The Old Post Office Building in Austin, Tex., where the first DO in the Dallas Region (and in the country) opened.

and Congressman James Buchanan, Chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations. . . . He held the press interview on the opening of the first Social Security office in the country.”

At that time, Fred was the only person in the office, which was located on the ground floor of the old Post Office Building at 6th and Colorado Streets. Many of our early offices were, in fact, co-located with the Post Office or in former postal facilities, because the Post Office was responsible for issuing Social Security numbers until June 30, 1937. Having only one Social Security employee in an area was not unusual, since the majority of offices originally had anywhere from one to six staff members.

Today, the Austin DO has about 60 employees, and it has relocated four times. Now it is in a shopping plaza near the center of the city. The old Post Office Building, by the way, is an auxiliary administration building for the University of Texas.

Alaska Next

The Juneau office opened on October 27, 1936, long before Alaska became a State. Social Security was located in the Territorial Building, which also housed the regional director’s office. In fact, then-regional director Hugh Wade also served as the acting manager of the Juneau office. He had four people assisting him.

Today, Juneau is a 1-person resident station, and it’s situated in the Federal Building. What was the Territorial Building is now the Capitol Building, where the State legislature meets.

Native Alaskan Nedra Doran, Super-

visory Resident Rep, remembers going to the Territorial Building to get her Social Security number at age 14. She told the OASIS that Hugh Wade became the first Secretary of State when Alaska achieved statehood in 1959.

A Busy November

The birth of the other offices whose lineage we traced occurred during the first few days of November 1936.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch announced the arrival of the St. Louis, Mo., office on November 5, listing the three employees-Manager Thomas Gaukel, Assistant A.J. McMahon and Secretary Faye Kuhl. In a related article, the newspaper reported that the “local office will assist in the administration of the various phases of the new Social Security Act, the most extensive provision of which is that for old-age pensions to be paid at the age of 65 to all persons who as employees are subject to the new income tax on their wages levied by the Act,”

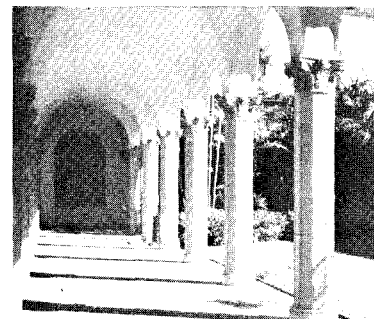
The St. Louis office was housed in the Federal Building, which today is the U.S. Court and Customs Building. Another Kansas City Region office opened on November 5-in Kansas City, Mo., in the Dierks Building, now the home of a savings and loan association.

The first DO to open in the Boston Region was in Providence, R.I., also on November 5. It was located at 40 Fountain St. in a building that today houses the State Disability Determination Services.

Catherine Egan helped to open the DO, and she remembers the first day well.

“There were only three people on duty-

Below: The Old Federal Building in Honolulu, where the San Francisco Region’s first DO opened; an early interview; and, the Court Square Building in Baltimore, where one of the first DOs opened in the Philadelphia Region.



myself, Victor Sadd, the manager, and John Grant, who was the equivalent of today's field rep," Catherine recalled. "Mr. Sadd's wife was there that first day, and she was really our only visitor.

"We did have a few telephone calls, though. One was from the head of the State Department of Employment Security. In later days, he often would go with Mr. Sadd on visits to companies to talk with employees about the new Social Security program."

Catherine, who started as a clerk-stenographer, spent her whole SSA career in the Providence DO, retiring as an operations (claims) supervisor in 1966. "The Providence office moved twice while I was working," she said, "and it is now in its fourth location."

Denver Region

Denver and Cheyenne have two things in common: both cities opened DOs on the same day (November 9, 1936), and both have since torn down the buildings that housed the offices.

Mary Edwards was one of the first employees in the original Denver DO. She retired from that office in 1966. "I was a temporary employee at first," she remembered. "Actually, all of the clerical help were temporaries. There were only six or seven permanent staff members.

"I remember trying to organize the files and the public information pamphlets during those first few days," she added. "Even after the office was opened, we were still moving furniture around."

According to the *Wyoming State Tribune* of Monday, November 9, 1936, "William Reid, former newspaperman, will be in

charge of the Cheyenne office. . . . Reid eventually will have a staff of six assistants.

One of the duties of the field office will be to provide employees, employers and all other interested persons with accurate information regarding federal old-age benefits.

"The services of experts in this field will be available to the public at all times. . . ."

What the newspaper didn't say was that field employees also had to be informed about the other aspects of the act-unemployment compensation, public assistance, etc.-as the public had difficulty differentiating between the various parts of the program. And, as the program grew, so did the role of the field office, from issuing Social Security numbers and taking claims for lump-sum payments in mid-1937 to taking claims for monthly benefits in late 1939.

The Others

The first offices opened in the remaining regions, along with their original locations and manager's names, follow:

San Francisco Region

Honolulu, Hawaii-Nov. 1-Old Federal Building-Oscar Goddard, Temporary Representative.

Atlanta Region

Atlanta, Ga.-Nov. 4-10 Forsyth St.-R.E. Haines, Manager.

Birmingham, Ala.-Nov. 4-Chamber of Commerce Building-A.R. Beneke, Manager.

Nashville, Term.-Nov. 4-Nashville Trust Building-May McGuire, Manager.

Chicago Region

Detroit, Mich.-Nov. 4-First National Bank Building-John Ballenger, Manager.

Philadelphia Region

Baltimore, Md.-Nov. 4-Court Square Building-Luther Becker, Manager.

Philadelphia, Pa.-Nov. 4-Widener Building-Alexander Fleisher, Manager.

New York Region

New York City, N.Y.-Nov. 5-Hamburg-American Building-Ralph Curren, Manager.

The last five decades have been periods of continuous growth and expanding workloads for field people. Today, field employees are meeting new challenges as they get ready for Field Office Systems Enhancement-and Social Security's next 50 years.

The Territorial Building, now called the Capitol Building, was the home of the first DO in the Seattle Region-Juneau, Alaska.

