

# Ohio town shows the divided country Obama will lead

By Eli Saslow, Washington Post

FREMONT, Ohio – On the same day, in the same county of northern Ohio, two new grandparents prepared to drive to the same factory for work. They had started their careers at Arm & Hammer the same year, and for more than two decades, they had stood together on a concrete floor and watched baking soda roll down an 80-foot production line. But, on this morning, what they saw looked nothing alike.

Bill Herr, 61, left a house that had declined in value by 20 percent, in a neighborhood blemished by foreclosures, in a town where he believed the economy for the middle class was “falling apart.” He said goodbye to a wife who was recovering from open-heart surgery, which she blamed in small part on the stress and disappointment of the presidential election. He grabbed a coat purchased for \$6 at Goodwill and walked out a front door where he had recently hung a sign created by a local Christian motorcycle group: “AMERICA NEEDS GOD’S HELP! PRAYER OUR ONLY HOPE.”

Cathy Morris, 53, left a home she had bought with the help of a middle-class tax break and then drove by the mailbox where she sent regular \$25 checks to President Obama. She passed through a town that she believed was “almost back” and pulled into an Arm & Hammer factory where orders had increased by 5 percent and management was once again hiring. “Obama,” she said. “Thank goodness.”

This is the America that Obama will govern in his second term: A place divided not only by ideology, race and class but also by the very perception of reality. Four years since Obama first took office, is the country better or worse off? Safer

or more at risk? Principled or desperately lost?

Here in Fremont, as in much of America, it all depends on whom you ask. In this rural, Rust Belt county where Obama won exactly 50 percent of the vote, located in a state where he won 50 percent, residents expect Obama to either ruin the country or rescue it. The president who spoke ambitiously at his first inauguration about uniting America instead arrives at his second with the country further divided. Fourteen percent of Republicans think he's doing a good job, compared with 88 percent of Democrats. The goal is no longer to effect sweeping conciliation so much as to find fractional compromise in a diminishing common ground.

Inside an Arm & Hammer factory that billows smoke across the farmlands of Ohio, 180 employees now self-segregate into what Morris calls "ideological islands." Co-workers who were once moderate Democrats or Republicans shifted fully to their sides over the past four years, intensifying the disconnect.

There are free copies of a National Rifle Association monthly magazine in one break room and, as of late last year, a life-size cardboard cutout of Obama in the other. There are workers who share copies of Obama's biography, "Dreams From My Father," and others who distribute the movie-version parody, "Dreams From My Real Father: A Story of Reds and Deception."

And then there are Morris and Herr, two longtime employees working side by side, each anticipating Obama's second inauguration as a seminal moment.

For one, it is confirmation that life has gotten better.

For the other, it is proof that life has gotten worse.

### **'Obama's America'**

Bill and Sally Herr built their farmhouse on the outskirts of Fremont in the months after Sept. 11, 2001, and they agreed to

decorate it in homage to the country they served and loved. They placed two American flags on the lawn, five flag magnets on the fridge, a flag-themed coloring book in the grandkids' room and a flag throw blanket on the living room couch. They framed another flag just inside the entryway, displaying it under three words that summarized their philosophy: "God Bless America."

But lately, when they talked about the state of the country, the phrase Bill preferred was something different, something much less reassuring.

"Obama's America," he said.

Obama's America: It was the wood pellets burning downstairs in their latest attempt to lower the energy bill; the constant threats of downsizing at the print shop where Sally has worked for 30 years; the 25 percent drop in tithing at their church; the date nights paid for with gift certificates to Arby's or Casa Fiesta; the 37-year-old son with a doctorate who had been forced to move back in with them for six months after losing his job as a counselor in Toledo.

What bothered Bill most of all was the way he thought Obama had slighted the military, removing troops from combat zones too quickly and once disregarding Iraq as a "stupid war." Stupid or not, Bill had been there to fight it when the Army sent orders to a 52-year-old whose military experience consisted mostly of humanitarian missions in South America with the Army Reserve. This time, the orders were to deploy on five days notice for a 12-month tour with a unit out of Chicago. So off he had gone into the desert with men less than half his age, once unloading 190 rounds in a single firefight, ducking behind a tank as his chin strap filled with sweat. "So that was stupid?" he wondered.

Bill and Sally were lifelong Republicans who had been wary of Obama from the start, but it was the frustrations of the past

four years that had welcomed Fox News as a constant presence into their living room and tea party members to their annual backyard Fourth of July bash. They wanted friends with whom to share their frustrations. Now they forwarded along e-mails from those new friends suggesting murky details in Obama's family history and traveled to Glenn Beck rallies across the state.

They had sought out a community of others who thought like them, and immersing in that community had changed what they thought.

"The first time he won, I really just considered him inexperienced and misguided," Sally said. "This time, I think he is purposely taking us to a place we don't recognize."

Obama had said he wanted to raise the federal debt limit; Sally and Bill, meanwhile, were teaching Financial Peace University at their church, where they talked about borrowing \$21,000 to buy their first house and then staying there 30 years until the mortgage was paid off.

"The most important lesson is you pay off what you owe before you borrow more," Bill had told the congregants.

Obama wanted to cover rising costs for food stamps and unemployment insurance; Bill had found a factory job that paid \$21 an hour and stuck with it through aching feet, back pain and boredom. He had selected a new Arm & Hammer trinket out of the company catalog to mark every five years of employment and displayed those gifts proudly around his house. He had continued to fill the vats of glue and load cartons of baking soda boxes onto the line, watching 270 of them get filled every minute, eight hours a day, for 23 years.

### **On the other side**

Cathy Morris, an Arm & Hammer quality supervisor, had worked alongside Bill for every one of those years without ever

speaking to him about politics. She had overheard enough of his conversations to know: "He's way over on the other side," she said – and she preferred to associate only with her own side whenever possible.

She picked out an elliptical machine at the gym farthest from the TVs, because they were always tuned to Fox News. She deleted conservative friends from her Facebook page. She went on Snopes.com to investigate rumors about Obama and then shared her findings mostly with other liberals – the mechanic at work whom she spotted at a rally for Vice President Biden, her union Democrat father or her two daughters who had graduated from liberal arts colleges. In what increasingly felt like a fight over basic American principles, she decided her role was to reinforce the stakes with liberals already on her side.

"Why waste my breath talking about the president to somebody who is always going to hate him?" Morris said. "If they can't understand what he's accomplished, it is already a lost cause."

How, she wondered, could anyone not see the proof? The local unemployment rate had dropped from 13 percent to just more than 6 percent. The nearby National Machinery Plant, which had nearly closed its doors a few years earlier, now had trucks lining up at the loading docks like floats awaiting the start of a victory parade. The two colleges in town had become more diverse, and Arm & Hammer had begun offering benefits to same-sex domestic partners. Because of health-care reform, Morris's youngest daughter, 22, has been able to stay on her mother's health insurance plan. Morris decided to repay the president by doing something she had never done: making regular donations to Obama's reelection campaign.

In this county of 50-50, she had decided there was no more room for ambivalence. "You are all in for him or against him, and you have to commit," Morris said.

Local membership had risen for both the tea party and the Democratic Women's Club, and one disagreement on election night had resulted in an assault charge. Even the area's once-tranquil town hall meetings had devolved into a shouting match, with one woman suggesting that liberals in Washington should be "shot in the head," prompting local Democrats to demand a police investigation. Ever since, local politics had all but come to a standstill.

But the line at Arm & Hammer had to keep moving, 270 cartons a minute, so employees had decided to guard the peace by talking sparingly about Obama or his second inauguration.

"I only confide in people who think like I think," Herr said.

"Smile and stick to your side," Morris said.

So they stood together in polite silence and watched baking soda roll down the manufacturing line and onto the trucks, where it would be delivered into an economy that was improving or combusting, in a country where life was getting better or worse.