

Hard Times

Hungry Years

Failure of the Poor Relief in Southwestern Kansas 1930-1933

by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

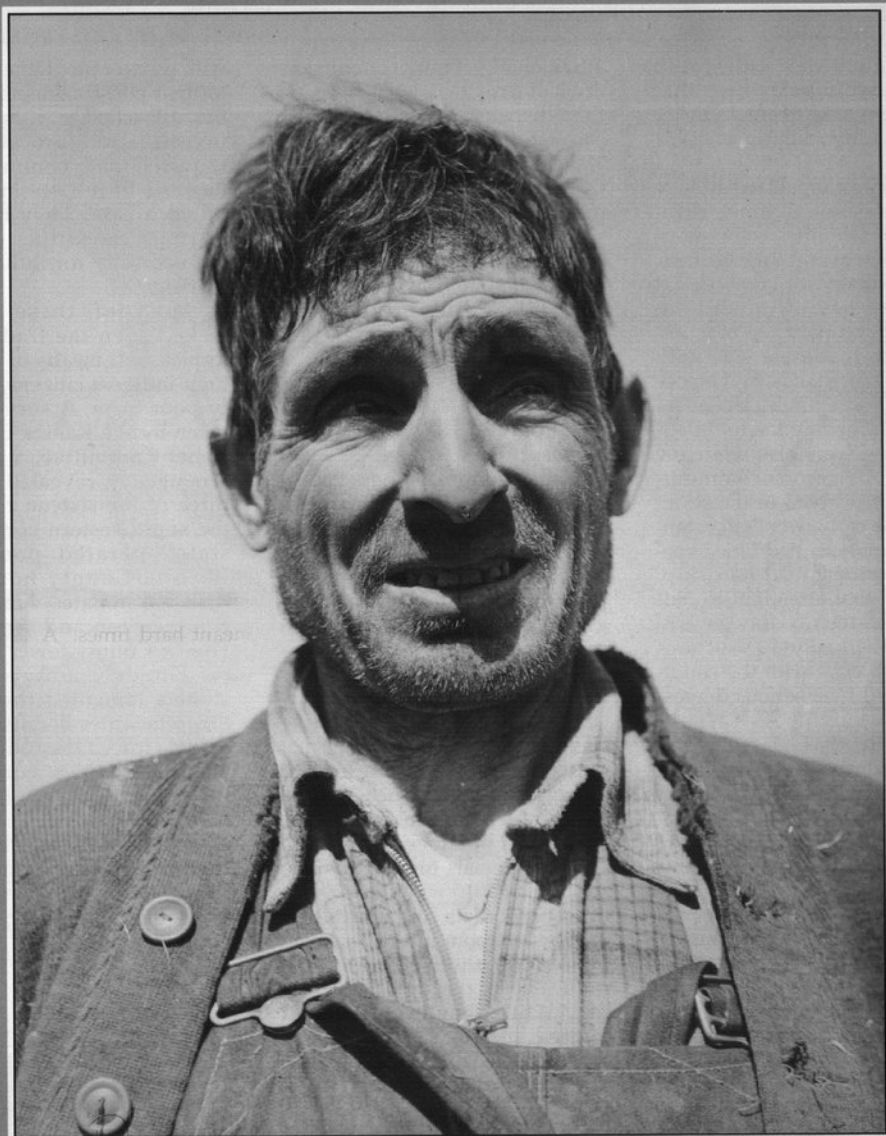
For millions of Americans, the decade of the 1930s meant hard times.¹ A massive economic downturn brought unemployment, underemployment, and general belt-tightening to most American families. In Kansas, and indeed, most of the Great Plains, those years also brought a severe drought. The people of southwestern Kansas were particularly hard hit, suffering blinding dirt storms in addition to eight years of abnormally dry conditions.² Many farmers harvested a bumper crop of wheat in 1931, only to find that terribly depressed prices had rendered it hardly worth the cost of cutting. Throughout the remainder of the decade, area farmers produced crops that ranged from disappointing to disastrous.

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1. For further information on the Great Depression and Dust Bowl on the Great Plains see Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981); and Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Depression on the Southern Great Plains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

2. For the purposes of this article, southwestern Kansas includes sixteen contiguous counties in the southwestern corner of the state that suffered extreme drought conditions throughout the 1930s. They include Clark, Finney, Ford, Grant, Gray, Hamilton, Haskell, Hodgeman, Kearny, Meade, Morton, Ness, Seward, Stanton, Stevens, and Wichita counties.



Throughout the decade of the Great Depression, southwest Kansas residents faced hard times and hungry years.

What resulted was widespread poverty and hopelessness that drained the area of one quarter of its population between 1931 and 1940.

The lack of organized welfare administration in most rural Kansas communities compounded this poverty and hopelessness. At the onset of the Great Depression, southwestern Kansas was an accumulation of towns of small to moderate size with their rural hinterlands, and a population almost entirely dependent upon farm income for its livelihood. These were also relatively new and prosperous communities, largely peopled in the boom years of the early twentieth century. Their residents had little experience of widespread hardship, other than that attendant to pioneering, and their county governments had virtually no structures designed to cope with the conditions created by a serious depression and drought. As a result, local relief efforts, both public and private, crumbled in the face of the disasters of the 1930s.

Between the onset of the Great Depression and the early months of 1933, most of the burden of providing relief fell upon the unready shoulders of local government officials. They faced problems of staggering dimensions. By early 1931, many southwestern Kansans were barely surviving. The wheat price crash devastated the area's economy, and then the drought set in. Officials of local governments were entirely unprepared to administer relief on a large scale.

Traditionally, county commissioners had provided what little aid they dispensed on a haphazard, case-by-case basis. In January of 1930, for example, the Haskell County commissioners presided over a welfare program that consisted of only a few dollars that they allowed for rent on one woman's home. By July of 1931, their disbursements had risen to only \$3.57, allocated for supplies for the poor. Not until December of 1931 did the commissioners create a Poor Fund, and then they allocated only \$23.97 in aid of two families.³

Once commissioners recognized the need for welfare programs and created poor funds, they were still unsure how to manage the day to day business of providing relief. Only after local grocers began handling relief cases did Stevens County commissioners realize that they had to limit allowed food aid to a few staple goods. Instead of allowing clients to purchase anything that they wanted, the board limited them to basic items such as flour, salt meat, beans, rice, coffee, lard, sugar, and potatoes.⁴ In Stanton County, officials found it impossible to keep up with the expense of grocery orders, and instead created a storeroom in the basement of the courthouse, hoping to reduce costs through bulk buying.⁵ While they experimented

with ways of providing necessities to their constituents, most counties still relied on a cumbersome investigation procedure that required the commissioners, meeting in full session, to vote on each case. They had yet to discover the virtues of, or feel the necessity for, full-time case workers.⁶

Most of these counties lacked even the traditional, if unpleasant, means of caring for their indigent citizens, the county poor farm. A survey undertaken by the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, a state welfare agency, revealed that only three of the sixteen counties in the southwestern corner of the state operated poor farms. Wichita County housed less than ten inmates, Ford County between ten and twenty, and Finney County fewer than thirty.⁷ Finney County's commissioners lamented these inadequate facilities because the lack of beds forced the county to pay more than \$125 a month in rent for families unable to pay for their own housing. The commissioners made plans, never carried out, to shelter their relief families. Only the advent of federally funded housing programs forestalled disaster.⁸

3. Commissioners' Journal, Haskell County, v. C, January 6, 1930, p. 437; July 6, 1931, p. 477; December 7, 1931, p. 485, Haskell County Clerk's Office, Sublette.

4. Commissioners' Journal, Stevens County, v. E, November 2, 1931, p. 559, Stevens County Clerk's Office, Hugoton.

5. Commissioners' Journal, Stanton County, December 7, 1931, p. 89, Stanton County Clerk's Office, Johnson.

6. Commissioners' Journal, Hamilton County, v. 5, April 4, 1932, p. 163, Hamilton County Clerk's Office, Syracuse.

7. Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, "A Study of Kansas Poor Farms," Bulletin KERC no. 307 (October 1935), x.

8. "County Will Build Homes for the Poor," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, November 7, 1931, 1; Commissioners' Journal, Finney County, v. G, January 5-6, 1932, p. 532, and December 6-7, 1932, p. 592, Finney County Clerk's Office, Garden City.



Years of drought and depressed prices resulted in widespread poverty and hopelessness.



Throughout the 1930s, southwest Kansas farmers produced crops that ranged from disappointing to disastrous.

Inexperience, the growing number of jobless workers, and worsening drought conditions soon bankrupted most local governments in southwestern Kansas. By mid-1932 and early 1933, county commissioners throughout the area presided over empty Poor Funds. Suffering this affliction, Hamilton County's Board of Commissioners issued the following statement, effectively abandoning its relief program: "Whereas the Poor Fund of Hamilton County has long since been exhausted, further pauper aid must of necessity be discontinued from and after this date." This situation still existed in the summer of 1933, when the board informed the township trustees that it would endorse orders against the Poor Fund "only in extreme emergency." Empty coffers such as those of Hamilton County were common to most local governments throughout southwestern Kansas.

These illustrations highlight the problems that county government officials faced during the 1930s. The case of Finney County provides a particularly clear example of the inadequacy of county-based efforts to meet effectively the challenge of providing consistent and adequate relief to impoverished residents before the advent of large-scale federal relief in 1933. In 1930, Finney County was one of the most "urban" counties in southwestern Kansas. Over ten thou-

9. Commissioners' Journal, Hamilton County, v. 5, July 5, 1932, p. 168, and June 5, 1933, p. 189.

sand people lived in Finney County in 1930, and more than six thousand of them resided in Garden City. Nevertheless, the economy of Finney County, like the economies of all southwestern Kansas counties, rested on an agricultural base. Even the county's major industry, the Garden City Company's sugar plant, grew out of the production of sugar beets in irrigated fields along the Arkansas River.

If greater size had meant greater preparedness and resources, local government officials in Finney County would have managed the drought and economic downturn better than their contemporaries in other southwestern Kansas counties, such as Grant, Morton, or Seward counties. Finney County's struggles with problems of relief administration, however, were a larger, and perhaps more confused, version of the problems that plagued county commissioners all across the region. Every community's resources were limited and becoming less adequate with each passing month, and Finney County's greater population also meant a larger burden in relief payments. The problems that administrators in Finney County confronted occurred on a similar or smaller scale throughout southwestern Kansas between 1930 and 1933.

Finney County began the 1930s with a minimal, rudimentary relief system. The county commissioners distributed aid on an individual basis. They provided mothers' pensions to a few

widows, and old age pensions to a few of their indigent elderly, but they operated no formal welfare system.¹⁰ In 1930, members of the Provident Association, a private organization coordinating all of the charitable associations in the county, worked with the county to supply food and clothing to the needy, and operated out of a room at the old courthouse. The county was equipped to meet the most basic needs of only a small number of destitute people. By the early spring of 1931, it was becoming evident that this very limited welfare system was inadequate to the dimensions of the situation. The county commissioners were spending more than two thousand dollars per month on poor relief, not including the aid given by the Provident Association, and their funds were running low. In June, the Provident Association was no longer able to meet growing demands, and relinquished its responsibility for local relief to a national organization, the Volunteers of America. With a regional office in Denver, the Volunteers operated much like the Salvation Army, offering the needy shelter, food, and guidance based on Christian princi-

10. The State of Kansas defined mothers' pensions as "Mothers Pensions. Granted to women with children under 14, who are widowed, divorced, or deserted, or whose husbands are unable to support them; total sum not to exceed \$50 a month; administered by board of county commissioners, assisted by an investigating board of three reputable women of the county or the board of public welfare, if there be such a board." Commissioner of Labor and Industry, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor and Industry of the State of Kansas* (1932), 56.

ples. Workers drew no salary from the organization and lived on donations. The Volunteers were to cooperate with the Red Cross and Salvation Army as well as the county commissioners.¹¹ Despite the adoption of this new and fairly inexpensive expedient, the members of the Finney County Board of Commissioners were none too sure of their ability to continue to care for the poor. They had more than exhausted the allowable levy for the poor fund, and there were still more demands to meet.

The commissioners attempted to explain their way out of their predicament, searching for individuals and groups upon whom they could place the blame for the county's bankruptcy. Bootleggers and their families drew the commissioners' ire. Jailing violators of the Volstead Act and feeding their indigent families while they were incarcerated was an expensive proposition. Officials began to wonder if they should enforce liquor laws in the county. The people of Finney County approved of prohibition, but "what the commission would like is for Mr. Volstead [to] arrange to take care of the families while the violator is serving his sentence."¹² The Mexican population of Finney County, drawn to the area by jobs with the rail-

11. "Provident Association Aid," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 15, 1931; "Approval for New Charity Organization," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 9, 1931.

12. "It's the Poor That Worries Commission," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, July 8, 1931.

roads and in the sugar beet fields, also received a good deal of criticism. An editor for the local newspaper commented, "they cannot be deported, it is said, and the only thing for the county to do is support them or let them starve." Whatever the degree of justice in these accusations, the commissioners saw a large part of their problem stemming from the needs of these marginalized members of the community, and although they thought they understood the source of the county's problems, they were at a loss for a cure. The board meeting of July 7, 1931, went on for more than a day and ended without the commissioners formulating any new plans.¹³

Despite these troubles, relief administered through the combined efforts of private agencies and the local government allowed the people of Finney County to limp along for the next eleven months. The Volunteers of America took over an increasing share of welfare work in the community, with a portion of their funds provided by the local government, in addition to donations. Between July and October of 1931, the Volunteers gave out 2,864 free meals, 444 nights lodging, aided nearly 400 families with grocery purchases, gave out 700 pieces of clothing, and found jobs for nearly 400 people, both men and women. When hungry people came begging for food at homes and busi-

nesses, the Volunteers asked that they not be fed, but sent to their headquarters.¹⁴

Other local organizations also helped to shoulder the relief burden. Members of the Finney County Junior Red Cross collected empty jars, cans, fruit, and vegetables for a canning project, and girls in the public school's home economics classes did the work. Through this joint effort they donated ninety quarts of food to the local relief committee. Boy and Girl Scouts sold tickets for a movie showing at the State Theater to benefit the Volunteers. The Elks cooperated with the Volunteers in distributing Christmas baskets to the needy.¹⁵

County efforts, however, garnered less praise and seemed to work less smoothly than private relief measures. In June of 1932, more than one hundred residents came to the county courthouse to protest the county's handling of poor relief. They criticized how the commission was handling the situation and suggested "that the county officers contribute ten per cent [*sic*] of their monthly wages to the county poor fund."¹⁶ The final outcome of the meeting was

14. "Volunteers of America Doing Community a Good," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, October 14, 1931; "Send Hungry to Volunteers," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, July 6, 1931.

15. "Local Junior Red Cross to Aid Needy By Canning Food," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, November 17, 1931; "Relief Show Will Feature Miss Bennett," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, November 17, 1931; "None Will Go Hungry Here on Christmas," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, December 24, 1931.

16. "Plan Drive to Get Funds for Poor in County," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 3, 1932.

an attempt to move relief further into the private sector by forming a committee of church and civic leaders to raise funds for relief. County officials were increasingly uneasy about their ability to continue providing publicly funded aid to the poor.

Four days later, the county commissioners gave up. During their meeting of June 7 and 8, 1932, they conceded the bankruptcy of the poor relief fund and resolved to let someone else deal with the situation:

Ways and means were discussed as to the handling of the poor situation, and it was decided that the county could not support the poor any longer as the funds were far overdrawn, and that it would be compelled to let the community handle the poor for the balance of the current year.¹⁷

The county poor relief budget had accumulated an overdraft of more than nine thousand dollars, and the Board of County Commissioners was no longer willing, or able, to release more funds. Garden City and Finney County were entirely without a public relief program.

In response, a group of civic minded individuals created a new relief agency, christened the Emergency Relief Committee, to work under the board of directors of the old Provident Asso-

17. Commissioners' Journal, Finney County, v. G, June 7-8, 1932, p. 561; "A Problem, Not Experiment," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 14, 1932.

13. *Ibid.*

ciation. The members of this committee planned to carry on relief work in the county, in conjunction with the Volunteers of America. The Volunteers were to take care of emergency cases and transients, while the committee undertook the distribution of general relief.¹⁸

The largest problem facing the members of the newly formed committee was fund-raising. They called for all salaried workers and professionals in Garden City to contribute 3 percent of their incomes to the relief fund. They asked retired farmers and businessmen to contribute an unspecified lump sum. To stretch these funds further and build public confidence, the committee pledged to distribute its money only to "bona fide relief organizations," and to require those organizations to screen applicants very carefully:

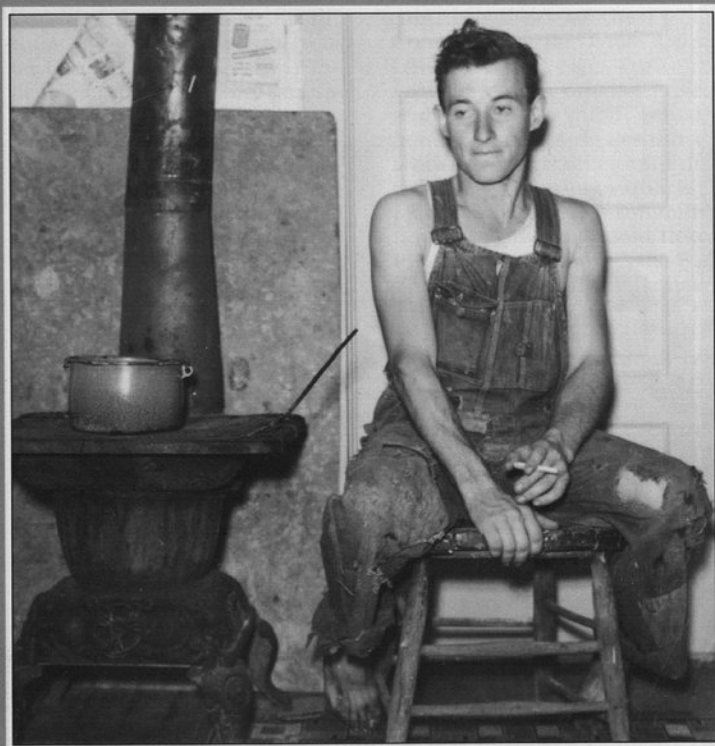
The applicant must sign that he fully acknowledges his obligation both moral and financial and agrees to tender a first lien on any and all property owned by himself, as security for the payment of the funds expended on his behalf. He further pledges that he is willing to perform such labor as the committee may prescribe at such rates of pay as prescribed by them.¹⁹

18. "Concentrated Effort to Aid Unemployed," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 14, 1932.

19. "A Problem, Not Experiment," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 14, 1932.



By early 1931, many southwestern Kansans were barely surviving. The wheat price crash devastated the area's economy, and then the drought set in.



Area residents made do on virtually nothing as county governments in southwestern Kansas continually failed to shoulder the dual burdens of economic and environmental disasters.

The Volunteers also established more stringent rules for aid recipients. Captain Boone, head of Garden City operations, explained that the Volunteers would require transients who were physically able to work two hours for supper, lodging, and breakfast, and to work eight hours to receive a second day's aid. To encourage contributions, the committee promised that "there will be no aid for the drone or the family which is not worthy," and that the committee, composed of "eleven Garden City business men," would keep a close eye on the funds and the storeroom from which supplies would be issued.²⁰ Hoping that these measures would encourage charitable giving, the Emergency Relief Committee began operations in the summer of 1932.

The committee's members carried out the relief obligations of Finney County on a small scale through the summer and fall of 1932. By August, they had collected more than \$400, and out of that, passed \$150 on to the Volunteers. An agreement with area grocery stores allowed the committee to purchase food at reduced prices and stretched charity dollars further.²¹ In September, the committee aided thirty-three families and eighty-six individuals.²² In October, the committee reported that it had received enough contributions for the time being but that the funds on hand would proba-

20. "Schulman to be Leader of Charity Board," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 18, 1932.

21. "Welfare Group Hears Reports," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, August 3, 1932.

22. "Committee Aids Needy Families," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, September 2, 1932.

bly be inadequate for the winter months. Whether aid came through private or public organizations, the cold winter months posed special problems in relief distribution because of increased food, clothing, and fuel needs.²³

In the fall of 1932, city and county government officials, as well as members of the local relief committee, began to explore the possibility of the county obtaining federal relief funds. In July, President Hoover had signed into law the Relief and Construction Act which allowed the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to loan money to states for public works projects. The state of Kansas had secured \$2,750,000 in RFC funds, and local government officials, including Mayor Fred Evans and relief committee chairman R. N. Downie, immediately went to work to secure for Finney County its fair share. In anticipation of the plan's approval, the city clerk began registering the unemployed for relief work. Everyone rejoiced when the state awarded Finney County \$3,456. According to plan, county officials used the money to widen a storm sewer in a Garden City park and eventually hired about sixty men to work on the project. This money, however, was only a drop in the bucket; nearly two hundred men

applied for the jobs.²⁴ Finney County, along with the rest of the country, faced a grim season.²⁵

Either through apathy or hopelessness, it appeared that the people of Finney County were willing to let the Emergency Relief Committee die in the winter of 1932-1933. Following a "poorly attended and disapproving meeting" in early December, R. N. Downie, chairman of the committee, announced that it would be suspending operations:

It appeared that people were not interested enough to attend the meeting to express a willingness that the organization continue with its work or even ask it to cease, and that the committee was not going to force itself upon the people unless it was really desired.²⁶

24. "Officials Map Proposed Plan for Unemployment Relief Here," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, September 10, 1932; "Relief Group Approves \$3,456 Fund for Work on Local Improvement," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, October 13, 1932; "25 Are Working at Relief Jobs," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, October 19, 1932.

25. Not all counties were as fortunate as Finney County in securing RFC funds. In Stanton County, for example, the editor of the *Johnson Pioneer* lamented the fact that "so far as this office is able to learn, there is nothing definite being done in regards to pushing local projects which would come under the \$3,000,000,000 public works program as outlined in the last session of congress." The county had registered the unemployed, but no "livewire volunteer" or county official had taken it upon him or herself to secure any federal funds for Stanton County. "Livewire Volunteer is Needed in Johnson Public Works Program," *Johnson Pioneer*, October 5, 1933.

26. "Lack of Interest in Relief Work is Shown Last Night," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, December 9, 1932.

The announcement precipitated an appeal from the editor of the *Garden City Daily Telegram*. He placed no blame for the collapse of the program with the Emergency Relief Committee. The committee had done good work. The fault instead lay with the people of Garden City and Finney County. The county government was still very low on funds and the best way to continue to provide relief to the needy was through private, community-wide effort. "The time for action has arrived," the editor proclaimed.²⁷ Most Finney County residents saw little option but to push for the continuation of privately sponsored relief; the county poor fund was overdrawn by more than ten thousand dollars.²⁸

By the beginning of January, the Emergency Relief Committee was back in business but still operating on the most minimal of funding. The *Garden City Daily Telegram* published a pledge form in the paper so that "everyone [would] have a chance to aid in furnishing funds to take care of the needy."²⁹ The committee had already mailed the forms to some local firms and individuals and was desperate for funds. Although the RFC loan still provided workers with jobs, the unemployed outnumbered the jobs, and cold weather limited the feasible amount of outdoor relief work. The county commissioners responded by cutting relief wages

27. "It Cannot Die," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, December 12, 1932.

28. "County Board Gives \$150 Monthly for Relief Organization," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, January 4, 1933.

29. "Help Needed," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, February, 11, 1933.

23. "Hear Relief Report," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, October 5, 1932.

from twenty-five cents an hour to fifteen cents an hour to employ more men, and the Emergency Relief Committee contemplated a house-to-house canvas for subscriptions.³⁰ The committee, with the few dollars collected early in its existence, could not bear the weight of a growing number of very poor people.³¹

In response to this growing burden, the committee voted to create a subcommittee to present the names of nonresident families that had applied to the Finney County attorney for relief. They requested that these newcomers "be sent back where they came from according to state law."³² Neither the members of the Emergency Relief Committee nor the members of the county government wanted to be responsible for incoming, indigent outsiders. To further discourage this migration, they voted to reduce the rations for the transients at the Volunteers' mission to Mulligan Stew and coffee.³³ Relief officials in Finney County had little to offer to their own people, and even less for migrants and transients.

By the winter of 1933, the situation in Finney County, and across the entire nation, had become grim. The level of funding provid-

ed under the RFC was relatively low, the state had scanty provisions for the poor, the county budget was clearly inadequate, and the Emergency Relief Committee could do very little relying on voluntary contributions in a time of great scarcity. One indicator of the severity of the situation was that the commissioners were even refusing to allow mothers' pensions, or as they put it, "Mothers Aid." In March, they tabled two requests for mothers' pensions "due to the fact that the poor fund was far overdrawn, but suggested that if necessary, help in the way of food and clothing would be provided."³⁴ Clearly, they hoped that such aid would prove unnecessary.

Fortunately for the people of Garden City and Finney County, lawmakers in Washington were beginning a massive response to the problems of unemployment and poverty. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inauguration in March of 1933 marked the beginning of a flurry of legislative action. In his first one hundred days in office, Roosevelt signed into law a number of measures providing aid to city and county alike. When these federal relief funds became available to Finney County in the summer and fall of 1933, the members of the committee breathed a sigh of relief and ceased operations.³⁵ As the drought worsened in 1934 and 1935, the needs of the county increased, and the county's dependence upon federal relief

increased likewise. By the summer of 1934, ten people per day were making applications for funding through the county.³⁶ Many of these people received relief only because the federal government had largely taken over the burden of funding welfare. In September, officials in Finney County distributed \$14,252.44 in aid, of which \$12,143.48 was federal money allocated by the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee.³⁷ Try as they might, the people of Finney County lacked the resources to fight this battle by themselves.

Many of the residents of Finney County, like the residents of all southwestern Kansas counties, came to rely on the federal government for the maintenance of their families, homes, and communities. It was a reliance that showed no sign of diminishing well into 1940. County officials allocated more money for relief in that year than they had in any year previously.

What happened to the people of Finney County was repeated all across the southwestern corner of the state. Evidence of southwestern Kansas' failure to recover from the early shocks of the depression, as well as the onset of the drought, was the repeated budget slashing by county officials, their continual inability to collect more than a small portion

30. "Relief Association Pledges, Donations Not Coming in Fast," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, February 3, 1933; "Relief Association Plans to Sponsor Community Garden," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, February 21, 1933.

31. "Demands for Relief Double During Month of February," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, March 3, 1933.

32. "Cut Relief to Allow More Laborers a Job," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 13, 1933.

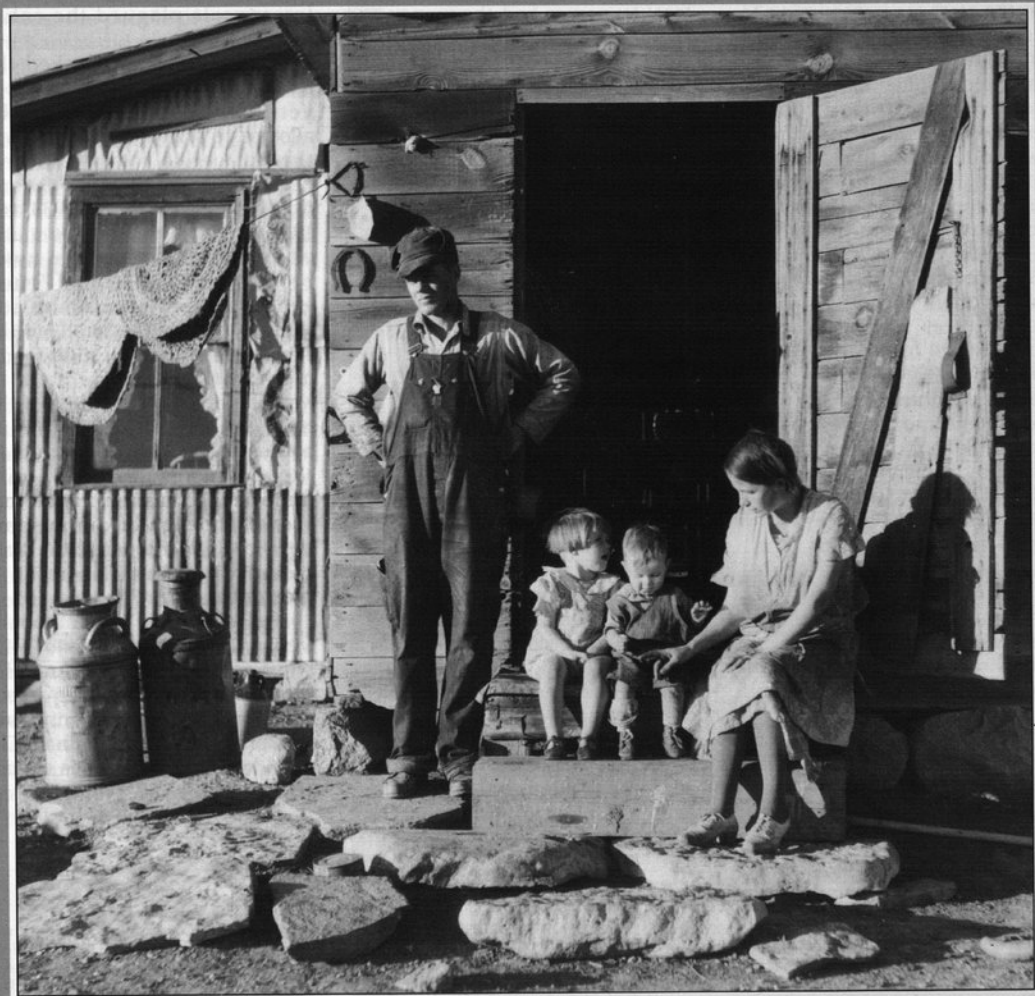
33. "Volunteers to Cut Transient Menu," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 13, 1933.

34. Commissioners' Journal, Finney County, v. G, March 7, 8, 10, 1933, p. 610.

35. "Relief Association Votes to Wind Up Its Work and Quit," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, September 13, 1933.

36. "Number of Relief Cases in a Rapid Increase of Late," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 27, 1934.

37. "Uncle Sam Bears Bulk of County's Poor Relief Load," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, October 3, 1934.



Although counties in southwestern Kansas clearly lacked the resources to aid their own people, their own people could not be allowed to starve. Federal aid was the answer to the needs of many.

of outstanding taxes, and persistent attempts to secure permission from the state tax commission to issue more poor relief bonds. Most budget cuts came early in the decade and resulted in significantly lower wages for all county employees from laborers on road crews, to teachers, to the county engineer. For example, Finney County's employees faced a 20 percent cut in wages in 1931, as did Stanton County's employees in 1932. Stevens County's board of commissioners laid off all 124 of its employees working on the county roads for an indefinite period in 1932.³⁸ Schools often absorbed the brunt of budget cuts, suffering enormous reductions in funding. School districts cutting funding by 50 percent or more in 1932 and 1933 included those in Grant, Morton, Stevens, and Seward counties. Teachers faced pay cuts of up to 25 percent.³⁹ Worried administrators trimmed to the bone any expenditures that were not absolutely necessary.

Budget cuts, however, had only a limited impact on the financial crisis because county officials had little or no ability to collect taxes. Citizens left their tax bills unpaid for years at a time, and property assessments for tax purposes fell precipitously. Between 1933 and 1938, county

officials took little action to recover lost revenue, knowing that few local taxpayers had the money to pay. A disastrous drought, lasting from 1931 to 1939, devastated local farmers, and their problems were compounded by terrible dust storms that reduced their fields and hopes to ashes. At the height of the Dust Bowl, confiscating homes, land, and businesses for back taxes would have been futile since real estate was virtually worthless due to drought conditions and the resulting depopulation. Only in 1938 and 1939 did county officers again start to enforce the tax laws.⁴⁰

In a desperate effort to stay afloat, county officials repeatedly appealed to the Kansas State Tax Commission for permission to increase the levy for the poor fund, and to issue emergency warrants and additional bonds for poor relief. During 1939, Morton County's commissioners asked that the state of Kansas pay 30 percent of the approved social welfare budget of the county. The drought had produced particularly devastating effects in that county, driving away almost 50 percent of the population and leaving the county's major town, Elkhart, a ghost of its former self.⁴¹ Although

Morton County's case was extreme, similar problems on a lesser scale plagued the entire area.⁴²

Counties clearly lacked the resources to aid their own people, yet their people could not be allowed to starve. Federal aid was the answer to many families' needs. Much of the relief federal officials distributed in 1933 and 1934 to people throughout southwestern Kansas came from funds provided by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), as administered by the Kansas Emergency Relief Commission (KERC). The state of Kansas provided very little of the relief money allocated within its borders. Nearly three-quarters of all relief money originated with the federal government, while just over a quarter of the money came from local governments; the state provided less than 1 percent of relief dollars spent.⁴³

Relief money made southwestern Kansas livable into 1940. The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl caught the area's people unprepared; their county governments were entirely unable to shoulder the dual burdens of eco-

38. Commissioners' Journal, Finney County, September 8-9, 1931, p. 511; Commissioners' Journal, Stevens County, v. E, May 2, 1932, p. 600; "Employees of Commissioners Receive 20 Percent Cut," *Johnson Pioneer*, July 7, 1932.

39. "Board of Education Cuts Budget of \$12,000," *Hugoton Hermes*, March 25, 1932; "Ulysses Grade School in Sweeping Reduction," *Grant County Republican*, April 14, 1932; "We Wish to Suggest as Commendable," *Johnson Pioneer*, January 5, 1933; "Open Sept. 4," *Liberal News*, August 24, 1933.

40. Commissioners' Journal, Seward County, v. 5, August 22, 1938, p. 468, Seward County Clerk's Office, Liberal. Haskell County, v. D, October 1939, p. 118; Morton County, Book 3, September 4, 1939, p. 14, Morton County Clerk's Office, Elkhart.

41. Real estate agents were actually selling homes in Elkhart to residents of other counties, and moving the homes to their buyers. People leaving town sometimes took their homes with them. It was cheaper to buy a home in Elkhart and move it than to construct new homes in most other places. Commissioners' Journal, Morton County, Book 3, May 15, 1939, p. 8.

42. "Relief Load Makes Big Gain in a Year," *Johnson Pioneer*, July 11, 1940; "Ness County Courthouse Official News Notes," *Ness County News*, Ness City, August 3, 1939.

43. Kansas ranked sixteenth of the forty-eight states based on state and local contributions to total relief expenditures. Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, *Fundamental Policies of the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee and Summaries of Obligations for Relief, 1924-1936* (Topeka: Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, 1936), 69-70.

conomic and environmental disaster. Because of the drought and dust storms, the people of southwestern Kansas did not experience the slight economic recovery the rest of the nation enjoyed between 1933 and 1937. Southwestern Kansas rested upon an agricultural base, and the yearly failure of the wheat crop between 1932 and 1939 ensured that the area farmers would not benefit from improved wheat prices after 1933. Without a yearly infusion of federal funds, life itself would have become impossible for the struggling population of southwestern Kansas.

Although communities experimented with a variety of public and private relief measures, the continuing lack of funds limited their effectiveness. The conditions of the decade conspired to rob area residents of their independence and to lose much control of their county governments. As much as they would have preferred to help themselves, the residents of Finney County, and all of southwestern Kansas, came to rely on the federal government for the maintenance of their families and communities for the duration of hard times. As one Wichita County wag wrote in 1936:

But as it is
It's lots of fun —
Everything comes
From Washington.⁴⁴

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44. Joe "Gloomy Dan" David, "Dustitis," from *Leoti Standard*, quoted in Wichita County History Association, *History of Wichita County Kansas. Volume 1* (North Newton, Kans.: Mennonite Press, 1980), 332.



The conditions of the 1930s conspired to rob hard-working people of their dignity and independence. As much as they would have preferred to help themselves, southwestern Kansans came to rely on the federal government for the survival of their families and communities for the duration of hard times.