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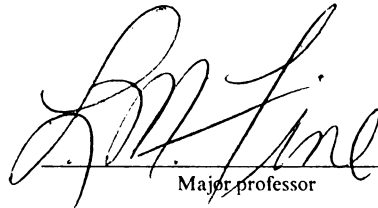
NEGOTIATING RELIEF: THE DEVELOPMENT
OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS
IN DEPRESSION-ERA MICHIGAN, 1930-1940

presented by

Susan Stein-Roggenbuck

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NEGOTIATING RELIEF:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS
IN DEPRESSION-ERA MICHIGAN, 1930-1940

VOLUME I

By
Susan Stein-Roggenbuck

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

NEGOTIATING RELIEF: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS IN DEPRESSION-ERA MICHIGAN, 1930-1940

By

Susan Stein-Roggenbuck

This dissertation analyzes the development of Michigan's social welfare programs in the context of the Great Depression, the New Deal programs that followed, and the state's Welfare Reorganization Act of 1939. This was a period in which the administration of relief policies shifted - at least in part - from local communities to the state and federal governments. Rather than providing new services, the New Deal programs, and the Social Security Act in particular, sought to establish a financial and administrative partnership between the federal government and the states in the delivery of some relief services. This study focuses on three counties (Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren), which represent the state's economic and population demographics, to reconstruct and assess Michigan's relief history during this period.

This dissertation also gives voice to the multiple groups (local officials, professional social workers, untrained relief workers, and the recipients) negotiating relief during this period. These groups articulated competing narratives of relief, and each offered its own definition of the need for relief. The study incorporates analysis of case records from the New Deal programs to assess the experiences and interactions of case workers and recipients.

The 1930s was a period of intense debate in Michigan regarding the state's

welfare systems and who was best able to administer them. Local officials, long responsible for relief administration, argued that they should continue to do so, while their opponents advocated the adoption of professional social work practices and the use of trained social workers. The successful referendum drive opposing the 1937 law reorganizing Michigan's welfare programs clearly depicted these opposing viewpoints. Local officials, and the residents of Michigan, rejected professional social work and its gendered professional values, opting instead to retain as much local administrative control as possible. The 1939 Welfare Reorganization law, which resulted from those debates, was a blend of traditional relief practices and more modern social welfare ideas. The vehemence of the debates, and the rhetoric employed, reveals the limits of the "New Deal" order in Michigan.

Key findings include the limited change resulting from the New Deal programs. Local officials continued to wield significant power and influence in relief administration, and relief in both the federal and local programs was governed by means testing and inadequate grants. The state continued to be the last resort for assistance, as case workers continued to enforce the responsibility of relatives to support family members under Michigan law. Such enforcement often exacerbated or even created conflicts among families, often at the expense of the person most in need. Michigan's 1939 law also created a dual system, with many counties operating separate administrative structures for the federal categorical aid programs (Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind) and general relief. The latter became a "third track" of welfare, outside the federal arena and often entirely under the control of local officials.

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For Frank



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I thank my committee members, Julia Grant, Mark Kornbluh, and Peter Levine for their helpful comments and criticisms. Special thanks go to Lisa M. Fine, who directed not only this project but also my master's thesis. I also had the pleasure of working for her both as a teaching and research assistant. She provided able guidance and advice throughout the research and writing stages, and her comments only improved the project

and my arguments. Her encouragement was vital in the completion and quality of this dissertation.

Travel grants from the MSU Department of History and the Graduate School helped to fund research trips to Washington D.C. and Minnesota. An American Association of University Women Dissertation Fellowship provided an incredible year free of teaching responsibilities, giving me time to write and to conduct additional research. The fellowship greatly enhanced the quality of this dissertation, and also speeded its completion. I am profoundly grateful to the AAUW for its assistance, and I appreciate its commitment to supporting women's education and research.

Graduate school can be frustrating, trying and disheartening, and at times my experience was no exception. It is the people we meet in graduate school who are best able to understand the experience and to help one through it. I was fortunate to belong to a dissertation writing group that was both social and intellectual, and proved critical to my completing this project with my sanity intact. We encouraged one another along the way, laughed at the absurdities in our lives, and benefitted from the intellectual abilities of one another. I thank Maria Quinlan Leiby, Patricia Rogers and Tammy Stone for being such a fun and stimulating group. I also thank Kyle Ciani, who moved across the country midway in this project but remains a part of our group in spirit. All read many of the early drafts of these chapters and provided helpful advice and encouragement throughout the research and writing process. The process would have been much less fun, and the product of less quality, without their influence. I thank in particular Maria, whose knowledge of Michigan history proved especially helpful in this project. She directed me

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best part of my life, and without his love and laughter, I am not sure I would be writing this today.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADC	Aid to Dependent Children
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AASW	American Association of Social Workers
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CWA	Civil Works Administration
DPW	Department of Public Welfare
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
ERA	Emergency Relief Administration
FERA	Federal Emergency Relief Administration
FWA	Family Welfare Association
NASW	National Association of Social Work
NYA	National Youth Administration
OAA	Old Age Assistance
SERA	State Emergency Relief Administration
SEWRC	State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission
SSA	Social Security Act
WCSWA	Wayne County Social Workers Association
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WRC	Welfare Relief Commission
WRSC	Welfare and Relief Study Commission

INTRODUCTION

Michigan Governor John Engler eliminated the state's General Assistance program, which provided relief for unemployed able-bodied individuals, in October 1991.¹ That decision was just the start of his administration's drive to reduce welfare costs, efforts mirrored at the national level, culminating in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. The presumption behind many of these reforms was that welfare recipients could work but refused to do so, and the definition of work centered on work for wages. The goal of early twentieth-century maternalists - to provide mothers' pensions to enable mothers to care for their children at home - disappeared. Child care only qualified as "work" if one was watching someone else's children.² Most recently, Michigan began requiring drug tests of welfare recipients to ensure that benefits were not used to support drug habits. The state legislature also began to conduct drug tests on newly-hired state employees and certain current employees.³ The

¹"Battle Lines Drawn on Engler Budget Plan," *Lansing State Journal*, January 17, 1991, 1B; "Engler: Welfare Cuts Reasonable," *Lansing State Journal*, February 28, 1991; "Wondering Where to Turn," *Lansing State Journal*, June 1, 1991; "Engler Offers Cure," *Lansing State Journal*, June 3, 1992; Ruth Connif, "Welfare, Ground Zero: Michigan Tries to End It All," *The Nation*, May 27, 1996, 16.

²Gwendolyn Mink, "The Lady and the Tramp (II): Feminist Welfare Politics, Poor Single Mothers, and the Challenge of Welfare Justice," *Feminist Studies* 24 (Spring 1998): 59-61; see also Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) 22, 108-9.

³The program began in three Family Independence Agency areas, and is to go statewide by 2003. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit challenging the policy the day it began. "Suit challenges drug tests for welfare applicants," *Lansing State Journal*, October 1, 1999, p. 1B; Judge Calls Halt to Welfare Drug Tests," *Lansing State*

punitive nature of the attacks on welfare seemed to have no bounds, and one legislator even suggested cutting benefits to those recipients who used air conditioning in the summer.⁴

The provision of social welfare benefits in America has been a continued debate throughout this century. Although the virulence of attacks on America's social welfare programs has varied in intensity, debates centering on the financial and moral costs of welfare have seldom disappeared.⁵ In more recent welfare reform debates, politicians and policy makers from both political parties pointed to the "failure" of the welfare state experiment that began with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. Welfare benefits, these politicians argued, eroded recipients' self-confidence, work ethic, and sense of responsibility. Politicians vowed to "save" the American people from the welfare trap. The 1996 welfare reforms were the most recent federal effort to "end welfare as we know it."

Such debates fail to fully understand the history of social welfare in America, or the realities of the United States economy and labor market. They situate the beginning of the American welfare state in the 1930s, an era which only marks the point of

Journal, November 11, 1999, 1A.

⁴Robyn Meredith, "Testing Welfare Applicants for Drugs," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1999, p. 14; "Supervisors for state test positive for drugs," *Lansing State Journal*, September 27, 1999, p. 1A.

⁵Edward Berkowitz argues that welfare policy development reflects a pattern of conflict and consensus, as the American public's attitudes toward welfare shifted with major changes in society. Edward D. Berkowitz, *America's Welfare State: From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Reagan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

increased federal involvement. They also assume that welfare needs are linked only to employment availability, thus ignoring the variety of reasons why people seek welfare aid. Such viewpoints also fail to consider race, class, nativity and gender as determinants of access not only to benefits but also to employment and educational opportunities that can eliminate the need for an individual or family to seek welfare. Bound with notions of family responsibility and gender roles within the family, social welfare debates seldom account fully for the complex development of gendered notions of responsibility and citizenship.

This dissertation seeks to provide a historical foundation to these debates by studying how one state experienced the worst economic downturn in American history, and the initiatives put forth to deal with those problems. My study analyzes the experiences in Michigan from 1930 to 1940, the period in which the administration of relief policies shifted - at least in part - from local communities to the state and the federal governments. Rather than providing new services, the New Deal programs sought to establish a financial and administrative partnership between the federal government and the states in the delivery of relief services. Although the Social Security Act of 1935 ushered in a new era of federal participation and state supervision, local administration continued. Local officials, both in general relief and the categorical aid programs of the SSA, were the mediators of relief between the federal and state governments and the recipients. Thus the views, and prejudices, of those officials affected the delivery of welfare services, and they wielded considerable power in relief administration before and after the New Deal.

The emergency relief period is associated primarily with the early New Deal years, but I argue that it continued in Michigan until 1940, when the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act was implemented. Although Michigan qualified for funds under the Social Security Act's Aid to Dependent Children, Aid to Blind and Old Age Assistance programs beginning in 1936, administration of those programs continued under the emergency relief administrative structure (local welfare relief commissions and the State Emergency Relief Administration) until 1940.⁶ Thus the emergency relief structure remained in place in Michigan, and in other states as well, well beyond the demise of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in December of 1935. Those years saw the overlap and intertwining of numerous welfare programs, including traditional poor relief, county infirmary care, mothers' and old age pensions, direct relief, work relief, and the categorical aid programs. This study seeks to untangle the maze of programs and trace the development of social welfare programs prior to implementation of the 1939 law.

This dissertation assesses a decade in which Michigan residents and state and local officials engaged in extensive debates about the administration of social welfare. In its simplest form, this debate pitted those with very traditional ideas about relief and welfare, reminiscent of the nineteenth-century poorhouse and outdoor relief ideas, against those who saw value in the social work profession and its emphasis on relief combined with service, casework, and investigation. The former saw the local officials as the obvious people to distribute benefits, while the latter group protested the mixing of relief

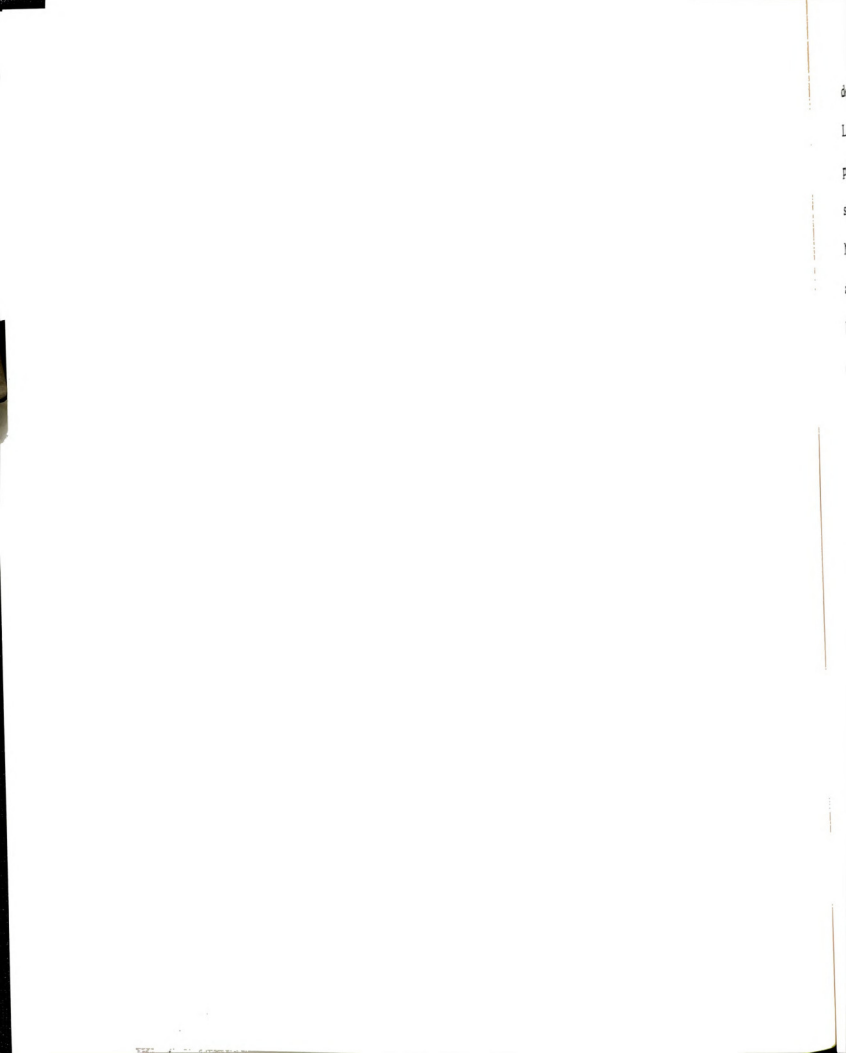
⁶SERA administered relief efforts at the state level, using local welfare relief commissions (also referred to as county emergency relief administrations). Both terms were used in the 1930s, but I tend to rely on the former (WRC).

administration and politics. The reaction against the passage of the 1937 law reorganizing welfare, which implemented in large measure the recommendations of the 1936 Welfare and Relief Study Commission, illustrates these polar views. The result - the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act - was a blend of more traditional practices and more modern ideas about social welfare.

Michigan's debates about welfare and relief speak to larger issues operating throughout the nation during this difficult and turbulent period. Fears centering on the centralization of government and the decline of the local community, and the values associated with notions of community, were at the center of several New Deal era movements, and also have a larger history in the American past. The reaction against social work, and centralized, state-supervised relief administration, is rooted in these larger national issues, although they manifested themselves in the relief debates in this state.

Alan Brinkley, in his study of Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin, the popular "radio priest" based in a parish in Royal Oak, Michigan, argues that the importance of these two men and their movements extended far beyond their limited constituencies: "They were manifestations of one of the most powerful impulses of the Great Depression, and of many decades of American life before it: the urge to defend the autonomy of the individual and the independence of the community against encroachments from the modern industrial state."⁷ This study of Michigan's relief

⁷Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin & The Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) xi.



debates further validates the resonance of those feelings. The hopes and fears tapped by Long and Coughlin were remarkably similar to those evidenced in these debates, and in part explain why opponents of professional welfare administration were ultimately successful. Fueled by anti-intellectualism, partisan politics, growing opposition to the New Deal programs by 1935, and anti-Semitism, opponents of welfare reform advocated a return to local administration of relief, to ensure that relief administration did not become too far removed from the electoral reach of Michigan voters.⁸ The rhetoric they employed struck a familiar chord among Michigan voters in the 1938 referendum on welfare reform.

Debates occurred at all levels of the relief programs, and this dissertation's title, "Negotiating Relief," refers to the multiple negotiations that took place between various groups during those debates: local officials, state officials, local welfare relief commissions, relief workers, professional social workers and the recipients of relief. All took part in these negotiations and helped to shape the outcome of relief administration. This multiple perspective reveals the often competing narratives of relief that emerged during the 1930s in Michigan. At the core of these debates were extremely vocal demands for a return to complete local control of relief, as had been done for decades,

⁸The extremely hostility to the profession of social work, and university-trained people in general, mirrors trends also described in Nancy MacLean's study of the Ku Klux Klan. MacLean terms the KKK ideology "reactionary populism": "In it, the anti-intellectualism characteristic of populism joined with the commitment to enforce the coordination of whole groups of people." MacLean argues that this ideology drew from several ideologies rooted in American history, including classical liberalism and republicanism, which enabled them to attract a significant following in the 1920s. See Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) xiii-xiv.

coupled with a wholesale rejection of the profession of social work, and more importantly, the gendered professional values social workers espoused and practiced. Social workers became the symbol of much of what opponents of centralized relief feared and opposed, and many critics argued that social workers fostered the supposed spread of dependency and the demise of self-sufficiency resulting from the overly-generous New Deal relief programs.

A key argument of this dissertation includes rethinking the place of the New Deal in social welfare history. Although a major period that witnessed significant changes and sparked heated debates, the New Deal continued many practices found in pre-Depression relief. The New Deal did introduce the professional social worker to public welfare on a much greater scale than earlier, shifted the source of funding from primarily local to a financial partnership between local, state and federal governments, and of course changed the magnitude and scope of welfare. But in fact there are numerous continuities between pre-New Deal relief and the establishment of the Social Security Act's Aid to Dependent Children and Old Age Assistance programs, as well as general relief programs under the 1939 state law.

Key areas of continuity include the stigma associated with the receipt of relief or public assistance. As Barbara Nelson and other scholars have argued, the New Deal entrenched the "two track" welfare system, separating those who were entitled to help from those who needed benefits. Connected to this was the notion that some recipients deserved assistance, such as widowed mothers of a certain ethnicity or culture, while others did not. And the issue of gender played an important role - women often were



among those who did not work in paid employment areas included in the early workers' compensation or the Social Security Act's insurance program; instead, they often fell under the area of dependent mothers.⁹ As with the mothers' pension programs of the early part of the century, the ADC program was intended to help children, not parents, and only provided support for the children. Support for the mother was to come from other sources. This notion of "partial support," or inadequate benefits, was an area of debate from the beginnings of the mothers' pension programs, but ADC continued to provide inadequate support for mothers and their children.¹⁰ Most ADC recipients, like mothers' pension recipients, had to find supplemental sources of income, including part-time work, alimony, income from boarders, or the earnings of an older child in the home. This also held true for old age assistance, which rarely covered a recipient's full needs. If a recipient was too old or infirm even for part-time work, which was often the case, he or she usually had to rely on family members or another income source to supplement OAA. And for the elderly poor and dependent mothers, termed "unemployable" by policy makers, continued to be stigmatized and stingy after 1935.

Often forgotten in the analysis of federal welfare under the Social Security Act are general relief services which remained outside the federal arena. Such relief programs

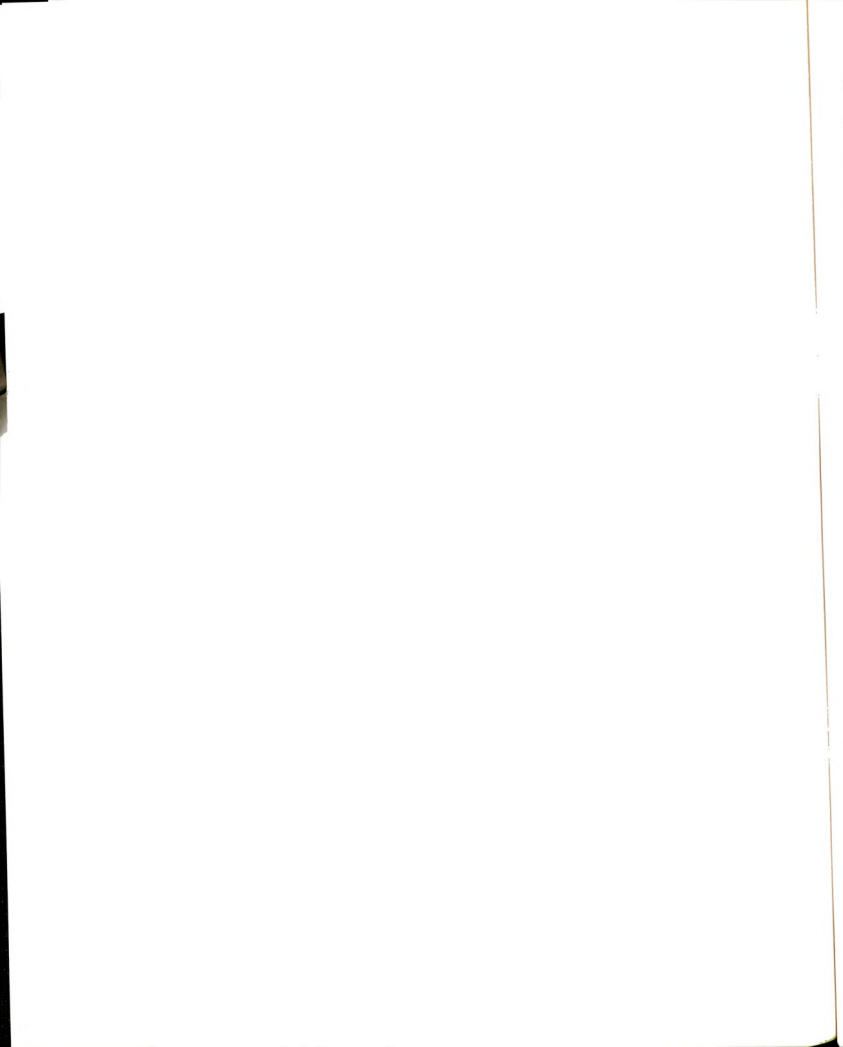
⁹Barbara Nelson, "The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and Mothers' Aid," in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

¹⁰Linda Gordon, "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in Early Twentieth Century," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 70, 80-81.

served those people not eligible for aid under ADC, OAA or AB - often the disabled or those unable to work but too young for OAA. The state government began to contribute funds to general relief after the 1939 reorganization, a key change from pre-New Deal years, but local officials successfully fought to retain full administrative control over these programs, despite the state's financial participation. For many counties, that translated into a wholesale return to poor relief practices and traditions. Local officials, particularly township supervisors, continued to wield extraordinary influence in the administration of relief. In some sense, general relief became a "third track" of welfare provision, and perhaps the most stigmatized of all the welfare programs.

Another area of continuity in social welfare policy, intertwined with the issue of gender, was the ideology of family responsibility, closely linked to the family wage. Social welfare law in Michigan, and most states, contained stipulations that family members had a legal responsibility to support other family members, if able to do so. For young children, fathers were the logical first step as they were expected to be the family breadwinner. If the father could not provide, the ideology of family responsibility extended that duty to other family members. The responsible relative clause dates to Michigan's earliest poor laws in the nineteenth century, and remained in force in Public Act 146 of 1925, which consolidated Michigan's poor laws. Children who had been deserted or abandoned by parents before they reached the age of sixteen were exempt from the responsibility, but they had to prove that they were in fact deserted.¹¹ Township

¹¹A Kent County man appealed a support order in 1932, arguing that his mother, who left him in Germany when she emigrated to the U.S., had deserted him. The court ruled that she assisted in his maintenance while she was gone, and sent for him as soon



supervisors or county superintendents of the poor enforced support of relatives in the county's Probate Court. The responsible relative clause persisted in the emergency relief administration practices, and also in the 1937 and 1939 welfare reorganization laws in Michigan.¹² The enforcement of the responsible relative clause was a key source of conflict among social workers, relief recipients and their families before, during, and after the New Deal. Often when families balked at helping other members, particularly elderly parents on OAA or mothers receiving ADC, the recipient paid the price in terms of a loss of benefits. Although the intention of the law was to use the state as a means of support as a last resort, the outcome at times was to punish those who needed the aid the most, and who often had the least power to persuade family members to contribute. Gender played a critical role in this debate, both in what social workers expected of recipients and the positions individuals held in the negotiation of relief in households and families.

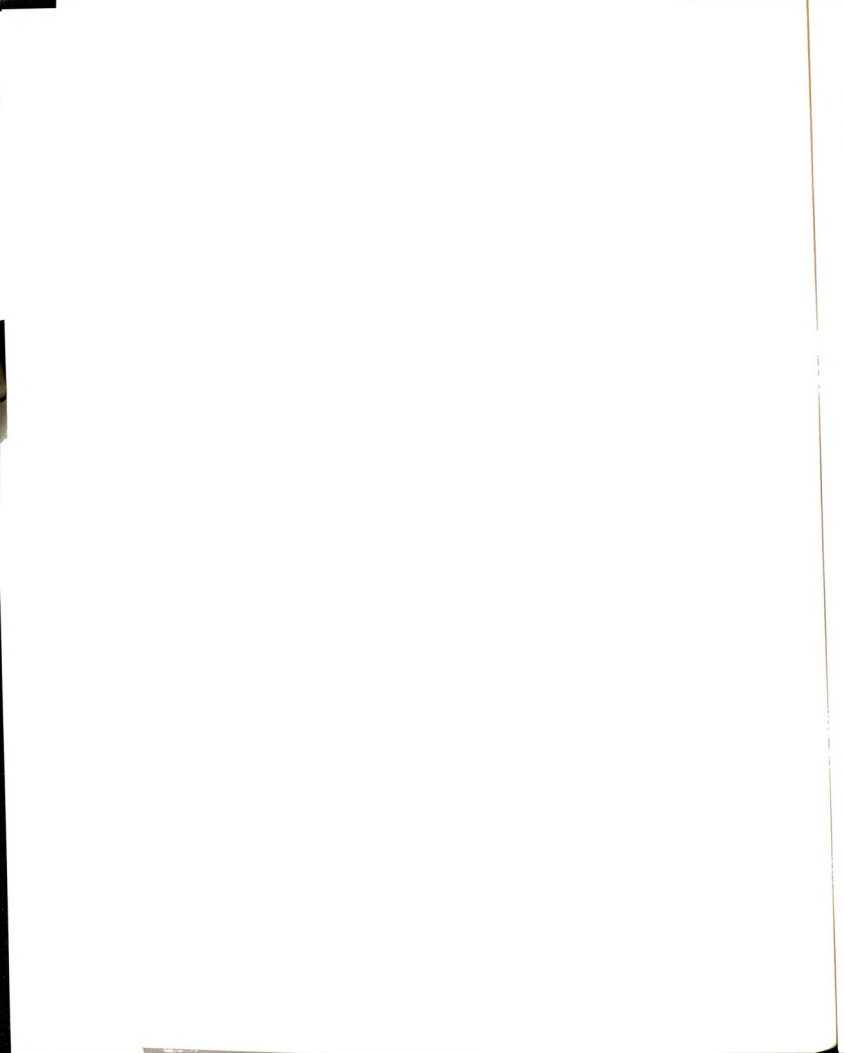
Social workers entered public welfare in an unprecedented way with the onset of the emergency relief programs of 1933, and were critical negotiators of relief, both with local officials and individual recipients. Although often portrayed as a part of the "social

as she was able; they then lived together for several years after the son joined her. His appeal was denied. See Edith Abbott, *Public Assistance: American Principles and Policies, Vol. I* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1940) 277-280.

¹²See Public Act 146 of 1925, Chapter 1, sections 1-21; Public Act 258 of 1937, Section 30-331; Public Act 280 of 1939, Section 76-77; "Local Public Welfare," n.d., RSC Records, Box 5, Folder 10, p. 96; Isabel Campbell Bruce and Edith Eickhoff. *The Michigan Poor Law: Its Development and Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936) 3, 10, 26, and 31. Grandparents were relieved of the burden of caring for grandchildren when they reached the age of sixteen under a 1953 law, but the responsibility of other relatives to support family members did not undergo significant change until 1970. See Public Act 148 of 1953 and Public Act 88 of 1970, Chapter 1.

control” problem, social workers were limited by the administrative boundaries of social welfare laws. Some sympathized with recipients with inadequate benefits and sought to help them find other sources of income, both welfare and non-welfare. They pointed recipients to the appropriate agencies for medical care, supplemental aid and employment information. They also intervened on behalf of recipients with other agencies to attempt to secure additional aid. Some social workers were problems; they did not see the faces behind their cases and viewed them through a narrow white, middle-class vision. The practice of case work led to the categorization of recipients, which all too often was based on stereotypes, racism, nativism and classism. Social workers were human beings, and shared many of the prejudices of the society in which they lived. But their ability to go against those views, even if they had wished to do so, was limited by the programs and regulations they were paid to administer.

In addition, the profession of social work faced its own internal conflicts during the 1930s, including debates about the role of the “new” relief worker who did not fit the professional model constructed so carefully by professional organizations in the previous decades. The professional social work system was hard-pressed to meet the training and educational demands of its untrained emergency workers. Like many undervalued professionals, social workers were underpaid, but the administrative costs of the emergency relief system, in particular the salaries paid to case workers, were at the heart of criticisms by opponents of professional social work. Some relief workers wanted no part of the “profession,” opting instead to use unionization to address issues such as



working conditions, low pay, and high caseloads, and some allied with relief recipients to secure more adequate benefits.

Recipients were very much a part of the relief story, and provided their own narrative of the experience of receiving relief during the 1930s. A major goal of this project is to give voice to that important group, largely through the use of case file records of the emergency relief programs and the early years of the categorical aid programs. I selected three counties as case studies based in part on the availability of case file materials from those localities; all three counties' case records from the New Deal programs have survived in some part.¹³ (See figures 1 and 2.) Van Buren County's Emergency Relief Administration case file collection includes 102 case files dating from 1930 to 1939, and is the most complete source base I have located.¹⁴ I also analyzed the OAA and ADC case files from Saginaw County, in the thumb area of Michigan on the east side of the state, and Marquette County, on the shores of Lake Superior in the Upper

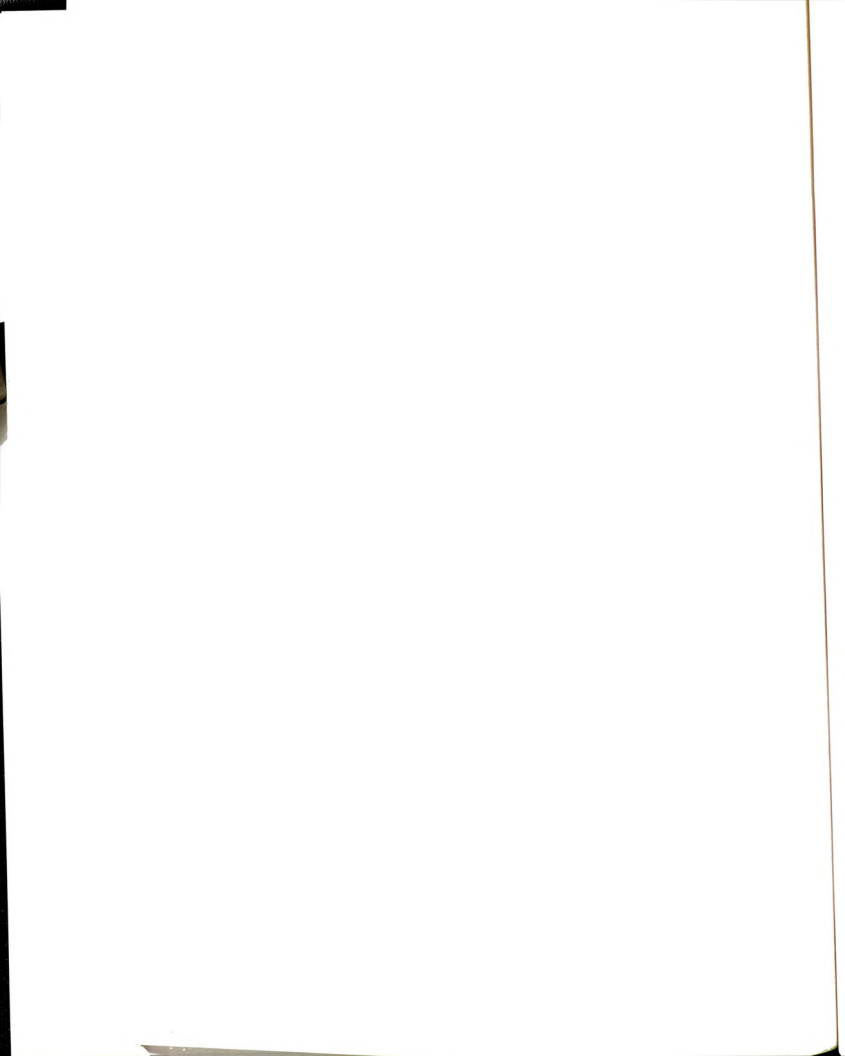
¹³All case files of the Department of Social Services have restricted access in the archives. Researchers must obtain permission from the department to see the files, and cannot record any proper names of recipients. Thus my records only include case numbers and the personal characteristics of the recipient. All recipients' names are fictitious, although I have endeavored to retain ethnic characteristics in the selection of a name. All case numbers, and footnote references to archival locations and microfilm reel numbers, are accurate; anyone who obtains permission from the department can identify specific cases using the case number.

¹⁴The full collection includes 133 records through 1945, but, as with the ADC and OAA files, I examined only those initiated before January 1, 1940 - the year that the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act was implemented. Samples of other counties' ERA records survive for Kent and Bay counties, but contain only a handful of case files. While useful for anecdotal purposes, they are too limited for any statistical analysis or for the county's administrative practices. Most counties emergency relief records were apparently lost, although many of the categorical aid records include ERA information. A large number of OAA and ADC recipients in the late 1930s also received direct relief under FERA.



Peninsula. Again those cases initiated before the close of 1939 are analyzed for this study. These case files, housed at the State Archives of Michigan in Lansing, include original application forms, verification investigations conducted by social workers, detailed case histories chronicling case visits, and correspondence.¹⁵ Particularly valuable are letters or other correspondence written by recipients voicing their views on the relief programs serving them. These records make it possible to study not only the basic questions of who sought relief and why, but they also permit a reconstruction of the interactive relationships between the various individuals and agencies involved in the administration and receipt of welfare aid. This enabled me to assess not only how both groups viewed welfare policy and their individual case, but also how relief recipients influenced the program's administration.

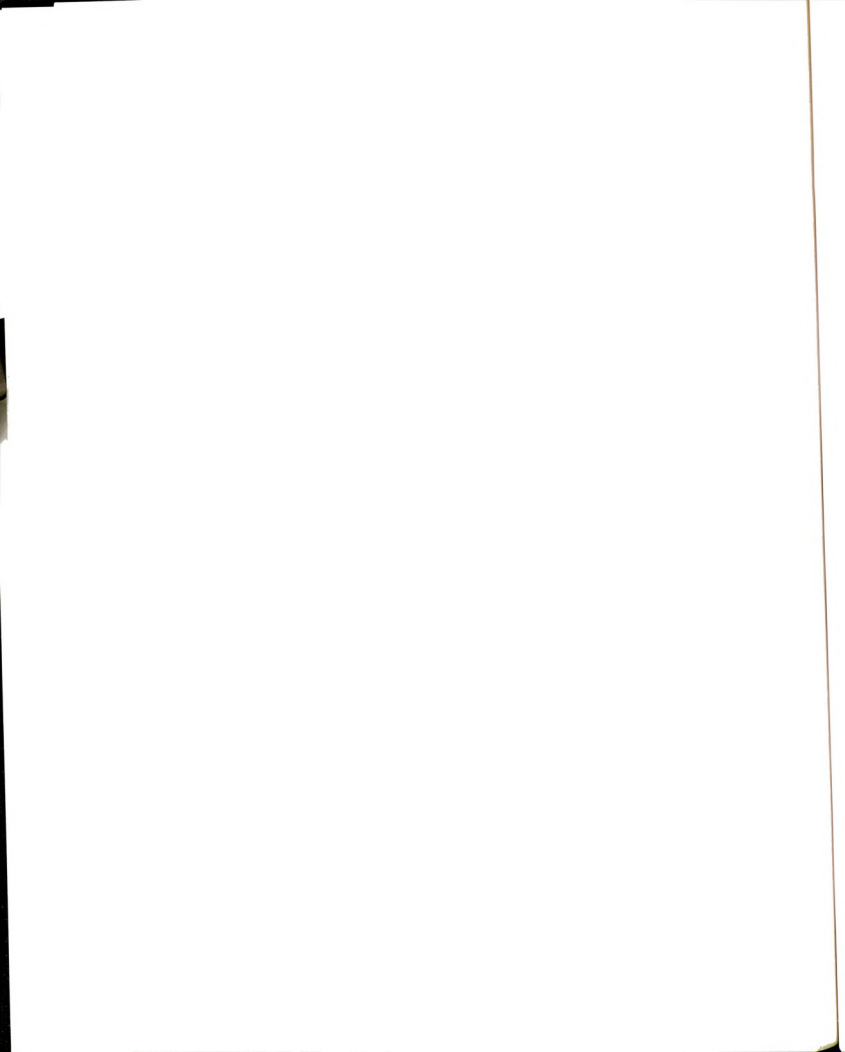
¹⁵Saginaw's collection is the most complete, including 409 ADC cases and 218 OAA cases. I analyzed the complete run of surviving ADC files and a sampling (every tenth case) of OAA records. Marquette's collection is much smaller, with just 16 ADC cases and 39 OAA cases. Only about a quarter of Michigan counties are represented in the collections with a significant number of case files; most collections contain only a 2 percent sample, thus limiting the counties available for study.



Michigan Counties



Figure 1



Key Locations in the Development of Social Welfare , 1930-1940

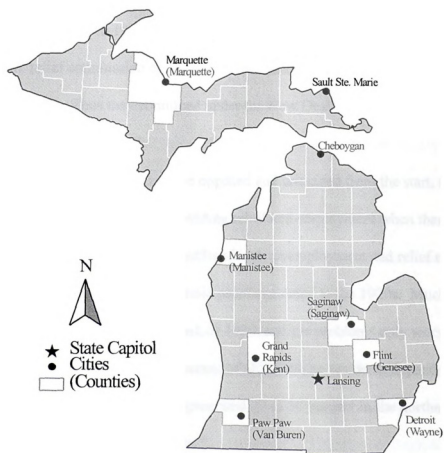


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The ERA case files and the categorical aid records must be analyzed somewhat differently. ERA records reflect a variety of case types, from unemployment to ill health to dependent mothers. They include anyone who applied for relief during the emergency relief period. In contrast, the ADC and OAA programs served unemployable individuals, or those people who either could not work, physically, or should not work, according to policy makers, because of parental responsibilities. Many of the categorical aid recipients also received emergency relief, and were simply transferred to the ADC and OAA programs when they began in 1936. Although they were categorized as ADC or OAA, the local welfare relief commission continued to administer those programs until the 1939 law was implemented. Thus they continued under the New Deal emergency relief umbrella until the end of the decade.

Although New Deal programs were opposed and criticized from the start, they were important to Michigan residents, providing relief and employment when there were few other outlets. The state of Michigan suffered high unemployment and relief rates during the Depression years, and its economic problems dated to the 1920s. Much of the state was already in a recession by the Crash of 1929, and the problems only worsened in the 1930s. By 1933 between 13 and 16 percent of all Michigan residents depended on some kind of relief, and those numbers approached 20 to 30 percent in the northern parts of the state, especially the Upper Peninsula.¹⁶

¹⁶William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security: A Survey of Michigan's Relief and Unemployment Problem* (Lansing: State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, 1936) 19, 39.



Michigan was a diverse state in terms of demographics and economics in the 1930s, and thus its residents experienced the Depression in different ways, depending upon one's region, race, nativity, citizenship, sex, age and occupation. Although Michigan contained a relatively small minority population (just 4 percent in 1930, 3.5 percent of which was African-American), its foreign-born population was 19.8 percent in 1920 and 17.4 percent in 1930. It also contained a variety of economic bases, from the industrial centers of Detroit and Flint to the agricultural centers in southwestern Michigan, mid-Michigan and the thumb area on the east side of the state between Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron. The U.P. and the northern Lower Peninsula centered on lumbering and lake commerce, and mining also was a critical industry in the U.P. The counties selected for this case study reflect this diversity in population demographics and economics, both of which are intertwined with the need for and delivery of relief and social welfare services in the 1930s. Representing that diversity, in conjunction with securing the case file source base, were the critical factors in selecting the counties for study.

Van Buren County, largely white and native born, represents the rural, agricultural experience in Michigan, while Marquette County illustrates the mining and lumbering (and some agriculture) economy of the Upper Peninsula. Saginaw County, with its racial and ethnic diversity, represents the "simultaneous growth of industry and agriculture" characteristic of Michigan and other Midwestern states.¹⁷ Its economy centered on sugar

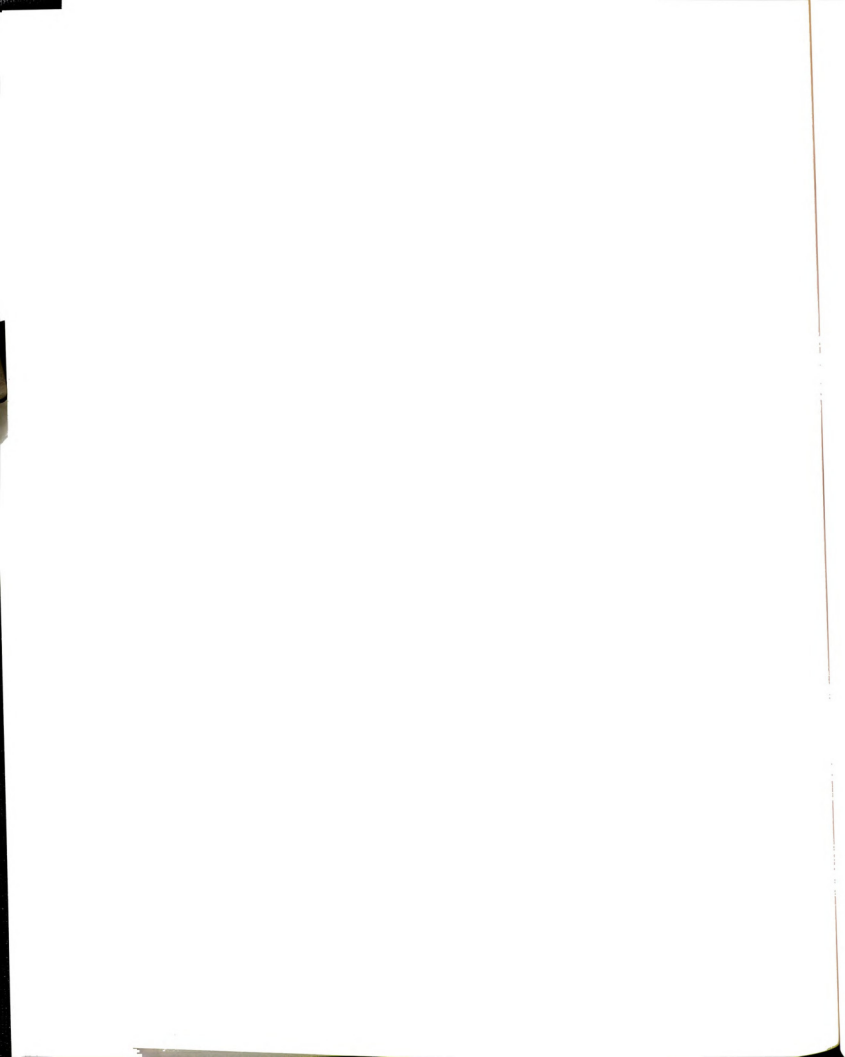
¹⁷Daniel Nelson, *Farm and Factory: Workers in the Midwest, 1880-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) vii.

beets and other agriculture, but industry also played an increasing role, particularly with the rise of the auto and steel industries, and later the defense plants of the 1940s.¹⁸ These job opportunities attracted African-Americans and Mexicans, offering an opportunity to assess the role of race and citizenship in the welfare process. Race was and is a critical issue in welfare policy, but citizenship played an equally important role. Non-citizens of all nationalities experienced discrimination in welfare programs as well as employment opportunities, and both Saginaw and Marquette counties offer the basis for this analysis. Saginaw's significant Mexican population also faced repatriation efforts in the 1930s, a strategy used at the state and local level to remove non-citizens who might take jobs, or relief benefits, from citizens and residents.

Wayne County was another logical choice to assess the industrial sector of Michigan's economy. It was without dispute the center of Michigan's automotive industry (and later the defense industry). It had the highest population of any county, and its racial demographics were very similar to Saginaw County (see Table 1). In fact, those two counties contained the majority of the state's African-American and Mexican populations. Wayne County had more than half of all Mexicans who lived in the state, but the Mexican population in Saginaw was a greater percentage of the county's population.¹⁹ I chose Saginaw because of its mix of agriculture and industry, which

¹⁸*Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Volume I, Population* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931) 1149.

¹⁹Wayne County's 1930 census listed 7,104 Mexicans - more than half of the state's 13,336 Mexicans. Saginaw had the next greatest number (2,270), which represented nearly 2 percent of the county's population.



reflected more accurately the nature of many Michigan cities. In addition, Wayne County (and Detroit) experienced a unique relief situation. Detroit professionalized its social welfare department in the 1920s, and thus does not represent the larger experiences in the state. Detroit's size also permitted it to create a Department of Social Welfare separate from Wayne County under the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act. In addition, Detroit and Wayne County were often included in published reports and studies conducted by federal and state officials, as well as private welfare organizations, thus enabling me to assess their experience, to some degree, in addition to the three case study counties. Historians know much more about social welfare, relief and the New Deal programs in large urban centers than about smaller towns and rural areas. My study seeks to shift the focus to Michigan's experience in the latter groups, rather than its largest city.

Table 1 Foreign-born and minority populations in 1930

County	1930 census population	% foreign-born	% African-American	% Mexican
Marquette	44,076	22.8	0.4	0.0
Saginaw	120,717	9.1	3.9	1.9
Van Buren	32,637	10.3	1.4	0.0
Wayne	1,888,946	25.3	7.0	0.37
State	4,842,325	7.4	3.5	0.3

Sources: *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vo. I, Population*, p. 1115, 1152.

Van Buren County had a primarily white, native-born population, largely dependent on the agricultural fruit industry. Located in southwestern Michigan partly on the shores of Lake Michigan, Van Buren is the smallest of the three counties analyzed; its



settlement dates to the early to mid-nineteenth century. Largely rural, with only one city (South Haven) in the 1930s, it had a population of 32,637 in 1930. At that time, the county's population was 88 percent native-born white, 10.5 percent foreign-born white and 1.4 percent African-American (see Table 1).²⁰ More than half of its employed residents labored in the farming industry, either on their own farms or as laborers. Other key areas of employment included retail, construction and domestic work (for women).²¹

Van Buren County residents made their living through the century from fruit production, including berries (blueberries, strawberries and cherries), apples, pears and peaches. Grape vineyards also yielded not only fruit but fed the wine and juice industries. Juice companies organized in the early years of the twentieth century, with companies in Lawton and Paw Paw. Welch Grape Juice Company started business in Van Buren County during World War I, manufacturing grape jelly for the armed forces. With the demise of Prohibition in 1933 came the growth of the wine-making industry, and by 1937 the county boasted five wineries.²² Some residents also labored in the paper mills of Watervliet in nearby Berrien County, as well as in nearby Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids.

²⁰See *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931) 1140.

²¹*Fifteenth Census*, 1164.

²²Douglas L. Semark, ed., *A History of Van Buren County, Michigan* (Hartford, MI: The Van Buren County Historical Society, 1983) 1, 3-5. For an analysis of nineteenth-century settlement in nearby Kalamazoo County, see Susan E. Gray, *The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

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A rural county, Van Buren did not have the extensive network of social welfare programs found in urban centers, but did have some private welfare organizations. The American Red Cross had at least one chapter in the county, and the Social Service Bureau, centered in South Haven, helped to coordinate relief activities in the area. Local churches also provided relief through more informal channels. But public welfare services, largely through the township supervisors and superintendents of the poor, would be important sources of aid to needy county residents.

In contrast to Van Buren County, Marquette County, like much of the Upper Peninsula, had a significant foreign-born population. It was slightly larger than Van Buren, with a population in 1930 of 44,076. Nearly one-quarter of its residents were non-native born whites; 22.8 percent were foreign-born. As was true for much of Michigan, Marquette had few non-white residents, with just 0.4 percent of its population listed as African-American.²³ Immigrants from Scandinavian countries, especially Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and also from Ireland, Scotland, England and Canada helped to settle Marquette. Some came under contract with mining companies, while others migrated for land in addition to the promise of employment.²⁴

Marquette's economic base, like much of the Lake Superior shore of the Upper Peninsula, centered on extractive industries such as mining and lumbering, dating to the mid-nineteenth century. For the Marquette area, iron ore was the major material, as

²³*Fifteenth Census*, Table 13, 1138, 1140.

²⁴Warren Vander Hill, "So Many Different People," in *A Most Superior Land* ed. Susan Newhof Pyle (Lansing: TwoPeninsula Press, 1983) 19-23.



compared to copper in the Keewenaw Peninsula area. Iron ore was first found in the region in 1844 and by 1845 the first mine - Jackson Mine - opened, and would be the site of the city of Negaunee in Marquette County.²⁵ Other mining ventures soon followed, including the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company. The county's location on the shores of Lake Superior made it a natural choice as an urban center for the U.P. and the mining industry, and completion of the shipping locks in 1855 at Sault Ste. Marie - connecting Lake Superior with the lower Great Lakes - only facilitated the industry's growth. Until the late nineteenth century, all of Michigan's iron ore industry was concentrated in the Marquette range.²⁶

Of the companies founded during the heyday of Marquette's mining industry, the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, the largest, continued to operate into the mid-twentieth century, and gained ownership of several smaller mines throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1920, the company operated twenty mines in the Marquette area. Mining continued to be a key employer in the area by 1930.²⁷ In addition to its role as a shipping center, Marquette also developed other industries, including

²⁵John S. Burt, "'Boys, look around and see what you can find,'" *Michigan History* v. 78 no. 6 (November/December 1994) 11, 14.

²⁶ "A Bond of Interest," in *Harlow's Wooden Man: Quarterly Journal of the Marquette County Historical Society*. Vol. XIII No. 5 (Fall 1978) 16; Kathleen Marie Blee, "The Impact of Family Settlement Patterns on the Politics of Lake Superior Communities, 1890-1920." (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1982) 87-88. See also Thomas G. Friggens, "Michigan Iron: An Historical Survey of the Michigan Iron Industry," (Bureau of History: Michigan Department of State, 1986). I thank Maria Quinlan Leiby of the Michigan Historical Museum for these citations.

²⁷"A Bond of Interest," 16; Blee, "The Impact of Family Settlement Patterns," 87-88.

chemical production (nitroglycerine), sawmills, brownstone quarries, flour mills and a brickyard, in addition to agriculture. Its key industries - mining, forestry and railroads - were all on the decline by the Depression, however, and the short growing season made agriculture less than ideal in the U.P.²⁸ But its more diverse industrial base saved it from disappearing, as some mining towns did.

The city of Marquette, incorporated in 1871, was the center of the county's political, social and economic activities. It was the county seat, and became the center of the area's social welfare activities. It had a network of both public and private social welfare services, including the local Family Welfare Society, religious charities, as well as corporate welfare offered through the mining companies, including CCIC, although on a smaller scale than in larger cities, such as Saginaw. Before the New Deal, Marquette residents relied on private charity and corporate paternalism for its relief needs, in addition to the public welfare programs described more fully in chapter one.²⁹

Saginaw County was the largest of the three counties, with a population of 120,717. Originally founded as a major lumbertown, Saginaw - both the city and the larger county - developed an industrial base that helped it to weather the worst of the Depression years. It had the second highest percentage of Mexicans living in its borders

²⁸*Fifteenth Census*, 1162; *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) 345-346.

²⁹Blee, "The Impact of Family Settlement Patterns," 289-292, 300-302. Blee describes the extensive influence of CCIC, particularly in areas outside of the city. CCIC had an "extensive program of corporate paternalism, with company housing as its centerpiece." Marquette, she argues, relied less on corporate welfare and more on local municipal relief, "under the control of local elites."



in the state, second only to Wayne County; 9.1 percent of its residents were foreign-born and 3.9 percent were African-American (see Table 1). Immigrants, some recruited to work in the lumber industry, from Germany, Poland and Canada (French) helped to settle the area by the 1870s, although native-born workers continued to dominate the lumber work force. Sugar beet farming and processing emerged by the early twentieth century as a major part of Saginaw's economy, bringing the area's first Mexicans to Saginaw as migrant laborers.³⁰

Lumbering provided the economic foundation for Saginaw, and the first sawmills were built on the shores of the Saginaw River in the 1830s. Saginaw's location - just downstream from the convergence of four major tributaries of the Saginaw River - made it a logical site for storing logs and constructing sawmills. Waterways were critical in the transport of lumber in the nineteenth century, making rich inland forests - filled with "green gold" - accessible to larger markets.³¹ Most wood cutting took place during the cold winter months, when the huge logs were more easily moved across frozen ground or on sleds over snow. The spring melt of the winter snows fed the rivers used to float the logs to sawmills. The logs were cut during the summer months. Work was unsteady and

³⁰Germans and Canadians were the major proportion (81 percent) of Saginaw's immigrant population by 1890. Jeremy W. Kilar, *Michigan's Lumbertowns: Lumbermen and Laborers in Saginaw, Bay City, and Muskegon, 1870-1905* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990) 104, 174, 177, 194; Jeremy W. Kilar and Sandy L. Schwan, *Saginaw's Changeable Past: An Illustrated History* (St. Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, 1994) 66, 98, 118-119.

³¹Kilar, *Michigan's Lumbertowns*, 20-22.

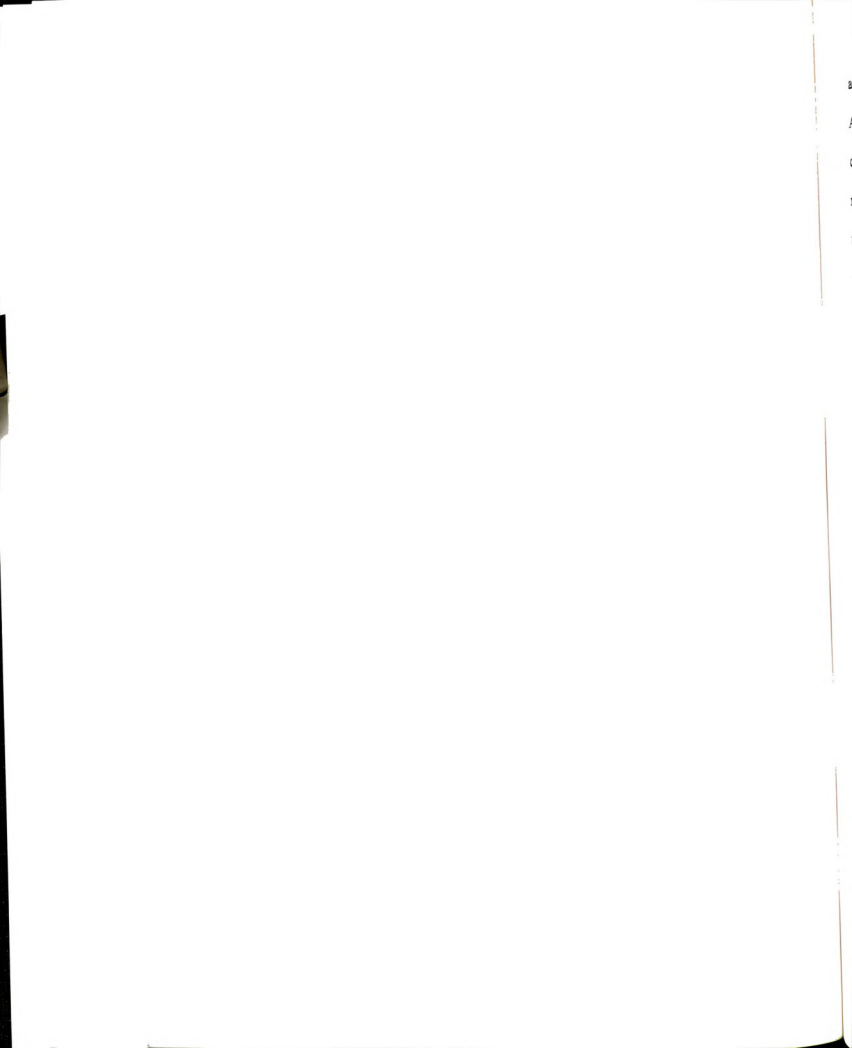


seasonal, and very dependent on weather.³² But the lumber industry prospered in the nineteenth century, and thus so did the city of Saginaw and the surrounding area. By the 1880s and 1890s, lumbering of the pine forests was on the decline, however, and only half of the sawmills remained in operation by the last decade of the century. Harvesting the region's hardwood trees provided a transitional industry, although not on the scale of the earlier era, and by the turn of the century, manufacturing began to replace lumbering as the dominant industry. Metal and automotive manufacturing companies developed rapidly, including what would become the largest employers in the area: Jackson-Church and Wilcox (later to be General Motors and Saginaw Steering Gear) and Valley Grey Iron (Chevrolet Grey Iron Foundry). The auto parts manufacturers would be major employers by World War I. By the 1930s more than 10,000 people worked in the Saginaw Steering Gear Division.³³

Reconstructing the history of relief and welfare in this period required extensive use of local sources. In addition to the case file analysis, I used local newspapers in each of the three counties (*The Daily Mining Journal* for Marquette County, *The Saginaw Daily News* in Saginaw County, and *The Hartford Day Spring* and *The Courier-Northerner* for Van Buren County) as well as minutes of each of the three county board of supervisors and the city of Saginaw. The minutes of the superintendents of the poor for both Van Buren and Marquette counties have survived from this period. Newspaper

³²Kilar, *Michigan's Lumbertowns*, 25-26.

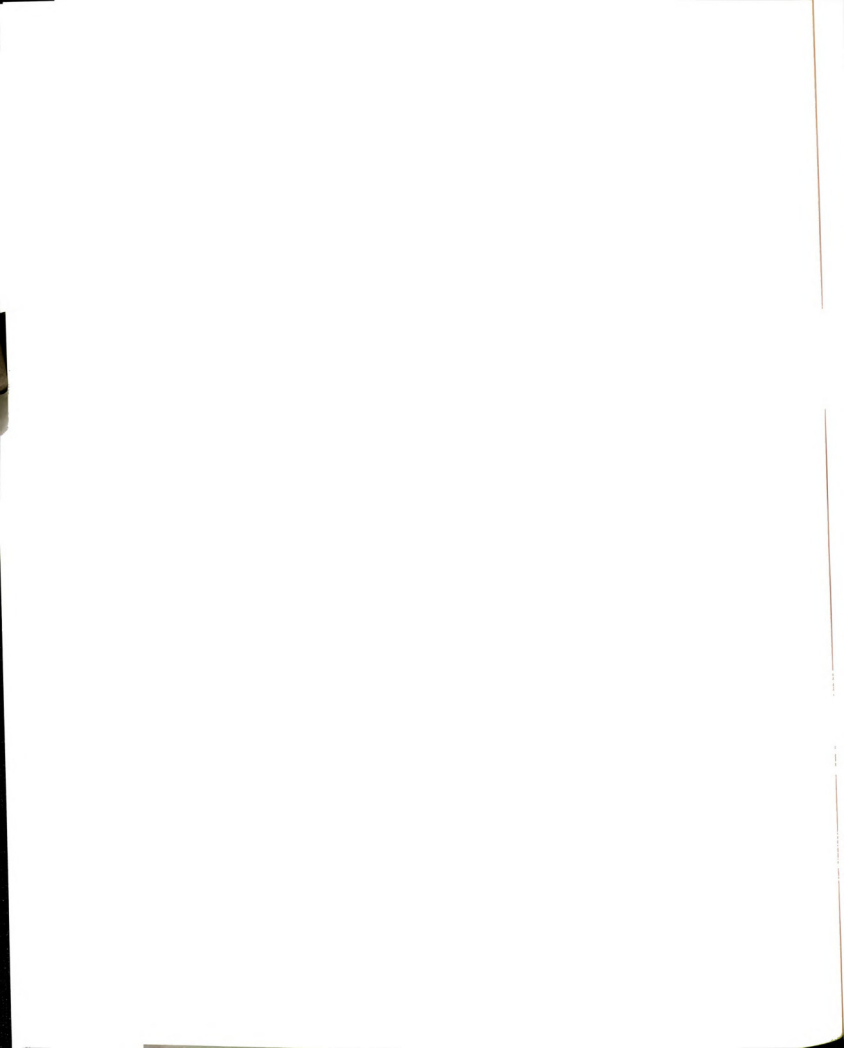
³³Kilar, *Michigan's Lumbertowns*, 293; Kilar and Schwan, *Saginaw's Changeable Past*, 114-115.



accounts (and some surviving published proceedings) of the various meetings of the State Association of Supervisors and the State Association of the Superintendents of the Poor chronicled those organizations' views on relief and the New Deal. In addition, published reports - both at the state and federal level - make it possible to situate the experiences of these counties in the larger context. These reports, in conjunction with the administrative records of the State Emergency Relief Administration and the Welfare and Relief Study Commission, also provide the state viewpoint. They also permit a look at Michigan beyond the three counties on which I focus this dissertation. Many published reports provided information on larger urban areas, including Saginaw, Grand Rapids, Flint, Lansing and Detroit.

Other sources include correspondence with federal officials, located in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration records of the National Archives in Washington D.C., which further details interactions between groups and individuals in the welfare process. Those records also included correspondence from all over Michigan, and also described training and education programs for relief workers. Social work organization records at the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota provide the professional viewpoints on these programs, and federal field reports in the Harry Hopkins collection at the Franklin Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York detail observations of local conditions.

"Negotiating Relief" is organized chronologically and also topically. Chapter One describes pre-Depression relief in Michigan, focusing on Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties and their social welfare systems, both public and private. Chapter Two



chronicles the efforts of both public and private agencies to meet the rising demand for unemployment relief in the early years of the Great Depression, before FERA. Ultimately all three counties would face major financial crises as a result of the relief problem, but resistance to federal aid remained strong until 1932, and never entirely disappeared.

Chapter Three assesses the early federal role in social welfare, beginning with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932 followed by the New Deal's Federal Emergency Relief Act in 1933. The FERA years foreshadowed the deep anti-centralization views regarding relief administration that would only magnify in the next five years. Many counties resented the intrusion of the federal and state governments into what they saw as their business; they welcomed the financial help, but did not want the rules that accompanied that aid. Relief negotiations at this level centered on conflicts over administration, funding contributions, and work relief projects, although to varying degrees in the counties. Partisan politics, the nature of the local economy, and the individual county's relief needs all factored into the relationship between local welfare relief commissions and the State Emergency Relief Administration. SERA faced resistance on several fronts, including local officials and the associations that represented them: the State Association of Supervisors and the State Association of the Superintendents of the Poor.

Chapters four and five turn to two groups critical to relief negotiations in this period: social workers, and the profession at large, and the recipients of relief. Chapter Four analyzes the effects of the Great Depression and New Deal years on the associations representing social workers as well as the social workers. High demand for case workers



created an influx of untrained relief workers who did not meet the professional education standards, creating tension and division within the profession. The conflict would culminate in the spread of social worker unions to address the labor grievances of relief workers.

Chapter Five analyzes the characteristics of the recipients, using state reports in conjunction with case file records, and then turns to the relief negotiations that occurred between case workers and recipients, who saw federal and state officials as new allies in the administration of welfare. Case file records contained case histories, application forms and correspondence to and from recipients, permitting the reconstruction of the recipients' narrative, which often contrasted sharply with that described by the case worker. Recipients were not passive participants, but agents in the administration of relief in the 1930s.

Chapter Six turns to the statewide negotiation of relief in the welfare reform debates. Michigan's welfare law needed major revision to enable the state to receive federal grants under the Social Security Act. Conflicts outlined in Chapter Three, the FERA years, only intensified as local officials sought to defend their authority against what they saw as encroachment by the federal and state governments. The center of the conflict was the profession of social work and the gendered values it professed and practiced; many home rule advocates believed that not only were social workers unnecessary and expensive, but they also fostered the "contagion of dependence" rather than containing reliance on the dole. Debates took place during meetings and hearings of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission, appointed in 1936 to assess the state's welfare

system. Local officials, and their representative associations, mobilized to defeat the 1937 laws that resulted from the commission's recommendations. The conflicts over relief administration in Michigan tapped into larger national trends related to fears about the centralization of government and the demise of community responsibility.

Although a federal program, FERA and the Social Security Act depended upon local officials and social welfare boards for administration. The state could step in to address complaints and assess administrative practices, but relied upon those in charge of local offices to conform to regulations. The 1930s was a time of intense conflict over relief administration, and ultimately home rule advocates would win in the 1939 legislation. Federal rules governed the categorical aid programs, but local officials continued to play a significant role in the daily administration of relief in all forms.



A Local Problem: Social Welfare Policy Before the New Deal

Chapter One

The onset of the Great Depression precipitated an unprecedented demand for social welfare and relief services in Michigan and throughout the United States, prompting extensive debates about the most effective means to administer relief. Public relief for poor, unemployed or otherwise needy individuals or families was not new, but the administration of that relief changed dramatically in the 1930s. The New Deal programs often signify to many people the beginning of America's welfare state, although 1932 marked the first federal appropriations for public relief.¹ Prior to that date, poor relief was almost exclusively a local problem that demanded local solutions. Much of Michigan's poor relief system had existed, with only minor changes, for more than a century, rooted in township, city and county governmental institutions. Local elected officials, including township supervisors and probate judges, dictated appropriations for the varied kinds of poor relief, and if they did not administer such relief directly, appointed the people who did. Thus officials wielded a significant amount of power in the distribution of that relief, and would fight to retain that power later in the decade. This chapter examines the social welfare practices and administration of relief in Michigan, with particular attention to the counties of Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren, which represent the population demographics and diverse economies found in Michigan.

¹Jeffrey Singleton, "Unemployment Relief and the Welfare State, 1930-1935." (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1987). Singleton's major goal is to reassess the issue of federalized relief. He argues that federal relief began in 1932, under Herbert Hoover's Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Act.

Understanding the relief structure in place before the Great Depression is critical in assessing the changes in social welfare during and after the New Deal, and the perspective of those who advocated a return to these very practices in the late 1930s.

Michigan poor law dates to the early nineteenth century and borrowed many of its practices from English law. An 1809 law established poor law, putting into place many of the practices that would continue largely unchanged for the next century. Provisions included residency requirements of one year and disbursement of funds by local officials, initially at the district level and later by the township or county government.² Many states, following the lead of Pennsylvania, enacted a county system, which included both institutional (usually a poorhouse or poor farm) and outdoor relief, or aid given in the form of cash or in-kind services or goods. Most state laws did not require counties to provide such services, and participation was voluntary, as in Michigan, although most counties offered some poor relief.³ Counties could select either the county-wide system or the township administration. Under the township program, cities and townships within the county administered their own relief. Saginaw operated under this system, while Marquette and Van Buren counties used the county system, in which the superintendents

²Opal V. Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents* (Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research, 1933) 9. Poor law dates to 1790, but it is the 1809 law that established the primary requirements and principles for Michigan poor relief.

³Marian Gertrude Simons, "Public Welfare Administration in Michigan." (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Chicago School of Social Administration, 1931) 127. Outdoor relief is the term used for all aid that is not granted in institutional form. Outdoor relief supported individuals in their communities and often in their own homes.

of the poor, appointed by the county board of supervisors, administered relief.⁴ Township supervisors or city poor department superintendents handled the relief responsibilities in counties operating under the township system. Virtually all welfare needs - temporary relief needs, medical care, placement in a county or state institution, or even requests for sterilization - originated with the local official.⁵ A major goal of many of these programs, from outdoor relief to institutional care, was to discourage relief. The danger was in making relief too easy to obtain and thus encouraging people to seek such aid. Instead, relief was to be a stigma.⁶ Discouraging public relief - or preventing the spread of dependence - was a critical part of the poor relief system some officials sought to restore in the late 1930s. As the Great Depression years would show, some county officials were

⁴See *Annual Abstract of the Reports of Superintendents of the Poor in the State of Michigan*, (Lansing) 1891, 1895 and 1900. According to these reports, forty-seven of Michigan's eighty-three counties used the county system of organization for poor relief, while twenty-five counties used the township system. Included in the latter category were Ingham, Kent and Wayne counties, which all held larger populations and included the urban centers of Lansing, Grand Rapids and Detroit, respectively. (No report was included for Gogebic County.)

⁵Welfare and Relief Study Commission records, Box 5, Folder 10, State of Michigan Archives, Lansing, "Local Public Welfare," draft report, n.d., p. 33-34. Although there is no date, the collection contains an earlier draft dated November 10, 1936. The State Welfare Commission, organized in 1921, ultimately granted approval for sterilizations. Most involved inmates of state institutions, particularly the mental institutions, but local officials could initiate such efforts through their local Probate Court. For Michigan, see Jeffrey Alan Hodges, "Euthenics, Eugenics and Compulsory Sterilization in Michigan: 1897-1960." Master's thesis, Michigan State University, 1995.

⁶Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996 rev ed) 17-18; Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York: Academic Press, 1983) 57-58. The latter volume analyzes the demographics of one New York infirmary (Erie County).

extremely reluctant to sacrifice economy and fiscal responsibility in order to meet the rising relief needs of their residents.

Eligibility for relief rested on proof of residence in the county (or city or township) for at least one year and evidence of need. Relief recipients in general were to own no property or other means of securing a living. If a resident was placed in a public institution, including the county poorhouse or poor farm, their property might be taken by the county as payment for relief. Individuals who had no income or means of support, but who did own property, essentially had to sign their property rights over to the county before receiving aid.⁷ This process could be reversed once the individuals became self-supporting, and was intended to allow the county or public unit to recover its relief costs from the estate of any relief recipient who died while receiving public aid.⁸ In some cases, poor individuals who owned property deeded ownership to the county in exchange for regular support payments. Under such agreements, the superintendent of the poor agreed to provide weekly relief payments and fuel, and the recipient also retained a life lease on their home. Upon death, the county received the property. Mrs. Maria Lercat of Paw Paw (Van Buren County) sought county care for her property in June of 1912; she

⁷Frank M. Landers and Claude R. Tharp, *Administration and Financing of Public Relief*, Michigan Pamphlets No. 17 (Bureau of Government: University of Michigan, 1942) 3.

⁸This was used most often for individuals committed to an institution for relief, such as the poor farm, poorhouse or county infirmary. Such aid was considered "permanent support," while outdoor relief was seen as temporary.

received \$1.50 per week plus fuel and deeded her house and lot to the county.⁹ Such cases generally involved property owners who had no family who could care for them or to whom they could leave their property in exchange for care. Mrs. Lachapelle of Marquette, a widow who owned property that generated some rental income, refused to sign a deed transfer and did not receive aid.¹⁰ Individuals who refused to deed property to the county generally were ineligible for poor relief.

In addition to attaching rights to property, public poor laws mandated the responsibility of relatives to support family members. Family members - parents, grandparents, spouses, and children - were expected to contribute to if not fully support the family member or members in need. The responsible relative clause is found in the earliest poor laws and remained in force in Public Act 146 of 1925, which consolidated Michigan's poor laws. Township supervisors or superintendents of the poor enforced such support through the Probate Court, which could order family members to provide financial support.¹¹ Officials often refused relief to individuals if they believed relatives

⁹The minutes of the Van Buren County Superintendent of the Poor and Poor Commission contain references to two such cases between 1912 and 1936. Orlin Ayres reached a similar agreement in 1936, although his doctor was to decide if such care would be outdoor relief in his own home or indoor relief in the County Infirmary. See Minutes, Western Michigan University Archives, entries for June 6, 1912 and October 1, 1936.

¹⁰*Proceedings of the Board of Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, December 17, 1926, Marquette County Historical Society.

¹¹See Section 2, Chapter 1 of Public Act No. 146 of 1925, *Public Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan* (Lansing: Robert Smith Printers, 1925) 188. Michigan differed from some states, including Illinois, in its exclusion of brothers and sisters from the responsible relative clause. See Isabel Campbell Bruce and Edith Eickhoff, *The Michigan Poor Law: Its Development and Administration with Special Reference to State Provision for Medical Care of the Indigent*. (Chicago: University of



were able to support them, or reduced the poor relief grants to applicants if family members could contribute.

Records documenting poor relief practices are sparse, and normally include only lists of bills paid and weekly or monthly totals of relief disbursed. In some cases, the administrator listed individual names and dates, as well as items or services granted. But although limited, these records do yield some insights into the relief process used. Outdoor relief could be in the form of grocery orders (redeemable for certain items at specific stores), fuel (wood or coal), clothing, and medical care (either doctor's visits, medicine, or medical supplies). Car repairs and items such as stoves might also be provided if deemed necessary. Medical aid might include care at the University of Michigan hospital, established by an 1875 law, if local services were not adequate or available. Usually referred to the poor commission by the county physician or another medical professional, residents could obtain care at the university for more serious medical illnesses.¹²

Temporary, or outdoor relief, was one form of poor relief offered in Michigan's counties; care in a county institution was another. Historian Michael Katz terms the nineteenth century the "poorhouse era," with its emphasis on institutional care for the

Chicago Press, 1936) 48. For a fuller discussion of the enforcement of this clause, and its persistence in social welfare practice in Michigan, see Chapter Five.

¹²The establishment of the University Hospital was a joint effort between the state legislature and the University and was to be overseen by the University of Michigan's Board of Regents. A major goal of the hospital was to provide training for doctors in the medical school. See Bruce and Eickhoff, *The Michigan Poor Law*, 88-100. See also Edith Abbott, *Public Assistance: American Principles and Politics, Vol. I* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1940) 418-421.



chronic poor. He argues that outdoor relief served far more people than institutions in the United States, but that the poorhouse represented the spirit of relief in the nineteenth century: a means to care for those unable or unwilling to care for themselves, but also as a deterrent intended to discourage people from seeking public welfare. Institutional care emerged largely in opposition to outdoor relief, which critics argued fostered relief.¹³ Such institutions contained a dual purpose: to be voluntary for those who needed food and shelter and who had no other means to obtain it, and yet also penal, for unwanted individuals such as vagrants and beggars. In describing this dual nature, Katz writes of the poorhouse, "it was supposed to care for the poor humanely and to discourage them from applying for relief." One of these aims - humane care or deterrence - had to prevail, according to Katz, and he argues that the deterrent aim won. In fact, "fear of the poorhouse became the key to sustaining the work ethic in nineteenth-century America."¹⁴ Poorhouses were also believed to be a means to rehabilitate the poor, a part of the shift toward institutional care in the early nineteenth century. They could serve all classes of the poor, from the ill and aged to the idle and unemployed, either by providing care or

¹³Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 17-18; Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 57-58.

¹⁴Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 25.



labor.¹⁵ Some county infirmaries, as they were later called, persisted beyond the New Deal years.¹⁶

Michigan's poorhouse system dates to 1828, when Wayne County passed the first law enabling the construction of a county poorhouse. The state passed legislation the following year allowing counties, townships, and cities to raise tax funds to construct such institutions to be run by appointed boards.¹⁷ Many such institutions developed in states across the country in the antebellum period, a part of the shift to institutional care for many groups classed as "dependents" in society. Midwestern states followed this trend, with Ohio taking the first step, followed by Michigan and Illinois.¹⁸ An 1871 law placed inspection and supervisory responsibilities of all public institutions with the Board

¹⁵David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971) 187-188. Rothman's argument is similar to Katz's in that he sees the nineteenth century as one that sought to stigmatize and discourage relief, but he places the poorhouse (or almshouse) in the context of the development of asylums to care for the mentally insane, poor, criminals and children. He terms that century the "age of the asylum."

¹⁶The term "poorhouse" was changed to infirmary in the 1908 Michigan Constitution, and refers to those county institutions which care for the poor. This dissertation will use the more modern term, infirmary, in its discussion. See Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 24. Seventy-nine infirmaries still operated by 1938, and that number dropped to sixty-three by 1947; by 1992 there were just three, and only one county farm remains in operation. See *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of State Association of County Social Welfare Boards*, August 19-21, 1947, p. 16; Deborah Sturtevant, "A Poor Farm Withstands the Test of Time." *Michigan History* Vol. 76 No. 5 (September/October 1992) 17.

¹⁷Bruce and Eickhoff, *The Michigan Poor Law*, 18-19; 74-75.

¹⁸Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 185.



of State Commissioners.¹⁹ Again, decisions regarding who was to reside in these institutions, and who would run them, rested with the local officials. Individuals requiring long-term assistance could be placed in a public institution by the superintendent of the poor or the township supervisor; superintendents of the poor interviewed and hired the staff, and authorized the payment of all bills. A 1933 report on Michigan's welfare system noted that few formal requirements for the administrative positions existed, and "in a few instances the position is given to the lowest bidder." This study also found that more than half of all keepers had been farmers before assuming responsibility of the county institution, which often included farmland. Such institutions usually were administered by a husband and wife; the husband usually served as keeper, responsible for operating the farm, and the wife as matron was responsible for the management of the infirmary. The wife was sometimes also a nurse who could assist in the care of patients. The hiring of additional help for cooking and cleaning was also common, and often was included in the salary negotiations of the keeper and matron.²⁰ The size of county farms

¹⁹The name was changed to the State Board of Corrections and Charities in 1873, and in 1921 the state created a State Welfare Department to replace the Board of Corrections and Charities. See Simons, "Public Welfare Administration in Michigan," 51.

²⁰Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 25; Bruce and Eickhoff, *The Michigan Poor Law*, 75; "Local Public Welfare," WRSC, 58-59. The latter report noted that although staff was largely untrained in administration and management, the infirmaries were surprisingly well run. Most suffered from under staffing and lack of professional training in social work, medicine and administration. Van Buren County hired husband and wife teams from 1912 to 1939, with one exception. David Rothman points to the lack of trained staff as a key reason why poorhouses failed to achieve the goals set by their founders in the nineteenth century. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 193; Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 29.

varied, but most raised food not only for the residents but also to sell to help support the institution. If able, residents assisted in the farm work, or in other chores in the infirmary. Residents receiving outdoor relief also might be required to "work off" their aid on the farm or the grounds of county institutions.²¹

Wayne County's infirmary opened in 1833 in a remodeled log tavern with 35 inmates. By 1936 the county infirmary housed more than 6,000 people. It was the largest of the state's infirmaries. The infirmary continuously expanded, moving into a new building in 1894, called the Eloise Infirmary. The county added a tubercular hospital in 1911 and a Women's Annex, which could hold 200 patients, in 1914.²² Michigan's eighty-three counties had eighty-one infirmaries by 1933. The same 1933 report found a variety of conditions at these institutions. Some were modern, well-run programs which provided wholesome food and shelter for their residents, while others were unsanitary and posed serious health risks in terms of diet, quality of food and condition of the buildings. Fire danger was perhaps the largest problem, and both Saginaw and Van Buren counties rebuilt infirmaries destroyed by fire around the turn of the century.²³

²¹The minutes from April 11, 1933 for the St. Clair County Superintendents of the Poor note the decision to rent an additional 240 acres of farmland to raise potatoes and a "community garden." Relief recipients were to do the work, and the commission hoped to "make the burden of another winter less costly." See St. Clair Superintendent of the Poor Records, Box 1, Folder 2. State Archives of Michigan, Lansing.

²²See *Annual Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor for the County of Wayne, 1911, 7-8. 1914, 15.* The 1914 report includes a history of the county institutions (infirmary and asylum, built in 1903). See pages 45-73.

²³Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 27-28.



Michigan's infirmaries housed anywhere from 5,000 individuals in 1891 to 30,000 in 1938 - five years after the onset of the New Deal programs. Men tended to outnumber women residents, with men accounting for about three-quarters of reported residents from 1891 to 1938. Children also continued to reside in infirmaries, despite efforts to the contrary. Institutions attempted to cease admitting children by the 1870s and 1880s, as such care was deemed damaging to children. Michigan sought to remove children from its infirmary in 1871 with the founding of a state school for dependent children. (Small children could remain with their mothers if in a county institution.) Never a large portion of the state totals, children did comprise anywhere from one to eight percent of the total poorhouse population.²⁴ Wayne County sought to keep its children residents to a minimum, although it considered constructing a Children's Cottage on the infirmary grounds in 1895. The superintendents found placement in private homes (foster

²⁴The figures used in this section on Michigan infirmaries come from a sampling of annual reports of the Superintendents of the Poor. I looked at figures in every fifth year available, beginning with 1891 (the 1890 report was not available) and ending with 1938, the last published report. See *Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor*, Table I, 1891, 1895, 1900, 1905, 1910, 1915, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935, 1938. Most poorhouses avoided housing children, unless no other options were available. Some children ended up in foster homes, rather than institutions. One result of this was the breakup of families, as Katz argues, although for some reformers separating parents and children was a desirable result. These people saw parents as a negative influence on their children, and believed that removing the children from parental care was necessary to prevent the "transmission of dependence." See Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, p. 107-109, quote from p. 109. Walter Trattner sees the trend as a recognition that children were teachable and thus did not belong in institutions with the poor and ill, but instead in institutions of their own, and later in private placement. See Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989, fourth edition) 107-113.

care) for most children, and thus never built the cottage. They decided that "no more children will be received at the institution except in rare cases and then only temporarily."²⁵ But the state reports show that children continued to reside at the county infirmary, although it is unclear for how long. The 1933 study also reported that children continued to reside in infirmaries, despite the legal prohibitions against such practices.²⁶ Michael Katz found a similar trend in his analysis of New York's Erie County infirmary. The number of children in that infirmary dropped from 32 to 13 percent between 1871 and 1874, and then to 3 percent later in the decade after the passage of the Children's Act of 1875.²⁷

In general, county infirmaries housed individuals with a variety of ailments, including old age, insanity, epilepsy, cancer, syphilis, and tuberculosis, as well as unemployment. An 1878 report found that some infirmaries served as lying-in hospitals for pregnant women who gave birth there.²⁸ Births in infirmaries also declined during the late nineteenth century, but rose again with the onset of the Depression. Sixty-three infants were born in Michigan's county institutions in 1891 (fifty-one of those identified as illegitimate), but that number declined in subsequent years. Usually between eleven

²⁵*Sixty-Second Annual Report of the Superintendents of the Poor for the County of Wayne, 1895*, 15.

²⁶Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 29-30. Matson visited the infirmaries in 1932, and found nine institutions housing children and another nine that had boarded them sometime during the year.

²⁷Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 72, 76.

²⁸Bruce and Eickhoff, *The Michigan Poor Law*, 76-77. See also Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 80-81.



and 36 births occurred during that time. But recorded births jumped to 117 in 1930 - nearly twice the 1891 figure - and then increased to 192 in 1938 after declining to 67 in 1935. Statistics show that illegitimate births accounted for about one half to two-thirds of the total number, but are a small minority of the larger increases in the 1930s. It is possible that the Depression hardships forced more women to use infirmaries as maternity wards owing to the severe strain on medical care provisions for the needy. The increases tended to be concentrated in specific counties.²⁹

Infirmaries also largely housed white residents. People of color were under represented in infirmary populations, seldom accounting for 2 percent of the total in the years reported.³⁰ In Wayne County, which had the largest concentration of African-American residents in Michigan, blacks rarely were more than 4 or 5 percent of the infirmary population.³¹ In part this reflects the low numbers of African-Americans in the total state population. People of color were 4.4 percent of the state's population in 1930; 2 percent in 1920; and less than one percent in 1910. But such figures were much higher for specific counties. Wayne County's black population was 1.1 percent in 1910, 3.7

²⁹This information is from the sampling of the *Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor* from 1891 to 1938. Information relative to sex and age is from Table I and birth information is included in Table III. The 1939 Michigan Welfare Reorganization Act eliminated the offices of Superintendent of the Poor.

³⁰Reports provide a breakdown by race (including figures for African-Americans, mulattos, and Indians) until the turn of the century. After that year, reports included non-whites in the "foreign-born" figure, implying that these individuals were separate from American society much as non-native born individuals were.

³¹See *Annual Reports for County of Wayne, 1895, 1900, 1905, 1910, 1915*; also *Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor, State of Michigan*, years aforementioned in previous footnote.

percent in 1920, and 7 percent in 1930; other counties with significant black populations were Cass, Lake and Saginaw.³² The issue of race received little attention in surviving records, including the published reports of the state and Wayne County. The small number of non-white residents in county infirmaries was likely a combination of racism and exclusion. People of color may have looked to resources in their own communities and extended families for care, either because they were not permitted in county infirmaries (or simply discouraged from entering) or because they preferred to seek alternatives.³³

Infirmaries proved important sources of aid for Michigan's foreign-born residents, although statistics on citizenship status were not reported. Infirmaries in nineteenth century America tended to have high numbers of foreign-born populations in relation to reported census figures.³⁴ State figures show that native-born white Americans accounted for about half of county institutional residents through 1925. After that year, native-born whites accounted for slightly more than half: fifty-four percent in 1925, sixty-two percent in 1930, fifty-three percent in 1935, and fifty-six percent in 1938. The slight decline in numbers likely reflected the more restrictive immigration laws, but throughout the period foreign-born whites resided in institutions in far greater numbers than their

³²See *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, Table 2, 1115; Table 13, 1135-1140; *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. II, Population, 946; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Vol. III, Population 487.

³³Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 101. Katz finds a similar trend in Erie County, but offers no explanation for the under-representation of people of color.

³⁴Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 76-79.



share of the state populations. Michigan's foreign-born population was 21 percent of the state's total population in 1910; that number declined to 19.8 in 1920 and 17.4 percent in 1930 (see Table 2).³⁵ Nineteenth-century critics argued that the foreign-born dominated because of the negative character traits they attributed to many immigrants, such as laziness or ignorance, rather than circumstances or factors outside the infirmity residents' control.³⁶

³⁵*Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor*, years aforementioned. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1931) Table 2, 1115. As noted, the poor reports do not specify citizenship status, so it is not know how many of those classified as foreign-born were naturalized citizens. According to census figures in 1920 and 1930, 6.8 percent and 5 percent (respectively) of the foreign-born had not pursued citizenship at some stage.

Reports provide a breakdown by race (including figures for African-Americans, mulattos, and Indians) until the turn of the century. After that year, reports included non-whites in the "foreign-born" figure, implying that these individuals were separate from American society much as non-native born individuals were.

³⁶Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 290-291.

Table 2 Nativity in Michigan's Infirmaries, 1890-1930
Percentage of foreign-born

	1890/1891	1900	1910	1920	1930
Marquette infirmary	88%	92%	79%	65%	72%
Marquette census	52%	42%	38%	30%	23%
Saginaw infirmary	66%	60%	63%	56%	43%
Saginaw census	31%	25%	22%	15%	10%
Van Buren infirmary	2%	3.7%	18%	100%	62%
Van Buren census	7.1%	6.8%	7.2%	10%	10%
state total infirmary	49%	44%	48%	50%	38%
state total census	25.9%	22.3%	21%	19.8%	17.4%

Sources: *Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor*, Table I, 1891, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930; *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901) 24-25, 506; *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, Vol. II, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1913) Table I, 932; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931) Table 2, 1115. Categories for race and nativity were combined in 1910 superintendent of the poor reports to include both foreign-born and people of color, thus those figures include non-white residents as well.

Figures for individual counties reveal the settlement patterns and population demographics of that region (Table 2). Marquette's infirmary population remained predominantly foreign-born throughout the period; foreign-born residents were well over half of the infirmary population throughout this period. Their share of the infirmary residents was above ninety percent through 1910, when it dipped to seventy-nine percent.

It rose to eighty-four percent in 1925, and fell slightly after that. In 1938 sixty-three percent of all infirmiry residents were categorized as foreign-born. In contrast, foreign-born whites were forty-two percent of the county's population in 1900, thirty-eight percent in 1910, thirty percent in 1920 and were just under twenty-three percent ten years later. Saginaw County also had foreign-born populations in its infirmiry that exceeded the state trends for the first part of this period, but by 1930 its demographics were more in line with state figures. Foreign-born infirmiry residents were between a low of fifty-five percent in 1895 to a peak at seventy-seven percent of the infirmiry population in 1925. By 1930 their representation declined to forty-three percent and remained below half for the next five years. These figures reflect the declining numbers of foreign-born county residents: twenty-five percent in 1900, twenty-two percent in 1910, fifteen percent in 1920, NS, and ten percent in 1930.³⁷

Van Buren County shows a very different picture of nativity from the other two counties. It differs from the state figures with its preponderance of native-born whites in its infirmiry, reflecting the larger county demographics. In general native-born whites were a significant majority of the infirmiry's residents, usually exceeding eighty percent of the total. These numbers are in line with the county's overall population, which was about ten percent foreign born in both 1920 and 1930. These numbers were an increase from the previous two decades. In 1900 foreign-born whites were 6.8 percent of the

³⁷*Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor, years* aforementioned, Table II. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population*, Table 13, 1138, 1140; *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, Vol. II, Population*, Table I, 940.

population and in 1910 were 7.2 percent. Three years do stand out as deviations from this trend; in 1915, the population was slightly more than half foreign-born, and in 1930 that number reached sixty-two percent. The third anomaly occurred in 1920, when one hundred percent of the infirmity's population were reported as foreign born, a figure that likely represents a reporting error. Van Buren had a somewhat larger than expected black representation in its infirmity in the early years when statistics accounted more specifically for race.³⁸

Michael Katz argues that family played a significant role in the evolution of the poorhouse or infirmity, and also in the care of the foreign-born. Families often entered such institutions together in the earlier part of the century, usually for brief periods of time, but by mid-century fewer residents had family with them, and he argues that the purpose of these institutions shifted from "family refuge to old age home." He connects this in part to the decline of children in infirmities; as children were removed, so were mothers. He also links this trend to the rise in foreign-born residents, speculating that these demographic shifts changed the role the infirmity played in relief. Rather than a place for families to seek aid, infirmities "became increasingly alien, a place for strangers who were, literally, starved to death."³⁹ Foreign-born residents may not have had family members on whom to depend for care as they grew older and more feeble, in part

³⁸*Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor*, years aforementioned, Table II. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population*, Table 13, 1138, 1140; *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, Vol. II, Population*, Table I, 946.

³⁹Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 78.



accounting for their higher representation in infirmary populations. Although some immigrants migrated as families or communities, not all did. Some immigrants remained single or childless, reducing the network of family available to help them in harder times. The association between poverty and need and the foreign-born, in particular non-citizens, would reach a new level in the 1920s when repatriation efforts sought to send these individuals back to their native countries.

The earlier reports listed the reasons for residents' placement in the county institution, but that reporting practice ceased after 1900. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, old age and sickness were the primary reasons people resided in the county infirmary - accounting for about one-third of all cases reported by the counties. Other factors of note included "idiocy" and "insanity," which were about fifteen percent of the totals reported in 1891, nineteen percent in 1895, and about ten percent in 1900. By 1900 a new category - feeble-minded - was included, accounting for four percent of the reported cases that year.⁴⁰ Feeble-mindedness became even more popular among professionals, including social workers and psychiatrists, by the 1910s. Professionals particularly tested institutional residents, including prisons and reformatories (or in this case, infirmaries), for mental deficiencies: "Expecting to find feeble-mindedness among these populations, they found it with a vengeance, linking almost every variety of

⁴⁰ *Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor*, years aforementioned, Table IV. Wayne County had both an infirmary and an asylum for those residents suffering from mental illnesses. In contrast, other counties had to rely on state institutions for placement of their residents in need of mental health care. See *Abstract*, 1895, 54-55.

antisocial behavior to inherited mental defect and reporting alarming rates of feeble-mindedness among prostitutes, tramps, criminals and paupers."⁴¹ It is not surprising that it appeared among the county infirmary and poor house populations, a likely target of such tests.

Health care was to be provided by the county physician although there was little provision for continued medical care outside of periodic visits by the doctor. Surviving records for specific counties, including Van Buren and Marquette, show that poor commissions awarded the medical contract for the county infirmary to the physician who submitted the lowest bid. The quality of medical care was a continued criticism of the state's infirmary system, as well as its outdoor relief program. People suffering from mental illnesses resided at the infirmaries, or in county jails, when space in state mental institutions was unavailable, a practice that continued well into the New Deal period.⁴² By the late 1930s, as the New Deal programs and Michigan's Old Age Assistance law took effect, infirmary populations centered more on the elderly and infirm who could not care for themselves and for whom no alternative care could be found.⁴³

⁴¹Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 53. Kunzel argues that feeble-mindedness included gendered symptoms: often criminal activity for men and sexual deviance or promiscuity among women. See also Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 64-65, 194.

⁴²Bruce and Eickhoff, 77-84. Wayne County was the only county to have its own county asylum, constructed in 1903.

⁴³"Local Public Welfare," WRSC, 62-63, 66-67.

Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties all operated infirmaries or poor farms for their residents, and all three counties built new structures around the turn of the century. Marquette's infirmary was replaced with a new building in 1901 because the old structure was in severe disrepair and too small. Lauded to be among the most modern in the region, the infirmary was intended by care for the county's poor for years to come, but two years later it was full and discussion began for expansion.⁴⁴ Saginaw County's infirmary burned to the ground in 1891, forcing the transfer of infirmary residents to nearby St. Mary's Hospital. The county built a new two-story facility almost immediately. By 1935 it included 328 acres about eight miles from the city.⁴⁵

Van Buren County opened its infirmary in 1873. The buildings burned to the ground in 1884 but were rebuilt, and remained in operation until 1958. The farm provided nearly all the food used by the infirmary. Aside from brief references to improvements such as a new well and silo, the poor commission recorded few details of the day-to-day life at the infirmary in their minutes. They did inspect the infirmary at least once per

⁴⁴"Accept Poor House Plans," *The Daily Mining Journal*, March 28, 1901; "Fine Poor House," *The Weekly Mining Journal*, August 31, 1901; "Is Badly Crowded," *The Weekly Mining Journal*, July 25, 1903.

⁴⁵A 1936 study conducted by the Welfare and Relief Study Commission found that all admissions were through the superintendent of the poor. A full analysis of this study is found in Chapter Six. The study was conducted by the Welfare Relief Study Commission, appointed in 1936 by Michigan Governor Frank Fitzgerald. The commission was to assess Michigan's social welfare programs and laws, and to recommend changes. This particular study involved the close analysis of seventeen Michigan counties, with particular emphasis placed on the issue of public assistance. This information on Saginaw County was obtained by a visit by staff to the area, and interviews with various staff members. See Welfare and Relief Study Commission records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7 Folder 7, Saginaw County.



year, and usually were accompanied by the probate judge. These inspections warranted little mention, although the December 2, 1926 visit was prompted by complaints. At that visit, the poor commission "inquired of each inmate if they were treated well and had all they wanted to eat. All were well satisfied. Rumors to the contrary having been circulated prompted this action."⁴⁶ Serious complaints sometimes led to a state investigation, as in Saginaw County. Complaints lodged with the State Welfare Department, and a request from the chair of the poor commission, prompted a large-scale inquiry into all aspects of Saginaw County's poor relief system, including the county poor farm and infirmary.⁴⁷ The investigation failed to substantiate charges about mismanagement and abuse at the infirmary although the state department did recommend changes in other areas of poor relief.⁴⁸

The infirmaries were institutions, and most keepers ran them as such. David Rothman argues that order and discipline were critical components of the earliest institutions for the poor. Experts believed that "order, discipline and an exacting routine" were important in "treating" the problems of residents: "The regimen would correct rather than confirm habits of idleness; inmates would learn 'constancy and diligence' and 'to

⁴⁶Minutes of the Van Buren County Superintendent of the Poor and Poor Commission, August 25, 1925; September 9, 1925; October 1925; December 2, 1926.

⁴⁷"County Farm Inquiry Launched by State," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 3, 1931; "State Agent Begins Poor Farm Inquiry," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 4, 1931.

⁴⁸*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, January 11, 1933, 47-64.



obey and respect.” Infirmaries were modeled in part after prisons and insane asylums.⁴⁹ Although guilty of little more than old age, infirmity or poverty, infirmary residents were treated as those in other institutions, and most infirmaries in Michigan insisted upon routine and rules in their operation: “Treatment of paupers is kind but firm, and inmates are required to conform to reasonable rules.”⁵⁰ Discipline was rarely a problem, and usually difficult residents turned their behavior around after “a good talking to,” according to one report.⁵¹ Infirmaries had isolation rooms for more problem patients, and meals might also be taken away as punishment. Other counties used similar forms of discipline; solitary confinement or withdrawal of meals were common. Some reports referred to the use of “cells” - sometimes padded - for the disorderly or insane resident. All these methods - focusing on control and isolation rather than treatment and care - were reasons medical professionals sought to remove mentally ill patients from county institutions into mental hospitals.⁵² Overcrowding in other state institutions often mandated that infirmaries - or local jails - house residents who rightfully belonged

⁴⁹Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 188-190.

⁵⁰*Abstracts of the Superintendents of the Poor*, 1891, summaries of poorhouses, Marquette, p. 42.

⁵¹See also *Abstracts of the Reports of the Superintendents of Poor*, 1891, 1905, p. 45 and 52 respectively.

⁵²David Rothman argues that the population of institutions - largely foreign-born - was a critical reason the larger population did not protest the poor treatment accorded inmates, particularly in prisons and insane asylums. David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980) 28-29; Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 23-24, 31.



somewhere else. But for those who had no where else to go, infirmaries served as institutions intended to control and contain them.

Opal Matson's 1933 investigations found the infirmaries in general to have little recreation. Few had pianos or radios, and even magazines and books were rarely in evidence. Sparse furnishings were the norm, and men tended to smoke and play cards, while women often sewed. "Both groups present a depressing spectacle," according to Matson.⁵³ Another study found similar conditions, with few furnishings; "sitting rooms for men and women were bare and cheerless." Little space was provided for the residents' personal belongings, and in some institutions residents simply laid in bed all day with little encouragement or incentive to do otherwise. Little leisure activity was provided or planned.⁵⁴

Various church groups from the Saginaw area conducted services at the infirmary once a month on a rotating basis. The infirmary owned a piano, and the interviewer noted that one resident owned a radio. The kitchen served special meals on holidays.⁵⁵ Wayne County offered rather extensive recreation for its patients, although this was due in part to its efforts to attract and retain staff members. As in Saginaw County, church services were held, although weekly rather than monthly, and it featured concerts and plays when the weather was cooler. A recreation hall was built in 1913 and a motion picture machine

⁵³Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 34.

⁵⁴Public relief study, WRSC, State Archives, Box 5, Folder 10, p. 56, 62.

⁵⁵See Welfare and Relief Study Commission records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7 Folder 7, Saginaw County; see also WRSC "Local Public Relief," unpublished report, Box 5, Folder 10, 62.



was added the following year. Movies were shown every other week to both staff and patients, and dances were also held on alternative weeks; separate showings were scheduled for the infirmary and asylum patients. Reports noted that such entertainment was critical medicine for the patients, and also necessary to keep staff members. The commission set aside a room for employees to meet socially with family and friends on site, and also installed a bowling alley in 1915. Reports commented numerous times on the difficulty of retaining staff members, noting that job opportunities in the Detroit factories for men and restaurant and hotels for women made it more difficult to hire and keep staff. Offering "profitable and healthy recreation" resulted in "a more contented and satisfied institution from this standpoint, and [was] a very great aid in solving our labor difficulties, for it is a fact that laborers are more easily obtained and held longer when entertaining environments are added." Labor issues, and not necessarily the well-being and care of the residents, were a critical motivation in the expansion of the institutions' recreational offerings.⁵⁶

Infirmarys provided care for only a fraction of residents in need of relief; far more were aided by outdoor relief, as Katz argues. Infirmary residents accounted for a small portion of the care provided through local public channels - usually less than five or ten percent for all counties. People were much more likely to receive a grocery or fuel order, or perhaps assistance with medical treatment or rent, than they were to seek care in an

⁵⁶*Annual Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor for the County of Wayne*, 1900, p. 45; 1912, 8-9, 26; 1913, 10; 1914, 16-17; 1915, 63.

infirmaries.⁵⁷ Statewide figures show that infirmaries served anywhere from 6 percent of all cases receiving aid (in 1895) to a high of 16.5 percent in 1920, while the remainder received non-institutional relief. By the early twentieth century, non-institutional relief programs, and the state's role in them, would expand through workers' compensation laws and mothers' pensions, but the power of local officials remained paramount in the administration of relief for mothers.

Workers and Mothers

The state expanded its welfare role with workers' compensation laws in 1912 and a mothers' pension law in 1913. Both brought the state government into the welfare arena, although only in limited ways, but these categorical aid programs laid the foundation for the later federal programs of the 1930s. They also reveal the gendered notions of male and female roles in the family and in the workplace, and how such beliefs influenced public welfare policy. Workers' compensation targeted largely white workers in industrial jobs dominated by men, while mothers' pensions provided benefits for dependent children, and usually only those children cared for by certain types of mothers.⁵⁸ The rise of workers' compensation laws was directly tied to welfare capitalism

⁵⁷*Abstract of the Reports of the Superintendents of the Poor*, aforementioned years, Table II.

⁵⁸These laws codified the notion that these male workers were to be the main breadwinners of their families, and that mothers were dependent upon their husbands for support. The state stepped in when a husband was dead or absent. See Virginia Sapiro, "The Gender Basis of American Social Policy," in *Women, the State and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 37, 39, 43; Barbara Nelson, "The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and



and corporate welfare programs.⁵⁹ Businesses saw these laws as a means to limit compensation benefits awarded through an unpredictable court system, and organized labor eventually saw them as a means to guarantee some benefits for injured workers. Many businesses supported these laws by 1905. A compensation schedule dictated what injuries or death would receive what benefits. Workers could gain benefits more quickly than through the court system, but they also relinquished any right to sue the company for more.⁵⁹

Mothers' pensions represented a different type of social provision. Advocated by many women's groups and a key provision pushed at the 1909 White House Conference on the Care for Dependent Children, mothers' pensions sought to provide poor mothers with a means to raise their own children, and was a part of the philosophical shift from institutional child care to home care for dependent children. The choice of the term "pension" was critical. It was to be payment for work - the work of raising children. It

Mothers' Aid," same volume.

⁵⁹A widow of a miner in Michigan's Upper Peninsula received \$2,700, while a man unable to work could receive between \$4 and \$10 per week for 500 weeks, for a maximum of \$4,000. Compensation was prorated based on the extent and permanence of the injury. For information on workers' compensation laws, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 293-298; Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 199-202. For Michigan, see Willis F. Dunbar and George S. May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, third rev. ed, 1995) 449-450; Larry Lankton, *Cradle to Grave: Life, Work, and Death at the Lake Superior Copper Mines*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 138-139.

was not to be relief or welfare, but an earned benefit much like a veterans' pension.⁶⁰ Intended to eliminate the need for mothers to work outside the home for pay, benefits rarely provided full support for families. Joanne Goodwin argues that instead mothers' pensions were "partial support" for mothers to raise children, and evidence for Michigan's experience supports her findings. Mothers received grants to support their children, but they received nothing for their own needs. The aid was intended for the children, with no provision included for the mother, a concept that would reappear in the 1935 Social Security Act's Aid to Dependent Children program.⁶¹ Although policy makers did not accept the idea of a "pension," and never provided full support, some recipients did, using the rhetoric of motherhood to justify continued state support in the 1930s.

⁶⁰Joanne L. Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 36-38; Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994) 137, 143-148; Kriste Lindenmeyer, "A Right to a Childhood": *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) 152-156; Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 32-34. Mink argues that mothers' pensions, although "wages for motherhood," also were designed to be tools of cultural assimilation, enforcing white, middle-class practices and values on non-white, immigrant families.

Josephine Brown argued in her 1940 publication that mothers' pensions, although not supported by all members of the private social welfare profession, prompted the social work profession to rethink its role and the role of public relief, foreshadowing the debates of the 1930s. See Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940) 48-49.

⁶¹Linda Gordon, "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century," in *U.S. History As Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 70, 80-81.

Michigan passed its first mothers' pension law in 1913 through an amendment to its Juvenile Court Law of 1907. Included among provisions for dependent children, the mothers' pension was allowed in place of institutional confinement or foster care if a mother was a "suitable guardian" but was "poor and unable to properly care" for her children (who were under the age of 17).⁶² It represented a shift from the thinking that poor mothers were automatically unfit to raise their own children, but the small benefits paid did not fulfill the law's intent. Mothers' pensions, although established through state law, were another manifestation of the principle that relief was a local concern. Funded entirely by local tax dollars, mothers' pensions were administered by elected judicial officials with an extraordinary amount of discretion. Investigations were done by county agents, and in some counties, mothers' pensions investigators, but the final decision rested with the probate judge. Needless to say, probate judges were men, and their views and values became policy in their granting of mothers' pensions. Likewise, the law was purely voluntary; local governments were not required to offer mothers' pensions, but some counties, including Saginaw and Marquette, eventually interpreted the law as a requirement. They saw mothers' pensions as an inescapable part of their budgets.⁶³

The maximum benefit allowed was \$3 per week per child, and the benefits were to be funded by the county and administered by the Probate Court, the administrative agency designated by twenty states. A key argument for that choice was that the quality

⁶²Public Act 228, *Public Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan, 1913* (Lansing: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co, 1913) 444-445.

⁶³See Chapter Two for a full discussion of this development.

of mothering was related to the child's behavior; allowing mothers to remain in the home to raise their children would reduce juvenile delinquency, explaining why the pension provision was a part of juvenile court law and not welfare.⁶⁴ The court was to appoint a county agent whose duty would be to investigate such cases for the probate court.⁶⁵

Probate judges - elected positions with no required qualifications - had almost unconditional jurisdiction over mothers' pensions, and could administer them as they saw fit, including who received aid and who did not, regardless of what the law stated.⁶⁶

While judges rarely conducted the investigations personally, they hired the staff who did and made the final decisions on who received aid. As with most poor relief, local officials controlled administration with no state supervision, although the State Department of Welfare would eventually conduct informational studies of the mothers' pension program. Michigan's law was modeled after other such legislation, and on its face all mothers - unmarried, deserted, widowed and divorced, white and non-white, citizen and non-citizen - were eligible for benefits. An amendment in 1915 extended aid to mothers whose husbands were insane, feebleminded, epileptic or blind and resided in a state institution and thus could not provide for their families.⁶⁷ Michigan was one of three

⁶⁴Emma Octavia Lundberg, *Public Aid to Mothers With Dependent Children*, U.S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 162 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1926) 10.

⁶⁵Public Act No. 228 of 1913, *Public Acts*, 445.

⁶⁶Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 105.

⁶⁷Illinois, in contrast, passed new legislation in 1913 - two years after its initial mothers' pension law - placing further restrictions on eligibility for such aid. The new law limited benefits to widows and mothers whose husbands were permanently disabled.

states to provide for unmarried mothers, even as late as 1931. Its law was among the most liberal in the nation, although its practice did not necessarily conform to the law's intent.⁶⁸

As with many poor relief records, mothers' pensions investigations left minimal evidence in Michigan. Federal studies through the U.S. Children's Bureau shed some light on the administration of mothers' pensions, but offer little information outside of Wayne County and Detroit.⁶⁹ The state investigation of Saginaw County's poor relief system in 1931 revealed that aid was extended to a somewhat diverse group of dependent mothers, including the foreign-born, women of color (both African-American and Mexican) and non-widows, but the majority of recipients were white, widowed mothers. Seventy percent of recipients in 1932 were native born, and five percent were either African-American or Mexican. Again, 70 percent were widows, but the rest were either

It also restricted benefits to citizens. The law also recognized the need for women to supplement their pensions, putting in place specific boundaries for wage earning. The law did not prohibit working for wages, and revealed the reality of "partial support" despite the intentions of mothers' pensions advocates. Goodwin argues that this law brought mothers' pensions more clearly in the arena of public relief. See Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 128-130.

⁶⁸Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 467; *Mothers' Aid, 1931*, U.S. Children's Bureau No. 220 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933) 3.

⁶⁹Mary F. Bogue, *Administration of Mothers' Aid in Ten Localities*, U.S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 184 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1928) 171-188. The study of Wayne County provides no information on recipients' race, nativity or citizenship.

divorced, deserted, or separated. Some women had spouses in institutions and one was unmarried.⁷⁰

The Depression and New Deal prompted some studies of mothers' pensions, often as part of efforts to assess state and local relief practices. The Civil Works Administration provided staff funding for a 1934 study of mothers' pensions in Michigan, fueled in part by the large numbers of complaints received by the State Department of Welfare from mothers refused aid, and also because so many counties eliminated their programs during the Depression.⁷¹ The report found that by 1933, thirty four of the state's eighty three counties had ceased providing such benefits. Van Buren County stopped paying mothers' pensions the following year in 1934, although both Marquette and Saginaw continued to fund them until the ADC program absorbed such cases in 1936. It was clear that depression conditions had prompted such cuts. Some counties simply shifted their mothers' pension cases to the welfare relief commissions, funded largely through federal and state funds, to save the county money. Although the Federal Emergency Relief Administration defined mothers' pensions as a local obligation and excluded them from

⁷⁰*Proceedings, Saginaw County*, January 11, 1933, 54-55. Similar figures appeared in the 1936 investigation of Kalamazoo County's program, a part of the larger study by the Welfare and Relief Study Commission. Sixty-five percent of recipients were widows and 20 percent were divorced or deserted. Just three percent were unmarried, and 12 percent had spouses in institutions (prison, insane asylum or a tuberculosis hospital). See Probate Court, Kalamazoo County, Welfare and Relief Study Commission Records, Box 7, Folder 2, Kalamazoo County; for Detroit, see Kyle Emily Ciani, "Choosing to Care: Meeting Children's Needs in Detroit and San Diego, 1880-1945," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1998, 102-103.

⁷¹"State Will Probe Mothers' Pensions," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 20, 1934.

federal funding, some counties received authorization to use WRC funds for mothers' pensions, particularly when no other funds were available.⁷²

The study revealed the contrast between the law and its practice, finding that the investigation and granting of mothers' pensions did not conform to the intent of the law. The report's findings also confirmed the power of the probate judge in the administration of mothers' pensions. Judges dictated what mothers would receive aid, and other local officials, who might be consulted on a specific case, had little legal authority. The report argued that although the pensions were not poor relief, courts used them in that way.⁷³ Marquette County officials, who believed that mothers' pensions were required under state law, worked together - primarily the probate judge and poor officials - to determine the most cost-effective means to provide aid. The judge referred some cases to the poor commission, believing that they could provide support cheaper than through the mothers' pension program. In one case, the judge requested poor relief instead of a mothers' pension because he didn't think a cash allowance would "be properly and judiciously

⁷²Reba F. Harris, *Mothers' Pensions in Michigan: Report of a Study Made by the State Welfare Department* (Lansing: State Welfare Department, 1934) 1, 3-4; Memorandum of State Welfare Department, "Report on Mothers' Pensions for the Fiscal Year," 1935, WRSC Records, Research and Information Files, Box 14, Folder 5, State Archives of Michigan. The former report is based upon information gathered from seventy-five counties. Counties not included in the report were Branch, Gogebic, Lake, Muskegon, Ontonagon, Oscoda, and Wayne. See also Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 36-39.

⁷³Harris, *Mothers' Pensions in Michigan*, 5. Matson places mothers' pensions in her category of outdoor relief, and as relief, she argues that the program should be transferred from the Probate Court to the county welfare department. Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 39.



spent.”⁷⁴ No specifics were listed, but the judge told the board that “home conditions were such that if a Mothers Pension were granted, the children would not receive the full benefit of that aid.”⁷⁵ Many counties refused to provide both mothers’ aid and poor relief; if a woman received a mothers’ pension, she was not likely to receive aid from the superintendent of the poor or the township supervisor, regardless of the adequacy of her mothers’ pension grant.⁷⁶

The study found that twenty-one counties refused aid to certain categories of mothers, despite the broad scope of the law. Seventeen counties refused pensions to divorced or unmarried mothers and four counties excluded aid to children whose fathers were in prison. Many counties would not support mothers with only one child, and some also excluded cases involving desertion, alcohol, insanity and the physically handicapped. Widows accounted for 61 percent of the cases analyzed in the report, with unmarried mothers accounting for just 1.25 percent. Divorced mothers were 8.8 percent of the total, and deserted mothers 16 percent.⁷⁷ One official argued that deserted mothers were

⁷⁴*Proceedings of the Board of Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, Marquette County Historical Society, January 18, 1924 and March 21, 1924.

⁷⁵*Proceedings, Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, January 22, 1931. The mother received a rental allowance of \$10 per month, and a monthly grocery order for \$20.

⁷⁶Minutes of the Van Buren Superintendent of the Poor and Poor Commission, April 1, 1914. Mrs. Mary Blaud asked the Poor Commission to cease payments to her, as the Probate Judge refused her a mothers’ pension as long as she received poor relief. Why she preferred a mothers’ pension is not clear, but it was likely either because the funds were greater or more secure, or also that she saw the mother’s pension as carrying less stigma than general poor relief.

⁷⁷Harris, *Mothers’ Pensions in Michigan*, 6.

provided for under the laws requiring support; a man deserting his family could be charged with a felony if he refused to support them. This judge believed that providing mothers' pensions to deserted wives relieved husbands of their responsibility, although he did not explain how a husband in prison for non-support was to support his family, or what a mother whose husband could not be found was to do to support her children.⁷⁸ A federal study found that although the Wayne County probate judge granted mothers' pensions to deserted mothers, he only did so for women who had been deserted at least two years.⁷⁹ Who sat on the bench - an elected position - determined in large measure which mothers would receive aid, as well as the amount of their grants.

Grants seldom reached the maximum level provided, again limited by the discretion of the presiding judge and the budget limitations. Although the law allowed up to \$3 per week per child, benefits tended to average far below that, and also varied depending on what category the mother's situation fit. Counties paid anywhere from a low of \$0.40 per child per week in extreme cases to anywhere from \$1.22 to \$2.33. The state average was \$1.75. Some probate judges would only provide funds for three or four children, regardless of the size of the family. The study also found that in many cases benefits would barely cover the family's food, not to mention rent, clothing and medical care. In short, pensions were not adequate and the variation within and between counties

⁷⁸*Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention of State Superintendents of the Poor and Keepers of County Infirmaries*, September 7-9, 1915, Ludington, 95. The official was the Kalamazoo County Probate Judge, Samuel Van Horn, who advocated removing deserted mothers from the law's eligibility parameters in the 1915 amendment. It was not passed.

⁷⁹Bogue, *Administration of Mothers' Aid*, 171.

revealed the extremely limited funding of mothers' pensions, reinforcing the argument that such aid was merely partial support.⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, 44 percent of all mothers receiving aid were employed for wages. Most were employed in their own homes, likely at piece work, while the rest worked outside the home. In another 14 percent of the cases, the earnings of older children supplemented the benefits received. The report also noted that such numbers likely were low, as many mothers hid their employment in fear of losing their benefits.⁸¹

Some county officials did not believe that mothers' pensions should be full support and administered the mothers' pension program deliberately using the concept of "partial support." Manistee County Probate Judge Fred Stone told the annual gathering of superintendents of the poor in 1924 that the pension was to supplement the mother's income (or income from older children). He rejected the notion that women's role was simply the home caretaker, and argued that most women had to help the family with wage work at some point. "It is very seldom that the probate court is called upon to aid those where the wife didn't help out during the husband's life time, and I don't believe that she should expect or the people should expect that she should be supported entirely by the

⁸⁰Harris, *Mothers' Pensions in Michigan*, 8-9. A 1918 study in Wayne County showed that very few mothers received the maximum benefit of \$3 per week per child. The same study, and subsequent studies over the next decade, showed that not only were mothers' pensions partial support, but that many mothers did work to supplement the pensions granted. Nearly 40 percent of all mothers worked outside the home, usually in a local factory or in domestic work. See Ciani, "Choosing to Care," 99-102.

⁸¹Harris, *Mothers' Pensions in Michigan*, 13-14.

county and do nothing for herself to earn money.”⁸² In his remarks to the convention, Stone referred to the type of population who would seek mothers’ pensions: the working classes or the working poor, accustomed to a need for supplementary income by wives and mothers in families for whom the family wage was not reality. Stone argued that the pension was to be the supplementary income in the family - not the sole source of support. The mothers’ pension was not to bring these families into the middle-class ideal of a mother who did not work for wages at all and whose sole focus was care of the home and family, as advocates of the pension concept argued. The Manistee County Board of Supervisors agreed with this philosophy in 1933 when it protested the minimum provision of \$2 per week, because it was “inadvisable, unnecessary and tends toward undue allowance under present conditions.” The supervisors believed the amount of the grant should be the discretion of the probate judge.⁸³ Kent County Judge Clark Higbee expressed similar ideas in 1934, noting that one mother receiving a mothers’ pension had “fine children; no better in Michigan.” They needed “her care and attention; they require that she stay in her home and care for them.” But he also noted that “she is helping too,” financially. Most likely it was home work, such as laundry or sewing, which allowed her

⁸²*Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Convention of the State Association of the Superintendents of the Poor, Keepers and Matrons of the County Infirmaries and City Poor Directors*, August 28, 1924, 55-56. See also “Local Public Welfare,” WRSC, 96-97. This report faulted pensions for being less than full support, but also connected that to local fiscal limitations. Some probate judges awarded a larger number of pensions, but in smaller grants, in order to spread the aid to more families.

⁸³*Supervisors’ Proceedings, Manistee County*, v. 13, April 12, 1933, 98-99. The resolution passed unanimously.

to remain in the home to supervise her children.⁸⁴ Probate judges implemented their own philosophies on the roles of mothers, whether as full-time care givers or also as wage-earners, as well as what categories of mothers deserved aid, in their daily administration of mothers' pensions.

Investigation procedures also varied. Sixty-two counties used the county agent to investigate such cases, as stipulated by law. Six counties either used the probation officer or a mothers' pension investigator. But the report harshly criticized the seven counties who used the superintendents of the poor, township supervisors or even jail officials as investigating officers. It also criticized the influence of such officials on the investigations, even if they were not conducting them. In many counties, the report stated, such individuals dictated the policies and administration of the mothers' pension programs, and in eight counties the local officials actually placed the mothers' pensions checks in their own accounts. They then distributed the money to the recipient, presumably as they deemed appropriate.⁸⁵

Some superintendents of the poor resented the placement of the mothers' pension program in the probate court, believing that they were the appropriate officials to administer the grants. And as the 1934 study found, some did. Most counties employed

⁸⁴*Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Convention of State Superintendents of the Poor and Keepers of County Infirmaries*, Thursday, September 24, 1914, Grand Rapids, 90. Gwendolyn Mink argues that welfare policy dictated that only certain mothers had the right (and continue to have the right) to raise their own children; poor women do not. See Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) 108-109.

⁸⁵Harris, *Mothers' Pensions in Michigan*, 7. Kent County was one of the few counties that hired a full-time investigator and administrator for its mothers' pension program. See Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 37-38.

county agents, acting as investigators for the Probate Court, to consult with superintendents of the poor and township supervisors as to the need of an applicant. Many officials at conventions of the superintendents of the poor advocated cooperation among the officials, in part to avoid duplication of support, as the key to the success of the program. Some superintendents of the poor were happy not to have the added responsibility, but also resented that the cases refused by the court usually came to them for aid as a result.⁸⁶ Others, like the example of Marquette County, coordinated the administration of the two programs.

In general, the State Welfare Department report severely criticized the practices used in the administration of mothers' pensions. Harris argued that if the law were followed as written, mothers' pensions would provide for the care of dependent children. Although she did not comment on the lack of benefits for mothers, she did not see the law as the problem. Instead, it was the administration and implementation of the law that was problematic. She also recognized that the state's responsibility went beyond simply legislation. In counties unable to fund adequate pensions, or the staffs to investigate and administer them, Harris argued that "it is the State's duty to step in and assume a part of the load."⁸⁷ Revising the law to permit state grants was one suggestion offered to deal

⁸⁶See *Proceedings*, 1914, 86-97; 1915, 93-101; 1924, 55-60. A study by the Michigan Council on Governmental Expenditures also criticized the duplication of aid - stemming in part from a lack of communication or cooperation between various officials - as contributing to the high cost of mothers' pensions. Rather than advocating restricting eligibility, this report called for more careful investigations and efficient reporting to contain costs. See Leo Day Woodworth, *Expenditures for Mothers' Pensions in Michigan, 1931* (Michigan Council on Governmental Expenditures, 1933) 4-5.

⁸⁷Harris, *Mothers' Pensions in Michigan*, 15-16.

with the mothers' pension problem. Harris also suggested having county welfare departments, in place as a result of FERA by the time she conducted her study, to assist in the investigation and administration. Transferring authority for the mothers' pension program to the county department, and out of the probate court, was another suggestion.

Federal Funds for Maternal and Infant Health

Mothers' pensions represented only limited participation by the state governments in relief programs, although the legal provision for mothers' aid was a significant step. The earliest example of the federal government's participation in social welfare programs of any kind was in the maternal and infant health education programs offered through the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act. Pushed through with the support of the U.S. Children's Bureau and a huge coalition of local women's groups (also critical in the passage of state-level mothers' pension programs), the Sheppard-Towner Act provided federal funds, in the form of matching grants to the states, for health education programs, health clinics focusing on prenatal and child health and visiting nurse services.⁸⁸ The Act also was unique in that it offered services to all women, and not just poor women; unlike mothers' pensions, participation in the Sheppard-Towner programs did not require proof of need.⁸⁹ Although relief and medical care were not included, in large measure because of the opposition of doctors and the powerful American Medical Association as well as other

⁸⁸Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 168-169.

⁸⁹Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 167-186.

conservative opponents, the act set a critical precedent in the distribution of federal funds for social welfare programs.⁹⁰ New Deal programs, in particular the categorical aid programs (Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind) of the Social Security Act, built on that practice by allocating matching funds based on what states appropriated for those relief programs. Like other public relief services, the maternal and infant health programs did not start with federal aid, and many state programs did not end with the Sheppard-Towner Act in 1929. Michigan continued its programs through county health departments and state funds, in addition to the Children's Trust Fund of Michigan, established in 1929.⁹¹

State and federal programs, although very limited, did appear in the early decades of the twentieth century. Workers' compensation laws, mothers' pension programs and maternal infant health programs were among the first "welfare" services established under state and federal laws. But the local governments continued to play the pivotal role in the administration of those programs, particularly with the mothers' pensions.

⁹⁰For a discussion of the opposition to the Act, and successful efforts to prevent its renewal, see Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 169-176; Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 93-96; Lindenmeyer, "A Right to Childhood," 85-88. Some physicians supported the Act, including pediatricians and obstetricians, and Lindenmeyer argues that the conflict over the issue in the AMA prompted the creation of the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1922.

⁹¹Kristi Rutz-Robbins, "Networks of Public and Private Organizations: Building Maternal and Child Health Programs in Michigan, 1910-1930," Master's thesis, Michigan State University, 1997, 28-29, 30-35, 40-41. Rutz-Robbins also documents the development of maternal and child health programs in Detroit, through the Detroit Board of Health and the Detroit Urban League. Detroit's black community benefitted little from the Sheppard-Towner Act, which primarily served white, rural women in Michigan.

Although state and federal law established these programs, all were mediated at least in part, if not entirely, through local officials. And in the case of maternal and infant health programs, local networks of women worked to provide those services before the 1921 act, and were critical in continuing those programs after federal funds ended. Individual citizens, including many women, also proved critical in the provision of welfare and relief services through private agencies, another path in the maze of pre-Depression relief programs.

Private Agencies

For most Michigan residents in the early twentieth century, the local superintendent of the poor, township supervisor or city poor official was the person to approach if in need. Mothers could seek aid from the Probate Court, and some workers had coverage under the 1912 laws. But public welfare was just one possible outlet for care; people in need also could turn to private institutions or organizations, and social welfare was very much thought to be a private concern before the New Deal. For the trained social worker, private welfare was the only outlet. Few public programs were large enough to warrant full-time staff, and few areas saw a need for a "trained" social worker. (Wayne County, which contains the city of Detroit, was among the few that used "professional" social workers.) Very few public agencies were members of the major social work organizations, including the Family Welfare Association, and most membership requirements precluded the admission of public agencies.⁹² A dichotomy in

⁹²Brown, *Public Relief*, 54.

terms of philosophy, training and practice existed between public and private social welfare. Private agencies also offered welfare services to clients, and a key distinguishing feature between public and private was the use of case work. Private agencies sought to help families or individuals solve the problems that caused their "need" for aid, which they understood to stem from other issues, including family conflict, ill health or other situation that caused their economic difficulties. Rather than simply providing material relief, private social workers sought to help families become self-supporting. In contrast, public welfare was a temporary measure focusing only on the immediate material needs of the recipient, and often was connected to local politics. A common criticism of public welfare by the early twentieth century was the lack of record keeping and case work conducted by public officials.⁹³

Private welfare encompassed a range of agencies which served a variety of constituencies. Some centered on specific religious, racial or ethnic groups, while others were more broad based. The development of private welfare was largely an urban phenomenon, and rural areas had far fewer private charity organizations and thus fewer avenues of aid for its residents. Private welfare organization's focus on a specific group, or to serve "its own," excluded others from receiving aid, and based many restrictions solely on citizenship or race.⁹⁴ Exclusion from public welfare programs was often a part of the impetus for groups, such as African-Americans, to establish their own social

⁹³Brown, *Public Relief*, 40-41, 51-55; Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, 52-54.

⁹⁴Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 59-60; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 56-61.

service organizations. Major charities operating in Michigan included the Associated Charities (a member of the Family Welfare Association), the Salvation Army, League of Catholic Women, St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Detroit Urban League, and the City Rescue Mission among others.⁹⁵ Cities such as Detroit, Flint and Grand Rapids had fairly extensive networks of private welfare, while other more rural areas, including Van Buren County, had far fewer options. Manistee County, in rural northern Lower Michigan, had a county Social Welfare League and Van Buren County a Social Service Bureau, which coordinated social welfare efforts.⁹⁶ Most counties had a chapter of the American Red Cross. Some areas, including Detroit and Grand Rapids, coordinated their fund-raising for private charity through the local Community Chest, which then distributed the funds to its member organizations.⁹⁷ Other areas, including Van Buren County, had no centralized social welfare organization. (Saginaw's private agencies were funded in part

⁹⁵The Family Service Association (originally chartered in 1911 as the National Association of Societies for Organizing Charity; the name was changed to the FSA in the 1930s and then the Family Welfare Association in the 1940s) was a national umbrella organization for its member organizations. It provided a voice for social welfare professionals in the social welfare field, and was largely comprised of private agencies. Some public agencies did seek membership. This agency served private organizations in nine Michigan cities, including Marquette. See *Social Service Organizations* ed. Peter Romanofsky (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978) 302-306. For reference to Michigan cities this agency served, see Family Service Association records, Social Welfare History Archives, Minneapolis, MN (Hereafter cited as FSA), Box 25, Midwestern Regional Committee, Prior to 1937.

⁹⁶Kathryn M. Bryan, "15th Article in the Series, 'We Too Know the People,'" *The Manistee Examiner*, collection in Manistee County Historical Society.

⁹⁷Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, 187-188; Brown, *Public Relief*. 55. For information on the Detroit Associated Charities, see Oliver Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) 263-265.



by the Saginaw Welfare League.) Many such agencies focused on family casework, with relief as a supplemental service. By the 1920s, casework was the norm in professional social work, and the days of "scientific charity" and friendly visiting were gone.⁹⁸ The level of cooperation between public and private agencies and officials before the New Deal years varied greatly. The inconsistent level of cooperation was a recurring theme in social work discussions in the early New Deal years.

Corporate Paternalism

A final source of aid in the pre-Depression period was corporate welfare, or paternalism. Limited in scope in the numbers of workers affected, welfare capitalism did play a role in Michigan industries, reaching its peak in the 1920s. Structured around a labor market hierarchy segregated along race, citizenship, class and gender, such programs tended to benefit white men in certain occupations, particularly industry and mining, and primarily those employed by larger companies.⁹⁹ Programs were intended to prevent union development, foster company loyalty, and help improve overall production

⁹⁸Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History*, 6, 92-93; Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, 18-21, 49-52; Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989, fourth edition) 73-103.

⁹⁹David Brody, "The Rise and Decline of Welfare Capitalism," *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 59; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 163. Cohen argues that Chicago employers used welfare capitalism to break down ethnic subcultures and replace them with loyalty and identity with the company. For a discussion of welfare capitalism and masculinity, see Lisa M. Fine, "'Our Big Factory Family': Masculinity and Paternalism at the Reo Motor Car Company of Lansing, Michigan." *Labor History* 34 (Spring/Summer 1993) 274-291.



as much as they were to aid company workers.¹⁰⁰ Companies offered housing purchasing plans, company housing, company stores, education and recreation programs, health care, and relief services.¹⁰¹ Some companies offered pension and stock option plans, but those were rare. One historian argues that companies in Michigan's Copper Country "defined paternalism," instituting programs for company housing and stores. Stores could be used to keep wages down by controlling the cost of living, and housing also encouraged stable family communities and settlement. In some cases employees were allowed to build houses on company land.¹⁰²

Controlling workers and limiting unions were, however, the primary reasons companies instituted such policies. Henry Ford, perhaps the most well-known among welfare capitalists, instituted his programs, including the five dollar day in 1914, to improve worker productivity and stabilize his work force. In addition to offering his employees benefits like a savings and loan associations and educational or recreation programs, he sought to provide incentives through higher wages. The five dollar day was less about sharing company profits with workers than about controlling workers' lives,

¹⁰⁰Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 174-180; Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 34, 97-98. Edsforth argues that corporate paternalism, in conjunction with the rising consumer culture (or "ideology of consumption"), were key in the prevention of an organized working-class movement in Flint before the 1930s.

¹⁰¹Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960) 181-185.

¹⁰²Larry Lankton, *Cradle to Grave: Life, Work, and Death at the Lake Superior Copper Mines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 145-149.



and only reached some workers. Ford's initial impetus was to counter the growing problems of worker absenteeism and turnover of employees, but it was also about encouraging workers to live their lives a certain way. The five dollar day was a "conditional gift," and careful investigations determined the worker's eligibility for company profit sharing.¹⁰³ Eligibility rested on age, legal marriage, good home conditions, and thrift. Women were excluded initially from these programs, and later were only eligible if they were heads of households; wives of Ford workers were forbidden from working for wages.¹⁰⁴ The purpose of the Ford programs was to enforce certain behaviors of his workers when they were not at work, and to encourage a "middle class vision in the role of the family."¹⁰⁵ Ford saw a link between specific family types (a nuclear family with a male breadwinner who earned the family's entire wages and a dependent wife and children) and a stable work force, and directed his welfare policies toward that end.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Stephen Meyer III, *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981) 107, 111-112; Martha May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage: The Ford Motor Company and the Five Dollar Day," *Feminist Studies* v. 8 (Summer 1982) 412-414.

¹⁰⁴May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage," 413-414; Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 115, 140.

¹⁰⁵May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage," 418; Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 107, 111-112, 115, 123.

¹⁰⁶May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage," 414-415, 418.



Access to such programs was not equal, and such programs operated in an ethnic and occupational hierarchy.¹⁰⁷ Only workers who conformed to Ford company policies, determined through investigations conducted by the Education Department, received Ford's "profit sharing" bonus, and eligibility depended on one's behavior and family situation outside the workplace.¹⁰⁸ Companies also often controlled far more than their workers and their place of employment. Many had extensive local power in government and the judicial system, and controlled in large measure local elective offices and the judicial process, as was the case in Marquette.¹⁰⁹ Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, which operated mines in several towns in Marquette County, used such tactics extensively. General Motors of Flint was another major Michigan company that engaged in extensive welfare capitalism and corporate paternalism. Company-sponsored housing, which employees could purchase long-term, was a major program offered by GM in Flint. Companies also offered educational and recreation programs for their workers, as well as relief programs during economic hard times. Like other major companies, GM sought to limit the threat of labor activism by offering its own programs to assist workers.¹¹⁰ The

¹⁰⁷Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 145-149; Stuart D. Brandeis, *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 5-6.

¹⁰⁸Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 127-130. The Department investigated all aspects of the worker's life, including moral behavior and spending habits.

¹⁰⁹Terry S. Reynolds, "We Were Satisfied With It," *Michigan History* Vol. 78 No. 6 (November/December 1994) 31; Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 145-149.

¹¹⁰Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969) 23-28; James Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed: Community and Union Activists in the Industrial Heartland* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 69; Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 146-147; Reynolds,



REO Motor Car Company also employed such programs, creating its Welfare Department in 1916 to address issues such as employee turnover and union organization. A combination of recreation and education, REO's programs were designed to instill company loyalty and pride in its workers. The company also sought to avoid foreign influences, believed to be inextricable from labor activism, through citizenship and naturalization programs, and its apprenticeship program was limited to American citizens.¹¹¹

Corporate paternalism was for male workers, and Ford, as noted, deliberately excluded women - whether heads of households or not - in the early stages of the program. Some programs did exist to help workers' wives, but few were certain. Companies in the mining districts of the UP directed other kinds of aid to widows of mining employees killed on the job in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Although none felt responsible to provide long-term support for families of men killed in the mines, they did offer some financial aid. Because of the lack of company jobs available to women in mining, as well as other industrial jobs, employment for the widow was rarely an option. The few women who worked for mining companies usually were employed in the company hospital or library, and comprised a very small number of the total workforce. But some companies, in both the Keewenaw and Marquette areas, did

"We Were Satisfied With It," 25-26; Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*, 97-98.

¹¹¹Peter Iversen Berg, "Welfare Capitalism at the REO Motor Car Company," *Michigan History* Vol. 69, No. 6 (November/December 1985) 38-40; Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 150.

permit widows of deceased employees to live at reduced rents or rent-free in company houses, or waived land rents on homes built on company property.¹¹² If they were not living in company housing, widows might have been moved into it. Most received some kind of one-time death benefit, but such aid rarely extended over any period of time. These measures did not solve the widows' problem of how to provide for their families, but it did remove some worry. Some widows moved their families into one portion of the house and rented the remainder out to boarders. Others found domestic or other service jobs, which were the few opportunities available to women at the time.¹¹³

But such aid was dependent at least in part on the status of the deceased husband and the number and age of a widow's children. Wives of officers or higher company officials received more consideration than those married to laborers. The mining company might offer employment to older sons of a widow, if they were of an age to be employed in the mines. If a widow had young children, the company was more likely to try to move her out of company housing, in order to offer it to another employee. They also offered widows the cash value of a year's rent, and some women used these funds to leave the area or return to family elsewhere. Copper country mining companies had few set rules, but instead opted to handle these cases on an individual basis. As with corporate paternalism, the problem with these "safety net" measures was that they were not guaranteed and also did not reach all employees.¹¹⁴ For many workers, unsteady

¹¹²Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 190-191.

¹¹³Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 191-192.

¹¹⁴Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 193-196.



employment, including periodic lay-offs, made them ineligible for benefits; only a minority of industrial workers actually qualified.¹¹⁵

The combination of private and public welfare offered people some avenues of help and support during times of need, but numerous factors affected whether one was able to secure aid through any specific place. Workers searched in vain in the 1920s, a time of supposed prosperity, for security and a "safety net." Michigan residents in particular faced many of the problems of the pre-Depression decade, which foreshadowed the experiences of the Depression years. Although the Depression and New Deal ultimately prompted shifts in welfare and relief practice and ideology, the groundwork was laid in the previous decade. The problems faced during the Depression years - the incredible need for unemployment relief, the taxing of private welfare resources and corporate paternalism - began on a smaller scale in the 1920s, and the Depression severely strained the networks of relief and welfare available to those in need. The next chapter will outline how welfare services - public and private - faced both the early manifestations of the problems in the 1920s and the severe problems of the Great Depression before the federal government entered the picture, first in 1932 and then in the various New Deal programs.

¹¹⁵Martin Edward Sullivan, "'On the Dole': The Relief Issue in Detroit, 1929-1939" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1974) 24.



**“The People of Michigan Will Take Care of Their Own”:
The Great Depression and the Relief Problem**

Chapter Two

When the stock market crashed in 1929, sectors of Michigan's diverse economy had experienced decline and downturns for nearly a decade, leaving many people with few resources to combat the severity or the length of the Great Depression. The economic collapse, and the accompanying rise in relief needs, taxed public and private welfare systems, in addition to corporate welfare, as never before, although earlier economic crises had revealed the limitations of the American welfare structure.¹ Private organizations began to shift their focus to relief rather than primarily social service, and fund-raising organizations, such as community chests and welfare leagues, also shifted budgets toward agencies providing relief services. Public agencies' appropriations for poor relief in some counties and cities reached record amounts, and many attempted to refine or reform their systems to deal more efficiently with the growing needs. In reality, relief in Michigan was much more public than private even before the 1930s, despite extensive rhetoric that welfare was to remain in the private sector. Public and private relief agencies faced difficult financial choices as they sought to give residents needed tax relief while also providing for the material needs of their unemployed, and their efforts to deal with the rising unemployment and need for relief brought many to the point of near bankruptcy. Resistance to federal aid was profound, as communities and private organizations did everything to handle the problem as they saw fit: locally. This

¹Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996, revised ed) 152-155.

resistance foreshadowed the conflicts that would emerge with the Federal Emergency Relief Act. But by 1932, federal and state aid became a necessity in Michigan, as private organizations and local governmental units could not handle the burden of relief.

High industrial unemployment is often the first trend described with the Great Depression, but Michigan's problems went far beyond unemployed auto workers. Michigan residents worked in agriculture, extractive industries such as lumber and mining, as well as the growing industrial centers of Flint and Detroit by the 1920s and 1930s. Agriculture was a statewide occupation, although the best land was found in the southern and middle parts of Michigan (including Van Buren County) and what is known as the thumb area around Saginaw Bay and the Lake Huron shoreline. Parts of the northern Lower Peninsula also yielded significant fruit production.² Mining was an Upper Peninsula industry, particularly in the Lake Superior regions (including Marquette County), and the lumber industry was centered in the northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula. Counties that relied on a single industry - such as Detroit - suffered immeasurably more than counties and cities, like Saginaw, that had more diverse economies.

Michigan agriculture produced a variety of crops, including fruit, grains, beans, and sugar beets, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kalamazoo was a major producer of celery, and the Lake Michigan shore, stretching from southwestern Michigan north to Grand Traverse Bay, was the state's major fruit belt, producing

²*Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) 7-8; 59-60.

peaches, apples and berries. The state ranked second in the nation in sugar beet production, concentrated in the thumb area, which also produced beans and grains.³ Michigan's total acreage in agriculture - about half of the available land in the state - peaked at more than 19 million acres in 1920. As was the case in farming areas across the nation, agriculture suffered economic hard times before the Crash, and the number of farms in Michigan actually declined in the twenties. Farmers in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, with its lower quality land and shorter growing season, faced difficulties competing with larger growers on better land. The value of farm land peaked in 1920 at \$75 per acre, but fell to \$45 by 1930. The value of Michigan's agricultural products reached a record high in 1920, but would not again attain that level until 1969. Surplus products after the war boom years only exacerbated the problems.⁴ Farming areas could weather hard times with subsistence agriculture in a way that urban workers could not, but the 1920s remained hard times for many farmers and agricultural workers.

Mining, a Michigan industry that was in its heyday in the nineteenth century, remained a significant source of employment into the twentieth century. The Upper Peninsula was Michigan's mining center, with copper production predominantly in the Keewenaw and Houghton areas along the Lake Superior shoreline, while the Marquette area, as well as Gogebic and Menominee, boasted the state's best iron ore production. The opening of the shipping locks at Sault Ste. Marie, allowing ships to travel from the

³*Michigan*, 59-60.

⁴Dunbar, Willis F. and George S. May. *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, third rev. ed. 1995) 502-503.



lower Great Lakes to Lake Superior, further enhanced the area's production capabilities in 1855.⁵ Michigan produced half of the world's copper in the mid-nineteenth century, with sixty mines in operation in 1886, and remained in third place as late as 1913. Its combined iron ore and copper production placed it second in the country in 1900.⁶ World War I prompted a new boom in copper and iron ore mining. Iron ore production reached its peak in 1920, but fell to less than 25 percent that level the following year. Increased mechanization also reduced the need for labor, sending many workers to the unemployment line. Copper mining, faced with increased competition from Canada, Africa and Chile, as well as depressed prices throughout the 1920s, also declined. Employing 19,000 workers in 1909, copper mining in the UP employed only 12,200 workers ten years later and was down to 7,800 by 1929. And as mining declined, so did the communities that depended on it.⁷

Lumbering experienced a history similar to that of mining. Lumbering was at its peak in the nineteenth century, particularly in the cities of Saginaw and Muskegon, but lumber mills and camps were found throughout the northern parts of Michigan. Michigan had 558 sawmills in 1849, and the industry only grew after that year, leading the nation in

⁵*Michigan*, 63.

⁶*Michigan*, 62-64. For copper mining see Larry Lankton, *Cradle to Grave: Life, Work and Death at the Lake Superior Copper Mines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷Dunbar and May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, 503-505; Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*, 24, 244-253; William Haber and Paul Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeLine Company, 1935) 9-10. Haber was the state relief administrator appointed under the Federal Emergency Relief Act, and this publication was the first report of the State ERA.



lumber production and employing more than 45,000 workers in 1889. By the turn of the century lumber was on the decline, but the state still had 437 sawmills in 1905. By the 1920s, the industry was in a serious downturn, with just 185 mills statewide in 1922 and only 12,000 workers in 1925.⁸ Workers often combined part-time lumber employment with farming or other seasonal work as the industry scaled back in the early part of the twentieth century into the 1920s.⁹

Michigan's industrial production increased markedly in the early twentieth century, in large part because of the development of the automotive industry, as well as foundries and machine shops. Other significant industries included paper manufacturing and cereal production in the southwestern region and furniture manufacturing in the Grand Rapids area.¹⁰ Cities hit especially hard in the 1920s included Detroit and others dependent on the automotive industry. The 1920s was a period of ups and downs for the auto industry, with lay-offs occurring several times during that period. Employment fluctuations, and lay-offs for retooling, contributed to what was a very unstable period for many workers, who turned to local welfare agencies - public and private - for aid when

⁸*Michigan*, 61-62; William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security* (Lansing, 1935) 135.

⁹A lack of reforestation efforts in the early years of the industry made forest replenishment and conservation a major project in the twentieth century as state and federal agencies assumed control of Michigan's forests as the amount of public land expanded. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 136-138.

¹⁰*Michigan*, 67-68.



their own resources were exhausted.¹¹ Racism usually resulted in quicker lay-offs for both African-American and Mexican workers, but all workers, particularly the unskilled, faced uncertain times in the years before the Great Depression. Automotive companies began their lay-offs in the spring of 1920, and by the end of the year about eighty percent of Detroit's auto workers were unemployed. Another production slow-down occurred just a few years later, resulting in a recession in 1926-1927. Again lay-offs ensued. For workers with little experience in urban living, unemployment with no land resources on which to draw was frightening. These problems placed heavy burdens on local relief agencies. Communities such as Saginaw, which manufactured auto parts for the Detroit plants, also experienced downturns, but a more diversified industrial base lessened the magnitude of the Depression's unemployment. Employment fluctuations in both Saginaw and Detroit, and other Michigan cities, prompted repatriation drives as early as the 1920s - even before the Great Depression - to reduce the numbers of non-citizens competing for jobs, a practice that would receive even more emphasis after the Depression hit.¹²

¹¹Martin Edward Sullivan, "'On the Dole': The Relief Issue in Detroit, 1929-1939" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1974) 36-37. Flint experienced similar employment fluctuations, although historian Ronald Edsforth argues that workers adapted to the cycles of the auto industry, and defined steady work as one that included periodic lay-offs and slack times. Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 116-117.

¹²Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 82-84; Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992) 45-47. On repatriation in Michigan, see Norman D. Humphrey, "Mexican Repatriation in

Relief costs also rose significantly in the 1920s, reflecting the uncertain employment situation of many people. The problem of rising relief demands emerged well before the Depression and New Deal, although such costs also rose significantly in the early 1930s. A study of relief trends of the early twentieth century, compiled by Anne Geddes and published by the Works Progress Administration in 1937, dated the trend in rising relief costs to around 1910, nearly two decades before the Great Depression. Relief costs naturally rose during economic downturns, including the 1921-22 depression, but Geddes found that relief costs seldom returned to their pre-depression levels throughout the entire period, although they declined from their highs during the worst of the economic times. But she also found that "after each depression they again moved upward from a new and higher base."¹³ Geddes reported that not only had relief expenditures grown faster than the population rate, but that public relief increases, especially in the larger cities, were greater than most other governmental expenditures. In part this was due to the spread of mothers' pensions, but the increase also signified that public agencies were taking on a larger responsibility for welfare.¹⁴

Michigan," *Social Service Review* Vo. 15, No. 3 (September 1941) and Lynn G. Kellogg, "Repatriation in Michigan," November 1, 1934 to May 1, 1936, State Welfare Department, May 20, 1936, WRSC, State Archives, Box 13 Folder 22.

¹³Anne E. Geddes, *Trends in Relief Expenditures, 1910-1935*, WPA Research Monograph X (Washington, DC: United State Government Printing Office, 1937) 1. Geddes noted that much of the data for the earlier period of welfare was scattered and inconsistent, but she argued that the trend of upward relief was consistent across regions and types of welfare.

¹⁴Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940) 56-57; Geddes, *Trends in Relief Expenditures*, xiii-xiv.



Social work agencies also documented the warnings of increased need for their services in the 1920s. As settlement worker Helen Hall wrote in 1930, such studies "are a measure, not of what rouses our American communities to action in bad times, but of what for the most part they are blind to when times are 'good'." ¹⁵ Hall headed a study by the Unemployment Committee of the National Federation of Settlements, and her volume of 150 cases documented in detail the volatile nature of industrial employment, and the havoc it wreaked on families with no major problems (such as sickness) other than unemployment. Unsteady work from periodic lay-offs and part-time work were the largest problems uncovered in the settlement study. Its major recommendation centered on ensuring steady work, and encouraged the development of more effective methods to re-employ women and men. This study spoke directly to the problems inherent in an industrial economy during times of prosperity, and its recommendations foreshadowed the key issues that would be debated in the next decade, including stabilizing employment, expanding employment services, and implementing provisions for adequate insurance and welfare.

Several private organizations conducted studies of economic conditions in the 1920s, and most results revealed the limits of the decade's prosperity. The American Association for Organizing Family Social Work conducted a study focusing on industrial problems in early 1925, and received seventy-two responses to its request for information. Fifty-five reported a case load increase "out of proportion to previous years," and the

¹⁵Helen Hall, "Introduction" in *Case Studies of Unemployment*, ed. Marion Elderton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931) xxix.



relief budgets of forty-seven agencies exceeded projections. Forty-three agencies also stated that the conditions of the local labor market were bad, largely in relation to unskilled laborers. The Family Welfare Association conducted a similar study two years later, and received replies from forty-five agencies. Fourteen responses noted an increased case load, and twelve also reported increases in relief cases. The problem of rising unemployment was raised in thirty-five of the responses, and fifteen listed seasonal or part-time employment as a major problem. According to the study, key factors in whether a community faced economic problems centered on the level of diversification of its economic base. Those dependent on one industry tended to have higher rates of seasonal hiring or unemployment, and lower wages, a point noted in both the 1925 and 1927 reports.¹⁶

The Associated Charities of Saginaw reported in 1927 that it had suffered considerable unemployment, but felt their problems were not nearly as severe as cities such as Flint, Detroit, Lansing and Pontiac. AC Secretary Elmer Bishop noted that Saginaw, with 150 different industries, was not as seriously affected by downturns in the automobile industry. But the agency was required to seek additional funds in 1921 and 1922, when the unemployment picture was far worse.¹⁷ The Grand Rapids FSA reported low wages as the primary problem, stemming from the dominance of the furniture

¹⁶"Committee on Industrial Problems," Report, FSA Records, Box 13, Folder 17, Industrial Problems.

¹⁷Letter to FSA from Bishop, AC of Saginaw, March 25, 1927, FSA Records, Box 13, Folder 17.

industry in the area.¹⁸ Grand Rapids, one of sixteen cities surveyed for a Russell Sage Foundation study cited by Geddes, showed a 21 percent increase in relief costs from 1924 to 1929, and Detroit's relief costs more than doubled. All the cities surveyed showed marked increases in relief costs.¹⁹

Michigan also was a state that funded most of its relief costs through public, and not private, funds even as early as 1928, at least four years before the infusion of federal relief funds. Studies conducted as the Depression began and worsened revealed that public funds had shouldered the relief load to a much greater degree than previously thought. In some cities and regions, private organizations funded only a fraction of relief. Even social work professionals were amazed to find that in 1928, even before the Depression, 71.6 percent of relief in fifteen cities was funded through public agencies.²⁰ A study requested by the President's Organization on Unemployment Relief and conducted by the Bureau of the Census analyzed numerous aspects of relief in urban areas in 1929 and 1931 to assess unemployment relief needs and trends. The study examined the first three months of each of the two years and included both public and private organizations. Fifteen Michigan cities were included in the study, and among those were

¹⁸Letter from Charlotte Donnell, Grand Rapids FSA, dated March 25, 1927, FSA Records, Box 13, Folder 17.

¹⁹Geddes, *Trends in Relief Expenditures*, 15-16. Geddes used information from two separate studies for her comparison and thus cautions that the numbers are approximate, but she argues that they are indicative of the magnitude of the trends in relief costs for those cities.

²⁰Brown, *Public Relief*, 55.

Saginaw, Detroit and Grand Rapids.²¹ Michigan showed a significant increase in relief expenditures in the two-year period, with relief expenditures in 1931 at more than six times the 1929 figure for both public and private agencies in cities with populations of more than 30,000. Relief expenses increased 179 percent in cities under 30,000. Both of these figures show that private agencies were emphasizing relief services more, as also indicated in the social service budgets of centralized fund-raising organizations.²²

What is also significant is the ratio of public to private expenditures. In Michigan, public funds accounted for far more of the relief aid than private, even in 1929 before the Depression. Michigan's larger cities aided 33,840 people per month (on average) in those first months of 1929, while private agencies assisted 9,580. In 1931, those numbers increased to 264,227 through public agencies and 37,387 for private organizations, increases of 680 and 290 percent respectively. In Michigan private funds were not maintaining a larger share of relief aid even before the Depression, a trend shared by twelve other states in this study.²³ The same trend held true for relief funds spent by

²¹*Relief Expenditures By Governmental and Private Organizations, 1929 and 1931* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932) 30. The fifteen cities were Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint, Saginaw, Lansing, Pontiac, Hamtramck, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Highland Park, Dearborn, Bay City, Battle Creek, Muskegon, and Port Huron. Muskegon, situated on the west side of Michigan on the shores of Lake Michigan, is the northernmost city included in the study. No cities in the Upper Peninsula were included, and none in the northern Lower Peninsula. Thus this study does not give a full picture of Michigan's relief situation, although I believe its trends are significant. It also did not include institutional welfare services, but only outdoor relief.

²²*Relief Expenditures*, 10.

²³*Relief Expenditures*, 19. Other states which also had public agencies aiding more families than private were Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Utah and California. Iowa and Montana shared



public and private agencies. All Michigan cities in the study expended far more through public agencies, even in 1929, than private. In Saginaw public funds accounted for six more times the funds spent in private agencies. Detroit's public funds accounted for more than 90 percent of the 1929 figures, and Grand Rapids spent three times more funds through public agencies rather than private funds.²⁴ A 1937 study confirmed those results. Private funds for relief accounted for just 14 percent of Saginaw's relief expenditures in 1929. Other major Michigan cities yielded the same trend: Detroit, 5.6 percent; Flint, 20 percent; and Grand Rapids, 10 percent.²⁵ Thus the argument that private organizations were carrying the larger burden of relief simply did not hold true for all of the country, including many cities in Michigan.

Rural communities had a different experience, as they rarely had chests or welfare leagues to coordinate fund-raising. But they did have private welfare organizations, including the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and others often connected to local

this trend in 1929, but then reversed it in 1931. States which showed the opposite trend (private relief exceeding public) included Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, Virginia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Arizona, and Washington. New Hampshire, Connecticut, Indiana, Kansas and Oregon initially showed more aid from private agencies in 1929, but reversed two years later. Colorado, Nebraska and South Dakota's figures were comparatively equal for both years.

²⁴*Relief Expenditures*, 30. These numbers did not include institutional care in county infirmaries, which also would be public expenditures. These trends mirrored those described in the previous note, although there was variation between cities in some states. Few were as consistent as Michigan, in which just one city (Kalamazoo) deviated from the statewide trend.

²⁵Emma A. Winslow, *Trends in Different Types of Public and Private Relief in Urban Areas, 1929-1935*, U.S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 237 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937) 77.



churches. Although the welfare system was less systematic and visible, it did exist.

Manistee County, as noted earlier, had a county-wide private welfare network, and Van Buren County had a similar set-up in its Social Service Bureau. But given that even larger cities found the needy largely dependent upon public relief funds, such a trend is even more likely in rural communities.

Michigan as a whole suffered extremely high unemployment once the Depression began. State Emergency Relief Administration William Haber recalled that Michigan was extremely hard hit by the Depression, even in a national context: "When the country has a cold, Michigan has pneumonia."²⁶ In 1930, agricultural unemployment was 18 percent. Between 1930 and 1933, the state had an unemployment rate of 34 percent, far higher than the national average of 26 percent. In October 1932, employment levels in Michigan's industries were less than 41 percent of the levels of the mid-1920s. In 1933, unemployment reached 46 percent, with 485,000 people out of work. As one historian wrote, "Michigan was perilously close to economic disaster." At one point, more than half a million people were seeking work in the state.²⁷ Unemployment at the Ford plants in Detroit reached 32 percent by early 1931. Employment dropped from more than

²⁶*The William Haber Oral Biography Project: Edited Transcripts*, Michigan Historical Collections, Tape X, p. 204.

²⁷James Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed: Community and Union Activists in the Industrial Heartland* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996) 3-4; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 2; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, Second Report of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission (Lansing: SEWRC, 1936) 17. See also Daniel Nelson, *Farm and Factory: Workers in the Midwest, 1880-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 119-121.



100,000 workers at the end of 1929 to 84,000 workers in the spring of 1931, and down to 37,000 by the end of that summer. In addition, those who were employed worked at reduced wages or only worked part time.²⁸ Similar trends occurred in Flint, another major automobile manufacturing town. In 1928 General Motors employed 208,981 workers; by 1932 that fell nearly 50 percent to 116,152, and the company's payroll fell 60 percent.²⁹ Both private and public agencies faced extreme financial difficulties in meeting the ever-rising relief demands that accompanied the high unemployment rates, and ultimately could not cope with the magnitude of the problem.

Private Welfare Agencies Respond

By Black Tuesday, many workers were unable to deal with the more serious problems of the Depression. Many laborers, especially those in unskilled or low-wage occupations, had no savings or had already exhausted those funds during the uneven 1920s. When the Depression reached its nadir in 1932, public and private welfare services were strained to the point of bankruptcy. Many private organization fund-raising drives fell short of their goals and agencies were forced to cut budgets. Private agencies directed more of their funds toward unemployment relief, but could not raise enough money to meet the rising demand; as a result, more and more people turned to public agencies for help.

²⁸Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 172.

²⁹Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975) 21.



Urban areas tended to have centralized fund-raising mechanisms such as the community chests found in both Marquette and Grand Rapids and the Saginaw Welfare League. Coordinated fund-raising organizations, like the chests, began in Cleveland in 1913, and expanded to most cities by 1929.³⁰ Saginaw's Welfare League organized in 1920 and Marquette's dated to 1924. All faced budget problems and were forced to extend fund-raising drives and/or reduce budgets of member agencies to adjust for the decline in contributions in the early Depression years. Of the three counties in this study, Saginaw had the largest cooperative fund-raising budget. But both Saginaw and Marquette faced difficulties meeting their goals, and eventually drastically reduced budgets of their member agencies, thus reducing their annual fund-raising goals. In addition, other social welfare agencies not affiliated with the chest or league also faced budget problems. In its Christmas drive in 1930, the Salvation Army in Saginaw ran short, and organizers said that the drive included "one of the longest list of needy families at Christmas time in the history of the local community." The agency's shortfall was about \$200 in a budget of \$1050, or 20 percent, indicative of the growing relief needs in the community.³¹

The budget of the Saginaw Welfare League, organized in 1920, totaled just under \$230,000 for 1930; its annual maintenance budget was \$172,000, up \$13,000 from the

³⁰Judith Ann Trolander, *Settlement Houses and the Great Depression* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1975) 26-27, 59.

³¹"Saginaw Army's Fund Falls Short," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 1, 1930, p. 3.



previous year.³² The year proved to be a demanding one for community agencies, and the largest area of increase for many agencies was for relief. Fortunately pledge collections amounted to more than 95 percent of the total contributions, and the agencies survived the year without budget cuts.³³ The League again met its goal in its annual drive that October, raising funds for 1932. It surpassed its \$240,000 goal, raising \$245,291, in large part because employees of the member agencies agreed to salary cuts totaling \$26,000, essentially pledging that money to the League.³⁴ The next year the drive fell short, raising just over \$158,451, more than a third of which would go toward relief. Agencies had to cut budgets because of the reduced available funds.³⁵

The realities of the Saginaw economy and the difficulties of the previous two drives prompted the League to reduce its goal in subsequent years, making it possible to reach the target figure but also requiring deep cuts in agency budgets and the elimination of the League's reserve fund. Even by 1936 its annual budget of \$218,884 had not

³²Member agencies included the Associated Charities, the Visiting Nurses' Association, YMCA, YWCA, two children's homes (one was St. Vincent's Orphan Home), hospital groups and the local tuberculosis society. The AC represented one of the largest budgets in the organization, behind only the YMCA. "League Elects Boyd 5th Time," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 18, 1930, p. 1. The maintenance budget represented the amounts given to the member agencies for their operation.

³³"Welfare League Weathers Unusual Strain of Depression Year," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 1, 1931, p. 8.

³⁴"Tomorrow Brings Welfare Fund Drive: \$240,000 Gift Asked to Relieve Distress," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 4, 1931, p. 1 and 4; "Voluntary Wage Cut Boosts Fund," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 9, 1931, p. 1.

³⁵"Welfare League Provides Manifold Services for Needy Folk," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 1, 1933, p. 8.



reached the pre-Depression level. Its ability to meet its goals for many of those years resulted in large part from harsh budget reductions, including material relief and services. Like many communities, private welfare in Saginaw was not keeping up with the rising demands for need and assistance.³⁶

Marquette faced a similar situation, although on a smaller scale. Its Community Chest funded eight agencies, and its pledges in the 1929 drive totaled just over \$19,000 and then \$20,000 in 1930.³⁷ The chest had far greater difficulty the following year, and extended its campaign after raising just two-thirds of its target of \$21,500.³⁸ The next year's drive anticipated a difficult road, and as in Saginaw, agencies reduced budgets even before the drive began. The goal was \$18,875, and again the chest had to extend its campaign to meet it, although it was still short by 25 percent in December.³⁹ To

³⁶"Its Needs Pledged, Welfare League Enjoys a Rosier Outlook," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 1, 1934, p. 8; "Campaigners State Big Victory Pledge," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 7, 1934, p. 1-2; "Success Crowns Welfare Campaign," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 7, 1935, p. 1; "'You've Gone Out and Done It' - Welfare Fund Exceeds Goal," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 26, 1934, p. 1.

³⁷The agencies with the largest share of the budget included the Family Welfare Society, which accounted for nearly a quarter of the budget, the local chapter of the Michigan Children's Aid Society, the Boy Scouts and the Salvation Army. It also supported the Visiting Nurse Association. "Chest Fund Has \$1,495 Balance, Audit Report," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 3, 1930, p. 2; "Chest Goal Is Reached, Says Campaign Head," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 25, 1930, p. 2; "Confidence Expressed By Chest Workers," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 6, 1931, p. 2.

³⁸"Community Chest Fund Is Short \$6,000; Will Keep Up With Canvass," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 10, 1931, p. 1.

³⁹"Community Chest Budget Less; Open Drive Oct. 19," *The Daily Mining Journal* October 12, 1932, p. 2; "Drive Extended To Reach Goal of Chest Fund," *The Daily Mining Journal* October 22, 1932, p. 3; "Will Continue to Work For Chest," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 25, 1932, p. 3; "Count on Grid Match To Put Drive Over



compound matters, collections were very poor for that year's pledges, totaling just over \$12,000, forcing even more budget cuts on the member agencies.⁴⁰ The chest faced similar problems for the next four campaigns - 1933, 1934, 1935 and 1936 - with drives extended to meet goals, although with little success.⁴¹ In 1933, campaign organizers noted that the number of pledges was up by 23 percent and more people were giving to the drive, but that the amount of pledges was down; people were not able to donate as much as they had in the past.⁴² More people were attempting to help those in need, but simply could not give the amount of previous years; either they faced financial difficulty or family members did, thus draining their own resources more.

Other Michigan communities faced similar problems by the early 1930s. The 1932 Community Chest campaign in Grand Rapids raised just \$254,000 of a projected \$425,000, and did not include the expenses of the fund-raising campaign. The chest

Top," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 29, 1932, p. 2; "Chest Fund Drive Is Continued Here," *The Daily Mining Journal*, December 3, 1932, p. ?

⁴⁰"Set Dates for Chest Drive To Raise \$18,800," *The Daily Mining Journal*, September 18, 1933, p. 2.

⁴¹"Must Hit Goal in Chest Drive, Workers Told," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 15, 1934, p. 2; \$12,500 Is Assured in Charity Drive," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 24, 1934, p. 3; "Marquette Starts Eleventh Annual Community Chest Campaign Next Tuesday," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 15, 1935, p.2; "We Must Have Chest," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 16, 1935, p. 6; "'Cleanup' of Chest Drive Is Underway," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 29, 1935, p. 3; "Thirty Four Community Chest Campaign Teams Begin Canvass This Morning," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 15, 1936; "CC Solicitors Move Them Half Way To Their \$19,882 Goal," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 24, 1936, p. 2.

⁴²"Pledges Made To Chest Fund Total \$12,570," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 9, 1933, p. 2.



faced possible dissolution, or at the very least severe cuts in the budgets of local social welfare agencies. Member agencies voted to keep the chest as the disbursing agency for the funds raised, and all received drastic cuts in their shares. Most faced cuts of up to fifty percent.⁴³ The chest faced similar problems the following year, although the difficulties stemmed from closed banks, which contained funds not only of the chest but also of its contributors.⁴⁴ Ann Arbor's Community Fund, which served as the city's central fund-raising agency for its member groups, faced similar problems. By 1931 its budget problems forced the reduction of all relief activities except soup kitchens and clothing drives, and by the fall it was borrowing from its next year's income in order to pay its expenses. By 1932 its contributions were down by more than 20 percent, and the city became the major relief agency that year.⁴⁵

This trend was mirrored around the state and nation. Detroit faced its own crisis of fund-raising in the early years of the Depression. Efforts to encourage greater contributions by the wealthy yielded dismal results, and fell far short of goals.⁴⁶ The

⁴³Letter from H.O. Hunter, Grand Rapids Community Chest, to Allen Burns, Association of Community Chests & Councils, November 5, 1932, and meeting notes, National Social Work Council and Grand Rapids Community Chest, December 31, 1932, National Social Work Assembly Records, Supplement 1, SWHA, Box 5, Folder 42.

⁴⁴Consultation Visit, Rose Porter in Grand Rapids, July 17-18, 1932, FSA Records, SWHA, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

⁴⁵David M. Katzman, "Ann Arbor: Depression City," *Michigan History* 50 (December 1966) 310-311. Before 1932, the city concentrated on aiding employable people with job placement, leaving most other relief to the private agencies.

⁴⁶Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960) 300; Richard T. Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan, 1929-1933* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982) 148.



winter campaigns of 1932-1933 across the U.S. were the "supreme and final effort of the private agencies to carry a substantial share of the costs of unemployment relief."⁴⁷

Private relief expenditures reached their peak that year, but still failed to cover even 20 percent of the total cost of relief. Many chests followed the path of Marquette and Saginaw: reducing budgets of all agencies, and shifting more funds to those organizations which provided relief to meet the rising demands.⁴⁸ Private agencies' declining budgets only shifted more of the relief burden to local public relief, further straining the local government's ability to meet the rising demands.

Public Welfare Agencies

Public agencies and governmental units responded to the economic crisis - before the federal government allocated funds in 1932 and 1933 - with a variety of relief programs and efforts to help those in need: unemployment committees and bureaus, work relief programs, city-owned stores and fuel centers, bond proposals, and efforts to remove "unwanted" workers, including Mexicans and other foreign-born populations. But most efforts were limited in effectiveness in part because of a lack of funds to address the severity of the unemployment problem, and also by the limited vision of many public officials. A reluctance to go into debt to fund truly effective work relief projects and the fear of creating a class of people dependent on "the dole" prompted many government and community leaders to look to the private business sector to provide employment.

⁴⁷Brown, *Public Relief*, 131.

⁴⁸Brown, *Public Relief*, 131-132.



Those views, combined with the persistent belief that welfare belonged in the private sector, created definite ideological barriers to the potential solutions offered. This attitude was reflected in a newspaper editorial in the *Saginaw Daily News*, seeking support of the Social Welfare League's 1931 fund-raising campaign. The editorial acknowledged the difficult conditions people faced, stressing the tremendous need for the drive this year, and the consequences if it failed: "Whereas in other years failure to reach the campaign quota would have been merely unfortunate, this year such a failure would assume the proportions of a catastrophe." The editorial cautioned against waiting for the government to step in, because that would simply result in paying through higher taxes: "This resolves itself into a local problem which each community must solve in its own way, using its established agencies as the basis of the whole program."⁴⁹ In actuality, public spending for relief outpaced private funds even in 1929, as noted earlier. By 1931, private agencies' relief expenditures accounted for just 5 percent of all relief costs in Saginaw that year. But the belief that relief was a local, and preferably a private, responsibility persisted.

Public agencies did modify their poor relief systems in the face of the rising demand, often increasing the amount of investigation done on cases, but such changes were not intended to incorporate methods used by social work professionals in the private sector. Many officials hoped that the economy would quickly recover, and thus avoided long-term and costly programs to alleviate unemployment. Private social agencies sought to combine material aid with service, seeking to help families and individuals resolve the

⁴⁹"Saginaw Cares - And Shares," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 4, 1931, p. 6.

problems causing their financial difficulties, which they understood resulted from other issues, such as family conflict or ill health. In the pre-New Deal period, most public agencies simply sought to ensure that no one cheated the system, or that all those receiving aid were in need of it. Ultimately, local governments - cities, counties and townships - could not handle the financial burden of relief, and federal and state aid was the only alternative. But it was a path traveled only after all alternatives were seemingly exhausted; much resistance existed (and would persist) toward the concept of a federal welfare program.⁵⁰ Localism would only strengthen in the next years, and the resistance to non-local relief solutions foreshadowed the larger battles to come.

A part of this resistance can be linked to partisan politics. Although not the only factor affecting the response of communities, political affiliation did play a role, along with the eventual relief needs in the county, the area's unemployment situation, and whether it was rural or urban, agricultural or industrial. The commitment to local and private welfare also remained strong at the national and state levels, as well as local communities, and was personified in President Herbert Hoover, and many officials agreed with his philosophies.⁵¹ Michigan was firmly Republican, and from 1896 to 1932, with just one exception, supported the Republican presidential candidate; during the 1920s the

⁵⁰Such resistance was widespread. For example see David Joseph Maurer, "Public Relief Programs in Ohio, 1929-1939," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1962) 6-7, 9, 25; Dwayne Charles Cole, "The Relief Crisis in Illinois During the Depression, 1930-1940" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, St. Louis University, 1973) 103-107.

⁵¹William E. Leuchtenberg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) 252; Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 287-288.

state legislature was overwhelmingly Republican, often with no Democrats serving in either the senate or the house.⁵² Just three of the state's eighty-three counties supported Democratic candidates as late as 1930, when Wayne County was the only county to give a majority to the Democratic candidate for governor.⁵³ The 1932 election proved to be the turning point, with forty-seven counties supporting Democrat William Comstock for governor and Democratic majorities in both state houses; the state also voted for Franklin Roosevelt for president.⁵⁴ Although just eleven counties voted Democratic in 1934 (most supported Republican governor Frank Fitzgerald), Republican dominance of Michigan politics was on the wane, but not in all counties.

Van Buren County, which would be the most resistant to state and federal intrusion on relief matters, remained fiercely Republican throughout the 1930s, and a 1942 study of Michigan's politics listed Van Buren County among fourteen "safe" Republican strongholds, many of which were rural and in the Lower Peninsula.⁵⁵ Republicans also dominated local politics, even as the financial situation of the county

⁵²James K. Pollock and Samuel J. Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition: An Areal Study of Voting Trends in the Last Decade*, University of Michigan Governmental Studies No. 10 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1942) 4. Michigan gave its votes to Theodore Roosevelt, who ran as a Progressive, in 1912.

⁵³Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 14; Samuel T. McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernatorial Campaign of 1938," *Michigan History* v. 45 (June 1961) 119.

⁵⁴Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 10-14; McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernatorial Campaign," 119.

⁵⁵Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 35.



steadily worsened in the early Depression years.⁵⁶ In contrast, Marquette and Saginaw were among those counties who shifted to the Democrat camp sometime in the 1930s: Saginaw in 1932 and Marquette in 1936. Marquette had one of the greatest voting shifts of any of the counties, and also the highest increase in voter participation. Marquette would remain in the Democrat column throughout the decade, although Saginaw would revert to the Republican camp in 1940.⁵⁷ The shifts would also appear in local elections, which did not remain Republican during the decade.⁵⁸ All counties and cities faced serious funding constraints during these years, but Van Buren County - the most firmly Republican - was also the most resistant to federal aid. Partisan politics accounts in part for the varied responses to the depression emergency and the New Deal, and would continue to play a role throughout the decade.

Another dimension of the funding problem was the new 15-mill tax limit approved through a state constitutional amendment in November 1932. The collective taxes imposed on property owners - including school, township, and county - could not exceed 15 mills, unless approved by a majority of voters for up to a total of 50 mills.

⁵⁶"19 County Supervisors Reelected," *Hartford Day Spring*, April 5, 1933; "Hoffman Defeats Foulkes by 8,000: Republicans Make Sweep of Van Buren County Offices," *Hartford Day Spring*, November 7, 1934; "Republicans Victors in VB," *Hartford Day Spring*, April 3, 1935.

⁵⁷Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 14, 29, 69.

⁵⁸"Marquette County Is Republican," *Daily Mining Journal*, November 9, 1932; "Eight Offices in County Won By Republican," *Daily Mining Journal*, November 8, 1934; "Republicans Lose," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1932. The 1934 election in Marquette was a mixed bag, as voters supported Democrats for most state offices, except for governor and senator.



Cities and villages were exempt only if other maximum rates were established through their city charters or general laws, although some voluntarily opted to hold themselves to the 15-mill limit.⁵⁹ The limit, in conjunction with alarmingly high tax delinquency rates, meant that most counties had to economize operations in order to keep their taxes within the constitutional limit. The decline in revenues hurt all three counties under study, as well as the state of Michigan.

For many local communities, the creation of unemployment committees to assess the unemployment problem and explore solutions was the first step. Registering the unemployed for placement on public work projects or referrals for employment thus topped the agenda of many of these committees. Committees extended beyond the local level to the regional and state levels. The Upper Peninsula coordinated its own unemployment committee, working with state and county officials, as well as the state highway department.⁶⁰ Saginaw Mayor Albert Tausend called area business leaders, social workers and other groups to participate in an unemployment conference to share information and ideas on November 12, 1930. In calling the conference, Tausend argued that the issue of unemployment was a community problem and required community

⁵⁹Claude R. Tharp, *A Manual of City Government in Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951) 113-114; Dean L. Berry, *The Powers of Local Government in Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1961) 5, 32, 52, 77; Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 263.

⁶⁰Marquette and Manistee counties also appointed unemployment committees. See *Proceedings, Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, v.7, November 12, 1931, p. 77; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Manistee County*, v. 12, October 14, 1931, 421, v. 13, October 21, 1932; "Unemployment Committee To Assemble Here," *The Daily Mining Journal*, November 29, 1932, p. 2.



solutions: either work for the unemployed or material aid for the destitute, a motivation behind many of these types of committees.⁶¹ The Michigan Department of Labor was a critical part of the program, providing advice on what the committee could and should do. The committee's first step was to register all the unemployed to get an accurate picture of the problem, and then devise ways to provide jobs for those unemployed. The group was also very careful to stress that the registration was not for welfare or charity, but for employment.⁶² Two days of registration yielded more than 4,500 unemployed, and people continued to register at the newly-created employment bureau in the city.⁶³ Efforts to secure jobs for those registering began even before the registration process was complete. The first step was to organize neighborhood groups to find odd jobs for the unemployed. Coordinated and promoted by the League of Women Voters, the program sought to get a "two-hour pledge" from as many Saginaw households as possible - to agree to provide employment for a man for two hours per week. The hope was that jobs could be combined to give workers between twenty and forty hours of work each week. Another

⁶¹The city also provided \$1,000 for administrative costs. *Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw*, November 25, 1930, p. 691-692; "Mayor Calls Unemployment Conference: Group of 58 Citizens Asked to Study Plan," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1930, p. 1 and 5.

⁶²"Mayor's Committee Moves To Aid Jobless: Registration of Idle Will Be Initial Step," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 13, 1930, p. 1-2; and "Complete Registry of Jobless Sought," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 22, 1930, p. 1-2.

⁶³"Board Studies Roster of Idle," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 26, 1930, p. 1-2.



project underway was to have men sell apples on the street as a means of employment.⁶⁴

The committee also organized distribution of food and clothing through the Canteen, a local agency created to provide material goods for the needy and solicited donations from individuals and businesses. The committee disbanded the following spring, although the employment service and Canteen continued to operate, with the city providing administrative support to the employment office.⁶⁵ In retrospect, such efforts seem futile if not pathetic, but again reveal the values operating behind such programs, including looking to the private sector to provide employment. As in other communities, such programs were not of the magnitude to solve the unemployment problem, but many people, including those engaged in the efforts in Saginaw, hoped that the unemployment problem would be of short duration, and that economic conditions would improve quickly.

The unemployment problem did worsen, and hopes that it would quickly disappear quickly faded, even in Saginaw which enjoyed more diversification of industry than other communities. Agencies, including in private social work organizations, represented by the Saginaw Welfare League, and public officials, began to coordinate

⁶⁴"Odd Job Program Launched To Provide Work for Unemployed," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 23, 1930, p. 4; "Apple Sale Offers Unemployment Aid," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 21, 1930, p. 2; "13 Apple Salesmen Quickly Bought Out," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 22, 1930, p. 1-2. The article describing the apple job program was quite optimistic about its effects: "They will be assigned stations in the business sections on both sides of the river and a brisk response is expected." Thirteen men were selected by the unemployment committee and the Associate Charities and for some the apple sales provided their first opportunity to earn wages in weeks. But few expected it to be a long-term solution for many workers.

⁶⁵"Jobs Committee To Discontinue," *Saginaw Daily News*, May 14, 1931.



welfare and relief.⁶⁶ City and county welfare officials, in conjunction with private agencies, worked together to avoid duplication of services. The creation of a central index of unemployed people throughout the county seeking aid from the various agencies was the first step. They also agreed to share information about work opportunities, including work relief programs and odd jobs available to local unemployed people. Coordinating efforts seemed to be the most effective means to deal with the growing unemployment problem.⁶⁷

Saginaw County also created an unemployment committee, but in this case to provide lists of eligible workers for state highway projects.⁶⁸ Under the state plan, local unemployment committees would certify the workers for the work projects, again directed at men.⁶⁹ A \$50,000 road repair plan, set to employ between 200 and 300 men, was approved by the board of supervisors on a 33-16 vote.⁷⁰ In December, 283 men

⁶⁶“Agencies Study Poor Problem,” *Saginaw Daily News*, September 4, 1931, p. 1 and 9.

⁶⁷“Relief Bodies To Cooperate,” *Saginaw Daily News*, December 11, 1931, p. 1 and 12.

⁶⁸Michigan cities with work relief programs before 1932 included Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Lansing, Muskegon, Port Huron and Saginaw. See Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 149-154; Joanna C. Colcord, *Emergency Work Relief* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1932) 254.

⁶⁹“Meeting Called To Plan Aid for Jobless,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 17, 1931; “Group of 10 Selected for Jobs Committee,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 22, 1931. Manistee County registered 1,137 men for work relief, and found jobs in the summer of 1932 for 470; expansion of the work relief program was a key recommendation of the county’s unemployment committee. See *Proceedings, Manistee County*, v. 13, October 21, 1932.

⁷⁰“\$50,000 to Provide Jobs for Idle,” *Saginaw Daily News*, Oct. 29, 1931, p. 1-2.



worked alternate work weeks on county road projects.⁷¹ The state unemployment commission worked with the local group to formulate an unemployment relief plan.⁷² Veterans groups coordinated snow removal crews, assigning men to a block, with residents hiring them to clear their sidewalks and driveways of snow.⁷³ City officials also sought to alleviate unemployment with public projects, but its ability to do so - and the county's ability to continue road projects - was severely hampered by a lack of funds. Tax delinquencies were running around 25 percent, and city officials did not believe they could get approval for the sale of bonds to fund the work, a problem shared by many local communities in Michigan and across the nation.⁷⁴ Marquette County's work relief projects started before the call for a committee from the governor. Supervisors realized in the fall of 1931 that work relief projects were critical in addressing the high unemployment rate among the county's men, and worked with the road commission and poor commission to develop lists of eligible men and available projects. The supervisors

⁷¹"283 Idle Work on Road Repair," *Saginaw Daily News*, Dec. 7, 1931, p. 1.

⁷²"Employment Body Meets Wednesday," *Saginaw Daily News*, Nov. 17, 1931.

⁷³"Veterans O.K. Plan for Jobs," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 10, 1931, p. 1-2; "Veterans Pushing Winter Work Plan," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 12, 1931, p. 2.

⁷⁴"Public Works Demanded of Council," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 1, 1931, p. 1-2; "Money Lack Held Bar To City Job Program," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 2, 1931, p. 1-2; "No Job Relief, Council Holds," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 8 1931, p. 1-2.

then appointed the poor commission members and road commission representatives to the unemployment committee to continue their efforts.⁷⁵

Most communities sought to provide work relief programs, rather than direct relief or "the dole," and although they got the return of work on their poor fund dollars, they still faced the reality of limited funds.⁷⁶ Work relief programs cost money, and many county and city governments could only support such programs for a short time. Work relief projects before the New Deal were virtually all for men (who were white and generally citizens), targeting male breadwinners (and heads of households) who could work on public works projects repairing roads and bridges, digging new sewer lines, and woodcutting. Men of color faced limited opportunities on the early road projects, and thus had to rely on odd jobs or relief from a public or private welfare agency. Women had no work relief possibilities in these three communities before 1933. Their only recourses were a mothers' pension, if they were mothers and if the county still funded them, or poor relief if they did not qualify for mothers' aid. Government officials viewed their communities through the lens of the family wage, whether such a reality existed or not in all households, and the results offered little relief for women needing to support families. Such an ideology would also permeate New Deal work projects, which have been

⁷⁵"Reach Peak Employment on County Roads," *Daily Mining Journal*, November 12, 1931; "Board Names Committee on Unemployment," *Daily Mining Journal*, November 13, 1931; *Proceedings, Marquette County*, v.7, May 18, 1932. Van Buren County also provided lists of unemployed, through the township supervisors, for road projects. *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, January 5, 1932.

⁷⁶Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 149-152.



criticized for their lack of attention to women workers in need of jobs.⁷⁷ But New Deal programs, although limited by ideas about gender, race and class, did offer some opportunities for women, unlike the local work relief programs before 1933.

Because work relief projects - largely small scale because of costs - could not reverse a global economic depression, Michigan's counties and cities sought to address their growing unemployment problem in the context of dramatically rising relief costs. In all three counties, poor fund and mothers' pension expenditures wreaked havoc on county and city budgets. Property taxes funded the bulk of local government and the combination of rising relief costs, high tax delinquency rates and thus decreased revenues, prompted local governments - including Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties - to examine their own poor relief practices and programs. The high costs forced county and city officials to cut budgets in other areas, including reductions in wages and services. Marquette and Saginaw both turned to bond proposals to raise funds for work and direct relief, but Van Buren - the most fiscally conservative of the three counties - resisted further debt, instead seeking to further discourage relief applications as well as forcing the state to pay tax monies owed to the county. All faced an uphill battle as the Depression worsened and more and more people sought relief.

⁷⁷Martha Swain argues in *Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women*, that although Woodward was criticized for the limited nature of work programs for women, it is amazing what Woodward was able to accomplish. See *Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), especially chapter 3 on Women and Work.



Escalating Poor Relief Expenses

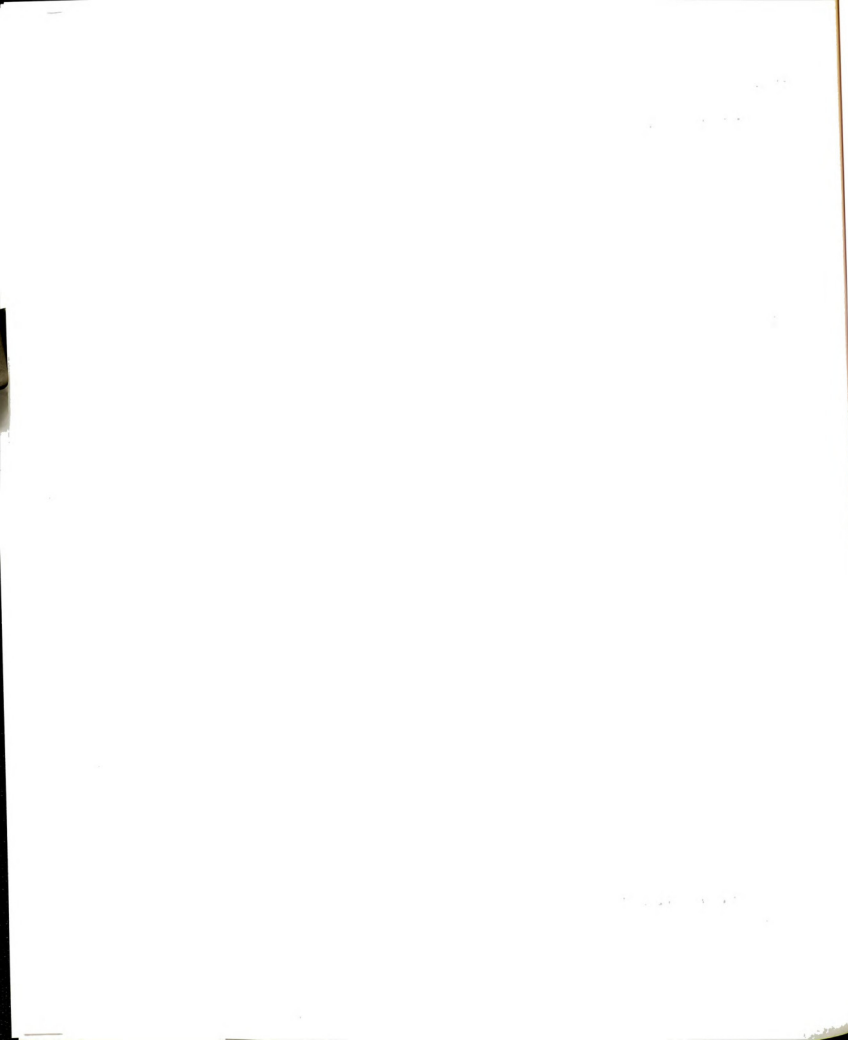
By early 1931, poor fund costs in the city of Saginaw reached a critical point, prompting city officials to take a closer look at the policies and practices of the poor department. Budget deficits prompted suggestions of staff cuts and 20 percent wage cuts for city employees, as poor funds continued to rise, with no idea when they would decline.⁷⁸ Few departments survived with their budgets intact, and the poor fund appropriation went from \$121,000 to \$109,000, despite having spent far more than that the previous year.⁷⁹ Salary cuts averaged about five percent for those earning less than \$2,000 per year, and were about ten percent in higher salaries.⁸⁰

After yet another need to transfer an additional \$36,450 to the poor department in May 1931, Saginaw Mayor George Phoenix launched efforts to re-examine the department. His first step was to improve the poor department's investigative methods - to ensure that those who received aid needed it. The department had used more than \$29,000 in the previous seventeen days just for provision orders, leaving little for investigating cases; most of the staff's time was taken up simply issuing orders to the growing numbers of relief recipients. Phoenix asked for \$1,000 to hire additional staff to

⁷⁸"20% Wage Cuts Urged as Council Attacks Budget," *Saginaw Daily News*, April 13, 1931, p. 1-2.

⁷⁹"1931 City Budget Climbs Near Taxation Limit," *Saginaw Daily News*, April 14, 1931, p. 1; "Estimators's Axe Cuts \$82,800 From Budget," *Saginaw Daily News*, May 5, 1931, p. 1 and 10.

⁸⁰"Court Upholds Board of Estimates: Charter Gives Power To Cut City Salaries," *The Saginaw Daily News*, June 5, 1931, p. 1-2.



conduct poor fund investigations.⁸¹ But the council was reluctant to agree to investigative costs without a definitive investigative policy in place, including a sworn statement of need required by all applicants - a practice common in pre-New Deal relief. Most council members agreed that investigation costs ultimately would save the city money by eliminating those who did not truly need the help. They readily approved the fund transfer but opted to wait on the issue of investigations.⁸²

Phoenix visited Grand Rapids, among other cities, to study their organizations and policies before drafting his own poor relief program. Grand Rapids implemented one of the most controversial programs to address its poor relief problem, and other Michigan cities and counties - including Saginaw - looked to the city as a model of how to address the rising costs of poor relief.⁸³ The financial problems faced by this small mid-Michigan city reached a crisis months before the stock market crash, following a slump in the purchase and production of furniture. The numbers of people seeking aid from the city's

⁸¹"Mayor Will Ask Transfer of Funds," *Saginaw Daily News*, May 12, 1931, p. 1; "Better Inquiry Asked By Board," *Saginaw Daily News*, May 14, 1931, p. 1-2; *Proceedings, City of Saginaw*, May 12, 1931, p. 335-336; June 16, 1931, p. 375-376.

⁸²"Two More City Officials Out," *Saginaw Daily News*, May 13, 1931, p. 10; *Proceedings, City of Saginaw*, June 23, 1931, p. 401, 428-429; July 14, 1931, p. 454.

⁸³Ann Arbor, another city which used work relief to address the rising unemployment of its citizens, also instituted a scrip payment program for work relief recipients. Other communities followed the work relief model used in Grand Rapids, including Saginaw, but few incorporated scrip payments into their systems. Katzman, "Ann Arbor: Depression City," 314-317. The Grand Rapids program was also highlighted in Joanna Colcord's guide to work relief programs, although she was critical of the use of scrip in conjunction with a city commissary. See Colcord, *Emergency Work Relief*, 85-90, 245-246.



relief program in 1929 jumped drastically, from about two hundred to thousands, placing incredible stress on both public and private welfare programs.⁸⁴

After severely cutting the city budget, and foregoing his own salary, city manager George Welsh balanced the city's budget by September 1929. The city, in fact, had a surplus of about \$176,000, which was earmarked for unemployment relief. Like many, Welsh also opposed the practice of the "dole," or giving aid to able-bodied workers. Instead, he instituted a work relief system, targeted almost exclusively at male workers.⁸⁵ The controversy over the work relief system centered on the method of payment. Welsh paid workers in paper scrip, redeemable for groceries at the local commissary. He argued that issuing scrip would stretch the city's relief dollars to as many people as possible. The commissary, which bought food in bulk, could offer better prices for food than local grocers, and thus save scrip workers money on their food budgets. The system engendered a large debate, with criticism coming from all political fronts in the city. Welsh expanded the program over the next two years to include many major city projects, including city sewer work, and again invited the anger of businesses who argued that such programs denied their employees work.⁸⁶ The scrip system eventually disappeared, and

⁸⁴Richard H. Harms, "Paid In Scrip," *Michigan History* Vol. 75 (January/February 1991) 38-39.

⁸⁵Workers removed snow from sidewalks and roads, and more than 650 men applied at the first call for workers. Other projects included highway work for the state, city sewer work, and running the commissary itself. Harms, "Paid in Scrip," 39.

⁸⁶Businesses argued that such practices hurt their business, as workers could not spend money in local stores. Thus work relief did not help fuel the local economy or local business interests. Labor leaders also argued that such practices denied workers freedom of choice in purchasing. Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed*, 59-60; Harms,



the city switched to cash payments in November 1932, although funding constraints severely limited the number of workers employed on subsequent projects.⁸⁷

Clearly influenced by what he saw, Saginaw Mayor Phoenix presented a more ambitious plan to reorganize the poor department, advocating requiring all relief recipients to work for their aid; in short, Phoenix sought to end "the dole system," or aid with no required work or service in return. Modeled after the Grand Rapids work plan, although without the stipulation that workers be paid in scrip, but with grocery orders, Phoenix's plan sought to achieve the same dual purpose: providing material help for those in need while also completing necessary work projects in the city.⁸⁸ He estimated that about \$22,500 would be needed for staffing and administration of the new program and \$1,500 for materials for the work projects, but countered this figure with the assurance that the new organization would ultimately result in a more efficient and cost-effective program. Again, the project clearly targeted men with families. Little mention was made of those families who were in need but "without a breadwinner," and although the mayor promised that they would be dealt with in an efficient manner, he gave few

"Paid in Scrip," 38-41; "Summary of Contacts," field visit by Ella M. Weinfurther to Grand Rapids FSA, March 19, 1931, p. 3, FSA Records, SWHA, Box 58, Grand Rapids folder; Harms, "Paid in Scrip," 39; Julius H. Amberg, "Scrip-Wise and Pound Foolish," *Survey* November 15, 1932, p. 596, copy in National Social Workers' Association Records, SWHA, Box 5, Folder 42.

⁸⁷Amberg, "Scrip-Wise and Pound Foolish," 596-597; Harms, "Paid in Scrip," 42-43.

⁸⁸"Phoenix To Inspect Poor Departments," *Saginaw Daily News*, June 4, 1931, p. 1; "Mayor Launches Plan To End Dole System," *Saginaw Daily News*, June 17, 1931, p. 1 and 5.



specifics.⁸⁹ By mid-August, one hundred sixty men were on the work projects, including water main work, ditch cleaning and wood cutting.⁹⁰ Relief recipients completed more than 48,000 hours of work on city projects by mid-October, and earned 50 cents of provisions for each hour worked.⁹¹ The city attempted to at least get a return on the money it spent on relief by completing necessary municipal projects, but eventually the money would run out.

Meanwhile, poor fund costs continued to climb. September costs jumped more than \$2,000 to more than \$28,000, and the upward trend continued.⁹² Council sought additional funds for the poor department in October - more than \$100,000 - to meet the rising demand for aid.⁹³ City officials also sought to keep tighter tabs on prices charged poor relief recipients, when the concern arose that grocers charged higher prices of those people paying for provisions with poor fund orders.⁹⁴ Estimates in October were that at

⁸⁹"Mayor Launches Plan To End Dole System," *Saginaw Daily News*, June 17, 1931, p. 1 and 5; "Estimators Hold Up Poor Fund Proposal," *Saginaw Daily News*, July 7, 1931, p. 1-2; "Board Allows Half of Poor Relief Fund," *Saginaw Daily News*, July 9, 1931, p. 1-2.

⁹⁰"Dole List Workers Now Number 160," *Saginaw Daily News*, August 20, 1931, p. 9.

⁹¹"\$24,000 Work Done By Dole Receivers," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 13, 1931, p. 9.

⁹²"Poor Department Costs Show Gain," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 13, 1931, p. 9.

⁹³"\$101,700 Set Aside for Relief of Poor," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 21, 1931, p. 10.

⁹⁴"Poor Department Checks on Costs," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 23, 1931, p. ??



least \$240,000 would be needed to meet poor relief costs, in addition to the budgeted amounts, prompting city council to approve the issue of emergency bonds for that amount.⁹⁵

The city of Saginaw operated a poor department separate from the county, but Saginaw County administered mothers' pensions - another budget problem - for all county residents. Saginaw County faced its own poor fund problems, which began to appear by mid-1931, as well as difficulties funding mothers' pensions. Surplus funds covered part of the county's deficit in 1931, but not all. Chief problems included the \$50,000 unemployment work relief program started by the county through the road commission. Overdrafts in the mothers' pension program also contributed to the budget problems, but although expenses in the mothers' pension fund and poor fund exceeded budgeted amounts in 1931, the board did not appropriate additional amounts for 1932, in part because the funds were not there to do so. Thus the mothers' pension appropriation remained the same (\$77,400) while the poor fund was cut from \$64,000 to \$28,100, setting the stage for a similar problem the following year.⁹⁶ The following year saw the county seeking to cut its budget to help fund the higher costs of poor relief.⁹⁷ Rural

⁹⁵"\$240,000 Bonds Asked for City Relief Work," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 8, 1931.

⁹⁶"Board Adopts County Budget Near Million: Supervisors Approve Increase of \$196,579," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 31, 1931, p. 1-2.

⁹⁷Among the efforts was to consolidate its health program into a single agency and also to enact salary cuts in most county positions. The board also arranged contracts with local health agencies for hospital care, rather than sending patients to the University of Michigan Hospital, for a savings of up to \$15,000. "County Budget Slash Tops \$400,000," *Saginaw Daily News*, 1 and 10; "Supervisors Cut Tax Half Million," *Saginaw*



supervisors in particular advocated salary cuts and other budget reductions to avoid higher taxes on county residents.⁹⁸ The only budget items to be increased over the previous year were those related to welfare and relief: the poor fund, mothers' pensions, children's aid for delinquent and dependent children, and soldiers' and sailors' relief. Appropriations for the poor fund increased from \$28,000 to \$48,000 and mothers' pension funds increased from \$72,000 to \$100,000. The county's contingency fund of \$180,000 in 1931 disappeared in the 1932 budget, offset by rising costs in other areas. Relief issues remained the predominant financial concern of both the county and the city as 1932 ended.⁹⁹

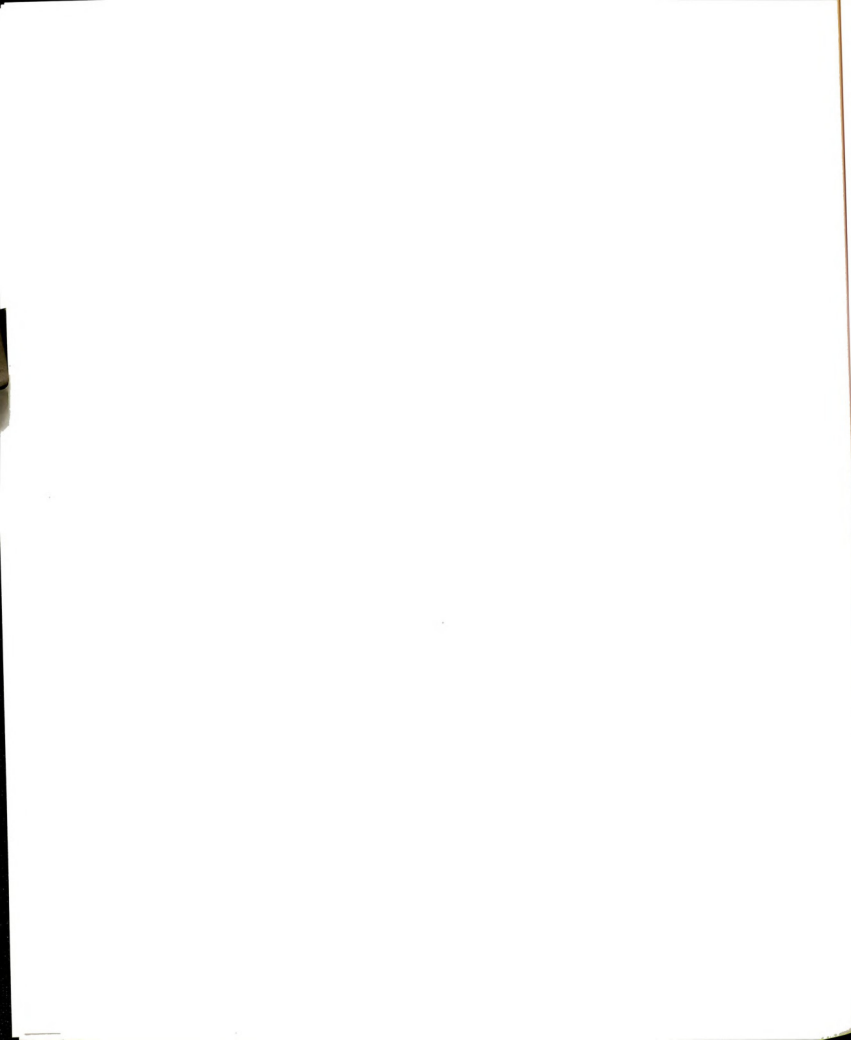
By 1933 mothers' pension funding was in serious jeopardy in the budget debates, prompting a heated power struggle between supervisors and the local probate judge. Already short of funds in October, Probate Judge John Murphy requested an additional \$25,000 to fund pensions until the end of the year.¹⁰⁰ But two weeks later, the board voted unanimously to deny the request, informing Murphy to cease taking mothers' pension

Daily News, October 28, 1932, p. 1 and 10;

⁹⁸"Board Gets Economy Committee's Report," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 11, 1932, p. 1-2; "Rural Bloc Votes Deeper Pay Cuts: Supervisors' Group Asks \$102,506 Saving," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 12, 1932, p. 1; "Deeper Budget Slash Asked By Rural Bloc," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 14, 1932, p. 1 and 10.

⁹⁹"County Budget Slash Tops \$400,000," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 26, 1932, p. 1 and 10.

¹⁰⁰"Mothers Fund Plea Before Supervisors," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 9, 1933, p. 1 and 8; "Supervisors Waver on Demand for Fund," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 10, 1933, p. 1-2; *Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County*, October 9, 1933, 2-3.



petitions. A debate over whether the state mothers' pension law was voluntary or mandatory ensued.¹⁰¹ The county referred the issue to the county prosecutor, who found that "the matter of mothers' pensions is wholly within the discretion of the probate court, over which the county board of supervisors and the board of county auditors have no control." In response, Murphy announced that he would continue to issue orders to recipients who, after investigation, were found eligible for the pensions. If the county refused to pay, he stated, he would not initiate any legal action, but recipients certainly could do so.¹⁰² When the final vote came for the budget two days later, the entire mothers' pension appropriation was nearly cut; Charles Bois, Birch Run Township supervisor and a long-time opponent of mothers' pensions, advocated eliminating the program and adding \$50,000 to the poor fund - thus providing aid to mothers in that way. The motion to eliminate the \$100,000 appropriation from the budget failed by just one vote, despite legal advice that stated the county had to provide the pensions. It remained in the budget on a 31 to 18 vote, but the board ignored Murphy's request for an additional

¹⁰¹"Deny Mothers Pension Fund Plea: Supervisors Flout Provisions of Law," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 24, 1933, p. 1-2; *Proceedings, Saginaw County*, October 23, 1933, 105. Marquette County's supervisors also believed that the law required counties to fund mothers' pensions if funds were available and thus continued to do so well into the Depression. See "Officials Say Aid to Mothers Is Mandatory," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 25, 1933, p. 3.

¹⁰²"Mothers Aid Will Continue," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 25, 1933, p. 1-2; *Proceedings, Saginaw County*, October 25, 1933, 115.

\$25,000.¹⁰³ Without the additional appropriation, however, mothers' pensions stopped for the rest of the budget year, and would not resume again until February.¹⁰⁴

Murphy did not stop there. He appealed to the board a few days later, arguing that it was a legal and moral duty to provide for all needy children in the county; he suggested borrowing funds from the county road fund to cover the pensions for the rest of 1933.¹⁰⁵ Mothers' pension recipients received letters explaining the fund problem, and instructing them to seek aid from their local governmental unit, either the city or township.¹⁰⁶ Two local attorneys donated their services in a court challenge to the supervisors' decision, arguing that the supervisors violated state law in their inaction. Mothers' pensions were mandatory, they argued, and the county had no choice.¹⁰⁷ The county supervisors argued in response that the funds were not there, and the court had no authority over the board of

¹⁰³“\$522,319 Tax Total Voted by Supervisors: Approve 1934 Budget, Slash General Fund,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 27, 1933, p. 1-2; “Mothers Pension Fund Put in Budget,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 27, 1933, p. 1 and 10; *Proceedings, Saginaw County*, October 26, 1933, 131-132.

¹⁰⁴“Resumes Paying Mother Pensions,” *Saginaw Daily News*, February 1, 1934.

¹⁰⁵“To Ask Judge Explain Views,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 3, 1933; “Mother Fund \$10,000 in Red,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 4, 1933; *Proceedings, Saginaw County*, November 3, 1933, 159.

¹⁰⁶“Mothers Apply to City for Help,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 6, 1933; “City To Aid Needy Widows,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1933. The Saginaw Council on Child Health and Protection also filed a petition with the supervisors, asking them to reconsider their decision, to no avail.

¹⁰⁷“Suit May Force Mothers' Pension Payments,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 7, 1933; “Pension Case Order Signed,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 8, 1933.



supervisors.¹⁰⁸ The mothers' pensions proponents lost the fight, as the judge ruled that the county lacked the funds to provide further for mothers' pensions that year; the responsibility rested with the townships and city, or the newly formed welfare relief commission under the Federal Emergency Relief Act, to provide aid until the 1934 appropriation began.¹⁰⁹ Not all counties had probate judges who exerted this effort on behalf of the mothers' pension program, but the situation in Saginaw shows that under the law, they could. In this case, Murphy worked to save much-needed aid for Saginaw's poor mothers for the following year, although pensions ceased for the rest of 1933.

The battle over mothers' pensions prompted Murphy to seek more state involvement in the program. Murphy, influenced by the funding struggles of 1933, suggested to the State Welfare Department in its 1934 study of mothers' pensions that it administer, in part with state funds, the entire program. If that did not occur, Murphy wanted the state law strengthened, making it mandatory for county boards of supervisors to provide adequate funds. Murphy was an advocate for state involvement because he did not see the supervisors as able to carry the responsibility alone. Only state enforcement of a mandatory law would ensure that dependent mothers received the help they needed, in his view.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸"Defend Position on Mothers' Pensions," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 13, 1933; "Pension Mandamus Denial Likely," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 17, 1933.

¹⁰⁹"Points Way to Relief for Needy Mothers," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 18, 1933.

¹¹⁰See "Asks State Direct Mothers' Pensions," *Saginaw Daily News*, March 11, 1934, p. 3.



Meanwhile, the city's poor costs continued to mount, surpassing the expenses of the year before, prompting the council to seek approval from voters for emergency bonds to fund poor relief in 1932. The council placed an amendment to the city charter on the November 8 ballot to allow the city to pursue additional emergency bonds under revised state laws, which permitted cities to issue more bonds than previously.¹¹¹ An editorial in the *Saginaw Daily News* endorsed the proposal four days before the vote and Mayor Phoenix also pushed voters to approve the amendment.¹¹² But voters did not agree and defeated the plan 9,401 to 6,120, leaving the city again to deal with the lack of funds for poor relief.¹¹³

Marquette County faced many of the same difficulties as Saginaw, including rising poor relief costs, higher rates of delinquent taxes, and budget cuts. It too sought a bond proposal to fund relief, but was more successful. One key difference between the two counties was that Marquette County administered all relief in the county; the city did not have a separate poor department, as in Saginaw. Relief costs began to mount in early 1930 in Marquette County, and county overdrafts on the poor fund in October 1930

¹¹¹Bond limits were based upon a percentage of the area's assessed valuation, but state legislators, in a special session in 1932, raised the percentage allowed from .25 percent to three-eighths percent, raising the city's bond limit from \$234,000 to \$352,000, payable within five years. "To Submit Bonding Proposal To Voters," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 4, 1932, p. 10; "City Bond Change Planned To Add Poor Relief Funds," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 2, 1932, p. 1.

¹¹²Editorial, *Saginaw Daily News*, November 4, 1932, p. 6; "Mayor Urges Approval of City Charter Change," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 5, 1932, p. 1-2.

¹¹³"City Turns Down Bond Limit Boost," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1932, p. 5.

necessitated increased appropriations, not only for the poor fund but also for the Morgan Heights Sanatorium, which treated tuberculosis patients. The anticipation of even greater need in the coming winter prompted the poor commission to request \$105,000 - rather than the previous \$90,000 - for the upcoming year. Mothers' pensions were not causing overdrafts, but accounted for \$32,000 in the budget.¹¹⁴

The problem did increase, as anticipated. The county set a new record high for poor relief at \$10,500 in January 1931 after steadily increasing since September. Total costs for the five-month period were more than \$45,000.¹¹⁵ The poor fund ran into a \$25,000 deficit in March after another near record-breaking month in February, and the county board authorized a \$105,000 transfer to last the year.¹¹⁶ Poor commissioners sought increases in their appropriation again that year, seeking \$150,000 rather than the \$105,000 received the previous year. The request for mothers' pensions from the probate court was also up to \$40,000.¹¹⁷ Relief county-wide was running more than \$10,000 per month, with expectations that it would increase.¹¹⁸ The board approved increases in both

¹¹⁴"\$63,000 Boost in County Tax Budget Voted," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 14, 1930, p. 2; *Proceedings, Marquette County*, v. 7, October 13, 1930, 24.

¹¹⁵"County's Poor Relief Fund Is Fading Rapidly," *The Daily Mining Journal*, February 20, 1931, p. 3.

¹¹⁶"County Poor Fund Receives \$105,000," *The Daily Mining Journal*, March 26, 1931.

¹¹⁷"County Board Will Discuss Budget Monday," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 2, 1931, p. 2; *Proceedings, Marquette County*, v. 7, October 12, 1931, 56.

¹¹⁸*Proceedings of the Board of Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, October 22, 1931; "County's Tax Bill Is Reduced \$37,000: Budget Cut Is Made Despite Heavy Demands," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 6, 1931, p. 1.



the poor fund and mothers' pension as requested, making cuts in other areas and eliminating some programs entirely. All county officials took a 10 percent pay cut, and elected officials also agreed to salary cuts. The appropriation to the sanatorium was again reduced as well, in addition to numerous smaller cuts.¹¹⁹

As in Saginaw, the rising costs prompted Marquette County to seek ways to economize all areas of its operations, in recognition of the high tax burden and the escalating relief costs. A newspaper editorial in the midst of the funding crunch criticized the poor commission's practices, in particular their lack of control over purchases made by recipients; grocery orders made no stipulation as to what kind of food was purchased. Increased demand had also required more staff, and the poor commission hired Edward R. Nelson, who also undertook a survey of all poor relief cases. His early results indicated that poor fund dollars were not going as far as they might in some cases. One supervisor advocated a system in which the poor commission would have "absolute control over the manner in which the indigent families use the money...a large percentage of these people are on the county because they are poor managers and are unable to make the of what money they do have. When we give them money, we should manage the expenditure of it for them."¹²⁰ Other supervisors disagreed, arguing that the poor commission was able to handle the situation. Some supervisors saw the recipients - and

¹¹⁹"Supervisors Cut \$51,000 Off Tax Bill," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 13, 1931, p. 1 and 8.

¹²⁰"Costly 'Leaks' In County Poor Fund Charged," *Daily Mining Journal*, November 13, 1931, p. 3.



not the economy - at fault for their need, although not all board members shared that view.

The board took no action in 1931, but appointed a budget committee in 1932 - comprised of five supervisors and three local bankers - to examine all departments and operations for ways to improve efficiency and reduce costs. The key recommendation, as in Saginaw, was improving investigative methods to ensure that all who received relief needed it. The committee recommended reinvestigation of all mothers' pension cases by the county welfare agent. The committee's investigation, it reported, had found that in some cases mothers were not handling their cash mothers' pension payments well, and might better be served with food orders from the poor commission.¹²¹

Another major change was the hiring of a business executive to handle all administrative matters in the poor department, hoping that such an investment would help stretch the county's shrinking poor fund. A business administrator, and not a social worker, was the preferred expert, a trend that would reappear throughout the decade. The groundwork was laid ten years before when the board of supervisors adopted a resolution advocating such a change, but never took further action. Supervisors now believed that it was even more necessary because of the large amount of funds expended. They

¹²¹The subsequent reinvestigation resulted in the transfer or elimination of about 20 percent of all cases, and the reduction of some grants. "Supervisors Okeh Report of Special Budget Committee," *The Daily Mining Journal*, July 28, 1932, p. 1 and 7; "Supervisors Okay Final Report of Budget Committee," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 11, 1932; *Proceedings, Marquette County*, v. 7, May 18, 1932, 86-87; July 27, 1932, 94-99. Among the committee's other recommendations was to attempt to transfer the Morgan Heights Sanatorium to a state sanatorium, operated by the state welfare department, to serve Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The sanatorium was a continued drain on county funds, but it served residents in several counties.



appointed William R. Meyers, a business executive with the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, to serve as poor director the following April. They also advocated urging all township supervisors to refrain from granting orders until an investigation was made by the poor commission to ensure that need existed. They also rejected the idea of a county store or commissary, arguing that with prices as low as they were, the overhead costs would eliminate any possible savings. Instead, they advocated continuing the issuance of grocery orders by the poor commissioners, because they believed the stigma attached to a commissary was not deserved by all who received such aid.¹²² This stance was in direct contrast to Van Buren County, which sought to stigmatize relief as much as possible to discourage applications. Marquette County believed in spending funds on investigators' salaries to determine need, but did not seek to punish all recipients.¹²³

¹²²"Supervisors Okeh Report of Special Budget Committee" and "Text of Committee's Report To Supervisors on Tax Investigation," *The Daily Mining Journal*, July 28, 1932, p. 1 and 7; "Wood-Chopping and Gardening Are Essential," *The Daily Mining Journal*, April 20, 1933, p. 2; *Proceedings, Marquette County*, v. 7, July 27, 1932, 96-97, 104-105; October 10, 1932, 122.

¹²³Marquette did prove to be relatively hostile to certain elements of the relief population, including transients (termed "floaters" by some local officials) as well as those agitating for more relief aid. The local newspaper reported that "Some of those in line [at the parade] appeared to be men who never sought employment in prosperous times and would not work." In short, they were not deserving of help, despite the economic downturn. Negaunee police also limited any one individual's stay in the jail at three nights per month and also required fingerprints and personal information, including whether they had been recently arrested for vagrancy or intoxication. Numbers seeking residence in the city jail dropped immediately. The local newspaper reported that the harsher measures resulted in a "different" group of people seeking aid; they were not referred to as "floaters" but as hard workers who were trying to find jobs in a difficult economic time. See "Many Unemployed Sleeping In Jail," *Daily Mining Journal*, February 7, 1931; "80 Men in Negaunee Unemployment 'Parade,'" *Daily Mining Journal*, February 11, 1931; "Finger Prints of Lodgers are Taken," *Daily Mining Journal*, March 3, 1931.



The final recommendation of the committee was to place a \$400,000 road bond proposal before voters in September of 1932, a strategy also used in Saginaw. Marquette County planned to use the bond proposal to fund unemployment relief on highway projects, again largely targeting male workers. Supervisors would use state payments from the gasoline taxes to pay off the bonds. Supervisors also hoped that part of the money would come from federal emergency relief funds for highway work, thus reducing the amount of bonds needed to fund the entire work project. Budget committee members offered the plan as the most economical way to alleviate the unemployment problem, as they expected the coming fall and winter to be much worse in terms of industrial activity, and did not expect a turnaround until later the following year.¹²⁴

As the date of the vote drew closer, supervisors pushed for its passage, undertaking a major campaign to reassure residents that it would not result in any additional taxes and would actually save taxpayers money. If the bonds were not approved, funds for relief would have to come entirely from the county general fund, and taxes collected from residents. They argued that this was part of their effort to reduce the tax burden by half, and that providing work relief was far preferable to "the dole."¹²⁵ The budget committee and *The Daily Mining Journal* coordinated to publish front page

¹²⁴"County Bond Issue Projected To Give Aid To Unemployed," *The Daily Mining Journal*, July 28, 1932, p. 1 and 7; *Proceedings, Marquette County*, v. 7, July 27, 1932, 104-105.

¹²⁵"Urge Approval of Bond Issue To Aid County," *The Daily Mining Journal*, September 1, 1932, p. 2.

explanations of the bond proposal the week before the vote.¹²⁶ The lobbying paid off, unlike in Saginaw County, and the bond proposal passed by a huge margin: 13,282 to 1,419.¹²⁷ Supervisors authorized the bonds at a special meeting one week after the vote, and the state highway funds for relief work allowed the county to cut its poor fund appropriation from \$160,000 to \$100,000.¹²⁸

Van Buren County faced perhaps the most severe financial crisis of the three counties, and ultimately ceased financing both poor relief and mothers' pensions because of a lack of funds. It was perhaps the most conservative of the three counties, and refused to go further into debt, either through road bonds or any other method, to solve its financial problems. Its board of supervisors was also committed to reducing taxes, as were other counties, in light of the 15-mill tax limitation as well as the economic burden its residents faced; economy and tax relief were the basis of most of the board's actions. Tax relief for property owners was an entitlement, while poor relief was most certainly not, in the eyes of Van Buren's supervisors.

Poor relief funds accounted for the largest line item in Van Buren County's 1931 budget, with the poor fund at \$50,000 and mothers' pensions at \$20,000 - after the board

¹²⁶"Bond Issue Approval Would Cut Taxes and Help Poor in County," *The Daily Mining Journal*, September 2, 1932, p. 1; "400,000 Bond Issue To Save Taxpayers' Money," *The Daily Mining Journal*, September 6, 1932, p. 1.

¹²⁷"Huge Majority for \$400,000 Bond Proposal," *The Daily Mining Journal*, September 17, 1932, p. 2.

¹²⁸"County's Total Tax Bill Down \$599,000," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 11, 1932, p. 1 and 5.

reduced the requested appropriation for poor relief by \$10,000.¹²⁹ Poor relief costs continued to mount the following year, and reached a record level by May 1, 1932. The county spent more than \$31,000 in a seven-month period on fuel, clothing, medical care, and funeral expenses, not to mention the additional expense of the county infirmary.¹³⁰ Because of the increases, county officials were forced to cut the budget elsewhere. The board of supervisors cut its own pay from \$5 per meeting day to \$4, and also cut other county salaries in an effort to reduce expenditures. Meal allocations for prisoners in the county jail were also cut from 15 cents per meal to 10.¹³¹ Like other counties, it used poor funds to pay for road work relief, but while it prevented a complete "dole" system, it did not reduce expenditures significantly.¹³² The situation only worsened during the winter, and by January of 1933 the poor fund was overdrawn \$63,000, prompting county officials to seek a state audit of its books to help unravel its financial problems.¹³³ The

¹²⁹*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County, Michigan*, October 26, 1931, p. 46-47; "County Solons Cut \$28,727.49 Off the Budget," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 28, 1931, p. 1 and 8.

¹³⁰Expenses reached such high levels that the county stopped funding burials, except under the reassurance it would be reimbursed from either family members or the estate. "Welfare Work For 7 Months Costs \$31,454," *Hartford Day Spring*, May 11, 1932, p. 1 and 3.

¹³¹"Supervisors Cut Own Pay 10 Per Cent," *Hartford Day Spring*, p. 1; "Supervisors Reduce Salaries and Trim Budget," *Hartford Day Spring*, p. 1.

¹³²*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County, Michigan*, January 5, 1932, p. 63. Relief workers had to be "needy men" or men with families, and were paid 20 cents per hour out of poor fund money. An effort to reduce the pay to 15 cents per hour failed on a nine to twelve vote.

¹³³"Supervisors Order Audit of County Books," *Hartford Day Spring*, January 18, 1933, p. 1.



deficit continued to grow at a rate of \$8,000 to \$10,000 per month. The county also faced the possible default of its road bonds, creating major financial headaches for the twenty-one members of the board of supervisors.¹³⁴

State highway funds, on which the county counted to help solve their financial problems, were also held up. Like the counties, the state coffers were also drained and the state would not be paying counties the \$6 million in highway funds due them April 15, 1933; Van Buren's share was \$50,000. Estimates were that the county was due another \$50,000 on July 15 and \$25,000 October 15, but it was unclear when the state would distribute that money.¹³⁵ One week later, in April 1933 and for the first time in the history of county poor relief, the county stopped issuing poor relief because there was no money in the treasury to honor orders written. The county already owed area merchants money, but most were willing to wait until the county sorted out its finances to be paid.¹³⁶ The supervisors needed that state money, and voted to withhold payments to the state of monies owed by the county until the state paid its own debt to the county. This impounded \$76,000 was left with the county treasurer to offset the \$100,000 owed by the state. In presenting the resolution, supervisor Charles Anderson of Hartford said he saw no reason to send county money to Lansing "when our own poor are unfed and county funds are exhausted." The board also voted to place temporary relief with the townships,

¹³⁴"County Solons Meet To Face Money Tangle," *Hartford Day Spring*, p. 1-2.

¹³⁵"County Solons Meet To Face Money Tangle," *Hartford Day Spring*, April 12, 1933, p. 1-2.

¹³⁶"Treasury Dry; Checks on Poor Fund Halted," *Hartford Day Spring*, April 19, 1933, p. 1.



in part as an effort to trim expenditures and prevent unnecessary spending. Thus townships could provide temporary relief as able, but the county was no longer providing poor relief.¹³⁷ The board of supervisors believed that township officials could better determine the actual need of their residents, rather than county poor officials, an argument they, and other local officials, would later use to justify a return to local relief administration.

But the impounding of the state money did not work as planned, because county treasurer John Swoap argued that diverting the state money for other expenditures was illegal.¹³⁸ The county continued to function by transferring money from other funds, but only as an interim measure. By September the county was even further in the red; the state audit found that the total deficit was \$182,000 between the poor fund and the general fund; the poor fund accounted for \$96,000 of the deficit.¹³⁹ The only funds on

¹³⁷An effort was made to stop temporary relief altogether, as had been done when the county ceased issuing orders, but that motion failed. Another motion to deny temporary relief to any family with an employable man also failed, but with funds as low as they were, little was available to provide aid to area residents. "Solons Juggle County Funds to Avert Crisis," *Hartford Day Spring*, May 3, 1933, p. 1 and 6; "County Board May Impound State Money," *Hartford Day Spring*, April 26, 1933; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, April 27, 1933, p. 5 and May 11, 1933, p. 10-11.

¹³⁸"County May Seek Loan From R.F.C: State's Cash Now Held Up By Treasurer," *Hartford Day Spring*, May 10, 1933, p. 1. The supervisors voted to refer the issue of an R.F.C loan to the finance committee at its May 11 meeting, and no further action was recorded in the minutes. They also met with treasurer Swoap and the county prosecuting attorney at the same meeting, but took no action and no discussion was recorded in the minutes. *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, May 11, 1933, p. 11-12.

¹³⁹"Two County Funds Are \$182,000 in Red, State Probers Find," *Hartford Day Spring*, September 20, 1933, p. 1.



hand were highway funds, some of which had been used to cover the deficit. But supervisors pledged to avoid any additional taxes, despite facing what the newspaper called "the most acute financial crisis in the county's history."¹⁴⁰ Ultimately the board voted to keep all funds owed to the state until the county received the gasoline and weight taxes it was due. They allocated just \$30,000 for poor relief, none of which was for temporary or direct relief. Instead, it was to fund the county infirmary, hospitalization costs and soldiers and sailors' relief. Again, township officials could fund relief if they wished, but no county funds were allocated for that purpose. They also eliminated mothers' pensions - the key relief program for female residents, who could not participate in work relief programs. They ordered Probate Judge Merle Young to pay any remaining outstanding pensions, but then stop. This followed a severe reduction in mothers' pensions funds in 1932, when supervisors reduced its appropriation from \$22,000 to \$12,000.¹⁴¹ Young did not publicly protest the cuts, as Saginaw's Murphy did, and Van Buren officials did not see mothers' pensions as mandatory under the law. Again, the funds were not there and thus they could not provide aid, a position Young apparently agreed with as he undertook no public efforts to reinstate the pensions.

¹⁴⁰"Supervisors To Wrestle With County Crisis," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 4, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁴¹"Supervisors End October Session: Look for Spots To Further Cut County Budget," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 25, 1933, p. 1 and 8; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, October 19, 1933, p. 58-59, and October 20, 1933, p. 60. On October 19, the supervisors heard the finance committee report, which called for \$12,000 for mothers' pensions and \$30,000 for the poor fund. But the next day the budget was amended, eliminating both appropriations. The supervisors also voted to suspend payments of mothers' pensions.



Supervisors also sought to discourage people from seeking relief, and adopted a paternalistic stance directed at the county's "dependents" or likely relief applicants. Some supervisors warned residents that relief could not be relied upon during the upcoming winter, urging people "to work now to eat next winter." The warning, posted in the supervisors' districts and published in the *Hartford Day Spring*, stated that aside from care in the county infirmary and outdoor relief for "a few old people outside the infirmary," poor relief was not available. Their warning carried the underlying message that want could be avoided with frugality and industry; they suggested raising large gardens and canning all surpluses, rather than selling it for immediate cash. They also encouraged paying for winter coal before the snow flew "instead of joyriding or going to shows." The message ended with a final piece of advice: "Also remember that coal gives more heat than gasoline; that milk is better food for babies than beer; that movies don't buy bread; and dogs - well!"¹⁴² The supervisors communicated their belief that at least some poor relief recipients were not doing all they could to prevent the need for relief. Their positioning as "father" also is apparent. They were chastising their "children" and seeking to guide their behavior to ensure that potential relief recipients did not create their own need.

The Hartford newspaper echoed these sentiments, and supported the supervisors' efforts to provide tax relief to residents as early as 1931. Escalating costs, including the poor fund, limited their abilities. Taxes were a product of the residents' demands, the

¹⁴²"Editorial: Idle Warned to Work Now To Eat Next Winter," *Hartford Day Spring*, May 10, 1933, p. 1.



editorial continued, and thus residents had to take their share of the blame for the escalating costs.¹⁴³ Eighteen months later the newspaper's editorial page reiterated its position when it identified the poor relief situation as the problem, noting that "the county is the beneficent stepdaddy to more unfortunate families than ever before." The paternalistic tone implied that the county was acting as a parent when it could ill afford to - and for "children" for whom it was not legally responsible. The story also noted that the issue of poor relief was haunting the board, calling the problem "the board's ghost".¹⁴⁴ In this the newspaper editors share the views held by the county officials. They also saw the supervisors as the county "fathers," and as fathers they were best able to care for - and discipline, if necessary - the county's "children," or relief recipients. The idea that relief recipients were somehow deficient, in part because of their dependency, operated in this county and others, despite the extent of the economic crisis. Stigmatizing relief had long been a strategy to reduce poor fund expenses, and this would not be the last time Van Buren officials would adopt it.¹⁴⁵

The cuts were a financial necessity in the eyes of county supervisors, as was their paternalistic efforts to discourage relief, but it left area residents in need of aid with few options. With poor relief funds virtually gone, residents had to look to township supervisors, who probably had little to offer, or private agencies, such as the county's

¹⁴³"Supervisors Made Honest Effort to Cut Taxes," *Hartford Day Spring*, November 4, 1931.

¹⁴⁴"County Solons Meet To Face Money Tangle," *Hartford Day Spring*, p. 1-2.

¹⁴⁵Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, 17-18.



Social Service Bureau or the American Red Cross. Again, these agencies likely had little left to give. If family members were unable to help, the needy had nowhere else to turn. Ensuring need among recipients was a strategy employed by all three counties in their efforts to reduce relief costs, but Van Buren was the only one to cut off relief funds. Their attitude toward recipients, who they believed could in some sense prevent their need, echoed the view of the Marquette supervisor quoted earlier, but the actions of the Van Buren supervisors point to a consensus of that opinion among the board members. Van Buren County officials would return to this position in the ensuing years, resisting any and all efforts to sacrifice fiscal economy to the relief needs of their residents. In part this stemmed from their Republican fiscal conservatism; they likely believed the business sector would eventually correct itself and the government, whether local, state or federal, should keep out. Sinking the county further into debt was not an option, no matter what hardship that presented to the residents; the supervisors' first obligation was to the tax payers, particularly the property owners who they believed were entitled to tax relief. Poor relief was not an entitlement but a service provided only when the county could afford to do so.

Repatriation

Local governments, public welfare officials, as well as state and federal officials also recognized the need not only to maximize relief dollars, and eventually to secure federal help for the unemployed, but many also endeavored to reduce the numbers of people in need they had to help. This included refusing aid to persons who did not reside



in a specific area, such as a city, county or township, a practice long central to poor relief, and also refusing aid to non-citizens. Citizenship became an important category designating who was "deserving" of aid and who was not. The treatment of non-citizens included not only the denial of aid, but also to the encouragement if not requirement of non-citizen populations to return to their native country. Although Mexicans and even Mexican-Americans are the most well-known populations targeted for such action, other non-citizen groups, including European immigrants, also suffered a similar fate. Michigan, which had a significant foreign-born population by the 1930s, also participated in the repatriation efforts. Drawn to, and recruited for, the agricultural industry as well as the automotive factories, immigrants, including Mexicans in Saginaw and Wayne counties, faced repatriation efforts as well as discrimination in access to local employment opportunities and relief. Although repatriation was often defined as "voluntary," historians have criticized taking the term at face value. Coercive methods often encouraged non-citizens to return to their native countries as means to reduce unemployment and relief costs.

The racial categories used in reporting census data make it difficult to gauge exact population growths for Mexicans in the United States. The 1920 census did not place Mexicans in a separate racial category, including them in the white population. In 1930 a separate category was created. One historian estimates that the Mexican population increased 103 percent in the 1920s. According to the 1930 census, Mexicans accounted



for just 0.3 percent of Michigan's total population.¹⁴⁶ More than half of the state's 13,336 Mexicans counted in the 1930 census resided in Wayne County (most in the city of Detroit); Saginaw County had the next highest portion at 17 percent. But although Wayne County had a higher number of Mexicans, they represented just 0.3 percent of the county's population, while Mexicans comprised 2 percent of Saginaw County's overall population.¹⁴⁷ The state's total foreign-born population was 17 percent of the total, but just 5 percent of those had taken no steps toward citizenship.¹⁴⁸

Efforts to repatriate Mexican workers began in the unsteady years of the 1920s, another sign that the so-called decade of prosperity had a darker side. Mexicans originally came to the Midwest seeking jobs in agriculture, especially in the sugar beet fields of Michigan. Labor agents recruited Mexicans and Mexican-Americans from Texas, transporting them to the beet fields of mid-Michigan and other Midwestern areas, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio. Faced with reduced European immigration first because of restrictions during World War I and then later following the

¹⁴⁶Repatriation occurred on a much larger scale in western states, in particular California, which Hoffman's study largely addresses. Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974) 14; Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976) 56; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931) 1115.

¹⁴⁷*Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population*, 1152. Genesee County (particularly the city of Flint) and St. Clair County north of Wayne County had the next largest numbers of Mexicans, but they were only a fraction of those in Wayne and Saginaw. Wayne had 7,104; Saginaw at 2,270, Genesee at 649; and St. Clair at 535.

¹⁴⁸*Fifteenth Census of the United States*, 1115.



restrictive National Origins Act of 1924, agricultural employers sought a new, unrestricted labor pool.¹⁴⁹ The sugar beet industry shifted to a predominantly Mexican labor force after World War I. The Michigan Sugar Beet Company recruited its first Mexican workers in 1915, beginning what became an annual migration of about 2,000 workers for the next fourteen years. By 1922 Mexicans were 33 percent of the state's beet worker population, and that figure rose to 75 percent by 1929.¹⁵⁰ The seasonal work prompted some Mexicans to return to Texas but many more went to the cities, including Detroit and Saginaw, to seek work in the growing factories. By the 1920s, historians document a major shift to factory employment among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.¹⁵¹ The Ford Motor Company began employing Mexicans in 1918, and other Detroit industries followed suit. By 1929, General Motors' Saginaw Foundry employed four hundred Mexican workers.¹⁵² But as companies experienced economic downturns and lay-offs, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and African-Americans were among the first laid off or fired. Between 1929 and 1931, 1,027 Mexicans, or 40 percent of those employed by Ford, lost their jobs. Restrictive hiring practices also increased, as signs stating "Only White Labor Employed" became more common, even in the sugar beet

¹⁴⁹Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 26-28; Juan R. Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996) 10-17.

¹⁵⁰Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 14.

¹⁵¹Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 50; Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 33-34.

¹⁵²Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 100; Robert N. McLean, "A Dike Against Mexicans," *The New Republic* 49 (August 14, 1929) 335; Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 65.



industry. Companies, encouraged by government officials at all levels, replaced Mexican workers with whites, particularly those who were American citizens.¹⁵³ Such action was a combination of American nativism and racism, targeting those not seen as American by virtue of either their birth or skin color, or both in the case of Mexicans. But with Mexicans, and other foreign-born residents, officials began to see their removal as a way to reduce welfare costs as well as to open up jobs for citizens.

Local departments of social welfare worked with the state agency, in conjunction with Mexican consulate officials, to encourage Mexicans to return to their native country. Such efforts were intended to reduce relief costs and unemployment rates by removing a pool of workers. Western states, in particular California, are much more known for these programs, but the Midwestern states also sought to remove the very laborers they had recruited just a few years before. Michigan, Illinois and Indiana had just 3.6 percent of the nation's Mexican population, but those states accounted for about 10 percent of repatriated Mexicans. By the end of 1932, between 1,100 and 1,500 Mexicans had left Michigan to return to Mexico under the repatriation program.¹⁵⁴ Sixty four percent of all Mexicans in the Midwest were repatriated, and populations in all major cities, including Detroit and Chicago, declined significantly.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 224-225.

¹⁵⁴Norman D. Humphrey, "The Migration and Settlement of Detroit Mexicans." *Economic Geography* 19 (October 1943) 360; Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, 121; Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 230. The *Saginaw Daily News* reported that 1,156 had left Michigan by mid-December of 1932. "More Mexicans Leave Tu [sic]," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 18, 1932, p. 5.

¹⁵⁵Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 238.



The first efforts to remove Mexicans from the Michigan population occurred in the 1920-21 depression. The City of Detroit and Wayne County reported all Mexican applicants for assistance to the Immigration Bureau, making them targets for deportation. Likewise, Saginaw officials refused aid to Mexican workers, arguing that they had come to the area voluntarily or at the instigation of the beet companies; thus they were not the government's responsibility. As a result, the city repatriated two hundred Mexican beet workers to Mexico in February 1921.¹⁵⁶ Inaction by the federal government prompted local officials, as in Saginaw and Detroit, to handle repatriations in order to alleviate local unemployment and relief problems before the worst economic crisis - the Great Depression - descended upon the country. Saginaw was one of several areas to participate in this "voluntary" repatriation effort as a gathering location for Mexicans of surrounding areas; others included Flint, Port Huron, Mt. Pleasant and Detroit. Newspapers carried reports of Mexicans returning to Mexico in 1931 and 1932. The first in Saginaw occurred in September 1931, when *The Saginaw Daily News* reported that "the first combined voluntary and involuntary deportation ever undertaken in the United States for a large group of aliens" began with sixty-eight Mexicans, thirty-seven of whom had entered the country illegally and thus were being deported. The rest of the group were family members or other Mexicans who had been on poor relief and were returning voluntarily to their native country. State welfare department supervisor Earl White worked with local officials to coordinate the deportation, and told those gathered that all but five of the people leaving had been on the city poor lists, and that the cost of moving

¹⁵⁶Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 83.



them was far less than continuing to support them in Saginaw.¹⁵⁷ Such arguments were also voiced by John Zurbick, an immigration service district director, who said "Many of these persons are on the city poor list and quite naturally a considerable saving will accrue in taxes because of their departure. Others were holding jobs that rightfully belong to United States citizens or foreign-born who have entered the country legally."¹⁵⁸ The group then went to Detroit, where a group of Hindus, Chinese and Mexicans joined the group leaving the U.S.¹⁵⁹ Three such trainloads left Saginaw and other cities that fall, and another round took place the following year.

State welfare official Arthur Webster approached the Saginaw city council in October of 1932 for \$5,000 to cover the transportation costs of ninety-eight Mexican families who were willing to return to Mexico. Webster reiterated earlier arguments, although while these families were not yet on poor relief, he pointed out that they likely soon would be. And if they were employed, their jobs could go to Saginaw citizens.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷"Mexican Journey To Border Begins," *Saginaw Daily News*, September 24, 1931, p. 1 and 10.

¹⁵⁸"Mexican Population Here Believed Reduced by 300," *Saginaw Daily News*, September 3, 1931, p. 10. Historian Abraham Hoffman argues that such distinctions between legal and illegal entry only became an issue after economic conditions began a downturn; during more prosperous times when the Mexican labor was critical officials worried little about how workers came to the United States. See Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, 38-39.

¹⁵⁹"Mexicans To Start Journey To Border," *Saginaw Daily News*, September 23, 1931, p. 1 and 9.

¹⁶⁰"Move To Send Mexicans Back," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 8, 1932, p. 1-2.

The council debated the issue several times, but eventually appropriated the \$5,000.¹⁶¹ Once the council pledged the funds, Detroit Mexican consul Ignaxio Batiza addressed two groups of Mexicans in Saginaw, encouraging them to return to Mexico. He warned them that conditions in the U.S. would only worsen, with few job opportunities, and thus they should return to Mexico "and become good citizens there."¹⁶² As in the fall of 1931, several trainloads of Mexicans departed Saginaw. Most newspaper accounts in Saginaw presented a picture of Mexicans happy to be returning home, describing the groups as a "merry throng" and a "happy lot." And they also were clearly not Americans, but foreigners, described as "dusky skinned fathers and mothers, black-haired babies" and were joined by Mexicans of other areas, their "compatriots," who were heading to "the land below the Rio Grande."¹⁶³ The travelers were always depicted as voluntary travelers, and were promised land upon their arrival, but one article noted that ten potential travelers changed their mind at the last minute. They left the train, abandoning their baggage, to remain in Saginaw, rather than return to Mexico.¹⁶⁴ The city of Saginaw paid

¹⁶¹"Mexican Colony's Exodus Discussed," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 10, 1932, o. 1 and 10; "Council Debates Moving Mexicans," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 11, 1932, p. 7.

¹⁶²"Urges Mexicans To Return Home," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 21, 1932, p. 1 and 10.

¹⁶³"Train Carries 430 Mexicans," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 23, 1932, p. 1 and 7.

¹⁶⁴"432 Mexicans Quit Detroit for Home," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 16, 1932.

more than \$3,500 of its \$5,000 appropriation for train fares of Saginaw residents returning to Mexico.¹⁶⁵

Historian Juan Garcia disputes the argument that Mexicans posed a significant relief burden, arguing that "a substantial body of evidence contradicts this premise."¹⁶⁶ Mexican workers were reluctant to seek public assistance for a variety of reasons, according to Garcia. For many, accepting public aid was too humiliating, indicating that one was unable to support a family; instead, they sought aid from the community mutual aid societies. And those Mexicans who had entered the U.S. illegally, at a time when labor demands relaxed immigration practices on the southern border, feared deportation if they sought public aid. Some public agencies would only aid those Mexicans who agreed to repatriation, or agency officials used coercive methods to prompt Mexicans to "choose" repatriation. Detroit officials in the Department of Public Welfare sought to encourage Mexicans to leave the city by requiring them to take their meals in the department "restaurants," rather than issuing a grocery order or cash relief. The food was poor and did not follow Mexican cooking habits, and the program carried a large dose of stigma in the community. One case worker noted that a "family is contemplating returning to Mexico and the case worker feels they might return more quickly if they are kept on a cafeteria list rather than be given a grocery order."¹⁶⁷ Agencies also refused aid

¹⁶⁵"Mexicans' Exodus Cost City \$3,565.16," *Saginaw Daily News*, December 7, 1932.

¹⁶⁶Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 226.

¹⁶⁷Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 227-228.



altogether, or withdrew aid, including rent support, if a family would not accept repatriation.¹⁶⁸ The practice extended to Mexican-Americans, as well as Mexicans with children who were born in the U.S. Garcia argues that the relief problem did not decline significantly after repatriation, lending little credence to the argument that the Mexican population constituted a large relief problem in the Midwest.

“Voluntary” repatriation was an often ill-used term, describing families whose options were severely limited and whose only recourse was to leave. Denied jobs, or removed from a job, because of race or citizenship, and also denied relief, their only option was to turn to mutual aid societies in their own communities. But such organizations, while providing important social and psychological functions, were ill-funded and unable to help all those who needed aid. Thus many Mexicans likely did accept the offers of free transportation and food for the journey if they returned to Mexico.¹⁶⁹ Garcia argues that true voluntary repatriation was much more common in the 1920-1921 depression, and that by 1931 and 1932, forced repatriation was more the norm.¹⁷⁰ Although newspaper accounts might offer a more positive view of repatriation, it is likely that methods used in Detroit and other cities to “encourage” repatriation also occurred in Saginaw, at least by some case workers. Saginaw officials saw Mexican

¹⁶⁸Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 232.

¹⁶⁹Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 233-234. Garcia documents the existence and practices of mutual aid societies in several Midwest Mexican communities, but notes that they suffered from a lack of money. Midwest societies tended to center on Mexicans who retained their native citizenship, while societies in the Southwest generally focused on Mexican-Americans. See pages 161-163.

¹⁷⁰Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 224, 232.



workers as a relief burden and a drain on jobs for white citizens, articulating that belief on numerous occasions. Some Mexicans did seek a voluntary return to Mexico, working with social welfare organizations, mutual aid societies and Mexican consuls to do so.¹⁷¹

But Mexicans were not the only non-citizens encouraged to leave the United States; by the Depression years, Michigan's Welfare Department began to work for the repatriation of other foreign-born residents as well. Repatriation efforts extended to European and African immigrants. A 1936 publication of the Michigan State Welfare Department assessed the repatriation efforts during the previous year. This report defined repatriation as a voluntary act "of restoring to one's own country, allegiance or citizenship." It noted that Michigan's demand for workers attracted the high numbers of non-citizens, but that many of the immigrants sent their pay to families in their homeland, leaving them with little to fall back on once the Depression and chronic unemployment hit. In addition, many European nations would not allow money to be exported, leaving the immigrant destitute. "And yet in his native land friends, relatives or property would insure a livelihood." The report also noted that these circumstances, plus the fact that the non-citizens accounted for nearly 10 percent of the state's institutional population, prompted the repatriation efforts. In short, their labor was no longer needed, and they should return to their native country.¹⁷² The report failed to note that non-citizens were

¹⁷¹Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*, 45-46, 230. The Mexican government established a Department of Repatriation in 1921 to establish procedures for repatriation and to facilitate the process for Mexicans, but Garcia gives few details about the agency's specific activities. See page 119.

¹⁷²"Repatriation in Michigan, November 1, 1934 to May 1, 1936," State Welfare Department, May 20, 1936, 1.



excluded from some kinds of employment, and usually were the first fired if they did obtain work. It also ignored the exclusion of non-citizens from work relief programs.¹⁷³

The welfare department worked with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, in addition to consular officials, to institute the later repatriation program. The state legislature appropriated \$25,000 in 1935-36 and 1936-37 with the expectation that far more would be saved in relief costs.¹⁷⁴ Transports to Europe were scheduled approximately every four weeks, and repatriates traveled by rail and then steamship to their homeland. During the period of the study, 219 applications were received; 130 were completed, involving 232 people. Of the 232 people, 61 were citizens, or the children of immigrants. Just eight had been in the U.S. less than five years, and forty-seven resided in the U.S. between five and nine years. Nearly half - 109 people - had lived in the U.S. more than ten years, and 24 of those for more than twenty five years.¹⁷⁵ According to the report, twenty were residents of institutions, and fifty-six families had received relief for more than two years. The repatriates headed for numerous countries in this period. The largest number (fifty one) returned to England, the next largest group (forty) for Mexico. Twenty people returned to Bulgaria, nineteen to Germany, seventeen to Rumania, sixteen to Holland and fifteen to Yugoslavia. Other nations included South Africa, Albania, and

¹⁷³See Harold Fields, "Where Shall the Alien Work," *Social Forces* 12 (December 1933) 213-221; Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, 18; Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 109-112; Reisler, *By The Sweat of their Brow*, 228-229.

¹⁷⁴"Repatriation in Michigan," 2.

¹⁷⁵"Repatriation in Michigan," 4, 8. Hoffman documents the transport of Mexican-American children who were citizens, but whose parents were not, in his study of California repatriation. Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, 95.



several European countries.¹⁷⁶ These efforts occurred after the largest number of repatriations took place. Repatriation efforts dwindled after states began to receive federal aid for relief in 1932 and 1933. In addition, federal funds could not be used for repatriation programs, thus reducing the incentive to return non-citizens to their native countries.¹⁷⁷

The State of Michigan

Many states, including Michigan, were slow to step in to the relief crisis in the early Depression years. Commissions and committees were the first step, but few states followed those efforts with any additional appropriations to help offset the high costs of relief; the concept that relief was a local issue demanding local solutions was widespread.¹⁷⁸ Michigan governor Wilber Brucker appointed a State Unemployment Commission in 1931 to coordinate all relief activities in the state and to work with local committees to develop work relief projects. Comprised of 105 members and led by a 15-member executive committee, the commission coordinated with churches, labor unions and other local organizations to avoid duplication of relief services, but its function was

¹⁷⁶"Repatriation in Michigan," 8.

¹⁷⁷Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, ??, 113.

¹⁷⁸David Joseph Maurer, "Public Relief Programs in Ohio, 1929-1939," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1962) 2-3, 9-10, 22-25; 46-47; Dwayne Charles Cole, "The Relief Crisis in Illinois During the Depression, 1930-1940" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, St. Louis University, 1973) 24-26, 38, 42-45; Raymond L. Koch, "The Development of Public Relief Programs in Minnesota, 1929-1941," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1967, 22.



largely advisory. It was a central clearinghouse for local and county relief information, but encouraged local control and decentralization. It also attempted to encourage people and the economy with cheerful advice and catchy slogans, although historian Richard Ortquist argues that it accomplished little and soon found that "words and catchy phrases would not win the war against want." He also argues that the committee was different from those of other states, such as New York and Illinois, in that it did little to address the relief problem in any practical way.¹⁷⁹ Like other committees, the state committee made little headway against what was a national problem and which defied quick fixes.

When county and city governments, including Saginaw, Marquette and Van Buren, began to buckle under the financial pressure of relief costs, the state government's financial condition was not conducive to providing much aid. A majority of the state's revenues came from property taxes, but as with the counties, the state faced the 15-mill limitation and the rising tax delinquency rates; too many people simply were unable to pay their property taxes. The state legislature enacted a 3 percent sales tax in June 1933, which replaced property taxes as the main source of revenue, and by 1935, the state left all property tax revenues to local governments. But sales tax revenues were difficult to project and unstable, dependent upon the status of the state's economy. The state had no income tax, as voters had repeatedly rejected constitutional amendments on that issue.¹⁸⁰ The state released \$12 million in highway funds to be used by local agencies for relief in

¹⁷⁹Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 144-145.

¹⁸⁰Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 263-264. Income tax amendments failed in 1922 and 1924, and again in 1934 and 1936.



1931. County and city unemployment commissions used the funds in part for local work relief projects, and also served to coordinate local relief activities. The state also received \$4 million from the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads. In 1932, the state authorized the distribution of a portion of the gasoline tax revenues, amounting to about \$9 million annually. Although they were not direct relief funds, the money did help local budget problems. But none of the appropriations represented additional expenditures and only advanced the distribution date of the funds.¹⁸¹ And as was the case of Van Buren County, the delay in distributing funds also caused severe problems for local communities, who could not rely on the timely receipt of state monies.

Many states, including Michigan, did not immediately push for federal funds for relief, seeking every alternative before relinquishing the concept of localism in relief administration.¹⁸² While some governors advocated federal support for relief costs by 1930, many governors and state legislatures, including Michigan, adopted a "do it ourselves" approach until as late as 1932. Instead, many states were optimistic that they could handle the relief and unemployment problems in their states, despite evidence to the contrary, and preferred not to invite federal intervention.¹⁸³ Michigan Governor Fred

¹⁸¹William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1935) 34-35; Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 145.

¹⁸²Maurer, "Public Relief Programs in Ohio, 1929-1939," 9, 25; Cole, "The Relief Crisis in Illinois," 103-106; Blanche D. Coll, *Safety Net: Welfare and Social Security, 1929-1979* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 9.

¹⁸³James T. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 28-31.



Green opposed the creation of an unemployment commission in late 1930 because he thought "that such a move would only emphasize the problem." Green did attempt to secure early release of highway funds so that the state could extend its highway projects, but was not successful.¹⁸⁴ His successor, Governor Brucker, also opposed federal aid for relief. Brucker telegraphed President Hoover on August 21, 1931, stating that "the people of Michigan will take care of their own problem." In his view, shared by many officials, relief was the arena of private charity and local government, which had not yet been proven incapable of handling the load. But officials in Michigan did not necessarily agree on the need for federal help. Just one month before Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy, along with representatives from numerous other municipalities as well as labor organizations, petitioned Hoover to call a special session to approve loans to the states for relief purposes. Murphy disagreed with Brucker's assessment of the state's situation, and told Hoover that Detroit had already expended large sums on relief, and could not do more: "The imminence of another winter of unprecedented deprivation through unemployment finds Detroit as determined as ever that no man, woman or child shall lack the elemental needs of food, clothing and shelter, but also finds the City less able than before to provide these necessities."¹⁸⁵ Detroit had exhausted its public and private resources, and Murphy, who would be elected governor of Michigan in 1936, turned to the federal government for help. He and other Michigan municipal leaders had sought

¹⁸⁴Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 140-141.

¹⁸⁵Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 141-142; Harry L. Hopkins, *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936) 48, 50; Sullivan, "On the Dole," 51-60, 66-67.



state aid for unemployment relief, but with little success, thus prompting them to turn to Washington D.C.¹⁸⁶ Other major cities faced similar problems, and most local communities had exhausted their own funds by 1931, or at the latest, 1932. By the fall of 1932, according to historian Irving Bernstein, "municipal relief...was bankrupt in virtually every city in the United States."¹⁸⁷

Although the state legislature and administration did little to appropriate new relief funds, again a common occurrence throughout the nation, they did eventually pass an old age pension law in 1933, two years before the federal Social Security Act, to aid the state's elderly poor. The depression's severity fueled approval for old age pensions in Michigan and elsewhere in the country, but the initial old age pension laws resulted in few pensions. Although not all businesses supported them, many experts agreed that the business sector could not (or would not) provide pension benefits for all workers. More Americans supported the idea of old age pensions as the Depression worsened. By 1930, twelve states had old age pension programs and the issue was becoming a hot political issue in elections. Support for pensions was widespread in Michigan in 1931, but disagreement existed over how to finance them. Conflict over the issue of financing stalled the issue and nothing was decided that year.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 155-156.

¹⁸⁷Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 300-301; Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 149-150.

¹⁸⁸Jill Quadagno, *The Transformation of Old Age Security: Class and Politics in the American Welfare State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 67-72; Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 485-487; Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 1929-1933, 134-136; Patterson, *The New Deal & The States*, 12. Patterson notes that ten states



Michigan passed its old age pension law on July 7, 1933, placing the old age pension bureau in the state welfare department. County agents, also responsible for the investigations for the probate court, were designated as the investigating officials. County old age pension boards - consisting of the county agent, probate judge and "one woman" appointed by the county board of supervisors - were to oversee local administration.¹⁸⁹ The law also provided state funding for the program, in contrast to the mothers' pension law, which placed all funding responsibilities on the local governmental unit. Legislators finally agreed to a \$2 head tax on all persons over 21 years of age, to be placed in the old age pension fund; failure to pay the tax was a misdemeanor and punishable by a fine of \$100 or ninety days in the county jail.¹⁹⁰

Eligibility for the old age benefits was limited to those Michigan residents who were seventy years of age and who had resided in the state continuously for the past ten years. Anyone guilty of deserting a spouse or failing to support a child was ineligible. The law specifically excluded non-citizens, and also required that any applicants had been citizens for at least fifteen years. This effectively excluded all immigrants who had not secured naturalization papers by 1918, and is another example of denying benefits to non-citizens or "new" citizens. It also excluded anyone with family, under the poor laws of

had laws before 1931, but they covered only those people over the age of 70 and pensions were small; just 75,000 people in the country received pensions in 1931.

¹⁸⁹See sections 4 and 5, Public Act No. 237 of 1933, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1933) 378-379.

¹⁹⁰Sections 33-36 of Public Act No. 237 of 1933, *Public and Local Acts*, 383-384.



Michigan, who was legally responsible for their care and support.¹⁹¹ Although called a pension, the law did not provide for that. Instead, it was assistance for the aged, based on need and not service. As with mothers' pensions, framers of the law sought to reduce the stigma of public aid, but old age pensions were public assistance. The misnaming of the law would cause much confusion for this law and the Old Age Assistance law later passed in conformity with the federal Social Security Act of 1935.

Enacting old age legislation had goals similar to those of mothers' pensions: the aim was to provide aid for a population with increased need, but to bypass the traditional poor relief methods which were viewed as too stigmatized. A key difference from mothers' pensions was the inclusion of a state funding mechanism, however flawed it would prove to be. Rather than placing the burden of funding on counties, as was the case in the 1913 mothers' pension law, the state sought to raise funds through the head tax specifically for old age pensions. A 1935 study found that old age pension laws, then in existence in twenty-eight states, had "proved themselves the most economical and self-respecting method of caring for the aged."¹⁹² In fact, some people hoped that a full system of old age pensions would eliminate the need for county infirmaries, except for the very ill. Other elderly people, still able to care for themselves, would be able to remain in their homes, living off an old age pension, which would be much less costly

¹⁹¹Section 10, Public Act No. 237 of 1933, *Public and Local Acts*, p. 379-380. Lengthy residence requirements and ages between 65 and 70 were common. See Coll, *Safety Net*, 42.

¹⁹²*Unemployable Persons on the Emergency Relief Rolls in Michigan*, A Report of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission (Lansing, 1935) 18.



than supporting them in a public institution. By 1930, just eighteen states had old age pension laws, and even those states' methods were criticized. Many of the key problems were also found in Michigan's 1933 law: the age requirement restricted aid only to those at least 70 years of age, and the pensions were entirely inadequate. The means of funding the program - the controversial head tax - and the citizenship requirement were also criticized.¹⁹³

The law, although passed in mid-1933, paid few pensions in its first years. The law did not include any mechanism for collecting the head tax, and thus only \$5,500 had been collected by August of 1933, although the cost of pensions was estimated to be \$60,000.¹⁹⁴ The state received 42,000 applications from October 1933 to December 1934, but only 2,660 elderly had received grants. Another 6,575 applications were approved and the rest were awaiting investigation.¹⁹⁵ The law was vague on when the collection needed to begin, and when the pensions were to begin. The Hartford newspaper questioned whether the law was a "hoax," and criticized legislators for raising the hopes of needy elderly people. The newspaper also charged that the entire process was merely a "vote-getting" campaign.¹⁹⁶ Most people agreed that the law was merely a step toward

¹⁹³*Unemployable Persons on the Emergency Relief Rolls in Michigan*, 18-19.

¹⁹⁴"Old Age Pension Law Not To Take Effect in October," *Hartford Day Spring*, August 16, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁹⁵Coll, *Safety Net*, 42.

¹⁹⁶"Pensions For Aged Are Not Available Now," *Hartford Day Spring*, August 2, 1933, p. 4; "Is Old Age Pension Law A Hoax?" *Hartford Day Spring*, August 16, 1933, p. 4.



developing an old age pension; additional legislation would be needed before such a program could be implemented.¹⁹⁷ A revised law was passed two years later in 1935, and did not take effect until July 1, 1935.¹⁹⁸ Investigations did not keep pace with applications, and in October 1935, Van Buren County was still investigating 1933 and 1934 applications.¹⁹⁹ Thus before 1935, old age pensions remained a rarity in Michigan, despite the passage of the 1933 law. It would not be until the Social Security Act was approved in 1935, with Michigan eligible for federal grants in 1936, that old age assistance began to reach a significant number of Michigan's elderly citizens.

Efforts to address the unemployment and relief problems of the Depression occurred at all levels of government as well as in the private sector. But as this chapter has demonstrated, the problem was too extensive for most communities, private organizations and even the state government and required the participation of the federal government. The responses of these various groups to the Depression's challenges, including rising relief costs and widespread unemployment, also reinforced who in society deserved help and who did not. Local governments' first response, found in the extreme in Van Buren County, was to make sure that those who received aid actually were in need. Work relief was the preferred solution, but those projects reached only a specific population; white men benefitted the most from the pre-New Deal programs

¹⁹⁷"Old Age Pensions Again," *The Daily Mining Journal*, August 9, 1933, p. ?

¹⁹⁸"Old Age Pension Rules Outlined By Dillman," *Hartford Day Spring*, June 19, 1935, p. 6.

¹⁹⁹"Supervisors Hear Report on Old Age Pensions," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 23, 1935, p. 8.



because virtually all work relief projects were intended for men. Non-citizens suffered as well, both in terms of opportunities to receive relief and work assignments, and of course through repatriation programs. The resistance to state and federal intrusion into the administration of relief foreshadowed the conflicts that would erupt with the New Deal programs, and the backlash that followed. Local officials welcomed the federal funds, but rejected the requirements attached to the money they so desperately needed. They continued to want "to take care of their own problem" as they saw fit.

10/10/1914

10/10/1914

**“We Need Help at Once for These Poor People”:
The New Deal Federalizes Social Welfare**

Chapter Three

“What we need in Hillsdale is a federal officer to investigate the condition of the unemployed,” wrote Pearl Gibbon to Franklin Roosevelt in July 1933. “We have families who are starving. The fathers are willing to work, but they have no work and no help from the welfare. When they ask for help, the county officers reply, ‘there are no funds, the county is broke.’ Can you help us out? We need help at once for these poor people.”¹ Jack Tatro of Marine City also wrote Roosevelt about the poor relief situation in his city at about the same time. Tatro noted that relief orders were inadequate to feed the families for the allotted time. Clothing was impossible to procure, and “consequently children are practically naked as are their parents in some cases.” Efforts to gain clothing or shoes meant being “sent from Supervisor to Supt of Poor and each refers them to one another, without results from either.” As with Gibbon’s case, the response Tatro reported was that the county had no money and could not help.² Tatro wrote that he was not complaining, but simply stating the facts as they happened. “The people of this county are true Americans and are not wont to complain.”³ Both Michigan residents wrote Roosevelt

¹Letter from Pearl Gibbon of Hillsdale, dated July 29, 1933, to FDR, FERA State Series, Michigan Complaints, RG 69, Box 141, Folder G-H. Hillsdale is a small town located in Hillsdale County in the southern agricultural section of Michigan.

²Letter from Jack Tatro of Marine City to Franklin Roosevelt, dated July 31, 1933, FERA State Series, Michigan Complaints, RG 69, Box 141, Folder T-Z. Marine City, located in St. Clair County, is on the eastern shore of Michigan north of Detroit.

³Letter from Tatro to Roosevelt, July 31, 1933.



during a critical time in the Depression. Their letters show the limited effects of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932 under President Herbert Hoover; the funds provided through the act's Reconstruction Finance Corporation did not provide the amount of aid needed to alleviate the extreme need in Michigan and throughout the country. The Federal Emergency Relief Act had become law less than two months earlier (in mid-1933) and was in the early administration stages in most Michigan counties. Most counties and municipalities were nearly bankrupt and turning away relief requests because they had no money to fill them. Both Gibbon and Tatro hoped more federal intervention would change how relief operated and would bring help to those who needed it: people willing to work but unable to find jobs. These letters point to the key reasons why federal aid occurred when it did, and what individual citizens hoped it would accomplish. Although many local officials opposed federal aid, some residents welcomed it, either for themselves or for their neighbors.

The Great Depression and the programs created in response to it changed American government and social welfare permanently, although significant continuities re-emerged by the end of the 1930s. Federal legislation, beginning with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, provided federal funds for unemployment relief programs for the first time. RFC funds were not enough to alleviate the extreme financial problems facing local governments and their inability to provide relief for their residents. Some governmental officials balked at the "loans," fearing to commit themselves to further debt when their coffers were so empty. Franklin Roosevelt's administration greatly expanded federal intervention with the New Deal. Modeled in part after



Roosevelt's experiences as governor of New York during the Depression years, these laws collectively sought to address the extreme hardship and want wrought by the economic troubles of the Great Depression. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration Act, the first major New Deal legislation passed in 1933, prompted the creation of a mass of state and local agencies to administer the new programs. Success demanded cooperation among local groups and officials, as well as the states and federal government. The new administrative structure would ultimately reshape social welfare in Michigan, but the resulting changes were incomplete and certainly not without conflict. The resistance to federal aid - and commitment to local solutions and responsibility - evident in the early Depression years only intensified with FERA. The experiences at the local level - by both social workers and recipients - reveal the limited influence exerted by federal intervention in public relief. Local administrative control, county and state monetary contributions for relief, and the role of professional social work - relating both to administrative costs and methods - were the core issues of conflict in the early days of FERA. The initial disputes that occurred under FERA from 1933 to 1935 set the stage for the more heated debates centered on the same issues over implementation of the Social Security Act in Michigan later in the decade.⁴

Counties reacted in different ways to the implementation of FERA, although few welcomed the regulations attached to the federal funds. Van Buren County was the most resistant during the FERA years, although Saginaw County's opposition to federal

⁴The debate was particularly heated in Michigan, and the details of the 1938 referendum, which defeated the 1937 laws, and the compromise legislation in 1939 will be discussed in Chapter Six.



intervention in relief administration would intensify later in the decade. Marquette proved most able to work with FERA. Partisan politics continued to play a role, but the counties' economic base and need for relief also shaped the response of local officials, as well as views mirrored in larger national trends. In the early New Deal years, officials reacted largely against the interference of the state and federal governments (and their insistence on professional social workers), viewing their intrusion as encroachment upon local authority and autonomy. Harkening back to the days of Populism in the 1890s, these anti-centralization views appeared in other venues of Depression America, including the popularity of such individuals as Charles Coughlin and Huey Long. Although this is not to argue that the constituencies were the same - Michigan opponents of welfare reform and the followers of the two men - parallels existed between the feelings tapped by Coughlin and Long and the fears expressed during the welfare debates. Historian Alan Brinkley, in his study of these two men and their ideals, argues that their ideologies contained a "message of real meaning," or "an affirmation of threatened values and institutions," in this case local control of relief and community responsibility.⁵ The importance of the democratic process and electoral control was also evident in these debates, as Brinkley describes:

Power, they argued, should not reside in distant, obscure places; the individual should not have to live in a world in which he could not govern or even know the forces determining his destiny. Instead, the nation should aspire to a set of political and economic arrangements in which authority rested securely in the

⁵Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin & The Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 143.



community, where it could be observed and, in some measure, controlled by its citizens.⁶

Local officials felt threatened from the start of FERA, and such feelings would only intensify by the middle of the decade.

As argued in the previous chapter, local governments and private agencies were nearly bankrupt by 1932 and could not meet the relief demands in their communities, but resistance to federal aid continued. More and more voices supported federal aid, including governors, state legislators, municipal leaders and social work professionals.⁷ A survey of local Michigan agencies conducted by the American Association of Public Welfare Officials found that areas around Detroit, Grand Rapids and the Upper Peninsula were in need of either state or federal help. In writing of the UP, the report noted that counties faced "much distress and practically no financial resources."⁸ Some social workers supported federal aid by the spring of 1932, although the American Association of Social Workers did not endorse federal aid until January 1933.⁹ The growing demands

⁶Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 144.

⁷Governor Gifford Pinchot of Pennsylvania was among the most vocal, making his case for federal aid in an article in *Survey*, the prominent social work publication, in January 1932. *Survey* editor Paul Kellogg spoke in favor of federal aid at congressional hearings in December 1931. Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940) 107-108.

⁸Report of Steering Committee, "A Social Work Study of Federal Aid for Unemployment Relief," January 1932, p. 10; National Association of Social Work Records, Box 18, Folder 195; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960) 462-463.

⁹Resolution in favor of federal aid for relief, American Association of Social Workers, NASW Records, Box 18, Folder 196.



resulted in passage of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act in July 1932. The act authorized the distribution of \$300 million through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, with a maximum of \$15 million allowed for any individual state. The money was to be in the form of a loan, to be paid back through the state's share of federal highway funds, although that was reversed in 1934 before any funds were repaid. Thus the funds became grants-in-aid to the states, but government officials did not know that in 1932.¹⁰ Illinois was the first state to make application for RFC funds; eventually about 60 percent of the total appropriation went to six states, including Michigan, California, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.¹¹ Michigan received \$21.8 million, a portion of which was spent on highway construction and the remainder was distributed to local public welfare agencies through the State Unemployment Commission.

Michigan encountered difficulty securing RFC funds, in part because of its unwillingness to appropriate state monies for direct relief. Michigan Governor Wilbur Brucker and Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy were at odds over requests for Detroit to receive the federal money, and under the federal law, the governor had to endorse any requests from within the state, and agree to have the funds charged against the state's future federal highway funds. The RFC informed Brucker in the fall of 1932 that the

¹⁰Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 90-91; Brown, *Public Relief*, 124-125; Blanche Coll, *Safety Net: Welfare and Social Security, 1929-1979* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 10-11; William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing, MI: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1935) 36.

¹¹Brown, *Public Relief*, 126.



state "must have exhausted its own resources" before it could seek federal money. Detroit finally secured some funds in October of that year, but only after much squabbling between the governor and Murphy.¹² The problem reappeared in 1933, only this time under William Comstock who won the governor's office in 1932. Again the issue of state funds for relief arose with the RFC; Comstock released weight-tax funds to the counties and the RFC approved the federal funds.¹³

Some Michigan local governments did seek RFC funds as a means to resolve their budget and relief problems, but not all saw them as a good option. Van Buren County, which had eliminated both poor relief and mothers' pensions, refused to seek RFC funding despite the needs of its residents. In January 1933, when its poor fund was overdrawn more than \$63,000, the board opposed applying for RFC money. Corporation representatives touring the area met with county officials in February, but supervisors rejected their offer of funds for highway work programs, largely because the board refused to place itself in any further debt. Attempts to persuade county officials that the money likely would not be repaid by the county but rather by the state through its

¹²Richard T. Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan, 1929-1933* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 158-161.

¹³Bernstein criticizes the RFC program for its slowness in distributing funds. He also points out that the loans were only for a month at a time, and thus states had to continually request funds. Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 237-238. See also Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 469-473. Other states experienced similar difficulties, in part because of their extreme reluctance, if not refusal, to appropriate state funds for relief. See Dwayne Charles Cole, "The Relief Crisis in Illinois During the Depression, 1930-1940" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, St. Louis University, 1983) 60-62; David Joseph Maurer, "Public Relief Programs in Ohio, 1929-1939" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1962) 47, 52-53.



highway funds failed. The chairperson told the county clerk to "notify the Federal Loan Board that Van Buren County does not care to make a loan."¹⁴ Three months later the county again rejected an RFC loan, although they considered it when county treasurer John Swoap refused to release state money to the supervisors. County officials traveled to Lansing to seek aid from "Uncle Sam's Santa Claus, known in financial circles as the RFC."¹⁵ The county did not apply for funds, although it did refer the issue to its finance committee and its building committee.¹⁶ The minutes do not record any further action by the board, most likely because the funds ran out before the county could apply, or because it simply rejected the idea of a loan again. To the supervisors, taking out a loan when it could not pay its bills at the time did not make fiscal sense. Economy and efficiency - and fiscal responsibility - on behalf of the county's taxpayers were to take precedence over the needs of the county's impoverished.

Both Saginaw County and the City of Saginaw did seek RFC funds; neither group shared Van Buren County's reluctance to seek additional debt. Rather, the two bodies saw the federal loan as a way to help their relief problems without incurring additional debt. Both planned to use state gasoline and weight tax monies to repay the money, although

¹⁴"Supervisors Oppose R.F.C. Loan: Offer Is Made For Financing Welfare Work," *Hartford Day Spring*, February 1, 1933, p. 1; "R.F.C. Loan Is Rejected By Supervisors," *Hartford Day Spring*, February 8, 1933, p. 1-2; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, February 1, 1933, p. 82.

¹⁵"County May Seek Loan From R.F.C: State's Cash Now Held Up By Treasurer," *Hartford Day Spring*, May 10, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁶*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, May 11, 1933, p. 12.



that never occurred. The funds they did receive were rarely for the amount requested, however, and were granted only for one month at a time.¹⁷ The city applied for \$90,000 in February 1933, planning to repay the money with its 1930 delinquent tax money. But when the loan was approved the next month, the city received only \$40,350 for March; the other application was still pending.¹⁸ Saginaw County also applied for help with its township relief. It requested just under \$8,000, but received only \$2,000, or about one-quarter of the amount needed to cover its relief bills for the month.¹⁹ These state funds, and the RFC money, were gone by the spring of 1933, and the Michigan legislature again provided gasoline and weight tax funds to the counties for county highway work and the retirement of emergency relief bonds. But this money quickly disappeared, and federal action again appeared to be the only option as all resources - state and local - were exhausted.²⁰ The RFC was not enough.

Roosevelt's administration greatly expanded the federal government's role in social welfare. Although opposed to the "dole," Roosevelt favored federal money for unemployment relief and the extensive New Deal programs emerged in his first hundred days in office. The most critical New Deal relief programs were the Federal Emergency Relief Act, the Civil Works Administration and later the Works Progress Administration.

¹⁷Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 469-473.

¹⁸"City To Seek \$90,000 Loan," *Saginaw Daily News*, February 9, 1933, p. 1 and 10; "RFC Approves Saginaw Loan," *Saginaw Daily News*, March 8, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁹"County Gets RFC Fund for Relief," *Saginaw Daily News*, p. 1-2.

²⁰Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 35-36.



All three dealt with relief in some form, and FERA and WPA also used investigative social work methods to determine eligibility. To receive aid through those programs, applicants had to maneuver through the application and investigation process, sometimes a deterrent in and of itself to those seeking aid. FERA, which became federal law on May 12, 1933, included an appropriation of \$500 million and had a two-year limit; legislators intended this to be only an "emergency" program. FERA, headed by Harry Hopkins, was to provide grants-in-aid to the states for both direct and work relief, with the amount received by the state related to the amount the state expended for relief and work relief. States could receive on a quarterly basis up to one-third of the amount of state funds spent.²¹ The goal of the grants was to stimulate states to appropriate their own funds, which could then be supplemented with federal funds. Federal funds were not to replace all local and state spending, but FERA was to establish a federal-state partnership to address the relief problem.²² Another goal was to develop extensive work relief projects, rather than a system of direct relief; Roosevelt was very much opposed to a "dole"

²¹Dorothy Carothers, *Chronology of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, May 12, 1933 to December 31, 1935*, WPA Research Monograph VI (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937) 1-2; Nancy Rose, *Put to Work: Relief Programs of the Great Depression* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994) 29-30. Some cities with virtually no funds remaining received outright grants, with no matching funds required initially, including Detroit. In contrast, Boston received no direct grants and Massachusetts received few matching grants because of its unwillingness to spend state money on welfare relief. See Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 148, 171.

²²Coll, *Safety Net*, 25.



system.²³ Unlike the RFC, FERA provided grants to states. The money did not have to be repaid, as was the original intent with RFC funds. Regulations specified that federal funds were not to finance mothers' or old age pensions, hospital care, or institutional (including infirmary) care; local and governments were to continue to fund those services.²⁴

FERA provided aid in two major forms: work relief and direct relief. Work relief was the preferred method. The plan was for local governments and schools to create work relief projects in their communities to employ local residents. Local funds provided the materials (for building renovations or road construction, for example) and federal funds furnished the payroll for the workers. Direct relief, or the "dole" in its derogatory terminology, was for those people and families who had no one employable to work on a project, or for whom no work was available. Direct relief was actually cheaper to provide than work relief, which required funds for project materials in addition to payroll, but public opinion, as well as most policy makers, favored work relief because it involved working for benefits. Again, opposition to the "dole" persisted. Work relief reduced the stigma of welfare for recipients and provided some concrete product in return: either improved roads or buildings or other public improvement, or goods to be distributed to

²³William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Books, 1963) 124; Rose, *Put to Work*, 30.

²⁴Carothers, *Chronology*, 8; Brown, *Public Relief*, 237. Medical care under FERA was intended to supplement but not replace existing structures of medical relief in local jurisdictions. See Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 78.



relief recipients: clothing, canned goods, or bedding. Direct relief was only used as a temporary measure until a work assignment could be made.²⁵

The federal programs targeted *employable* people, or those who could work but were unable to find work. *Unemployable* individuals, unable to work because of age, health, disability or family responsibilities, were confined to the direct relief programs. Although many of these individuals fell into categories that were to be covered through local programs, including old age and mothers' pensions, FERA did carry a large part of that burden. Nationally unemployables made up 20 percent of relief recipients, and in Michigan that number ranged from 17 to 24 percent in FERA's second year.²⁶ The distinction between employable and unemployable was made along gendered lines, as well as age. Many women, able to work but with children to care for, were classified as unemployable. Mothers' pensions were to care for those women and their families, but as was evident from the first chapter of this study, a small number of counties were still providing mothers' pensions by the New Deal era. Both Saginaw and Van Buren counties halted mothers' pensions in October 1933 because of budget constraints, and Manistee County stopped paying mothers' pensions five months before that.²⁷ Michigan's

²⁵Brown, *Public Relief*, 150-151, 158; Rose, *Put to Work*, 30, 37.

²⁶Rose, *Put to Work*, 32; William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment. Relief and Economic Security: A Survey of Michigan's Relief and Unemployment Problem* (Lansing: State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, 1936) 57-58.

²⁷"Report on Mothers' Pensions for the Fiscal Year July 1, 1934 to June 30, 1935," Michigan State Welfare Department, WRSC Records, Box 14, Folder 5. More than thirty counties discontinued mothers' pensions by 1934. Genesee discontinued them in September 1934; Kent, Marquette and Wayne counties continued to fund mothers' pensions.



flawed old age pension law of 1933 proved woefully inadequate and did little to alleviate the poverty of older Michigan residents. Although unemployables remained a local responsibility, they often faced severe cuts in grants, if they got one at all. Thus FERA, through the local welfare relief commission, often cared for unemployables prior to the Social Security Act in 1935.

FERA and the funds it provided came with strings attached; although states were allowed to set up their own commissions and emergency relief administrations to administer the federal program, they were expected to operate within federal guidelines. The federal authority over the administration of funds extended not only to those monies provided by the federal government, but also to those contributed by local and state governments for emergency relief purposes: "When these powers of control are considered, it is clear that the F.E.R.A. constituted not only a source of financial aid to the state, but also a very definite and powerful authority over relief activities in each state which received Federal funds."²⁸ States which refused to conform to federal rules and regulations over grants faced federal officials assuming control of their state emergency relief programs. Michigan governors and legislatures during this period, although they certainly had conflicts with FERA officials, never lost control of the state emergency relief administration.²⁹ The state's reluctance - as well as local governments'

²⁸ Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 39.

²⁹ Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 4. States in which federal officials stepped in to administer federal relief included Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Ohio, and Oklahoma. See Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 209; Edward Ainsworth Williams, *Federal Aid for Relief* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939) 176-177; James T. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States*:



unwillingness - to allocate funds for relief frustrated federal officials, but such conflicts never reached the crises found in other states.³⁰

Michigan enacted enabling legislation for FERA on June 28, 1933, although only after a lengthy administrative deadlock that threatened its federal grant.³¹ Legislators appropriated \$12 million for relief, to be administered through the SERA. The law established a state emergency welfare relief commission and allowed for the creation of county welfare relief commissions. State commission members were appointed by the governor, and county commissions, comprised of three county residents, were appointed by the state commission and approved by the governor. All communications with FERA went through the state administration, which also distributed federal funds to the counties.³² Michigan's commission held its first meeting July 7 in Lansing, appointing Fred Johnson of Detroit administrator of SERA. Johnson, secretary of the Michigan's

Federalism in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 65-73.

³⁰Patterson, *The New Deal and the States*, 66-67; Michigan report by Howard Hunter, December 1933, FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports, 1933-34, Box 67. Hunter expressed frustration with Michigan's refusal to appropriate funds for relief: "These people have been mollicoddled by the Federal government for over a year." Hunter did not fault the state commission, but rather local and state officials, who "believe that Santa Claus will keep on coming down the chimney no matter how bad they are." Blanche Coll argues that in states which did face federal take-overs, such as in Ohio, FERA "left a legacy ranging from discontent to resentment of the heavy federal hand." Coll, *Safety Net*, 29. For Massachusetts, see Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 162.

³¹Russell H. Kurtz, "On the Governor's Doorstep," *Survey*. Vol. 69 (October 1933) 344.

³²Public Act 201 of 1933, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1933) 303-307; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 40.



Children's Aid Society and a recognized social work professional, took a leave from his private position to serve as administrator. William Haber, an associate professor of economics at the University of Michigan who would succeed Johnson as administrator one year later, was appointed a field supervisor.³³ Michigan had created a state emergency welfare relief commission earlier in the year to oversee distribution of RFC funds, but only one member of the original SEWRC also served on the commission for SERA: Charles Bender, a banker from Grand Rapids. The commission created six months later included Bender, Will Norton of Detroit and Earnest Brooks of Holland. Norton headed the Children's Fund of Michigan and also led the Detroit Community Fund (later the United Way) from 1917 to 1930. Brooks worked in the insurance business.³⁴ The state commission was to ensure that county personnel - both on commissions and in the office staffs - were qualified under federal regulations, and that

³³Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: July 7, 1933; "State Organization for Public Welfare in Michigan," WRSC Report, WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 4, p. 184; George Granger, who would succeed Haber, held a bachelor's degree from the University of Syracuse and had taken graduate courses in social work at the University of Michigan. Granger was a member of the National Association of Social Workers. NASW Records, Box 56, Folder 56, Membership Listing, 1936.

³⁴Norton also was chair of Detroit's Emergency Relief Committee in 1931. Martin Edward Sullivan, "On the Dole": The Relief Issue in Detroit, 1929-1939" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1974) 87; Ortquist, *Depression Politics in Michigan*, 236. See SEWRC Minutes, July 7, 1933; *The William Haber Oral Biography Project: Edited Transcripts*, Tape X, "Michigan in the Thirties," 201; *Holland City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1936) 68. The original commission, created under the Brown-Stout bill passed in January 1933, included the state welfare director (then William S. Carpenter) and two citizens appointed by the governor. The earlier commission received virtually no attention in most studies of the depression period in Michigan and the various responses to it.



the operation of the emergency relief administration remained non-partisan and without interference from local government officials.³⁵ The inclusion of a commission member (Norton) and administrators with social work backgrounds contributed to the commission's willingness to accept FERA policies. They shared the social work philosophy behind FERA, in contrast to other state commissions and many Michigan local officials; thus the commission sought to enforce FERA policies at the local level, rather than allowing local officials free rein. Although staffing and distance limited the state's ability to enforce federal guidelines, they were willing to do so if an administrator reported problems.

SERA's first task - appointing county welfare relief commission members and relief administrators - laid the foundation for the conflicts with local officials over relief that would follow. County WRCs were comprised of three residents of the county, and no supervisor could serve either as a commission member or as administrator. FERA officials hoped to remove politics from relief by requiring trained workers, if possible, or at least supervision by professional social workers. They sought to minimize the granting of jobs as political gifts and also to ensure that relief cases were adequately investigated by professionals. The exclusion of supervisors from this process alienated many supervisors from the WRC even before it began work. Long responsible for relief, many supervisors greatly resented the loss of administrative control. Although case workers

³⁵Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 44.



often consulted supervisors on recipients in their townships or cities, supervisors were on the outside looking in and most did not like it.³⁶

The state commission also approved the appointments of county administrators, who were to handle the daily administration of the programs including the hiring of staff, with the county WRC providing guidance and supervision.³⁷ Each county agency had to have one "trained and experienced investigator" and also at least one supervisor, "trained and experienced in the essential elements of family case work and relief administration."³⁸ Administrators were not always social workers, but investigators were to be, if possible.³⁹ Although many women obtained employment as case workers, investigators and clerical office staff in relief agencies, not all were women. Some social workers were men, and often administrators were also male. Several counties turned to local business executives to head their relief agencies. The gendered professional values connected to social work were the crux of the conflict, but in some cases, the gender of the staff, especially if women served as administrators or investigators, exacerbated conflicts between the WRC and both local officials and relief recipients.⁴⁰

³⁶Brown, *Public Relief*, 274-276.

³⁷Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 46.

³⁸Carothers, *Chronology*, FERA Rules and Regulations No. 3, p. 7.

³⁹Brown, *Public Relief*, 274-276.

⁴⁰The issue of social work and gender will be dealt with to a much greater extent in Chapter Four.

Approving county welfare relief commissions, and county administrators, was among the first tasks undertaken by the state commission. Funds could not be distributed until county commissions were in place. The state commission approved the Kent County commission July 17, 1933; Van Buren County on July 28, 1933; Saginaw and Marquette counties on August 11, 1933; and Manistee County's commission on August 31, 1933. County administrators were approved for Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren by the end of September.⁴¹ By October, sixty-nine of Michigan's eighty-three counties had established welfare relief commissions.⁴²

Not Without Conflict: FERA Implementation at the County Level

FERA aimed to incorporate professional social work practices into public relief, and the federal funds included in the act empowered the federal agency to strong-arm state and local governments, within some limits. The state/federal supervision and lack of local autonomy, in addition to the required matching of local funds, were the issues that would generate the most conflict as the WRC programs developed. Many local

⁴¹The state commission appointed Louise Armstrong administrator of Manistee County on September 29, 1933. Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: August 31, 1933, September 18, 1933, September 29, 1933.

⁴²Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: July 17, July 28, August 11, and October 13, 1933. Studies of both Illinois and Ohio reveal similar views; both states adhered to the concept that local officials, and not social workers, should administer relief. See David Joseph Maurer, "Public Relief Programs in Ohio, 1929-1939," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1962) 77; Dwayne Charles Cole, "The Relief Crisis in Illinois During the Depression, 1930-1940" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, St. Louis University, 1973) 285-291.



officials wanted to administer and control the relief programs. Rural officials tended to be the most vocal against federal and state intrusion, despite the funds that came with it. They also resented the infusion of social work practice into public relief, as many believed that such a system was unwieldy, inefficient, and costly. This scenario was in contrast to Baltimore, a city which did not have a municipal public welfare department until required to do so by FERA, but which accepted the infusion of social work practice into the program.⁴³ Jo Ann Argersinger found that the critical problems in implementing the New Deal in Baltimore were the lack of support from local officials, and conflicts between public social workers and private agencies. Baltimore city officials (and Maryland's state administration) had disagreements with FERA officials over relief contributions, but local autonomy and control over the administration of relief were not central to these problems, as they were in Michigan.⁴⁴ A desire for local control was also not a critical issue in Boston, according to Charles Trout. Trout argues that political conflict among local politicians was the key problem in implementing the New Deal programs.⁴⁵

⁴³Jo Ann E. Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore: People and Government in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 22-28. City officials first only provided funds to private agencies for relief, and resisted establishing a city Department of Public Welfare for fear that it would become permanent.

⁴⁴Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 32, 36, 206-207, 211-212. Argersinger's focus is the interactions of the various levels of government, as well as the citizen response it engendered.

⁴⁵Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression and the New Deal*, 158. Boston officials also had conflicts with FERA, and Massachusetts did lose control of its ERA, but a demand for local control was not the key issue. State and local contributions to relief



Few records of local relief agencies are available, but other sources permit the reconstruction of this story. Local newspaper reports, county and city meeting records, social agency reports and WRC publications reveal both the conflict and cooperation. One county relief administrator, Louise Armstrong of Manistee County, wrote a lengthy memoir of her experiences and detailed the relationships between herself, her office and local officials in an illuminating account of this important period in Michigan social welfare history. Although her memoir is of course just one administrator's viewpoint, Armstrong does highlight issues and trends appearing in other counties. This section will first describe events in the three case study counties, and will then outline the establishment of the WRC as described by Armstrong.

Counties reacted with varying hostility toward SERA and the local WRC. Van Buren and Manistee counties were among the most resistant, while Saginaw and Marquette officials developed a more cooperative relationship with SERA. Several factors affected the nature of the relief negotiations between state and local officials, including partisan politics, the nature of the local economy, the county's need for relief, and the county's financial condition. Some counties, like Van Buren, greatly resented their exclusion from emergency relief administration, and were extremely reluctant to provide financial support for a program they believed to be wasteful, inefficient and overly generous. Counties who resisted SERA's procedures and programs believed they could stretch federal and state relief funds further, and thus could provide both poor relief and tax relief without further straining their own budgets. In contrast, Marquette County

were a problem, but political infighting was the larger problem, Trout argues.



welcomed federal and state funds, and worked to coordinate relief activities between existing agencies and the WRC; many officials felt that the funds meant that state officials should have significant control over those funds. In addition, the extremely high numbers of residents on relief in Marquette, and throughout the Upper Peninsula, made federal and state relief funds critical in the eyes of local officials. A convergence of different factors, with many possible variations, produced the range of responses among counties to SERA and the county's WRC.

Van Buren County's WRC opened its offices in the basement of the Olney National Bank September 19, 1933. E.M. Zuver of Hartford was chair of the commission, Gail Cavanaugh of Paw Paw was vice chairperson, and Cecil Runhan of South Haven was secretary. Van Buren's county agency was staffed largely by women. The commission hired Margaret Woolcott of Watervliet, a Hartford teacher for several years, as county administrator. Two other women, Caroline Hale of South Haven and Louise Wilkinson of Paw Paw, were deputy administrators.⁴⁶ Van Buren County's governing board was less than enthusiastic about the new law, despite its acute financial crisis by late 1933. Although the first reported task of the new office staff was to meet with local supervisors to ascertain needs and to avoid duplication, actions by the board of supervisors indicated a decided lack of interest in the local emergency relief program. The minutes of the Van Buren County Board of Supervisors reveal a pattern of inattention if not contempt for the new program. They did approve the use of a typewriter

⁴⁶"New Welfare Board Opens Offices Here," *Hartford Day Spring*, September 20, 1933.



and two file cabinets by the WRC on a 20-1 vote October 10, 1933, but tabled "until some future time" a request to use highway funds for a work relief project, under the direction of the WRC, at the same meeting.⁴⁷ Numerous other communications regarding the WRC were also tabled, with no discussion or description in the minutes, including a letter from the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission at the same October 10 meeting, and a letter from Governor William Comstock regarding emergency welfare relief on January 8, 1934. Both were tabled with no action taken.⁴⁸ According to local newspaper reports, Comstock's letter included a request to use the county's share of gasoline tax money (\$11,000) for part of the county's contribution to emergency relief. Although the minutes record no formal action, the *Hartford Day Spring* reported that the supervisors refused to comply with the request, although not through formal vote. One supervisor called the governor's proposal "an insult to every board of supervisors in the state."⁴⁹

⁴⁷*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, October 10, 1933, 34-35. The proceedings of the county board of supervisors for 1934 and early 1935 are missing from the series that is housed in the Paw Paw County Clerk's office, but newspaper reports covering the county meetings are remarkably accurate. I am relying on that source only for the period not covered in the surviving minutes. It is significant to note that supervisors' minutes, recorded by the county clerk, rarely include discussion of issues, other than to note that a discussion took place. Thus newspaper accounts often provide a much more complete account of the debates that occurred at those meetings.

⁴⁸*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, October 10, 1933, p. 34, January 8, 1934, p. 74.

⁴⁹"Solons Refuse Cash to Governor: County Not To Yield Gas Tax to Relief Fund," *Hartford Day Spring*, January 10, 1934, 1.



Key reasons behind the county's extreme opposition to FERA were the loss of local autonomy and the issue of local fund contribution. The *Hartford Day Spring* reported that there were "murmurs of dissatisfaction with the manner in which county welfare relief is to be administered" under the new program. A part of their displeasure rested on their belief that the new administrative set-up would not provide much financial relief for the county or its taxpayers. Supervisors argued that not only were they required to fund one-third of the new relief program, under federal law, but also retained financial responsibility for mothers' pensions, the county infirmary and hospitalization costs. Van Buren County did not see FERA as the solution to its serious financial crisis but rather an unwelcome intrusion.⁵⁰ Supervisors sought tax relief for the county's taxpayers, and FERA was not the answer in their eyes. Again, tax relief took precedence over the needs of the county's poor and unemployed.

Supervisors also opposed federal work relief programs, from the Civil Works Administration to the Works Progress Administration. As federal programs they fell under federal supervision, and local officials had little say in who was hired on those projects. Under earlier work programs using county funds or state highway funds, the county's supervisors recommended men for projects from their own townships. But work projects now fell under the county WRC, which coordinated work assignments. Some supervisors resented the loss of that authority, again believing they knew best who needed

⁵⁰"Supervisors End October Session: Look for Spots to Further Cut County Budget," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 25, 1933, p. 1.



and deserved aid.⁵¹ They also disliked the project application process, arguing "that CWA projects were obtained only by pilgrimages to Lansing."⁵² Louise Armstrong reported similar feelings in Manistee, where local officials sought to determine who would be assigned work relief. She argued that supervisors, portrayed extremely negatively in her work, wanted to assign friends and relatives to work relief projects. Armstrong had to call in state officials, she wrote, to prevent federal regulation violations. While Van Buren officials resisted state control in much the same way, it is not clear that their motivations were the same as alleged by Armstrong about the Manistee supervisors. Van Buren officials argued that they could administer relief more efficiently and in a cost-effective manner.⁵³

Marquette County opened its WRC offices in October 13, 1933 in Marquette, although it also registered applicants at various township locations throughout the county. The commission first sought to register the unemployed and then endeavored to find employment for them on public works projects. Immediate direct relief would be provided if needed, to carry applicants until work relief could be found.⁵⁴ The county's commission was headed by C.C. Cowpland of Ishpeming. Arthur Jacques, later to be a

⁵¹"Hartford Will Have Share in Road 'Relief,'" *Hartford Day Spring*. November 4, 1931, 1, 6; "Solons Refuse Cash to Governor," *Hartford Day Spring*. January 10, 1934, 1.

⁵²"Solons Refuse Cash to Governor," *Hartford Day Spring*. January 10, 1934, 1.

⁵³Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 180-183.

⁵⁴"Office Opened in Marquette To Help Needy," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 14, 1933.

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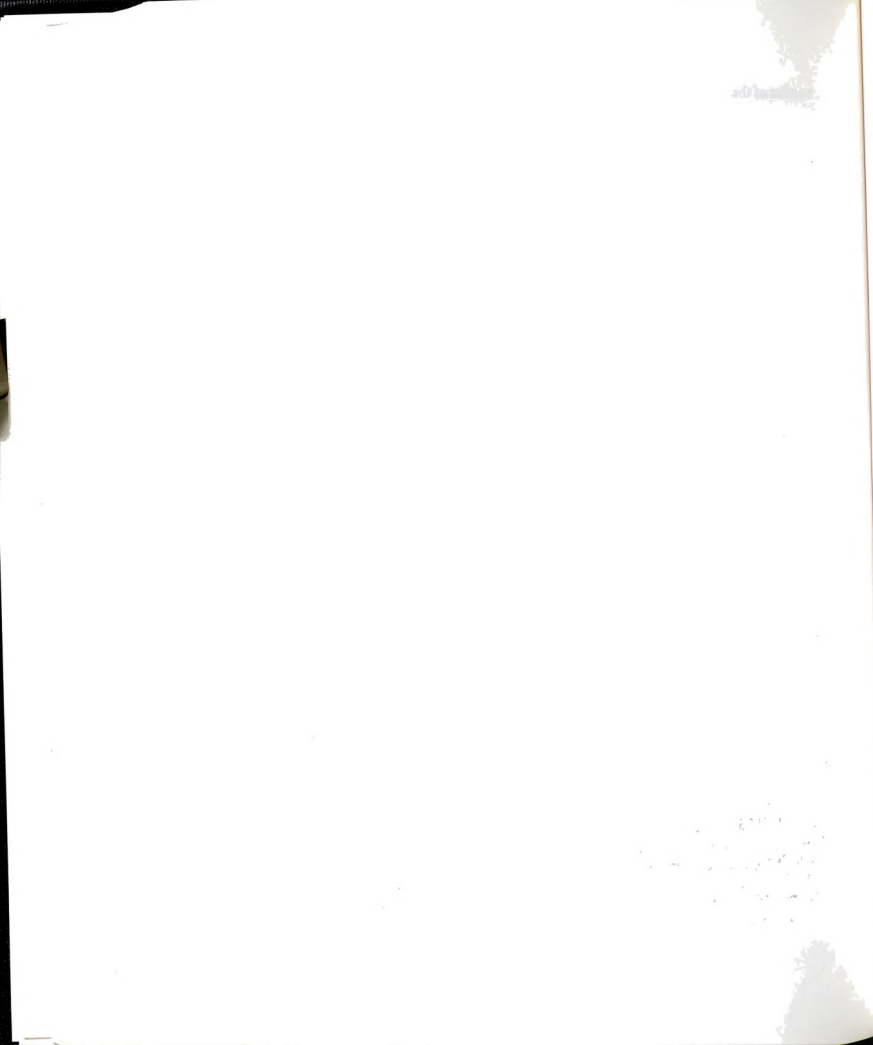
member of the state's Welfare Relief Study Commission and a Marquette city resident, and James A. Thomas of Negaunee were also named to the commission.⁵⁵ Both Jacques and Thomas were businessmen in their respective communities.⁵⁶ Initially the state commission appointed K.I. Sawyer, superintendent of the county road commission, as Marquette County administrator at its August 31 meeting, but he apparently did not take office, as the county WRC submitted the name of George Jackman as county administrator a few weeks later.⁵⁷ Jackman's appointment was announced in the September 9 issue of *The Daily Mining Journal*; the state commission, however, refused to confirm that appointment in its September 18 meeting on the advice of Johnson.⁵⁸ The state commission refused to reconsider its decision, despite protests from Marquette

⁵⁵"County Board Named To Aid Welfare Group," *The Daily Mining Journal*, August 22, 1933, p. 6.

⁵⁶Jacques was general manager of James Pickands & Co., a coal company, and also was secretary-treasurer of Marquette Dock Co. Thomas worked for Thomas Heating & Plumbing in Negaunee. Jacques was elected mayor of Marquette a few years later. See *Marquette City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1929) 139; *Marquette City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1937) 17 and 110; *Marquette-Ishpeming-Negaunee City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1939) 453.

⁵⁷K.I. Sawyer was named "acting administrator" at the commission's joint meeting with the Road Commission and County Board of Supervisors' Executive Committee on August 29, 1933. *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, August 30, 1933, p. 163

⁵⁸Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: August 31, 1933, September 18, 1933; "County Relief Head Named By Commissioners," *The Daily Mining Journal*, September 9, 1933, p. 2. The minutes do not specify why Jackman's appointment was rejected. Jackman was not a resident of Marquette in 1929, but was listed in the 1937 directory. No occupation was listed. He was not in the 1939 directory. *Marquette City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1937) 109; *Marquette-Ishpeming-Negaunee City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1939) 213.



County, and instead named Cowpland as temporary administrator.⁵⁹ Jackman announced the commission's plans to register the unemployed in the October 5 edition of the newspaper, and was referred to as the county administrator. But in November, his title was assistant administrator; likely Cowpland served as county administrator on paper to satisfy the state commission, while Jackman handled the day-to-day administration of the emergency welfare relief office.⁶⁰ The state commission removed Cowpland, calling him a "weak administrator," in early 1935.⁶¹ William Fountain, appointed county administrator after Cowpland resigned, did not possess a "professional" social work background. He had been an investigator for the superintendents of the poor and was a superintendent with the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company before working for the county.⁶²

⁵⁹Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: September 29, 1933.

⁶⁰"Negaunee Set for Survey of Needy Persons," *The Daily Mining Journal*, October 5, 1933, p. 1; "Close Offices at Which Needy Are Registered," *The Daily Mining Journal*, November 10, 1933, p. 5; "Relief Forces of Peninsula Meet Saturday," *The Daily Mining Journal*, January 12, 1934, p.3.

⁶¹Haber requested Cowpland's resignation as administrator at a meeting held January 9, 1935, in Haber's Lansing office. Cowpland remained on the commission. State Relief Administrator diary, William Haber Papers, Box 33, Wednesday, November 28, 1934, January 9, 1935. Rose Porter, a Family Service Association field investigator, noted that the public agency in Marquette County lacked social work training and experience, an indirect commentary on the role of business professionals, rather than social workers, in the county relief administration. She hoped that the Family Welfare Society might help change this, but little headway was made, according to Porter, in the first few months of the WRC. Her observations remained valid as the agency continued to operate. "Consultation Visit," October 7-8, 1933 and June 16, 1934, Marquette Correspondence 1928-1935, FSA, Box 58.

⁶²Fountain began work as an investigator for the Superintendents of the Poor in February 1933. SERA Administrator Diary, August 23, 1935, William Haber Papers, Box 33; *Marquette City Directory*, 1929, 118; *Marquette City Directory*, 1937, 86;



Virtually all of Marquette County's welfare administrators had business or county administration experience, and were not professional social workers, as had been the case when they appointed business executive William Meyers poor director. The county officials, and they were not alone, believed that business and financial skills were critical in relief administration, rather than the expertise of a professional social worker. Many counties and cities followed suit in the hiring of administrators and other social welfare staff, where possible.

Saginaw County's board included two Saginaw residents (Elsie Mershon and George Weadock) and Frank A. Greenfielder of Chesaning.⁶³ Mershon, a single woman in her 60s and president of the Associated Charities of Saginaw, had extensive experience in the private social work field and advocated using professional social work methods, including case work.⁶⁴ George Weadock was an attorney.⁶⁵ Weadock resigned later that month, announcing that he had other more pressing duties, and the state commission replaced him with Clement Quinn. Quinn, who worked in the local timber industry,

Marquette-Ishpeming-Negaunee City Directory, 1939, 154; *Proceedings of the Board of the Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, February 19, 1933.

⁶³Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: August 11, 1933; "County Relief Board Chosen," *Saginaw Daily News*, August 19, 1933, p. 1.

⁶⁴Rosemary Reynolds, "Summary of Contacts from Sept. 1939 to Feb. 1940," Associated Charities, Saginaw Correspondence, FSA, Box 59. The Family Welfare Society of Saginaw sought membership in the FWA in 1939. See also *Saginaw City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1931) 324; *Saginaw City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1933) 253.

⁶⁵*Saginaw City Directory* (Detroit: R.C. Polk & Co., 1931) 475.



became chairperson of the commission.⁶⁶ The state commission appointed Lucius E. Howlett county administrator at its September 18 meeting. Howlett, who was not a resident of Saginaw, had worked for the poor commissions in Oakland and Bay County before his appointment as administrator of the Saginaw County WRC.⁶⁷ As in Detroit, the City of Saginaw's poor department investigated emergency relief cases for the WRC, and was reimbursed by the county for two-thirds of the funds expended. The other third was their share of the relief burden. Townships were charged individually for their share of relief costs, and the county allocated no direct funds for emergency relief.⁶⁸

Manistee County, like Van Buren County, experienced significant conflict with the state ERA, as seen in newspaper accounts as well as Louise Armstrong's memoir. Armstrong published her lengthy account of her three years as emergency relief administrator in Manistee County, in northern lower Michigan, in 1938. It is the only first-hand account of a county relief administrator in Michigan that I have found. Armstrong revealed a deep sense of compassion for the people her office was to serve - relief recipients - and an equally deep contempt for the local officials for which she held little regard. Her title, "We Too Are the People," and the book's contents allied her with the people her office served, rather than the county and city's leadership. But she also

⁶⁶Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: September 18 and September 29, 1933; "Relief Funds Need is Shown," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 13, 1933, p. 1-2.

⁶⁷*Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 9, 1939, 28-29.

⁶⁸*Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw*, October 31, 1933, November 7, 1933.

categorized the clients, at least in her mind, as worthy and unworthy, and commented extensively on ethnic and racial "tendencies" regarding behavior and the need for relief. The book was received extremely well by many critics, including those in the social work field and FERA, and SERA Administrator William Haber had nothing but praise for the book.⁶⁹ Local residents of Manistee were less enthralled with it, in large part because it presented an extremely negative picture of them and their communities. Many also disagreed with her pro-social work perspective, much as Van Buren officials would have. Armstrong minced no words when it came to the selfish politicians who simply wanted to control relief and the federal money, and who deeply resented her intrusion and the interference of other state and federally-appointed officials. The county residents appeared backward and selfish in her account, which prompted a rebuttal series entitled "We Too Know the People" in the *Manistee Examiner* by Dr. Kathryn M. Bryan. Bryan

⁶⁹Letter from William Haber to Armstrong dated May 31, 1938, Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Correspondence folder; Letter from Haber to George Granger dated May 1, 1938, then acting administrator of SERA, William Haber Papers, Box 4, Correspondence. Haber recommended the book to Granger: "it is an effective and dramatically told story of the job of a county relief administrator." He considered it "one of the finest volumes on the relief problem which has been published during the depression." Granger agreed in a reply dated June 3, 1938.

Positive reviews also appeared in many newspapers, including the *Grand Rapids Press*, *Ann Arbor News*, *The Grand Rapids Herald*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. The *Manistee County Pioneer Press* was "perturbed" by the book, and believed that the problems of the county "might better be forgotten rather than published in a book for nationwide perusal." The *Manistee Examiner* also criticized the book, and resented many of the national reviewers' applause. Clippings are from Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews folder. See also Lawrence McCracken, "Manistee in Turmoil as Book Hits Blow at Local Pride," *Detroit Free Press* September 25, 1938, p. 8; Lewis Gannett, "Books and Things," *The New York Herald Tribune* June 3, 1938; R.L. Duffus, "The Private Lives of Americans Who Are On Relief," *The New York Times Book Review* June 5, 1938, p. 3.



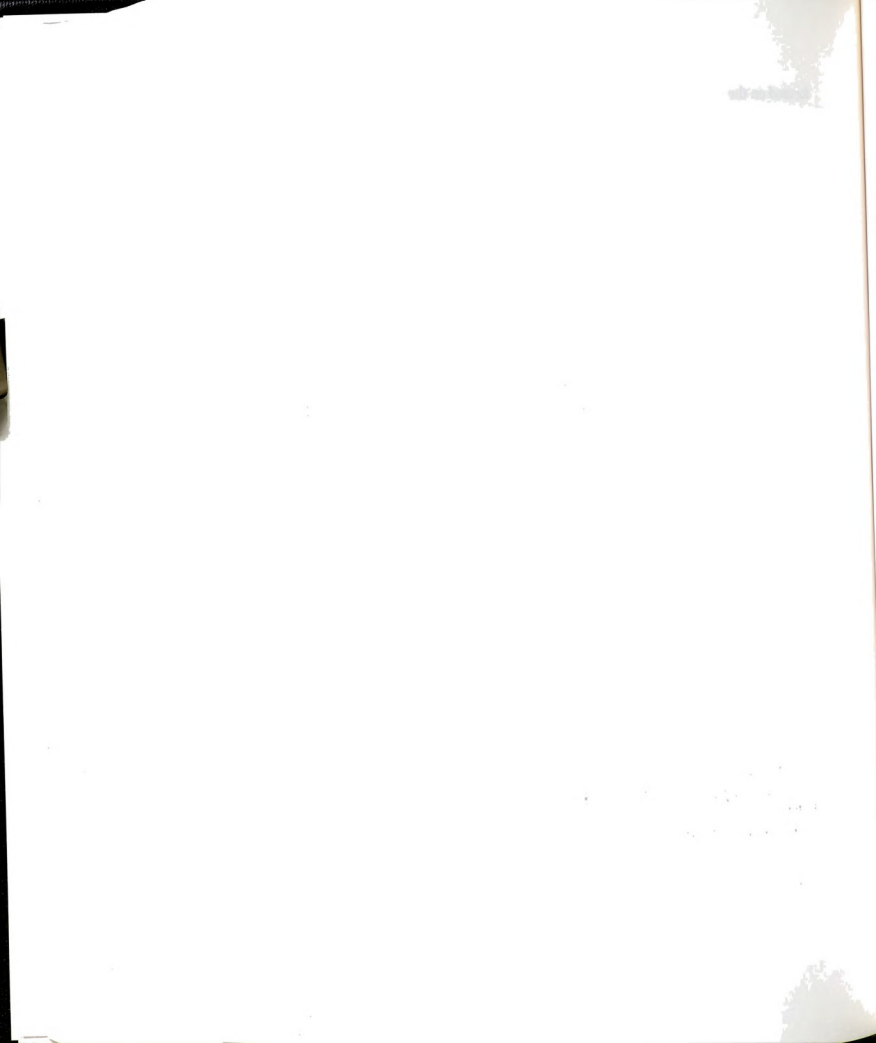
focused on the lessons one learned from living in a small, rural community with the abundance of natural resources nearby.⁷⁰ While Armstrong's opinions of local officials may have been exaggerated, the issues that she highlighted, including the desire for local control of funds and administration, are found operating other counties, including Van Buren, and also proved critical in the 1938 and 1939 welfare reform debates. Clearly her experience was not unique, although the degree and magnification may be skewed in her book.

Armstrong was a Chicago resident who summered in Manistee for several years. After the depression hit, she and her husband moved to their Manistee summer home year-round, as they could live on their modest income comfortably free of a mortgage. Fortunately they had a house - already paid for - to live in and both secured jobs with New Deal agencies. (Her husband was a fee appraiser for the Home Owners' Loan Corporation.)⁷¹ She worked for three years in the 1910s at the Northwestern University Settlement, and it was her social service experience that attracted the interest of state officials looking for a relief administrator.⁷² According to Armstrong, she was approached by the local state representative because he could find no other trained social

⁷⁰Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews, Folders 6 and 7. The *Manistee Examiner* was a bi-weekly publication that survived for just a few years in the 1930s. It was apparently unable to compete with the community's other major newspapers, the daily *Manistee News-Advocate*, and the bi-weekly, *Manistee County Pioneer Press*.

⁷¹Louise V. Armstrong, *We Too Are the People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938) 10-11, 81.

⁷²Biographical Sketch, Louise Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Miscellaneous, p. 3.



workers in the area; after receiving the endorsement of the field director, she began work.⁷³ The state commission approved her appointment September 29, 1933.⁷⁴

Armstrong's first task was to hire her staff: an accountant, four case workers and herself as administrator. She began interviewing applicants and hired two women with college educations (one a nurse and the other a teacher) and another who had no college education but was self-educated and had been active in local charity work. These three women remained with the office until the cutbacks of 1935, and were joined by numerous other case workers at various times. The fourth case worker was the son of the state representative who initially recruited her.⁷⁵ Armstrong looked for education - either formal or informal - as well as energy and common sense. Armstrong, criticized often as a newcomer to the county and accused of getting the position as a political favor, soundly defended her hiring. She believed her status as an outsider gave her a more objective view of the people - both relief recipients and local officials - and she firmly believed that a social work background was essential. The only other adequate applicant was the local Red Cross director, she wrote, and she believed that the woman's long-time residence in the area, in addition to her older age, were hindrances.⁷⁶

⁷³Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 57-62.

⁷⁴Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: September 29, 1933.

⁷⁵Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 76. She hired the young man despite reservations by the Field Director, she wrote, and he proved to be a good case worker. But he resigned several months later. He was an official in the local Democratic Party, and had to choose between that position and his job with the ERA. He chose the former.

⁷⁶Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 67-70, 81.



State officials instructed Armstrong to work with local public officials, including the poor commissioners and township supervisors, and also private agencies for referrals for cases. But there was little need for referrals, as people flooded the office the first day it was open. Armstrong reported that she took more than forty applications that first day, as her case workers were visiting another office for training and observation: "In less than half an hour the main office began filling up with the old people, the sick people, the widows and the like, who had been receiving aid from the Poor Commission."⁷⁷

Armstrong took the names and addresses of all applicants, as well as a brief description of their situation. She then assigned them to the four case workers to investigate immediately. All those deemed eligible for relief would receive direct relief, in the form of grocery orders, until work projects were established. Then those who could work would be assigned to work projects.⁷⁸

Although virtually all counties in Michigan had the required WRC, this did not mean that township supervisors and superintendents of the poor were entirely excluded from the process. On the contrary, in Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties, township supervisors continued to be consulted on most cases, particularly those in rural areas. WRC workers in Van Buren County often consulted the local township supervisor as one of three required reference checks on new applications, and usually followed their lead. WRC workers also sought suggestions from township supervisors on long-term cases, and informed officials who was on relief in their county. Both WRC staff and

⁷⁷Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 83-84.

⁷⁸Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 62.



township supervisors in Marquette County saw the supervisor as a part of the investigation process.⁷⁹ Township supervisors were consulted on a less systematic basis in Saginaw County, although they were permitted to write relief orders on cases approved by the ERA. Such attitudes are less overt in records after the Social Security Act was implemented in Michigan, but remained a part of the case file records in the earlier days of the New Deal.

Most applicants received aid in the form of a grocery order, particularly until a work relief assignment could be arranged for employable family members. Although cash relief existed, most Michigan counties used grocery orders. Less than one percent of all relief extended in the first year of FERA in Michigan was in the form of cash relief.⁸⁰ Grocery orders had to be taken to local merchants and filled for the amount specified; item restrictions also applied in many cases. Thus recipients announced that they were relief clients each time they used the orders to purchase food or clothing for their families. SERA did prohibit the use of public commissaries to fill relief orders, such as the system used in Grand Rapids and described in Chapter Two.⁸¹ Studies of the use of cash relief highlighted the benefits to recipients, including that "it maintains the normal habits of

⁷⁹"Welfare Activities in Counties - Survey Report," Van Buren County, October 15, 1936, WRSC Records, Box 15, Folder 3, p. 1; *Proceedings, Marquette County Supervisors*, November 13, 1935, p. 335. ERA case files clearly document the consultation by ERA workers with township officials on the worthiness of applicants' requests for aid. The comments on the Van Buren County ERA case files refer to the 133 surviving records housed at the State Archives of Michigan in Lansing.

⁸⁰Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 77.

⁸¹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 75; Brown, *Public Relief*, 242-244.



shopping and bargain hunting and eliminates the humiliation to the client which is attached to the relief order.” The use of cash relief in Michigan increased markedly in the second year of the ERA, from the previously mentioned one percent to nearly 27 percent in November 1934. The percentage remained between 19 and 29 percent for the rest of the fiscal year, a trend that SERA officials applauded in their second annual report. The state trend toward more cash relief mirrored national trends, although Michigan was one of several states in which this trend was more pronounced.⁸² Van Buren, Marquette, and Saginaw counties all used grocery orders before the advent of the Social Security Act and categorical aids. After that, orders were used only in cases in which recipients had difficulty managing their cash grants.⁸³ Although the SERA’s report lauded the use of cash relief, agitation for a shift to cash sometimes came from the local governments or residents, especially in the case of relief workers. The City of Saginaw sought to pay its relief workers in cash rather than grocery orders in late 1934, appealing to SERA director Haber for that policy change.⁸⁴ Relief workers in Delta County in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula circulated a petition seeking cash payments for work and sent it to federal

⁸²Joanna C. Colcord and Russell H. Kurtz, “More Cash Relief,” *Survey*. Vol. 71 (May 1935) 151-152.

⁸³Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 45-46. For a description of Wayne County’s transition to cash relief, see Joanna C. Colcord, *Cash Relief* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936) 86-98.

⁸⁴“Council To Ask New Relief Plan: Dole Workers May Get Cash,” *Saginaw Daily News* October 16, 1934, p. 1 and 10.

officials. The action prompted the county to change its policy to cash relief.⁸⁵ Cash grants for direct relief were less common before the Social Security Act.

There was a class bias in the use of cash relief, however. Some administrators and social workers saw the Depression relief recipient as different from earlier relief applicants. More middle-class families suffered unemployment, and thus relief agency employees more easily blamed the problems on circumstance and forces beyond the individual's control, rather than on the failings of the applicant. For some recipients, this meant "different" treatment, including the granting of cash payments in direct relief, simply because the applicant was from the middle class. Martin Sullivan found this preferential treatment operating in the Detroit Department of Public Welfare, and it also appeared in Van Buren County. But while Sullivan notes that equalizing treatment of applicants was a goal of FERA, the following case shows that not all agencies followed the federal lead.⁸⁶ A Van Buren WRC case worker, following the orders of her supervisor, granted Walter Schneider cash relief when he applied for aid in April of 1938, because they believed he "represents one of the higher types of families in this community." Schneider, who held a law degree from the University of Michigan, had applied for OAA, but the application was still pending. He was unable to work, and he and his sister were living on a small income from boarders. Case workers did not require the usual collateral form, with the required three references, "since [Mr. Schneider's]

⁸⁵Letter dated September 20, 1933 from Fred Johnson, SERA, to Hugh O'Donnell, FERA, FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Folder D.

⁸⁶Martin Edward Sullivan, "'On the Dole': The Relief Issue in Detroit, 1929-1939," Unpublished Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1974, 152.

reputation is high, and it is positive that aid is needed in this case."⁸⁷ Most recipients received grocery orders, but case workers believed Schneider's education and class status warranted preferential treatment, and thus he did not have to use a grocery order to purchase food at the store, which would alert others that he was a relief recipient.

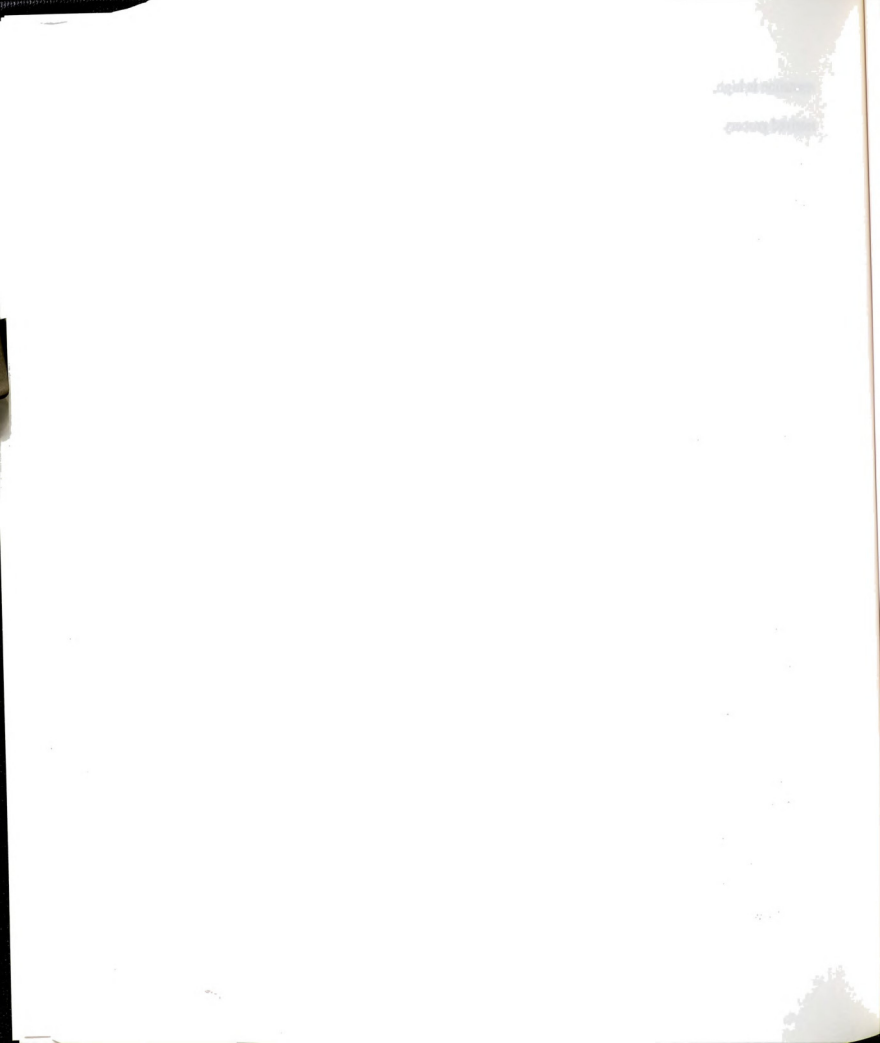
The size of relief grants varied from county to county, and most increased during the second year of FERA. The average grant in the state for the first fiscal year of FERA (ending June 30, 1934) was \$5.18 per month for an individual, and \$21.22 for a family. That average increased to \$9.14 per person the following year (ending June 30, 1935) and \$32.79 per family.⁸⁸ The average grant per family nationally in May 1933, two months before FERA was implemented, was \$15.15; that figure rose to \$24.53 one year later - slightly more than Michigan's average grant. By May 1935, the national average was \$29.33, less than Michigan's average grant.⁸⁹

Breakdowns by counties reveal greater variation in the amount of grants. Although the average grants in all counties increased from the first year to the next, significant differences between counties remained. As Table 3 shows, Van Buren and Saginaw had the lowest average grants, while Wayne County's remained the highest in the state for both years. In the first year of FERA, Marquette ranked seventh; Kent and

⁸⁷Case #13480, VB ERA Records, Box 3 Folder 3, Case history dated April 26, 1938. Schneider received his OAA in May of 1939, and his case was apparently closed.

⁸⁸Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Appendix, Table 3; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, Figure 11, p. 42, Table 16, p. 84 and Appendix, Table VIII.

⁸⁹Brown, *Public Relief*, 249.



Genesee were eleventh and twelfth respectively. Saginaw was forty-eight.⁹⁰ Statewide in the second year of FERA, Genesee ranked eighth and Marquette tenth in the size of grants for families, while Kent County was in seventeenth place and Saginaw was in thirty-third. Van Buren came in at seventy-nine during both years; just four counties paid lower average grants to families that year. Many of the counties paying the lowest grants were in Michigan's southern agricultural region, including Van Buren.⁹¹

Table 3 Average Grants For 1934 and 1935

County	Average 1934 family grant	Average 1934 individual grant	Average 1935 family grant	Average 1935 individual grant
Genesee	\$20.52	\$5.35	\$33.21	\$9.89
Kent	\$20.57	\$4.87	\$29.43	\$8.23
Manistee	\$15.43	\$3.91	\$24.04	NA
Marquette	\$21.01	\$4.43	\$31.62	\$8.56
Saginaw	\$13.85	\$3.71	\$26.14	\$6.06
Van Buren	\$10.17	\$2.62	\$16.86	\$6.36
Wayne	\$28.64	\$6.69	\$43.47	\$11.72
State of MI	\$21.22	\$5.18	\$32.79	\$9.14

Source: Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Appendix, Table 3; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, Figure 11, p. 43, Table 16, p. 84 and Appendix, Table VIII. Grants listed under 1934 refer to average grants for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1934, and grants from 1935 refer to average grants for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1935.

⁹⁰Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 65.

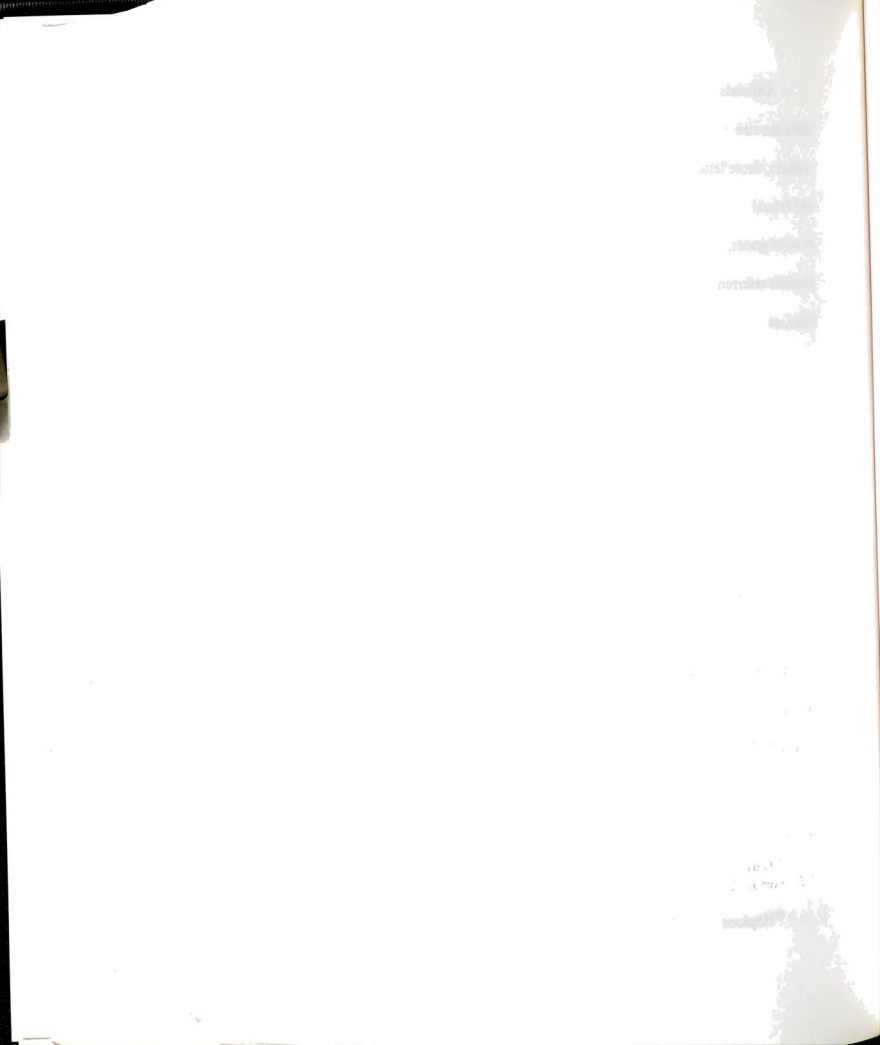
⁹¹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, Figure 11, p. 42-43.

Officials at FERA, SERA and local WRC offices received extensive complaints about the size of grants, both for direct and work relief. Recipients complained to case workers, wrote letters to county administrators, and then voiced their displeasure to state and federal workers. Harry Hopkins agreed with all who complained about the adequacy of relief grants, both for work and direct relief. In recounting his FERA experiences, Hopkins referred to those complaints, which came from those families who received relief, as "the one most truthful allegation" made about relief: "We have never given adequate relief." Hopkins went on to say that officials did the most with the money they had, but that it was never enough.⁹² Food allowances were the first priority, but again budgets were low: "There have been families who have had less than they wanted to eat and little that they liked."⁹³

Variations in grants stemmed from numerous factors, including the amount of local funds contributed for emergency relief, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Other factors included the cost of living and poor relief traditions; areas which had formerly paid low relief rates tended to continue that trend. The availability of work, including seasonal agricultural work, also affected the size of grants, as well as the climate. Fuel costs were much higher in Marquette County than in Van Buren County, and the ability of a family to raise food in a garden or to earn supplemental income in the

⁹²Harry L. Hopkins, *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936) 99.

⁹³Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, 103.



agricultural season was much higher in the latter county.⁹⁴ Gardens were expected of people in areas with suitable soil and climate, and relief could be refused if space was available and applicants failed to attempt to raise a garden.⁹⁵ Agricultural areas, like Van Buren County, also reduced relief rolls during the planting and harvest seasons as officials believed ample work was available with local farmers. This resulted in reduced budgets for some families, and the WRC would not provide relief for single employable men when agricultural work was available. Some clients voluntarily left the relief rolls for the summer months, because they or their family members could find employment until fall arrived. Van Buren, a largely agricultural county, experienced these trends the most of the three counties under study, although all three counties were affected by it.⁹⁶

⁹⁴Similar arguments can be made about variations in grants among states. Contributions by states to relief funds was a major reason for discrepancies in grants. See Patterson, *The New Deal and the States*, 54-55.

⁹⁵Carothers, *Chronology*, 41, 51. FERA ruled that produce, or income from produce, could not be counted against a family's budget, but this rule was not always followed. SERA did collect reports of gardens and produce raised in them from county WRC. See SERA Letter #7, 1934, seeking garden bulletin reports. Michigan State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission Papers, 1934-1939, Box 1, Folder January to June 1934. See also "Ask Relief Clients for 1,000 Gardens," *Hartford Day Spring*, April 24, 1935, p. 1.

⁹⁶Several references to the practice of refusing or reducing aid during the growing season are found in the Van Buren ERA case files. State Emergency Relief Administration Letters #353 dated May 1, 1935 and #579, dated May 18, 1936, reminded county administrators to review relief cases for those who could take temporary work. Complaints about this problem arose, the 1936 letter noted, from farmers and others who could not find enough workers. Work relief projects were also curtailed during agricultural employment periods. See SERA Letter #353 and #579, SEWRC Records, Box 1; see also Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 130.



Manistee County also found its relief rolls reduced during periods when agricultural employment was available.⁹⁷

Rural parts of Saginaw also had agricultural employment available, particularly in the sugar beet industry. Relief clients were expected to accept work if available, but only at a "living wage." When sugar beet company officials asked the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission to deny aid to those families who refused employment in the sugar beet fields, the commission would not "as the amount of wages is not such as will enable [relief clients] to provide for themselves without the aid of relief agencies." It is not clear whether cases thus received supplementation from the WRC or if relief recipients were empowered to refuse sugar beet employment altogether. The SEWRC did rule that "where a living wage is offered for an honest day's work," families refusing such employment should be removed from the relief rolls.⁹⁸ When sugar beet representatives renewed their request just two weeks later, the commission reiterated its earlier stand, noting "that they deemed it their duty in the interest of humanity to see that labor is decently paid," and asked administrator Fred Johnson to inform people "that the Commission was not going to be an instrument in forcing labor into the sugar beet fields at a starvation wage."⁹⁹ Farmers in Manistee County also complained of an inability to secure workers for their fields, but Louise Armstrong argued that they paid "disgracefully

⁹⁷Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 130.

⁹⁸Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: May 23, 1934.

⁹⁹Minutes of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, Box 2, Folder 1: June 6, 1934.

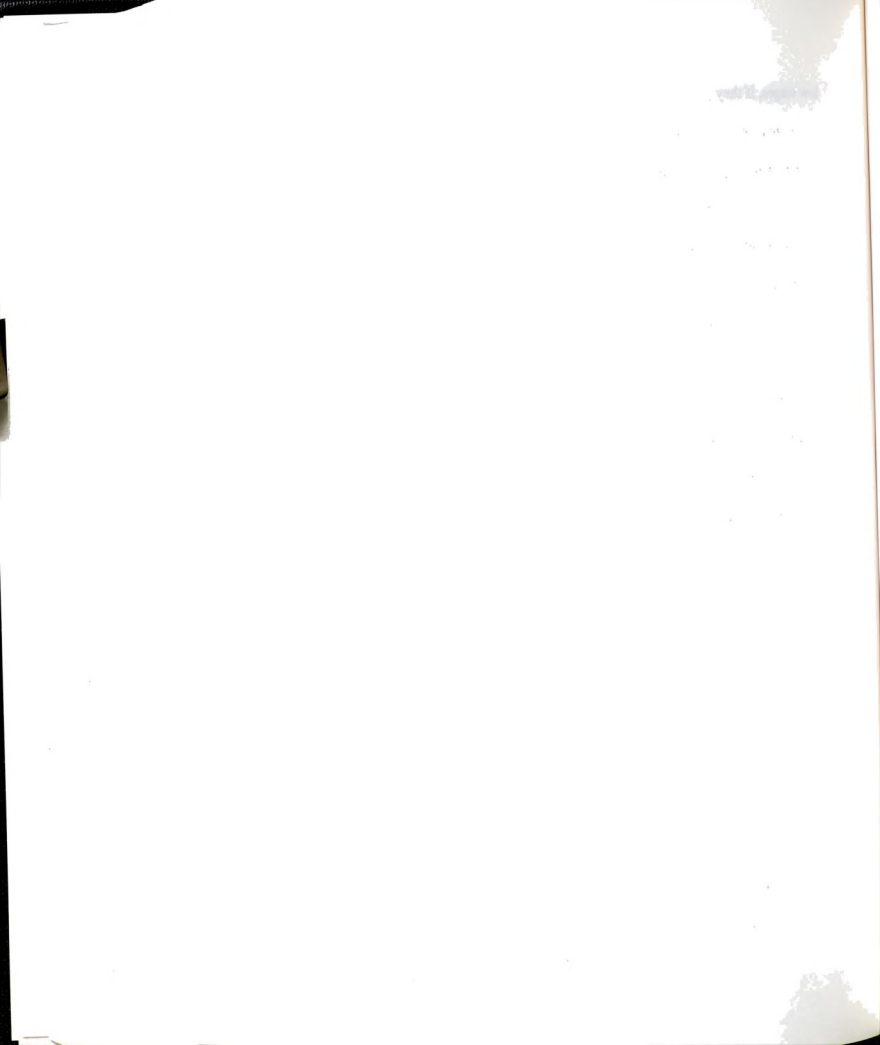


low wages, if they paid cash wages at all;" some farmers only paid their workers with goods, and sometimes at prices far inflated above the market value. Some workers also were not paid anything until the farmer was paid for the crop.¹⁰⁰

Devra Weber found a similar trend in California, where growers protested the granting of relief to migrant workers, either through direct relief or the transient program, arguing that it cost them workers. As in Michigan's sugar beet fields, California's growers found that their wages were far less than relief grants, which were already meager enough. The availability of relief instituted a "de facto minimum wage," Weber argues, and enabled agricultural workers to bargain for better wages.¹⁰¹ The SEWRC rulings did not preclude local agencies from implementing different policies until state or federal officials became aware of them, but it did outline the commission's policy on agriculture employment and relief; wages were to be adequate to replace relief grants at the minimum. Other local discriminatory practices existed, despite federal regulations, including those prohibiting the denial of benefits to people of color and non-citizens. As with other regulations previously described, federal supervision was not thorough enough to prevent suffering by specific groups. As with much of FERA, supervision of WRC policies, including relief for migrant and agricultural workers, diminished with the demise of FERA. These placed control over more aspects of WRC policy in the local officials' hands, with the federal government instituting the WPA program, a work program, and turning over direct relief control to local units. The shift in policy was

¹⁰⁰Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 130-131.

¹⁰¹Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 127-128.



nicknamed Harry Hopkins's "work or starve edict," and while it did not remove all agricultural and migrant workers from relief, it did reduce their numbers.¹⁰²

Conflicts over Local Contributions

Another significant factor in the size of grants was the amount of federal and state funds available. Estimated ahead of time, grants could prove inadequate if relief rolls increased more than anticipated, thus requiring the reduction of all grants because of fund shortages.¹⁰³ Often the problem stemmed from a lack of local contribution to emergency relief funds; once federal funds were exhausted, the expected share of local monies was intended to fund relief. But in counties that rarely provided funds, such as Van Buren and Manistee counties, grants were reduced and sometimes eliminated. This was especially true by late 1935, when SERA and FERA officials began to withdraw state and federal funds from counties that refused to provide local matching funds. The conflicts centered not only on whether the county could pay, but who (often state-appointed social workers) was administering the funds; county officials were often reluctant to provide money over which they had no administrative control.

During the first year of FERA, Michigan counties contributed varied amounts to the local county WRC, with the state average at a low 6.18 percent. The availability of funds was a major reason, but the county officials' attitude toward SERA and the relief

¹⁰²Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 129-130; Brown, *Public Relief*, 301. FERA was replaced by WPA, for employable relief recipients, and the Social Security Act, a long-term program designed to serve those individuals who were unemployable.

¹⁰³Brown, *Public Relief*, 249-251.

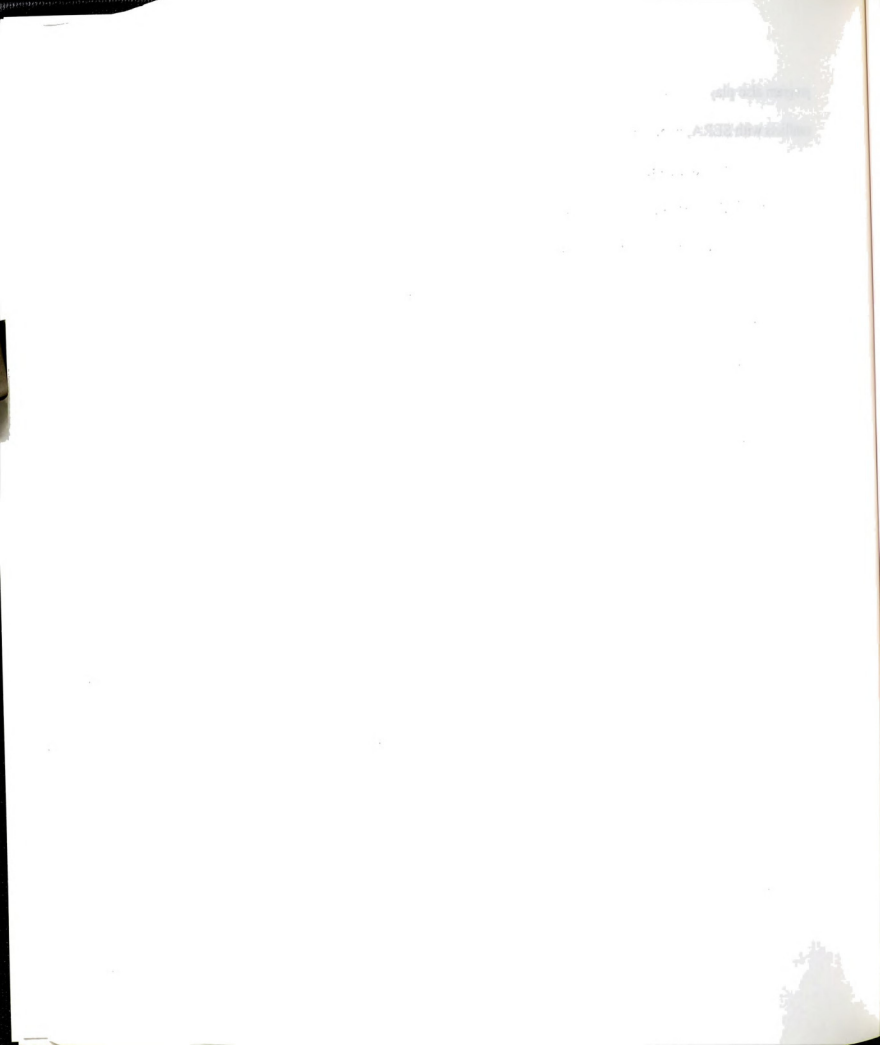


program also played a role. Counties like Van Buren and Manistee, which had major conflicts with SERA, contributed the least. Saginaw and Marquette, whose relationships with SERA were more amiable, were among those counties contributing the highest percentage of relief funds statewide. As seen in Table 4, Saginaw was ranked third with a 27.86 percent contribution and Marquette was in eighth with 23.64 percent. Van Buren, which would later nearly lose state funding over the issue of inadequate local contributions, contributed less than 5 percent, placing it in forty-seventh place among the eighty-three counties.¹⁰⁴ Overall for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1934, local funds accounted for slightly more than ten percent of all relief funds expended, while state dollars contributed twenty-two percent and the rest - more than two-thirds - came from federal dollars.¹⁰⁵ In the first report of the SERA, director William Haber reported that no county was able to contribute more than thirty-eight percent of relief costs, in part because few counties had the money available.¹⁰⁶ Contributions from most counties increased in the second year, and Saginaw and Marquette remained in the top third of percentage contributions: Saginaw ranked ninth and Marquette fifteenth. Wayne County fell in at fifty-seven, with Genesee at sixty-eight and Kent at seventy. Van Buren was one of the few counties to actually contribute a smaller share the second year, when just three counties provided a smaller percentage of relief funds than Van Buren. Manistee did

¹⁰⁴Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Figure 12.

¹⁰⁵Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Figure 9.

¹⁰⁶Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 54.



worse than Van Buren both years, however, and was one of those three counties that provided less the second year.¹⁰⁷

Table 4 Percentage of relief funds from counties

County	Percent of local funds for emergency relief - FY 1934	Percent of local funds for emergency relief - FY 1935
Genesee	1.63	9.40
Kent	1.69	9.06
Manistee	0.03	3.19
Marquette	23.64	23.35
Saginaw	27.86	27.05
Van Buren	4.96	3.65
Wayne	3.96	11.32
State average	6.09	13.42

Source: Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Figure 12, Appendix Table 3; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, Figure 8, 35.

County administrators and WRC members played a crucial role in the negotiations for local contributions. They were expected to provide detailed information about the relief efforts, including costs, case load information, and the status of work projects. They were told to use the threat of withdrawal of federal and state funds as leverage in negotiations of local fund contributions. But they also were allowed to use their judgments in situations where counties or cities could not afford the expected one-third. County administrators were told not to wait for local officials to come to them, but to

¹⁰⁷Table 3; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, Figure 8, 35.

crystal size and shape
beverage and food industry

crystallization
process

crystallization
rate
control

crystallization
time

crystallization

initiate contact before annual budget meetings, usually held in October.¹⁰⁸ By the second year of FERA, they also were expected to help “sell” the ERA structure, and to persuade local officials that a professionally run social work agency was preferred and more efficient than the old poor relief system.¹⁰⁹ This became particularly important as Michigan entered its welfare reorganization debates following passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. In recalling those years, Haber remembered the conflicts with state and local officials over the relief administration under FERA, and the need to persuade them of its merits. “It was not well received, because even in those days there was still a prevailing, a widely held point of view, that people on relief didn’t want to work,” he recalled forty years later.¹¹⁰ Proponents of the new relief administration under FERA faced an uphill battle in many areas, including some Michigan counties, combating entrenched ideas about the need to stigmatize relief, its connection to personal failings, and the need for local control of relief administration. Usually recipients paid the greatest price as a result of these disputes; they often received smaller grants, or relief was cut off entirely for periods of time, leaving them with few options.

¹⁰⁸SERA Letter #173, October 5, 1934, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder October-December 1934; SERA Letter #360, May 10, 1935, Folder April-June 1935; and Letter from SERA Administrator William Haber to all county boards of supervisors, dated October 1, 1935, Folder October-December 1935.

¹⁰⁹SERA Letter #468, October 7, 1935, and SERA Letter, November 11, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder October to December 1935; and SERA Letter #544, March 31, 1936, Folder January-March 1936.

¹¹⁰*William Haber Oral Biography Project*, transcripts, p. 205.

Van Buren and Manistee were among those counties with the most extreme conflicts over local fund contributions for relief. Manistee's emergency relief agency actually shut down over a funding dispute with the state, and Van Buren's agency nearly did. The supervisors of both counties resisted the state's control over relief administration and its demand for local dollars, in part because both counties faced serious financial problems and difficulties meeting their operating expenses. Saginaw's supervisors were not all supportive of the WRC, but there was little collective resistance by the county against the WRC, in part because of its administrative set-up. Marquette County did provide its share of relief funds for the WRC; its contributions to the WRC were among the highest in the state.

Van Buren County's WRC took over the administration of relief that fall, but by early 1934 sought county funds to aid in their work. Relief funds ran low in January and relief recipients faced large cuts in grants.¹¹¹ Federal funds were exhausted and while more were expected, county aid was needed in the interim. WRC officials lobbied township supervisors to provide some relief aid.¹¹² County supervisors met with state officials in early February to negotiate a way to balance governmental participation, but with little agreement. State and local officials clashed over how relief was to be administered. State officials expected the county to contribute one-third of relief costs until March 1, with the state and federal government providing the remaining two-thirds.

¹¹¹"Welfare Funds in County Cut 70 Percent in January," *Hartford Day Spring*, January 17, 1934, p. 1.

¹¹²"Request County Aid in Relief Work," *Hartford Day Spring*, February 14, 1934, 1.

E.M. Zuver, a Hartford resident who chaired the commission, told supervisors that the current crisis stemmed from the lack of financial participation by the county in the first months of the new administrative structure.

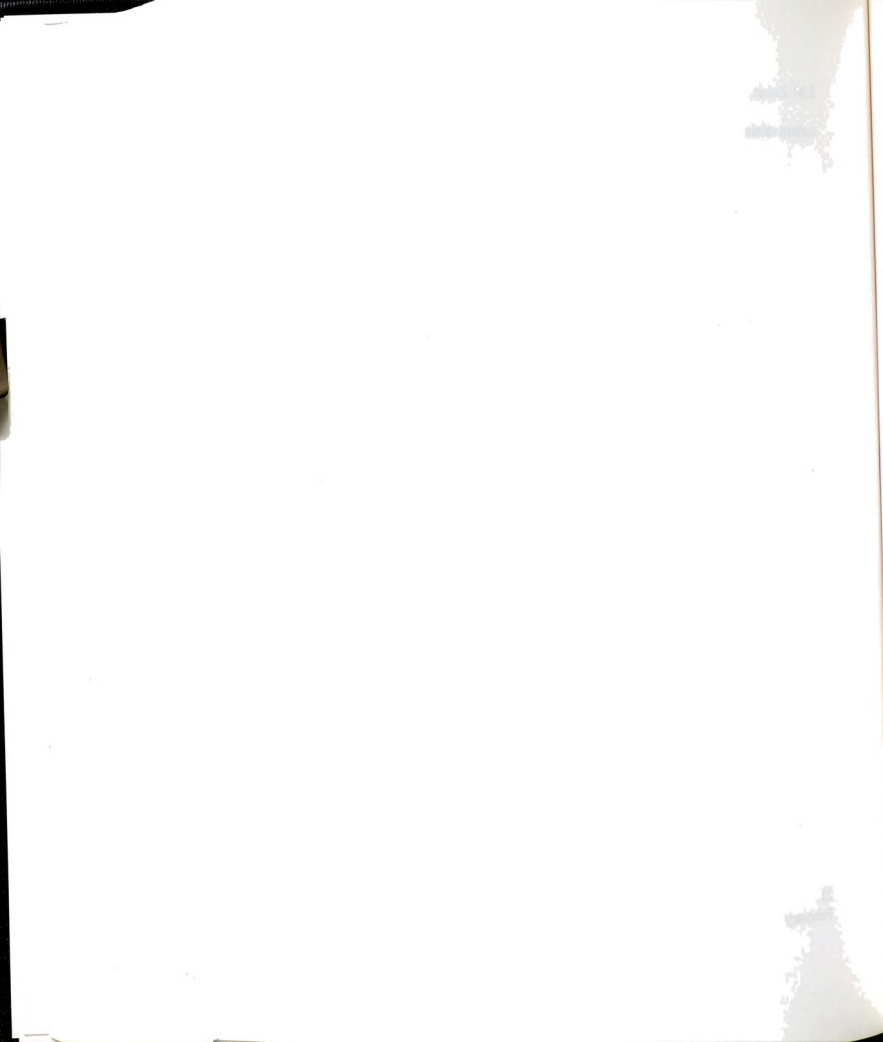
The crux of the conflict centered not only on where funds came from, but also who supervised the administration of those funds. The county officials agreed to contribute their share, but only if the "county 'dads' would handle [the] relief funds."¹¹³ The paternalistic language emerged in discussions of county administration of relief. This paternalistic attitude was directed not only at the relief recipients, as occurred earlier, but also at those involved in the state relief administration, including the women who ran the local offices. The county supervisors passed a resolution to that effect, extending this offer to the state:

Resolved, that the board of supervisors of Van Buren county offered their services to the state welfare commission as so-called case workers in their respective townships at no expense to the commission, displacing present case workers, and that the county pledges itself to contribute one-third of the total expense of the class of relief handled by the county commission, provided above offer is accepted and complied with, and in case this county receives its full quota of relief from state and federal funds.¹¹⁴

Supervisors sought to regain control of relief administration, suggesting that they replace "so-called case workers," which they clearly did not see as more able to administer poor relief. Van Buren's supervisors rejected the argument that professional social workers

¹¹³"County 'Dads' Would Handle Relief Funds," *Hartford Day Spring*, February 21, 1934, p. 1 and 5; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, February 16, 1934, p. 92.

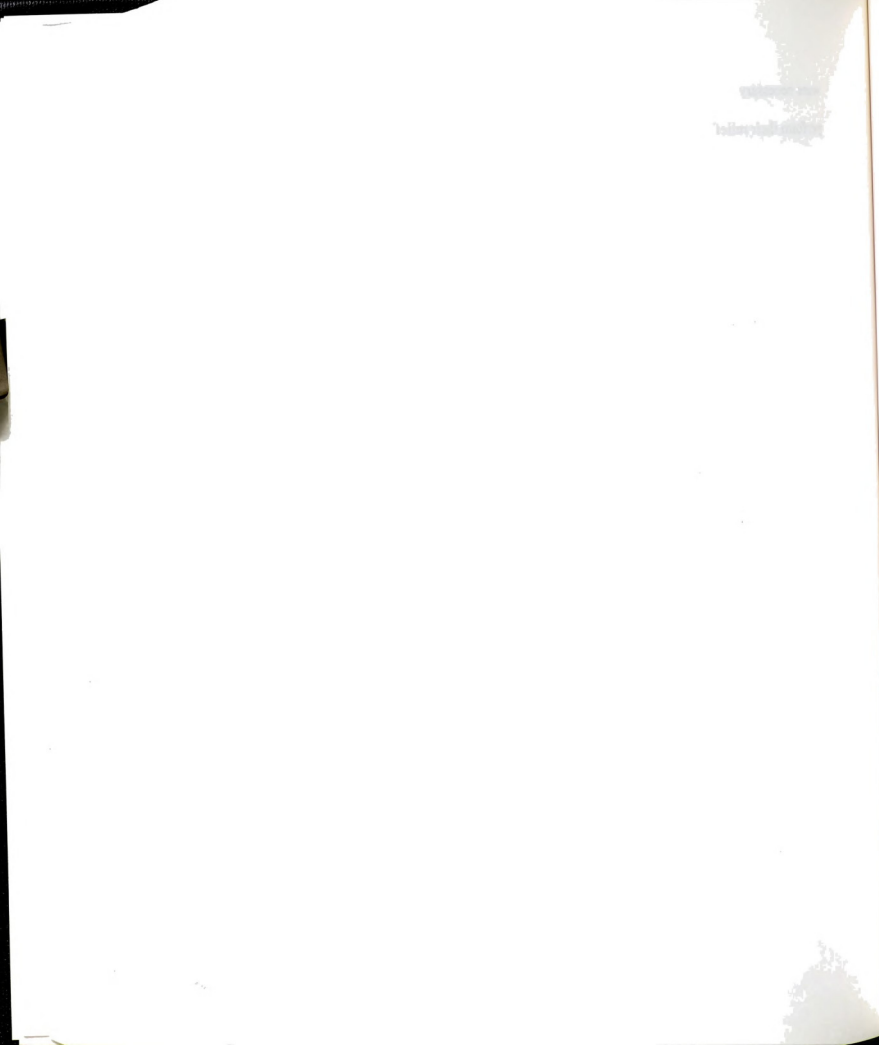
¹¹⁴"County 'Dads' Would Handle Relief Funds," *Hartford Day Spring*, February 21, 1934, p. 1 and 5; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, February 16, 1934, p. 92.



were necessary for relief administration. They argued that township supervisors would perform their relief duties as part of their job as supervisor, thus saving the county the cost of professional social workers. The supervisors believed that they were more qualified to administer relief, an argument that would recur in the 1937 and 1938 debates. In part this stemmed from the salaries paid to case workers, but also from the belief that township supervisors knew their residents - and whether they needed or deserved relief - best. The Van Buren county supervisors did not accept the profession of social work, and resented state and federal controls over funds, in particular their funds. But they also expected the state to accept these terms, while still providing the funds under FERA. They did agree, after a closed session to draft the response to state welfare officials, to a contribution of \$1568.45. Given that SERA expended more than \$311,000 in the first year in the county, the amount offered was hardly enough to solve the relief fund crisis.¹¹⁵

State officials rejected the plan when supervisors brought it to Lansing. No agreement was reached, and the county refused to contribute to the relief program. SERA officials reported in June that more than \$238,000 was spent the previous eight months in the county on relief, but with no contribution from the county or townships. The board tabled the request for aid and did not act upon it. It again voiced its offer to contribute its share if the supervisors had more say in how funds were spent. Supervisors pointed out that just \$12,000 was in the county treasury, and any amount the county gave would mean little in a program that size. They did not have the money to give the state, they argued,

¹¹⁵*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, February 16, 1934, p. 92; "County Welfare Costs \$311,502.17," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 17, 1934, 1.



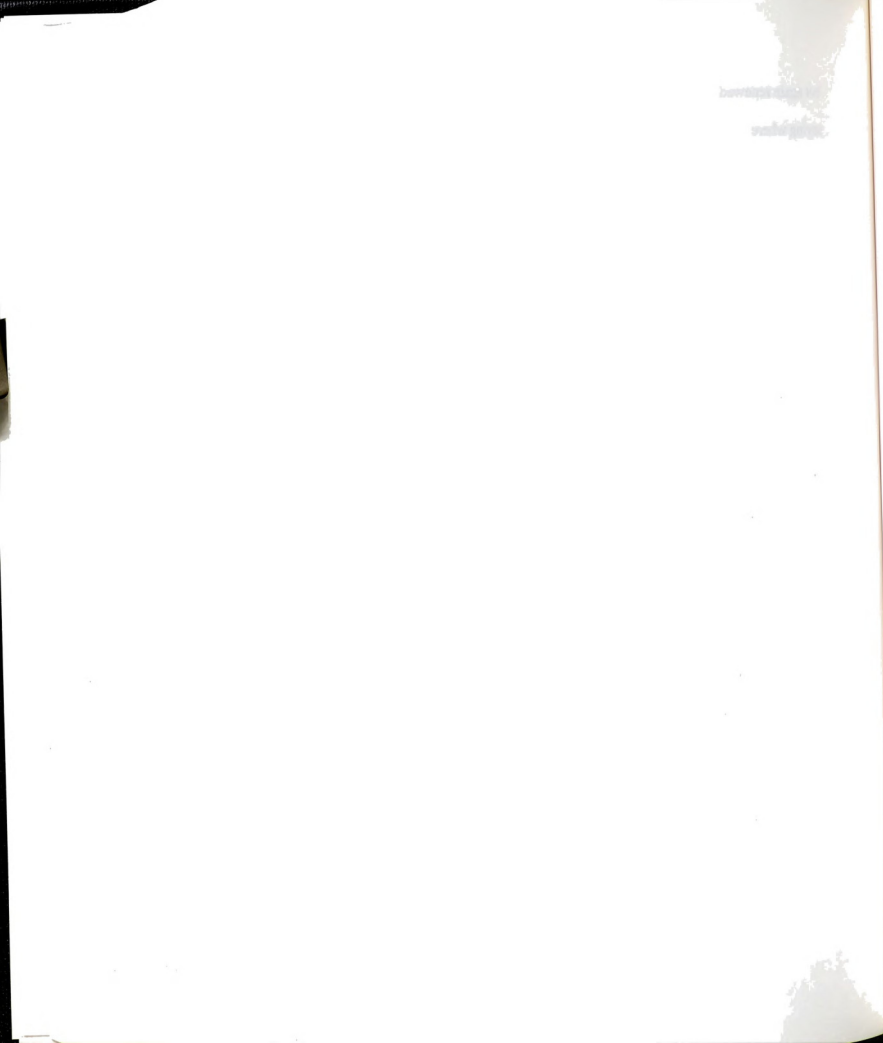
but again renewed the offer to assist with relief funds if they were given "a voice in saying where the money was spent."¹¹⁶

The issue appeared again at the board's annual budget meetings in October, with the state again requesting a one-third contribution from the county in conjunction with its report of relief activities and expenditures in the preceding year. The supervisors did adopt a resolution agreeing to partial payment of the funds it owed "insofar as funds are available," and only after the year's tax rolls were collected.¹¹⁷ The county would not commit funds to relief until other obligations were met and its revenues collected.

The amount of funds expended on staff and administration was a key criticism of the SERA, and the federal program. As seen in the February resolution, county board members had little use for professional social work or the need for "trained" case workers; they saw themselves as competent to do investigations and at a much lower cost. SERA issued a report in 1935 to counter those charges, and reported that 91.4 cents of each dollar went for relief, with just 8.6 cents spent on administration. Van Buren County administrative costs were about 8.29 percent of the total amount spend on relief, and the state report showed that administrative costs accounted for a decreasing amount of relief dollars. The greater amount of the cost rested in salaries of staff, including case workers. The report defended these costs, despite the fact that they were much higher than pre-depression days, and argued that in some areas, staffs were not adequate to fully

¹¹⁶"Supervisors Argue Over Welfare Cost," *Hartford Day Spring*, June 27, 1934, p. 1 and 5.

¹¹⁷"County Budget Totals \$136,793.76," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 24, 1934, p. 1.



investigate the cases they have. Careful investigations resulted in fewer people able to "cheat" the system, the report argued.¹¹⁸

Manistee County, whose officials shared Van Buren's attitude toward SERA, underwent a similar debate with state officials, although with more serious consequences. County minutes reveal inattention to the WRC, and notifications for local contributions for relief often were tabled indefinitely.¹¹⁹ The initial conflict over fund contribution occurred over the distribution of state gasoline tax money, of which Manistee County was to receive \$25,000. The state suggested that amount, in addition to other county funds, constitute the county's contribution to the relief program. State funds totaled more than \$240,000 for the year, and one-third of that would be \$80,000, which SERA knew the county could not afford. But SERA warned officials that without some meaningful provision in relief aid, state operations would cease in Manistee County.¹²⁰ The county refused to turn over the full amount of gasoline money, instead allocating just \$5,000 for relief, which Armstrong called "a ridiculous and insulting offering," given the amount of state funds expended.¹²¹ Initially the supervisors took no action at all, after the Welfare

¹¹⁸"County's Relief Bill is \$76,028 for 3 Months," *Hartford Day Spring*, May 29, 1935, p. 1 and 3.

¹¹⁹*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Manistee County*, April 10, 1934, p. 199-202; October 14, 1935, p. 346-347.

¹²⁰"County Boosts Pension Name Collecting Fee," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, October 10, 1934; "County's Relief Expense Is \$240,000 in Past Year," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, October 12, 1934.

¹²¹"Board Votes to Give \$5,000 to Welfare Relief," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, October 17, 1934; "\$5,000 Welfare Fund Turned Down," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, November 6, 1934; Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 283-284.



Committee reported that no funds were available, apparently not seeing the gasoline money as a possible source.¹²² The state told Armstrong to refuse the contribution, and told county officials that without a more substantial allocation, relief would shut down. The state expected \$30,000.¹²³

Relief offices closed and projects were ordered stopped until, and if, the situation was resolved. The regional field director arrived to assist in negotiations, and a settlement was reached. Aware of the county's limited funds and difficult financial situation, the state agreed to consider work relief wages paid by the road commission, totaling \$20,000, as part of the county's contribution. This would provide the necessary local contribution and reopen the relief office and the work projects, but with no additional cash provided by the county. The agreement was signed and relief resumed.¹²⁴ Until that time, relief recipients had to turn to township supervisors under the old system

¹²²*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Manistee County*, October 25, 1935, p. 405.

¹²³Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 284-286; "Demand Appropriation for Welfare Purposes," *The Manistee Examiner*, November 1, 1934, clipping in Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews Folder 3; "\$5,000 Welfare Fund Turned Down." A key part of the county's argument against the WRC was the number of "chiselers" that were on the relief rolls, and the county undertook an extensive effort to investigate the relief rolls and invited reports from citizens on information about people cheating the system. "Anti-Chiseling Group Carries on With Work," *Manistee News-Advocate*, November 22, 1934, 1 and 8, clipping also in Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews Folder 4.

¹²⁴Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 288-295; "Relief Due to Be Resumed," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, November 21, 1934; "Relief Is Ordered Resumed," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, November 26, 1934. Armstrong describes a road commissioner and other local officials as extremely reluctant to sign the agreement, but the realization that no county WRC meant no federal and state funds for relief prompted them to sign the agreement, she argues. Supervisors' minutes contain no record of the conflict, likely because it occurred between regular meeting dates.



for poor relief. Given the extreme financial crisis in the county, they likely received little aid. Again recipients paid the most severe price in these funding disputes.

Manistee was one county in which conflicts between administrators and/or commission members and local official exacerbated already tense situations. As noted, some local residents and government officials resented Armstrong's appointment from the beginning, and the first commission resigned in protest in 1934 when their demand that Armstrong be removed was not honored. According to Armstrong, they actually opposed her strict adherence to the state rules regarding the administration of relief and work projects, including the hiring of relief workers. They expected her to play by their rules - and those of supervisors seeking to get family and friends on work projects and relief - rather than FERA or SERA.¹²⁵ She refused to resign when they requested, much to their surprise, she wrote.¹²⁶ The state commission sent Haber to meet with Manistee officials, but found that their anger was indeed directed at "the strict observance of the rules of this commission."¹²⁷ The state commission appointed a new commission two months later.¹²⁸ Eventually Armstrong would resign when SERA revised its regulations and local officials had a greater say in relief operations. She did not think she could work with local officials, without the power of the state behind her, and resigned in 1936 after

¹²⁵Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 141, 179-183.

¹²⁶Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 188-189.

¹²⁷SEWRC Minutes, Box 2, Folder 1, April 10, 1934.

¹²⁸SEWRC Minutes, Box 2, Folder 1, June 26, 1934.



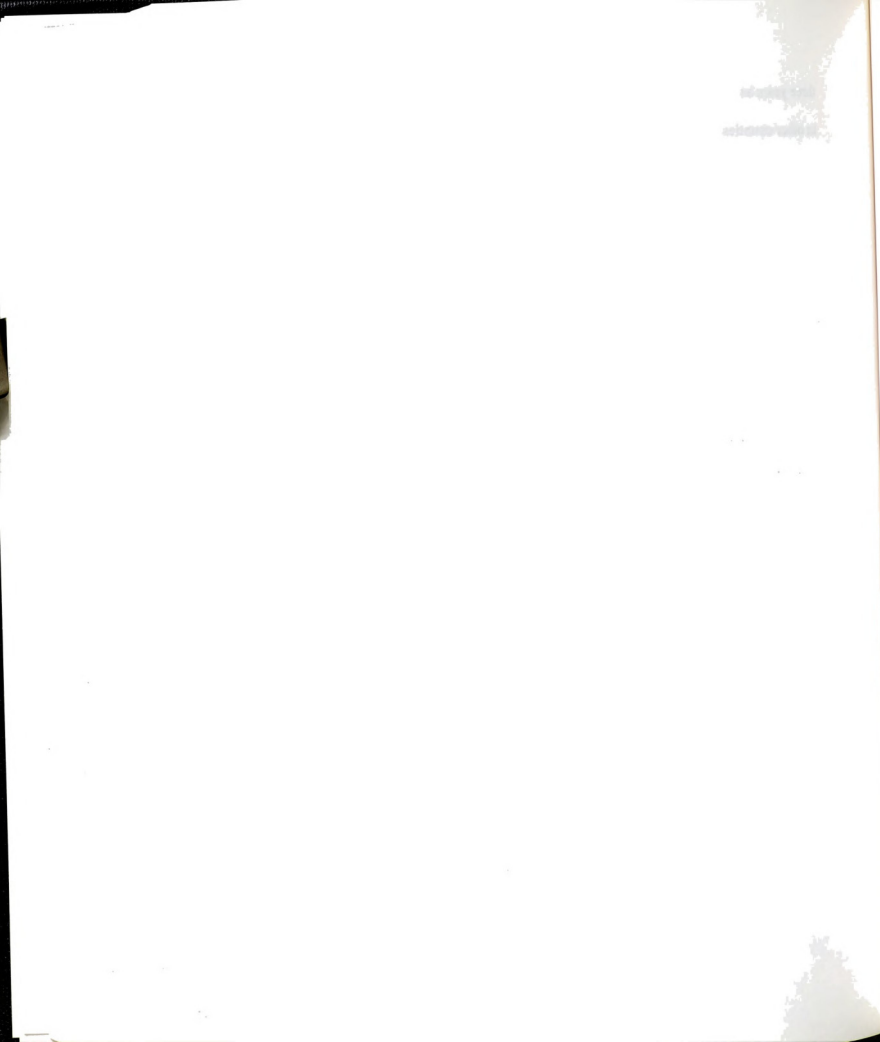
three years as administrator.¹²⁹ Evidence is less clear on relations between administrators in other counties and their local officials, but the refusal of Saginaw County to hire its former WRC administrator, Lucius E. Howlett, to head its reorganized social welfare board in late 1939 indicated negative feelings either toward his ability or his views on social welfare.¹³⁰

Van Buren County never saw its relief offices closed, but supervisors continued to spar with state officials the following year. County ERA officials requested \$20,000 as the county's contribution to relief, but the county supervisors ignored the request in their budget meeting, taking no action on it.¹³¹ The state began to take a more punitive stance, and was less forgiving of counties unwilling to pay their share. Allegan County, immediately north of Van Buren County, experienced this in December 1935, when the state ERA cut off state and federal funds to the county because its board refused to appropriate \$24,000 for relief needs. The county offices were closed, and at the same time state officials announced the start of an investigation into Van Buren County, which also

¹²⁹Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 467.

¹³⁰He was appointed, on the recommendation of the board of supervisors, to head the categorical aid programs, but not the county general relief program. The supervisors also rejected the application of a former poor commissioner, Catherine Phillion, as a social welfare board member. *Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 9, 1939, 28-29, and October 16, 1939, 105-106, 109-110; "Bois Probable Chief of Relief," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 29, 1939; "School Annex Relief's Home," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1939.

¹³¹"Budget for '36 Is Adopted by County Board," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 30, 1935, 1. Minutes reveal several meetings held with ERA officials, but no action recorded on the fund request. *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, October 14, 16, October 17, October 23, and October 24, 1935, 28, 42-43, 54-55, 66.



had not contributed relief dollars in its budget. Van Buren officials argued that their share was covered through hospitalization costs, as well as through poor relief administered through the county poor commission, which still operated.¹³² Van Buren County's supervisors wanted credit for the funds they did expend for relief, although the federal regulations defined those as a local obligation. A representative of the SERA conducted an investigation, with the stipulation that if the county was found to be able to contribute, it had to or the entire relief cost would be turned over to county officials. The local offices would close and state funds withdrawn, as had happened in Allegan County. Relief clients would again have to turn to their local supervisors, and the county would have to fully fund the relief programs.¹³³

The state ultimately requested a \$24,000 appropriation from the county - slightly less than one-fifth of the estimated \$125,000 that would be needed in the budget year. County ERA officials based their estimates on a recent survey of unemployed and unemployable county residents. The *Hartford Day Spring* reported that rumors around the courthouse were that the supervisors favored a monthly appropriation of \$2,000, which would prevent them from committing to a full year's funding immediately. The state,

¹³²Allegan County was also a rural, agricultural county, and one that remained loyal to the Republican Party throughout the 1930s. "State Probes County's ERA Funds," *Hartford Day Spring*, Dec. 11, 1935; James K. Pollock and Samuel J. Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1942) 70.

¹³³"Survey Is Made of Relief Need in This County," *Hartford Day Spring*, December 18, 1935, p. 1 and 8.

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however, preferred to have the full county share in a lump sum.¹³⁴ The board of supervisors voted 15 to 5 to provide for relief at the rate of \$2,000 per month until the April elections, when the new board could tackle the issue that had perplexed local officials for more than five years.¹³⁵ No county appropriation was forthcoming after April 1, and funds were exhausted by mid-June. County administrator Harold Humphrey reported in June that despite reductions in the relief load, funds would be gone before more state funds were forthcoming July 1, 1936. And a shortage of funds had already resulted in reduced budgets and denials of aid, resulting in "insufficient relief and suffering since" county funds ceased.¹³⁶ Supervisors continued to demand a voice in local relief administration, and until that occurred, their allocation of funds would be severely limited.

Recipients approved for emergency relief had to seek out their local supervisor for assistance when the WRC ran out of funds. Jerry Brewster, a thirty-year-old farmer afflicted with inflammatory rheumatism, was approved for aid in April 1936. He and his wife, Lillian, sought a few grocery orders to carry them until he had recovered enough to resume farming. They were readily approved, and the case worker approved aid for a

¹³⁴"Relief Budget of \$125,000 Sought: \$24,000 Asked of Van Buren for Relief Aid," *Hartford Day Spring*, January 8, 1936; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, January 7, 1936, p. 74.

¹³⁵"Solons Cote \$2,000 Month Relief Fund," *Hartford Day Spring*, January 15, 1936, p. 1; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, January 10, 1936, p. 84.

¹³⁶"Administrator Gives Figures on Van Buren County Relief," *Hartford Day Spring*, June 17, 1936, 1; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, April 14, 1936, 4.

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longer period of time as she believed he would need longer to recover. The WRC covered the grocery orders until mid-May, but then Brewster had to seek help from the township supervisor, because the WRC offices were not able to extend aid until June 1.¹³⁷ The records do not indicate if he was successful or not. Other recipients faced similar problems, at a time when townships had little money and mothers' pensions were no longer funded. Options for relief were few when the WRC could not help.

Saginaw County's experience was not as contentious. It did make an effort to appropriate funds for relief, largely through the townships and city, and contributed a fair proportion of funds as Table 3 shows. But the effort came at a cost to city services and salaries, and eventually the city would scale back contributions to meet its own expenses. The county supervisors organized a seven-member committee to meet with the WRC in 1933. There was little opposition to participating in the federal program, and initially local control was not an issue vocalized a great deal. Supervisors desperately wanted tax relief for their residents from the large welfare costs, but were concerned that any funds the county received be distributed equitably among the townships. How to fund the contribution was another issue. City officials opposed a county-wide tax because city residents already paid taxes for the poor commission, whose funds were already pledged in large measure to the county WRC.¹³⁸ County funds were limited, in large part because

¹³⁷Case #5217, VB ERA Records, Box 1, Folder B.

¹³⁸"Supervisors Debate Relief Fund Request," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 14, 1933, p. 1 and 3; "Welfare Fund Need Explained," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 16, 1933, p. 1-2; "Pledge Relief Cooperation," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 17, 1933, p. 1 and 9; *Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 13, 1933, 82-83, October 14, 1933, 87.

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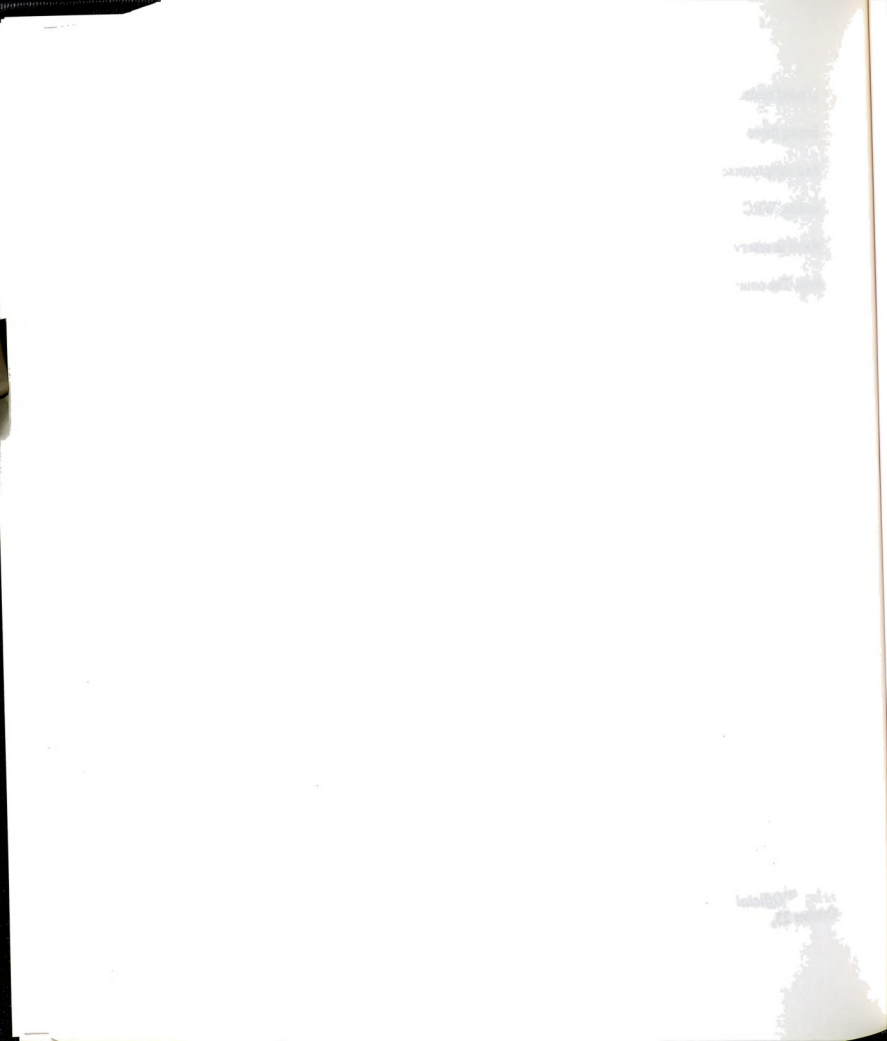
of relief costs. The county had stopped funding mothers' pensions the month before, forcing those women to seek aid from the poor commission or their township supervisors. As a compromise and to cover administrative costs which had to be funded with local monies, WRC chair Clement Quinn suggested that \$10,000 of the county's poor fund be placed in reserve with the county treasurer for the WRC to draw upon for administrative costs. The county agreed, and the WRC began its work in earnest.¹³⁹ Although the administrative costs were funded by the county, payment for the local share of relief costs were to be paid individually by the townships and the City of Saginaw. The WRC paid the bills and then charged the local costs back to the township, while the city provided its poor relief funds and then was later reimbursed by the WRC. The townships eventually paid the share not covered by the state ERA.¹⁴⁰

The WRC was not accepted by all supervisors, and sixteen supervisors, many representing the rural townships in the county, opposed the \$10,000 allocation.¹⁴¹ The core of the opposition centered on the equitable distribution of the relief burden among townships, as well as the issue of local control. As with Van Buren and Manistee counties, some Saginaw County supervisors believed they could more efficiently

¹³⁹“Relief Board Asks \$10,000,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 18, 1933, p. 1-2; “Favor Relief Fund Request,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 21, 1933, p. 1; *Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 18, 1933, 95-96, October 23, 1933, 107.

¹⁴⁰WRSC Records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7, Folder 6; “Relief Board Asks \$10,000,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 18, 1933, 1-2; *Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw*, October 31, 1933, p. 367.

¹⁴¹*Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 23, 1933, 107.



administer relief. Over the next three years, twenty-four of Saginaw's twenty-seven townships opted to participate with the WRC. Three townships, including Chapin, Chesaning and Marion, did not, as they believed they were "able to look after [their] own." Saginaw Township initially participated, but was cut off for six months due to a failure to pay the \$1,100 it owed the WRC. Eventually the bill was paid and the township resumed its participation.¹⁴²

Despite the opposition, Saginaw County's relationship with SERA remained cordial. Although townships did not pay their bills immediately, Saginaw Township was the only one to be cut off. Many simply did not have the funds to pay the money owed (\$12,500 in total for the county), but were expected to pay their share. Also, the year proved much less costly in administrative terms than anticipated, and the WRC returned nearly two-thirds of the original appropriation for administrative costs - \$6,200 - to the county, and only requested \$4,000 for the next year. The commission spent more than \$600,000 in relief during the 13-month period from September 1933 to October 1934, with the townships and city providing \$191,000. Among all counties in the state, Saginaw ranked among the highest in terms of relief fund cooperation between the state, federal government, and local government.¹⁴³ The supervisors received even more good news the following day when the county superintendents of the poor reported a \$60,000 balance remaining in the poor fund, largely because of the participation of the federal and

¹⁴²WRSC Records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7, Folder 7, Saginaw County.

¹⁴³"Welfare Unit Pays Back Most of Fund," *Saginaw Daily News*, Oct. 8, 1934, 1 and 4.

state funds, as well as reimbursements for specific types of aid, including transient individuals.¹⁴⁴ But the board's finance committee reported that the funds saved were in fact a result of double taxation - the appropriation of county money raised from county taxes, and also the repayment by townships and the city for relief expended. The committee recommended discontinuing the county collection for poor relief and conducting a careful annual accounting of county-at-large poor relief expended, recommendations adopted unanimously by the board four days later. Superintendent of the poor chair Arthur Hauffe protested the move, arguing that it was not double taxation, but failed to convince the board.¹⁴⁵

Marquette County's relationship with the WRC and SERA was the most cooperative, and the local WRC and poor commission worked together throughout the emergency relief period. As noted, Marquette contributed regularly to the WRC, usually using its poor fund budget. Although the surviving records are not clear on the relationship between the WRC and the county's decision to create, and then eliminate, the office of poor director, the two events seem connected. The county supervisors, in a unanimous decision, abruptly opted to end the position, just a few months after hiring a mining executive, William R. Meyers, in August of 1933.¹⁴⁶ It seems likely that the

¹⁴⁴"\$60,000 Turned Back to County," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 9, 1934, p. 1 and 5.

¹⁴⁵"Ask Poor Fund Policy Change," *Saginaw Daily News*, Oct. 16, 1934, 1-2; "County Poor Fund Policy Revised," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 20, 1934, p. 1 and 4.

¹⁴⁶Meyers was appointed by the county poor commission at its April meeting, following the recommendations of the county's budget committee. *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, August 30, 1933; *Proceedings of the Board of*

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supervisors believed that the newly-created WRC could coordinate the relief programs in the county, thus eliminating the need for the \$4,000 appropriation for the director position.¹⁴⁷ The supervisors' poor committee validated the decision to eliminate the position, stating that it was "consistent with good judgement." The supervisors also voted to turn the wood cutting program, which provided fuel for relief recipients cheaper than purchasing coal, over to the WRC to coordinate.¹⁴⁸ The poor commission and the WRC appeared to coordinate many of the duties associated with emergency relief, including distribution of surplus commodities, and coordination of the wood cutting and gardening programs.¹⁴⁹ The WRC took over investigations of emergency and work relief cases, but the poor commission continued to investigate requests for medical care and unemployable cases. They also worked with the WRC on a work relief project to repair the county infirmary, with the cost of materials for the project taken from the poor fund budget.¹⁵⁰ The poor commission did seek to have the WRC take over more of the duties, apparently

the Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County, April 21, 1933.

¹⁴⁷The *Daily Mining Journal* editorial board criticized the move in a September 6 editorial, calling the move a step backward in poor relief administration. It speculated that some had disliked Meyers's connection to the CCIC, a powerful company, and others had also criticized the cost of the position. See "Making Progress Backward," *Daily Mining Journal*, September 6, 1933, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, October 9, 1933, p. 168-169.

¹⁴⁹*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, October 9, 1933, 168-169; *Proceedings of the Board of the Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, October 18, 1933.

¹⁵⁰*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, October 8, 1934, p. 229.



finding the workload difficult to handle with its staff, but "at their request, agreed to continue as we have been doing for the present."¹⁵¹ Marquette County's supervisors' main conflict with SERA stemmed from their belief that while they had shouldered their share - and more - of the relief problem, other counties had not: "it might also be pointed out that there are only three counties in northern Michigan that have apparently played ball with the state ERA," Marquette being one of them.¹⁵²

Surplus Commodities and Work Relief

Relief grants were not the only source of aid for recipients, as both work relief and surplus commodities were available. Surplus commodities, or goods that were intended to supplement relief orders, began in the fall of 1933 and most relief recipients, as well as CWA and WPA workers, were eligible to receive them. The federal government, through the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, purchased the surplus agricultural and livestock products and then distributed them to the various state agencies, who then provided them to local commissions. Items included meat, cereal and dairy products, including butter, as well as blankets, mattresses and some clothing. Most recipients received a card telling them where to pick up their surplus items; most clothing requests were handled

¹⁵¹*Proceedings of the Board of the Superintendents of the Poor, Marquette County*, December 21, 1934.

¹⁵²*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, v. 8, February 15, 1939, p. 59.

individually by the case workers.¹⁵³ In some cases the state organization purchased items for use within the state, using some of its federal funds.¹⁵⁴ Surplus commodities were to be in addition to the family's overall budget, and thus were not to detract from the order or grant the family received for direct or work relief.¹⁵⁵ But again, despite the regulations, some local agencies used surplus commodities to reduce grants in order to make their meager relief dollars go farther. Harry Ross of Grand Rapids alerted SERA that this was occurring in Grand Rapids in Kent County. Investigation by the county administrator revealed that while this may have occurred on occasion, it was not policy and the confusion may have stemmed from the varied families' budgets. He also pointed out that the agency had to keep direct relief budgets in line with what "the border line cases can earn as a result of working."¹⁵⁶ Thus agency efforts were to ensure that relief budgets did not outpace the earnings of workers. George Granger, SERA's assistant administrator,

¹⁵³Louise Armstrong tried to deliver surplus goods through local grocery stores, but encountered too many difficulties with local business people. Eventually the agency obtained a warehouse to store and distribute the materials, and also provided delivery for those recipients unable to collect their own food. See Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, Chapter 8, "'Government Food' and Allied Projects."

¹⁵⁴Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 128-130; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 289-290; Brown, *Public Relief*, 254-256.

¹⁵⁵Carothers, *Chronology*, 16, 20, 25; Brown, *Public Relief*, 255. On November 6, 1933, FERA announced that recipients of "local" relief, including mothers' pensions, old age pension cases, private welfare cases, etc, were also eligible for surplus commodities. Again, surplus commodities were to be in addition to regular grants.

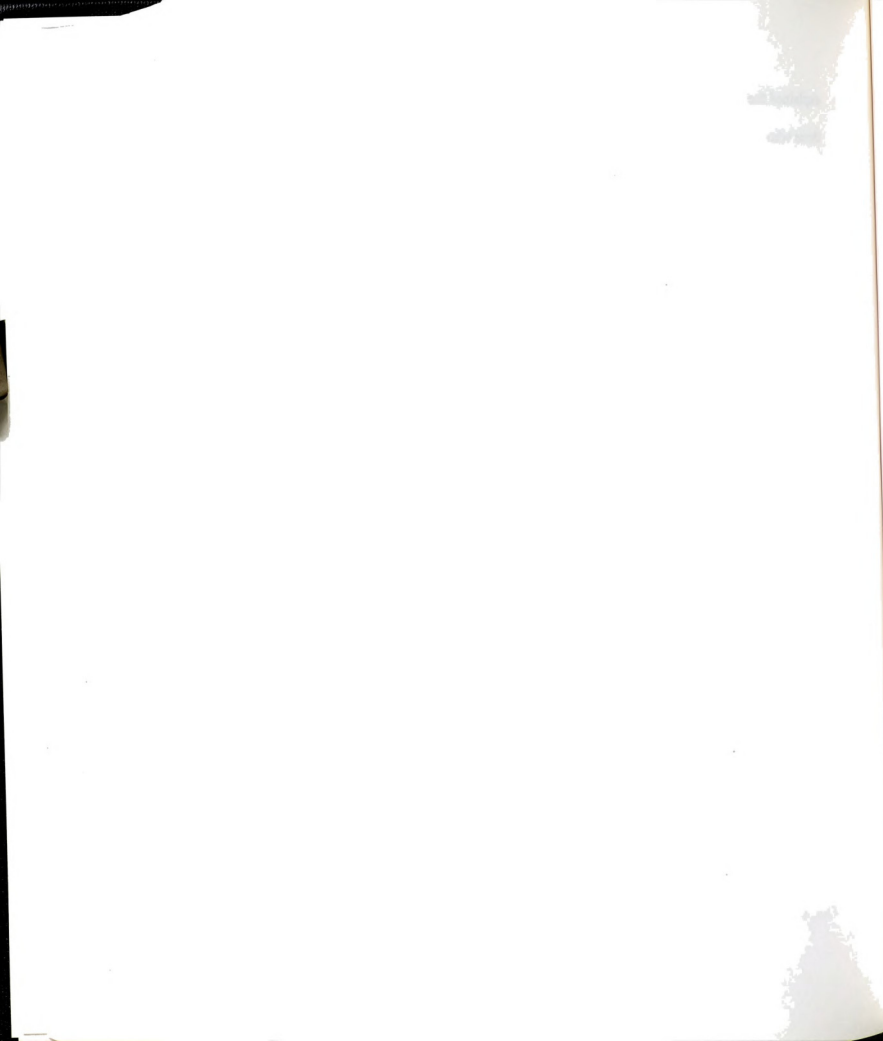
¹⁵⁶Letter from Harry Ross of Grand Rapids dated November 24, 1934; Reply from George Granger, SERA, to Nels Anderson, advisor on Labor Relations, FERA, dated December 14, 1934; FERA State Series, Michigan Complaints, Box 141, Folder R-S.

explained the case in a letter to federal officials, noting that the administrator met with those who were not happy with the practices, and all understood the situation. County administrator James Bryant apparently explained the budgeting practices to the clients.¹⁵⁷ But although the investigation did take place, it did not involve state officials and relied strictly on the report of the local agency, a common practice in the FERA years. Although field representatives were a part of the administrative structure, large districts precluded frequent visiting. Thus again it is not clear whether the federal rules were actually followed or not.

Surplus commodities were closely linked to work relief projects; many of the products of work relief projects used materials from the surplus commodities program and then were distributed through it as well. Early critics of the work relief projects argued that such programs provided unfair competition for business, prompting officials to ensure that the products of these projects - especially sewing and canning operations, for example - went to relief clients who would otherwise be unable to purchase the items. Thus they were not competing with goods in the private sector, but instead providing a needed item for relief recipients, as well as providing work relief for the employable people on the relief rolls. Production-for-use projects proved especially important for women, whose major work relief employment came from those programs.¹⁵⁸ But protests from the business community and private sector intensified in 1934, and production-for-

¹⁵⁷Letter from Harry Ross of Grand Rapids dated November 24, 1934; Reply from George Granger, SERA, to Nels Anderson, advisor on Labor Relations, FERA, dated December 14, 1934; FERA State Series, Michigan Complaints, Box 141, Folder R-S.

¹⁵⁸Rose, *Put to Work*, 65-70.



use programs were reduced in response.¹⁵⁹ The key problems with the work programs were that they discriminated by race, nativity, gender, as well as age, and provided employment largely for white men. Thus many groups had limited work options under those programs.

The early FERA projects largely were continuations of locally-funded projects, but with federal money.¹⁶⁰ The realization that the programs in place were not enough to deal with the unemployment problem prompted the creation of the Civil Works Administration in November 1933. A part of the National Recovery Act, the CWA had a crucial difference from FERA work projects, and later from the Works Progress Administration: proving need was not a requirement for employment. Applicants did not have to undergo the intrusive investigation which relief recipients experienced; simply being unemployed demonstrated "need." While some CWA workers were approved relief cases, not all were and nor did they need to be. They also were under different wage rates than FERA workers, and thus earned higher wages and were not limited in the hours they worked. CWA did not carry the stigma or intrusion that FERA and later the WPA did, but it also was in operation for less than six months.¹⁶¹

While racial discrimination did exist on job assignments, despite federal regulations to the contrary, historian Harvard Sitkoff argues that federal programs, in

¹⁵⁹Rose, *Put to Work*, 76-80, 85-87.

¹⁶⁰Rose, *Put to Work*, 38.

¹⁶¹Rose, *Put to Work*, 45-47; Martha H. Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1995) 44-45.

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spite of their shortcomings, made a real difference in the lives of blacks, especially by 1936. Regulations against discrimination became more stringent and more enforced, although never totally effective, but the numbers of blacks employed by New Deal work relief agencies increased significantly by Roosevelt's second term. The number of young black men assigned to CCC camps is just one example. Although many of the camps were segregated, they did provide black youth with employment. By 1940, the south contained ninety-three segregated camps and another sixty-eight were found throughout the country. Three camps were in Michigan, one of which was in the Manistee National Forest.¹⁶²

Work relief was thought to be the answer to the problem of high numbers of people of color on the emergency relief rolls; a lack of employment opportunity could be remedied by public works jobs. African-Americans were able to secure jobs through the CWA, CCC, WPA, and NYA, and some were reluctant to accept employment in private industry because of the lack of discrimination.¹⁶³ A 1937 report on Michigan's NYA projects lauded the number (ninety-three total) of projects that included black youth. The projects, the report continued, included a variety of training opportunities, especially in Detroit, although whites benefitted from training programs more than blacks. In August

¹⁶²Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 51, 69-72, 74; "The CCC and Colored Youth," CCC (Record Group 35), Division of Planning and Public Relations, from John B. Kirby, ed., *The New Deal and Black America* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984, microfilm), reel 8, p. 2; "Negro CCC Camps," April 1940, NDBA, reel 8. This collection (hereafter cited as NDBA) contains 25 reels of microfilmed documents related to African-Americans and the New Deal agencies.

¹⁶³Sullivan, "'On the Dole,'" 153-154.



1939, projects for blacks centered on recreation, library, gardening, clerical, health and hospitals, construction and woodshops. They existed in nineteen counties, including Genesee, Kent, Saginaw and Wayne, and employed 648 blacks among 5093 total young people.¹⁶⁴ But the larger problem, according to the report, was that "after receiving this wonderful training, there are very few outlets for this training." Few places would hire blacks, despite their training, leaving the youth no better off in terms of employment.¹⁶⁵

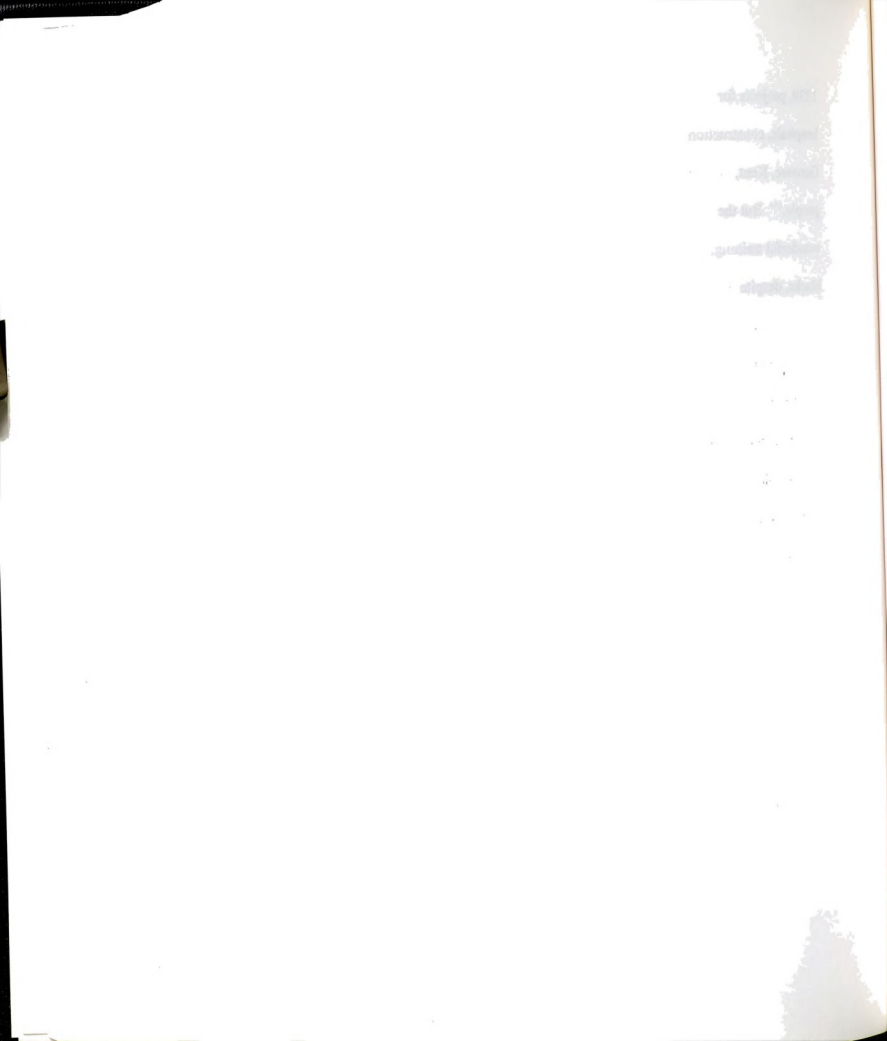
As with many works projects, including those in the pre-New Deal years, the CWA and most FERA projects provided employment for men. In fact, the CWA included primarily construction work, which eliminated employment for women. It was directed at male heads of household. In response to demands for employment for women, Harry Hopkins, whose lack of concern for women's employment has been documented, created the Civil Works Service.¹⁶⁶ The CWS included some white collar work projects and also production-for-use programs, which employed women in canning, sewing and other projects. But the CWS fell under FERA, and thus included both the means test and lower wage rates and hours in contrast to the CWA program.¹⁶⁷ Work programs for women also employed only a fraction - perhaps 10 percent - of the total numbers of relief

¹⁶⁴"Work Report by Districts and Counties," August 16, 1939, NYA, NDBA, Reel 6.

¹⁶⁵Letter dated August 27, 1937, from C.R. Bradshaw, acting director of the NYA in Michigan, to Richard Brown, deputy executive director of the NYA, NYA (Record Group 119), NDBA, Reel 4, p. 1-2.

¹⁶⁶Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 67.

¹⁶⁷Rose, *Put to Work*, 47-48; Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward*, 44-45.



workers in Michigan. The number of women employed on the CWA, CWS, and education programs seldom surpassed 5,000 in the state in early 1934, and decreased further when the CWA ended.¹⁶⁸ In contrast, monthly numbers of workers peaked at more than 60,000 in November 1933, and again surpassed that figure in June 1934. A total of 475,669 relief workers were tallied from July 1933 to June 1934; women comprised only a small fraction of that total.¹⁶⁹

The trend continued under WPA, with its emphasis on construction and public works improvement projects. Employment was not restricted to only men, but the goal was to employ male heads of households, if possible, to protect their authority in the family. This included putting "some brake upon women's eagerness to be the family breadwinner, wage recipient, and controller of the family pocketbook."¹⁷⁰ Married women were given WPA assignments, as in the case of Mabel Stevenson, who previously had worked as a domestic and in a packing plant. She and her husband, Henry, were employable but she was assigned to a recreation project in June of 1938. Henry, a day laborer, was having difficulty finding work, and either no appropriate assignment was available for him, or case workers accepted Mabel's request for employment. That ended 18 months later, when Mabel was to be recertified. She was rejected "on the basis that

¹⁶⁸Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 119.

¹⁶⁹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 97.

¹⁷⁰Quoted in Nancy E. Rose, *Workfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare, and Government Work Programs*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998) 40.

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the logical head of the family is not being certified.”¹⁷¹ The case worker had bent the rules, apparently, but the WPA supervisor rejected the certification.

Women with small children were also not perceived as “eligible” for WPA employment, although regulations did not directly exclude them. SERA’s policy relating to women who received mothers’ pensions and also supplemental relief from the WRC permitted certifying a son or daughter, if old enough, for WPA to support the family. The policy specifically advised not certifying the mother for WPA unless there was another older person able to care for the children: “We do not want to defeat the purpose of the pension law by stimulating those mothers to work outside the home.”¹⁷² WPA redefined “eligible worker” in its manual and included all women who were able to work, and did not specifically exclude mothers with home responsibilities. In the bulletin alerting county administrators of this change, SERA administrator Haber cautioned about applying the new rule to mothers: “It is not the intent to stimulate employment outside the home of women who have not previously sought such employment.”¹⁷³ Some confusion apparently followed, as Haber clarified the ruling a few weeks later, firmly stating that the new ruling did not mean that all women, “particularly those with small children,” were

¹⁷¹Letter dated January 25, 1940, from Earl Scott, chief, intake and certification, Case #18155, VB ERA Records, Box 3 Folder 4.

¹⁷²SERA Letter #445, August 30, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder July to September 1935.

¹⁷³SERA Letter #472, October 11, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder October to December 1935.

To the Honorable
The Senate of the
State of New York

In answer to a
Resolution passed
April 10, 1907

Relative to the
Condition of the
State of New York

For the year ending
June 30, 1907

By the
Governor

and
the Comptroller

of the State

Albany, New York,
1907

Printed by
the State Printer

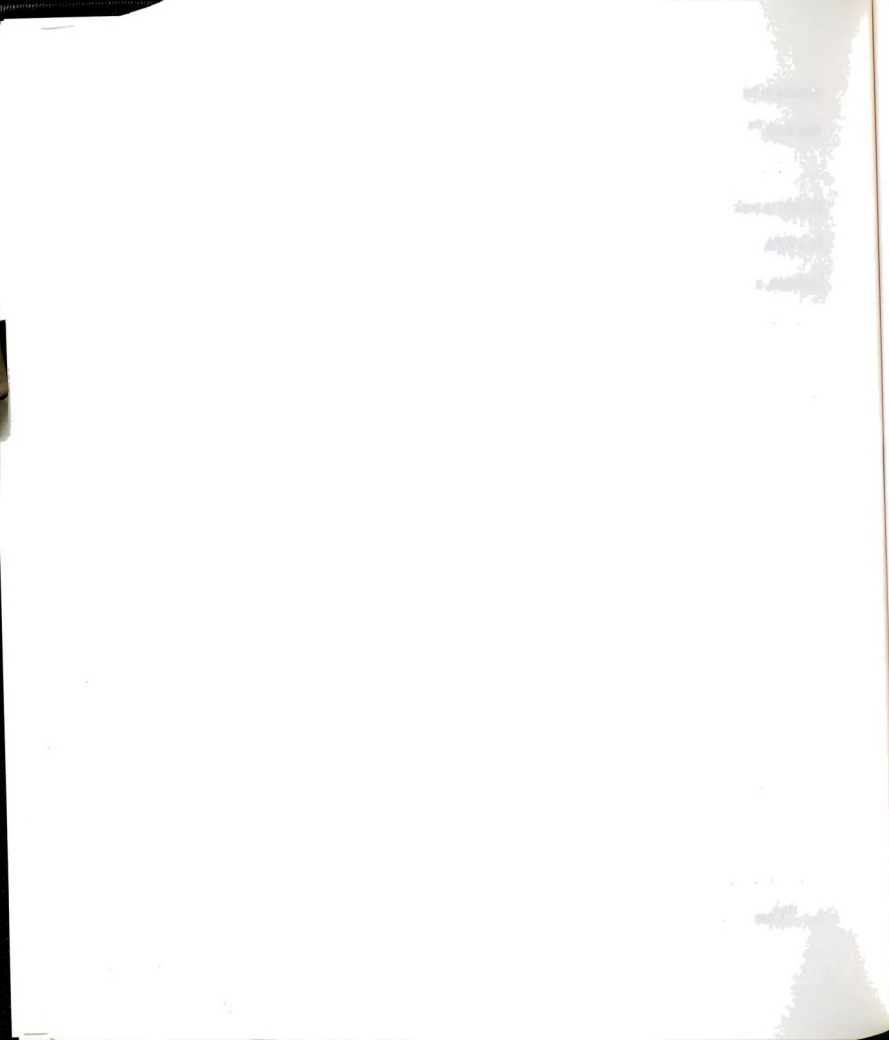
required to be certified for WPA, unless they requested it and were willing to accept full-time work.¹⁷⁴

In practice, case workers went further than simply not encouraging women with children to seek employment; eligibility for ADC could exclude women from certification for a WPA project, or eventually cause them to be removed from their assignment. Mary Linderson, a divorced mother of two children, ages 14 and 16, was a supervisor for a WPA sewing project in Saginaw. She began receiving ADC in mid-1937, and supplemented her grant with income from boarders. In 1938, she asked to be recertified for WPA, but case workers told her that they could not because she was eligible for ADC.¹⁷⁵

Women, who were eligible for ADC but employed on WPA projects, lost their assignments as the decade waned. Although some wanted to work rather than receive the categorical aid, they had no choice. Hannah Justin lived with her two sons, ages eight and fifteen, in Saginaw. She also was employed on WPA but was removed in January 1939 because she was eligible for ADC. She applied for ADC that month. Justin preferred work, but faced difficulty finding private employment because she was only separated from her husband, and had not yet secured a divorce. She told her case worker that she had been supporting and caring for her family on WPA before this, but had had no choice in the change: "She feels that it is up to us to take care of her, and in a way that

¹⁷⁴SERA Letter #485, November 1, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder October to December 1935.

¹⁷⁵Case C7300203, reel 4534, Saginaw ADC, case history dated October 27, 1938.



is true.”¹⁷⁶ Even the case worker acknowledged the agency’s responsibility in this woman’s unemployment problem. Justin eventually borrowed the money for a divorce and secured a factory job in December 1940. Gertrude Schneider faced a similar situation; a WPA employee from 1936 to 1939, she lost her assignment because of her eligibility for ADC. She had seven children, four of whom still lived at home, ranging in ages from six to fifteen. Divorced in 1938, Schneider faced the foreclosure of her home because she could not keep up the house payments and taxes. She supplemented her grant with income from laundry and watching her older daughters’ children, but did not leave the relief roll until her son secured a full-time job in 1942.¹⁷⁷ Thus women who had supported families with WPA income were removed from their jobs to receive ADC. The grants, which barely covered their children’s needs, required supplementation through odd jobs, including laundry, boarders or child care. ADC recipients were not eligible for WPA jobs until 1942.¹⁷⁸

A group of Detroit mothers employed on WPA projects successfully protested such efforts, staging a sit-in strike to protest announced lay-offs of all workers eligible for ADC. They did not want to exchange their monthly wages of \$86 per month (or more) for ADC grants that would provide just \$18 per month for the first child and \$12 for each additional child: “For this group of women the Social Security Act became a threat to

¹⁷⁶Case C7300100, reel 4532, Saginaw ADC records, case history, April 19, 1939.

¹⁷⁷Case C7300239, reel 4535, Saginaw ADC records.

¹⁷⁸Case C7300215, reel 4534, Saginaw ADC records.

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their minimum standard of living.”¹⁷⁹ Two days of occupation, with the support and aid of the Wayne County Federation of Labor, the United Auto Workers and the WPA union, yielded an exemption for the projects from Harry Hopkins in Washington, D.C., allowing the mothers to keep their jobs.¹⁸⁰

Not all women were unhappy to leave WPA jobs to remain home full time to care for their children. Elizabeth Porter, an African-American mother of three children, whose father had deserted the family in 1932, supported her family with day work and later a WPA sewing job in 1938. She was also laid off WPA in early 1939, but welcomed the chance to stay home. She believed her fifteen-year-old daughter needed her supervision, which she could better provide if she was not employed. She supplemented her grant with day work, and was admired by her case worker, who believed she had done a good job keeping her family together despite the lack of a husband.¹⁸¹

Another criticism of the women’s work projects was their emphasis on unskilled work, particularly as in the case of sewing and domestic work, the “dumping ground” for women relief workers.¹⁸² Few work relief projects, except those targeting white collar

¹⁷⁹Arthur L. Stone and Martin Kahn, “Detroit Sits Down To Work,” *Social Work Today* v. 4 no. 8 (May 1937) 14.

¹⁸⁰Stone and Kahn, “Detroit Sits Down to Work,” 15.

¹⁸¹Case C7300279, reel 4536, Saginaw ADC records; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 224-225. Jones argues that for some black women, particularly in the urban north, “New Deal welfare programs afforded an opportunity to place family considerations over the demands of white employers.”

¹⁸²Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 72; Blanche Weisen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933-1938, Volume II* (New York: Viking Press, 1999) 87-88.

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workers, translated into skills marketable in private employment at reasonable wages. White collar workers had the skills before the Depression, and such projects offered no training. Unskilled work for women did not command the wages for unskilled work for men, of course, and thus few women who needed long-term work advanced their position in the labor market. An undated press release, "The Negro and the WPA," boasted that those black women who participated in the household training programs not only secured jobs after completing the programs, but at higher wages than they would have earned otherwise.¹⁸³ Such training programs hoped to raise the status of domestic work by "professionalizing" it through training and standards, but they proved ineffective.¹⁸⁴ In many cases, such programs trained women to take low-wage, low-skill jobs in the local communities, particularly in areas with a high demand for domestic or agricultural labor. Hispanic women, particularly those who were not citizens, also suffered discrimination.¹⁸⁵ Women of color were aided the least by the work relief projects, and were referred to as the "problem children" in the program. Referring in part to their disadvantaged opportunities and training, the term also connotes paternalism and blame on the part of

¹⁸³"The Negro and the WPA," WPA (Record Group 69), NDBA, Reel 21, p. 6.

¹⁸⁴Alfred Edgar Smith, "Negro Project Workers: 1937 Annual Report," WPA, NDBA, reel 21, p. 2; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 205-206, 218; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933-1938*, 261-262.

¹⁸⁵Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward*, 53; Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 75-76; Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929-1939* (College Station: Texas A & M University, 1984) 128-129.

black women. The women were the problem, not the labor market or the work projects.¹⁸⁶

Stereotypical views of African-American women as lazy and sexually promiscuous, which usually made them inadequate if not neglectful mothers, appear in the case records, and women of color often had to disprove those views. Until clients proved otherwise, many case workers viewed women of color - African-American, Mexican and Native American - through a racist lens. A woman whose behavior contradicted the stereotype was seen as the exception, one who was able to overcome the limits of her race. The contradictory treatment of black women, and even those whom case workers viewed favorably, appears vividly in the record of Joanne Bates. A mother of six children aged five to sixteen, Bates had been widowed in 1926; she and her second husband separated in 1938. She supported her family with income from boarders, in addition to alimony from her estranged husband. Case workers found her to be ambitious. She had just a fifth grade education, but was attending night school and had a lot of common sense. She worked at various jobs, including a cook in a boarding house, hoping to combine her various sources of income so she would not need ADC. She finally succeeded in early 1942. Three months later she returned, seeking a new job. She was employed as a cleaning woman in a house of prostitution, and hoped to secure alternative employment in the WPA. But case workers could not do so, because she had private employment, regardless of the nature of it. Bates wanted to leave what many -

¹⁸⁶"Narrative Report," January 1937, Press Release, WPA, NDBA, reel 15; "The Negro and the New Deal," p. 5.

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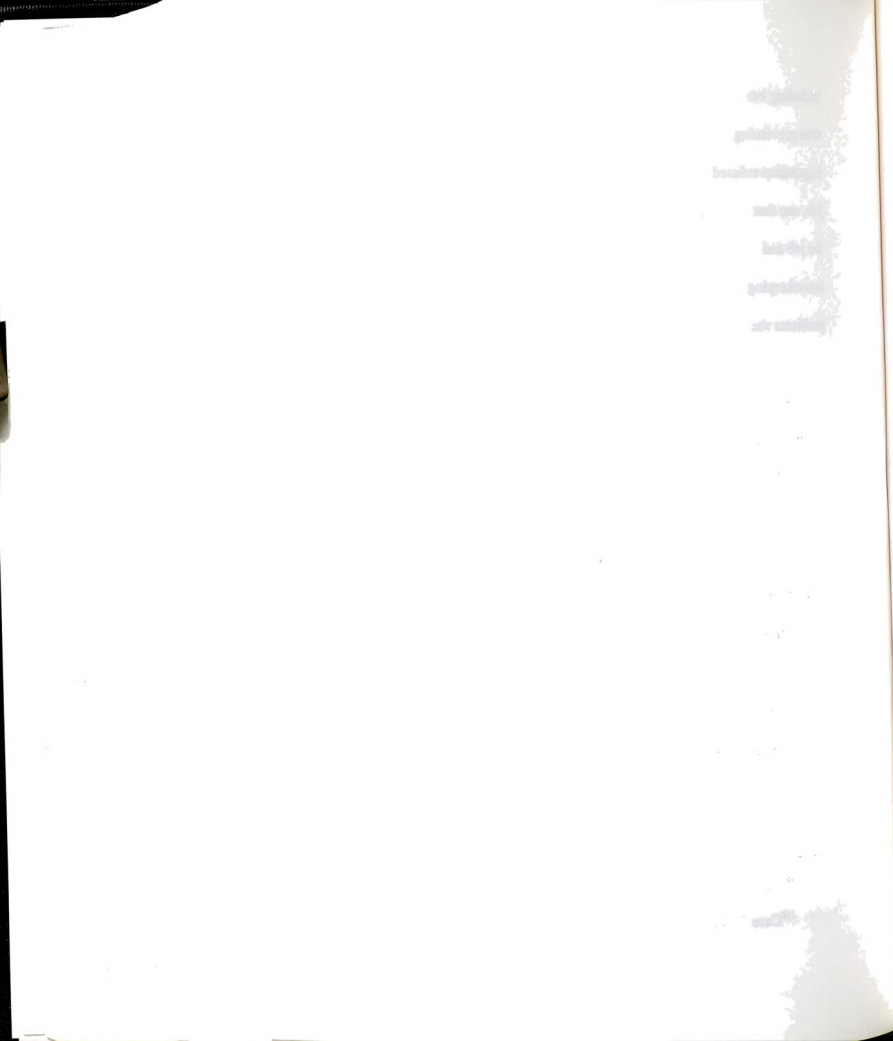
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including her - would see as an immoral place of work, but WPA regulations precluded it, thus preventing her from leaving what she considered distasteful work. Federal regulations refused her a work assignment that would allow her to leave an "immoral" job, one that confirmed many racist stereotypes held about black women. She finally quit the job and reapplied for ADC. Then case workers certified her for a WPA job as a housekeeping aide.¹⁸⁷ But although they admired her greatly, and sympathized with the problems she faced, they saw her as unique among black women, a "good manager and of good character in comparison to the average in this neighborhood."¹⁸⁸ Her case workers failed to recognize the limited work options she had, which prompted her to accept a job she did not see as acceptable but needed to support her family.

Non-citizens also suffered on the WPA rolls, as well as in the private labor market. The WPA and private employers often refused jobs to non-citizens, fueling the belief that if they would leave, there would be enough jobs for Americans. Twenty-year-old Maria Gortez supported her entire family - her widowed mother and four siblings - with a WPA job in Saginaw, although her mother also received a small ADC grant to supplement Maria's earnings. Case workers noted that supporting the entire family "was too much to be expected of her." But she later lost her WPA job because she was not a citizen, and also could not obtain factory employment without having her first papers,

¹⁸⁷Case C7300168, reel 4533, Saginaw ADC records.

¹⁸⁸Case C7300168, case history December 12, 1938 and May 19, 1942.



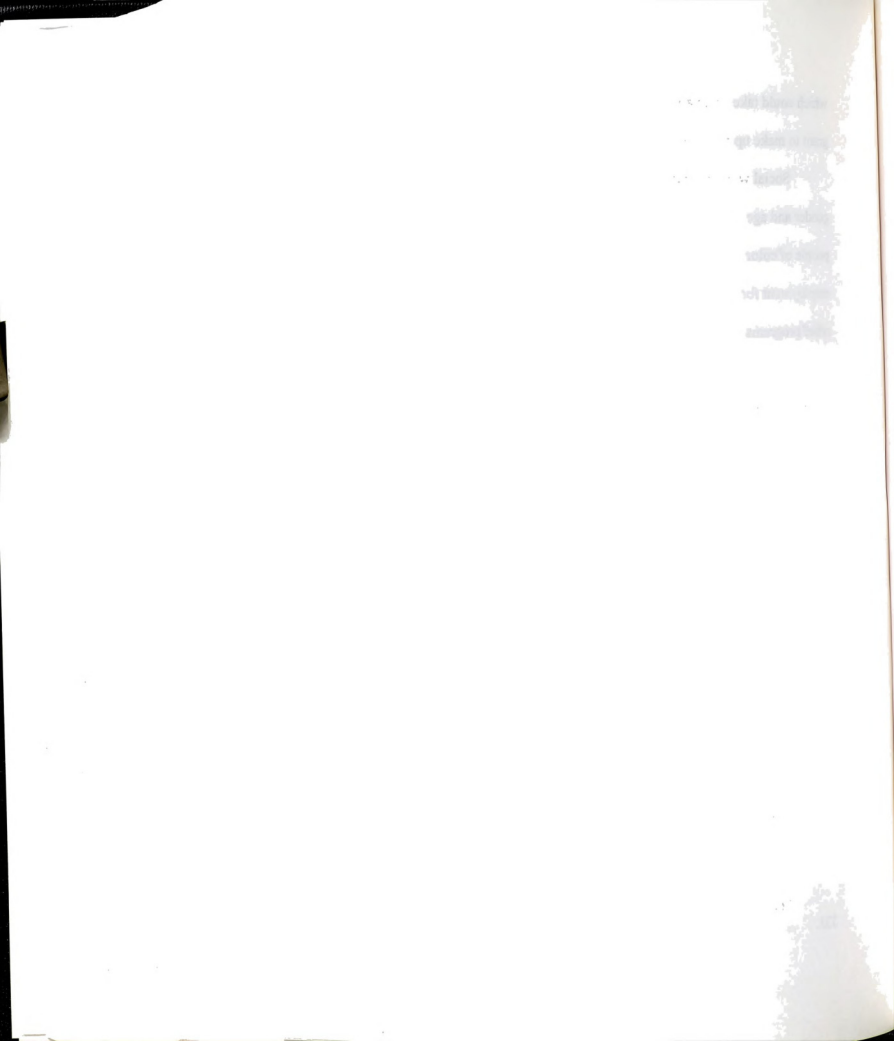
which could take up to a year.¹⁸⁹ Case workers had no choice but to increase the ADC grant to make up for Maria's lost wages.

Social workers also criticized the overall limited effects of WPA, in particular its gender and age discrimination, but paid little attention to the discrimination against people of color and the foreign-born. Louise Armstrong lamented the lack of employment for women in general in Manistee County, and recognized that the work relief programs did little to add to those opportunities.¹⁹⁰ Gertrude Springer, through her Miss Bailey series, agreed, noting that projects rarely taught skills, or for those women who had never worked outside the home, how to function in a wage environment. Miss Bailey believed they could do much more: "It seems to me we are missing a chance in not using projects to give these women something that industry or business is likely to want and that might rescue them from being last hired and first fired."¹⁹¹ The tendency toward public works projects not only excluded women, but also older men. Many could no longer do the heavy work such projects required, but were able to work in a different capacity. Miss Bailey noted that age discrimination did exist in WPA programs, despite

¹⁸⁹Case C7300120, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4533, case history from August 4, 1937 and September 20, 1937.

¹⁹⁰Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 304. See Chapter 10, "Women and Creeds and Christmas Toys."

¹⁹¹Gertrude Springer, "Border Lines and Gaps," *Survey* vol. 71 (November 1935) 333.



regulations against it.¹⁹² WPA was simply not enough; it was only for the best of the unemployed, but would not serve all.

Springer also criticized regulations that restricted supplementation of WPA wages, and for larger families, this meant that their budgets on work relief were stingier than if they received direct relief. Wages were not calculated based on family need, and thus might not cover the entire family. Not all areas restricted supplementation, but in those that did - generally counties that contributed little to relief in general - WPA workers could not receive even surplus commodities. About 20 percent of all cases, according to Miss Bailey did not fit this mold, and again the program's lack of flexibility frustrated her:

WPA seems to have been conceived, say the workers, on the assumption that everything about it would click, that its gears would all mesh smoothly, that all families have the average of 4.1 children, that everyone has average good health, that accidents don't happen and that mankind, singly and collectively, faces squarely up to its responsibilities. And that assumption, their experience indicates, is about 20 percent off in one way or another.¹⁹³

Despite the criticisms of WPA and other programs found in the Miss Bailey series, racial discrimination - and racial issues in general - were obvious omissions. Although African-Americans appeared in the column, they were rarely social workers and generally were recipients of relief. And, as seen in the case of Joanne Bates and other women of color, case workers seldom connected their recipients' problems to the racism they faced in American society and the welfare programs.

¹⁹²Springer, "Border Lines and Gaps," 332.

¹⁹³Gertrude Springer, "You Can't Eat Morale," *Survey* vol. 72 (March 1936) 77.



Social workers and policy makers recognized the need for more permanent aid for those unable to work. Unemployable people made up between 20 and 25 percent of all relief recipients during the two years FERA was in operation; a 1935 study of unemployability in January pegged the unemployable rate at 19 percent during that month.¹⁹⁴ Employment programs and unemployment insurance would not solve their problems. SERA reports attributed the inability of some people to provide for themselves, or to plan ahead for when they could not work, not on the individual but on the circumstances of the labor market or their own family circumstances. Many unemployable people were older, single people, but they also were mothers with dependent children; again, mothers were classed as unemployable as their job was to care for their children.¹⁹⁵ Not all counties faced the same amount of unemployable cases. Among our case counties, Marquette had the fewest in 1935 at less than 10 percent. Saginaw was among the highest at more than 25 percent. Table 5 shows the number of unemployable people in Michigan counties in January 1935:

¹⁹⁴Michigan State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, *Unemployable Persons on the Emergency Relief Rolls in Michigan* (Lansing, 1935) 7; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 57-58.

¹⁹⁵*Unemployable Persons*, 10-11.

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Table 5 Unemployability in Michigan in January 1935

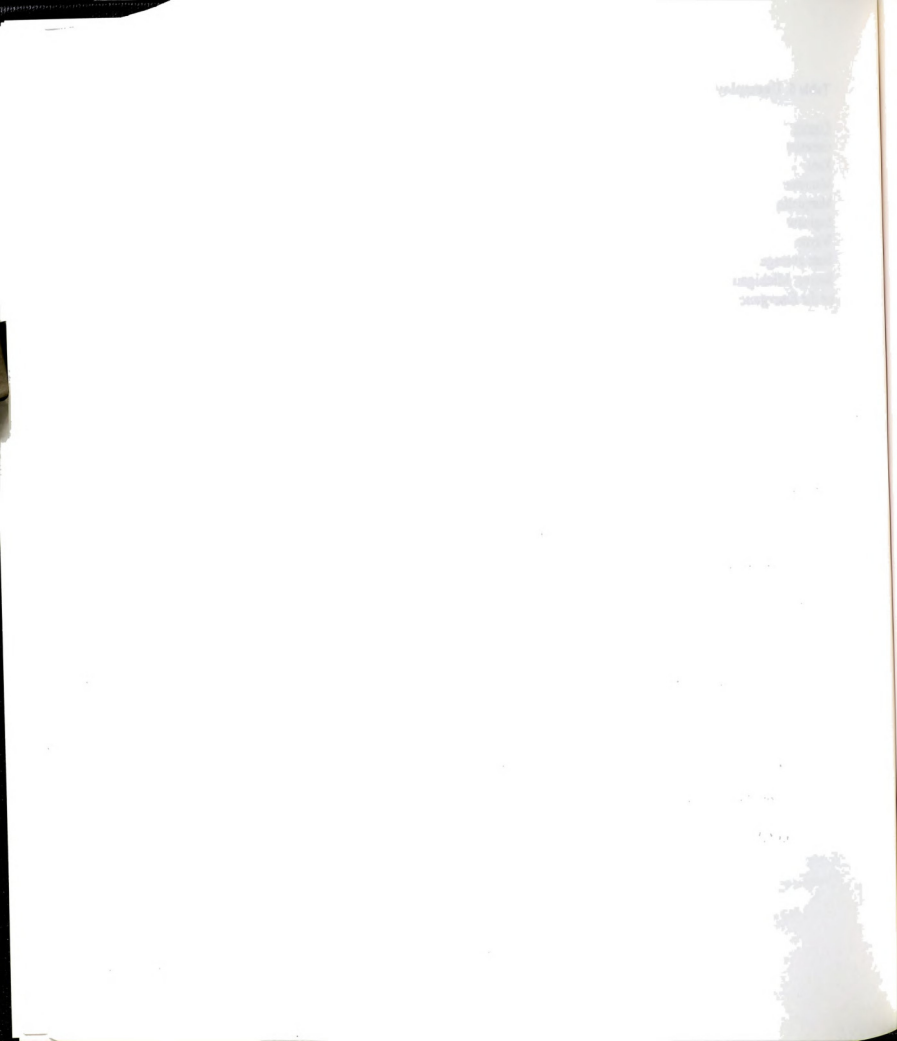
<u>County</u>	<u>Percent of unemployable cases</u>
Genesee	20 to 24%
Kent	25 to 29%
Manistee	25 to 29%
Marquette	Less than 10%
Saginaw	25 to 29%
Wayne	10 to 14%
State average	19.48%

Source: Michigan State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, *Unemployable Persons on the Emergency Relief Rolls in Michigan* (Lansing 1935) 13.

Targeting those unemployable people was the goal of the Social Security Act of 1935, and the categorical aids - Aid to Dependent Children, Aid to Blind, and Old Age Assistance - were designed to provide income for these groups of people.

The Uneven Nature of Social Security

The Social Security Act, signed by Franklin Roosevelt in August 1935, set out to provide more permanent systems of aid for America's needy citizens. Policy makers recognized that America contained a significant population of people who could not work and had no means of support. The Social Security Act, coupled with the WPA, which became law on April 8, 1935, replaced the other major New Deal programs, including FERA. WPA was to continue to provide work relief for the unemployed, but only as a temporary program, while the Social Security Act was to care for the "unemployables," as well as to provide a social insurance program for workers that would eventually replace the need for Old Age Assistance, in theory. Direct relief was returned to the states



gradually throughout the last few months of 1935, and by January of 1936, federal aid for direct relief had ended.¹⁹⁶

The Social Security Act's programs fell into two major categories: those classified as insurance, and funded, in theory, by contributions from workers and employers, and those termed public assistance, funded not through contributions but from government revenues. The former and the most well-known was the social insurance program, intended to provide for retired workers in their final years. Old age insurance, in contrast to the categorical aid programs under the public assistance rubric, was intended to be seen as an "earned" benefit, through those contributions, and not a welfare program.¹⁹⁷ Usually referred to as "social security" to the exclusion of the other parts of the program, the old age insurance program was severely limited in the workers covered and exclusions were based largely on race, ethnicity and gender, given the labor market structures and the ideology of the family wage implicit in the program. Gwendolyn Mink argues that the social security act entrenched different ideas about men's and women's work and citizenship. Policies presumed that men were workers and the family breadwinners, while women's primary role was family caretaker, dependent on male wages for support. While this ideology was not new, the Social Security Act entrenched

¹⁹⁶Rose, *Put to Work*, 94-96; Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 132-133.

¹⁹⁷Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: Free Press, 1994) 253-254; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Designing Women and Old Fools: The Construction of the Social Security Amendments of 1939," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 90-91.

these gender ideologies into federal policy.¹⁹⁸ Domestic and agricultural workers were not included in the program's coverage, thus excluding many women and people of color, who perhaps needed the benefits the most. Also excluded were government workers and employees of non-profit organizations. The limits reveal, according to another historian, that "social insurance did not concern helping the needy, so much as providing a base of security for the nation's industrial population."¹⁹⁹

The other provisions in the act (also referred to as the categorical aids), targeted the needy, including unemployables, and were not seen as earned benefits, but as welfare. They included means-testing, and later morals testing under revisions to the Aid to Dependent Children program. The program called for matching grants for states, which would thus not have to shoulder the entire financial burden for caring for dependent mothers, the elderly and the blind. Under the original act, states could receive up to one-half the costs of the Old Age Assistance grants, which were capped at a \$40 per month maximum in benefits. In contrast, federal contributions to ADC grants were just one-third, with a maximum benefit set at \$18 for the first child and \$12 for each additional

¹⁹⁸Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 126-127. See also Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs*. 19 (Winter 1994): 309-336.

¹⁹⁹Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 233-234; Edward D. Berkowitz, *America's Welfare State: From Roosevelt to Reagan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 25. Berkowitz does not argue that the limits of the social security act are based on race, class or gender ideologies. He argues the key analytical framework is the pattern of conflict and consensus surrounding welfare programs at any given time.

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1942-1943

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1948-1949

1949-1950

child. Children sixteen and under were eligible. Federal grants for ADC benefits rose to one-half, matching OAA, under the 1939 amendments.²⁰⁰ But ADC was intended only for the children, as had been the case for mothers' pensions; no grant for the mother was provided until 1950.²⁰¹ OAA was to replace the state old age pension laws and ADC would replace existing mothers' pension laws.

Enactment of the Social Security Act at the federal level did not automatically result in the programs operating in the states. States had to enact enabling legislation that included the required administrative set-up to run the programs. Thus the three major categorical aids - ADC, OAA, and Aid to Blind - were instituted in the states at different rates and times. Laws had to be statewide in operation with a state agency in charge of supervising local operations. The state agency also had to have regulatory powers relating to personnel, grant amounts and administration of the program, and anyone

²⁰⁰Coll, *Safety Net*, 51-52, 103; Claude R. Tharp, *Social Security And Related Services in Michigan, Their Administration and Financing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1946) 7-8, 14-15; Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, 316; *Social Security in America* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937) 249. The Social Security Board publication notes that one third for ADC would be from the federal government, one third from the state, and the final third from the local government. Coll argues that the ADC lobby did not have the numbers or resources as those found in the OAA camp, thus resulting, at least for a time, in the different matching formulas.

²⁰¹Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, 316; Linda Gordon, "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century," in *U.S. History as Women's History*, 81-82; Winifred Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) 23.

denied aid had to be allowed a fair hearing. There was some latitude beyond those basic requirements, but all state legislation had to be approved by the Social Security Board.²⁰²

Michigan was among the first states to gain approval for OAA grants. Its 1933 law required changing the citizenship requirement and extending aid to non-citizens, which the legislature did in 1935.²⁰³ The ADC and AB programs were more difficult. Michigan's 1913 mothers' pension law was administered through the probate court and was not mandatory, and thus violating two provisions of the Social Security Act: statewide operation and state supervision. (The state had no AB law; blind people were cared for under the poor relief system and later the emergency relief programs.) The state submitted an interim plan for SERA to administer both ADC and AB in mid-1936, until more substantive legislative changes could be made; it was approved and most mothers' pension cases were transferred to the ADC program by the end of that year. Any emergency relief cases that qualified also were transferred to the ADC program.²⁰⁴ This practice continued until passage of Michigan's Social Welfare Act of 1939.²⁰⁵ Although

²⁰²"Public Assistance Legislation in a Public Welfare Program," Conference Proceedings, 1937, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 6; George F. Granger and Lawrence R. Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan, 1933-1939* (Lansing, 1939) 9.

²⁰³Granger and Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan*, 9; *Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission* (Lansing, December 26, 1936) 41; Tharp, *Social Security and Related Services in Michigan*, 6; "State Organization for Public Welfare in Michigan," 1937, WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 4, p. 85-86, 98.

²⁰⁴Granger and Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan*, 9-10; Tharp, *Social Security and Related Services in Michigan*, 11-12, 17; SERA Letter #637, September 18, 1936, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder July to September 1936.

²⁰⁵See Chapter Six for a full discussion of the evolution of the 1939 welfare legislation.

many counties had ceased funding mothers' pensions by 1933, those that still did provide such aid began to discontinue that program. By the end of 1940, it appeared that no counties were funding mothers' pensions, and instead were using those funds for the local share of ADC.²⁰⁶

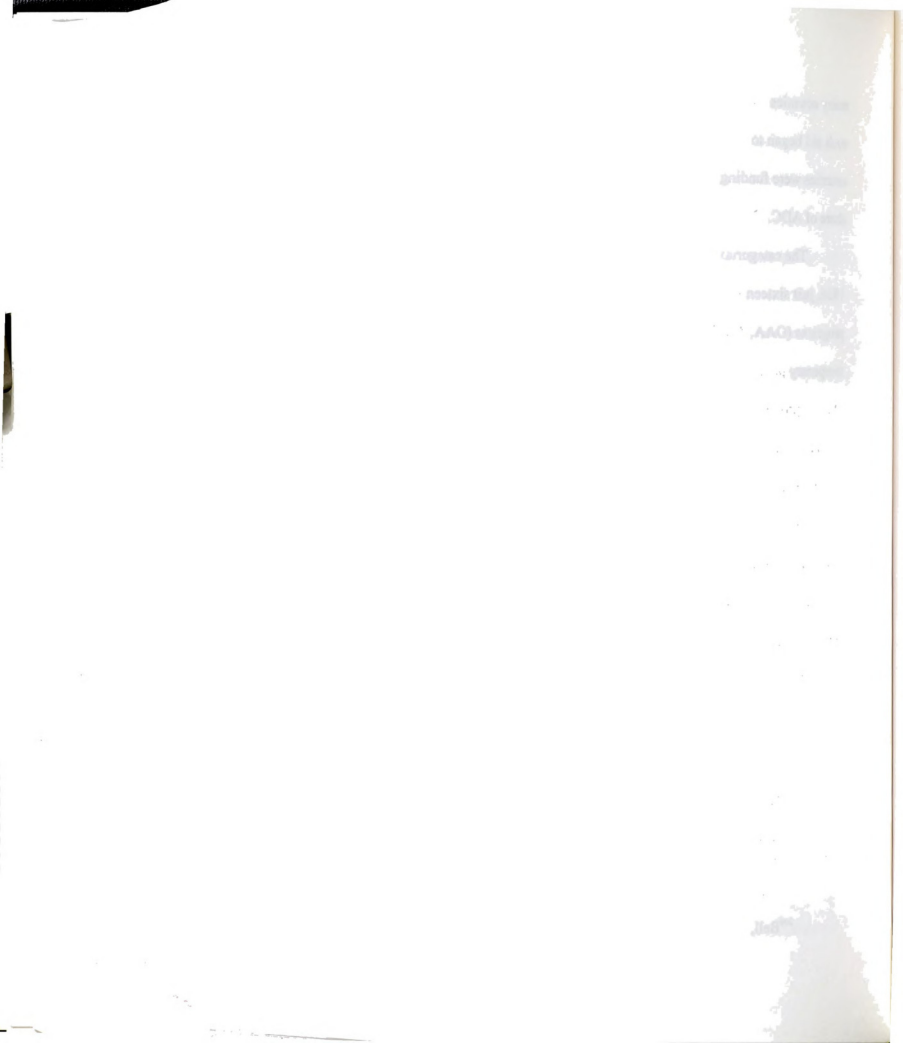
The categorial aid programs spread slowly throughout the country. By August of 1936, just sixteen states had enabling legislation for the three major categorial aid programs (OAA, ADC, and AB); Michigan was not one of them as it was using a temporary plan under SERA to receive federal grants. Thirty-eight states did have OAA plans approved, and just five states (all in the south) had not submitted any plan to the Social Security Board. Twenty-two had approved ADC plans and just two states had submitted nothing to date. Twenty-one states had approved AB plans.²⁰⁷ Two months later forty-two states had OAA laws, but just twenty-six had ADC laws.²⁰⁸ States were much quicker to enact OAA laws than ADC. As 1938 ended, all states had OAA programs in place, but eight still had no ADC plan. Investments in OAA were much higher, in general, among states and local communities, than funds provided for children through the ADC program.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶Tharp, *Social Security and Related Services*, 13.

²⁰⁷"Status of Public Assistance Legislation in the States as of August 10, 1936," Social Security Board, WRSC Records, Box 11, Folder 24.

²⁰⁸Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, 316.

²⁰⁹Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children*, 23.



Michigan's laws would enable the state to receive federal matching funds for its major categorical programs. Tables 6 and 7 show the amount of funds, and their sources, for both OAA and ADC. OAA grants ranged from \$1.4 million in 1936 to \$8 million by 1940. Likewise, ADC grants began at about \$1.1 million in 1937 but increased to \$2.7 million by 1940. And although local funds were to provide one-third of the funds for ADC, the local contribution never passed 10 percent in the first years of the program. It started out at 7.6 percent in 1937, and rarely rose in the first years. (See Table 6.)

Table 6 OAA Expenditures in Michigan (in thousands of dollars)

Year ending June 30	Federal funds	State funds	Percent federal	Percent state
1935	0	\$363	0	100
1936	\$1,445	\$1,523	48.69	51.31
1937	\$3,445	\$3,628	48.71	51.29
1938	\$7,279	\$7,668	48.70	51.30
1939	\$7,821	\$8,238	48.70	51.30
1940	\$8,045	\$8,391	48.95	51.05

Source: Claude Tharp, *Social Security and Related Services in Michigan, Their Administration and Financing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1946) 12.

Table 7 ADC Expenditures in Michigan (in thousands of dollars)

Year ending June 30	Federal funds	State funds	Local funds	Percent federal	Percent state	Percent local
1937	\$1,151	\$1,762	\$240	36.5	55.9	7.6
1938	\$1,877	\$2,875	\$391	36.5	55.9	7.6
1939	\$2,123	\$3,252	\$442	36.5	55.9	7.6
1940	\$2,707	\$4,687	\$459	34.5	59.7	5.8

Source: Claude Tharp, *Social Security and Related Services in Michigan, Their Administration and Financing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1946) 16.

OAA applications were investigated slowly, however, often because a lack of state funds prevented the approval of new cases. Less than half of those who applied ever received a grant, according to a 1936 study. About one-fifth were denied, and another 16 percent of applications were withdrawn before they could be investigated. Eight percent of applicants died before aid could be granted. OAA grants were also extremely low, despite the maximum allowances in the law. The average grant was just \$16.50, but grants ranged from \$4 to \$20 - just half of the maximum provided by law.²¹⁰

Michigan gained federal funds relatively quickly, using its revised OAA law and SERA as the administering agency for ADC and AB. But that did not solve its long-term problem of how to revise its welfare laws. Revision was critical if the state was to continue to receive federal matching grants, and the categorical aids removed some responsibility for assistance from the local governments, including the elderly and dependent mothers. But implementing the Social Security Act only intensified the anti-federalism that emerged in the FERA years. What followed were nearly three years of

²¹⁰“State Organization,” WRSC Records, p. 100-102.



welfare debate, centered on local control and funding, and the use of professional social workers. The debate often pitted local officials, including township supervisors and superintendents of the poor, against state and social work officials. The professional social worker - and the new relief worker - came to symbolize the intrusion of the state and federal governments on local officials, and the profession of social work would be at the center of the battles over relief administration - within and outside of the profession - during the 1930s.





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NEGOTIATING RELIEF:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS
IN DEPRESSION-ERA MICHIGAN, 1930-1940

VOLUME II

By

Susan Stein-Roggenbuck

A DISSERTATION

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“These So-Called Case Workers”: Relief Workers and Professionalization

Chapter Four

E.M. Zuver, chairperson of the Van Buren County Welfare Relief Commission, issued a statement in November 1933, just weeks after county emergency relief offices opened, refuting reports that WRC employees earned \$900 for two weeks of work. The report, printed in a neighboring county's newspaper, included Van Buren in its allegations, which were not true.¹ The incident was not uncommon. A major criticism of the emergency relief system was the administrative costs, a large portion of which went to pay the numerous employees of the county and state relief agencies, from stenographers and clerks to case workers, supervisors and county administrators. Local officials believed they could do the work much cheaper than “these so-called case workers,” and SERA issued more than one report defending its administrative expenses.² Critics included local officials, community members as well as some recipients who compared their meager grants to the salary paid the case worker assigned to their case. But the low salaries also angered social workers, who were supposed professionals yet were paid less than many skilled laborers. The New Deal programs prompted major changes in the profession, and as a result, the professional social workers debated the profession's role and public welfare in these years on two fronts: within the profession and with those

¹“Denies Report of Expense of County Welfare Commission,” *Hartford Day Spring*, November 15, 1933, p. 1.

²Quote from Van Buren County Board of Supervisors' resolution, February 16, 1934, *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, p. 92. See Chapter Three, p. 45.

groups outside the profession, primarily those opposed to the professionalization of public welfare. This chapter focuses on the internal professional debates and conflicts generated during these years of change.

The Great Depression and the New Deal changed social work permanently, despite the continuities in policy before and after the Great Depression. A relatively new profession, social work was still engaged in creating its own identity and defining its professional niche when its services were in demand as never before. Social workers and social work organizations participated in public policy development during the Depression and eventually the New Deal.³ In addition to helping to frame policies, the profession faced a huge influx of new social workers, many of whom had no formal training, but who were hired to staff the emergency relief agencies around the country. The 1930s saw the rise of the “new social worker”: usually a young person with some college education, but with little or no formal social work training. Many were also women, which was not surprising in a profession that was among the earliest to offer opportunities to educated women. The profession greatly expanded, both in numbers and in influence, as social workers entered the public welfare arena to a much greater degree. Estimates were that the U.S. had about 30,500 social workers in 1930, largely employed

³The AASW was created in 1921. The Family Welfare Association began as the National Association of Societies for Organizing Charities in 1911. It changed its name to the FWA just before the Great Depression and became the Family Service Association in 1946. See eds. Peter Romanofsky and Clarke Chambers, *Social Service Organizations*, Vol. I (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978) 22-23, 302-303.

by private agencies; their ranks doubled by the time Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1932.⁴

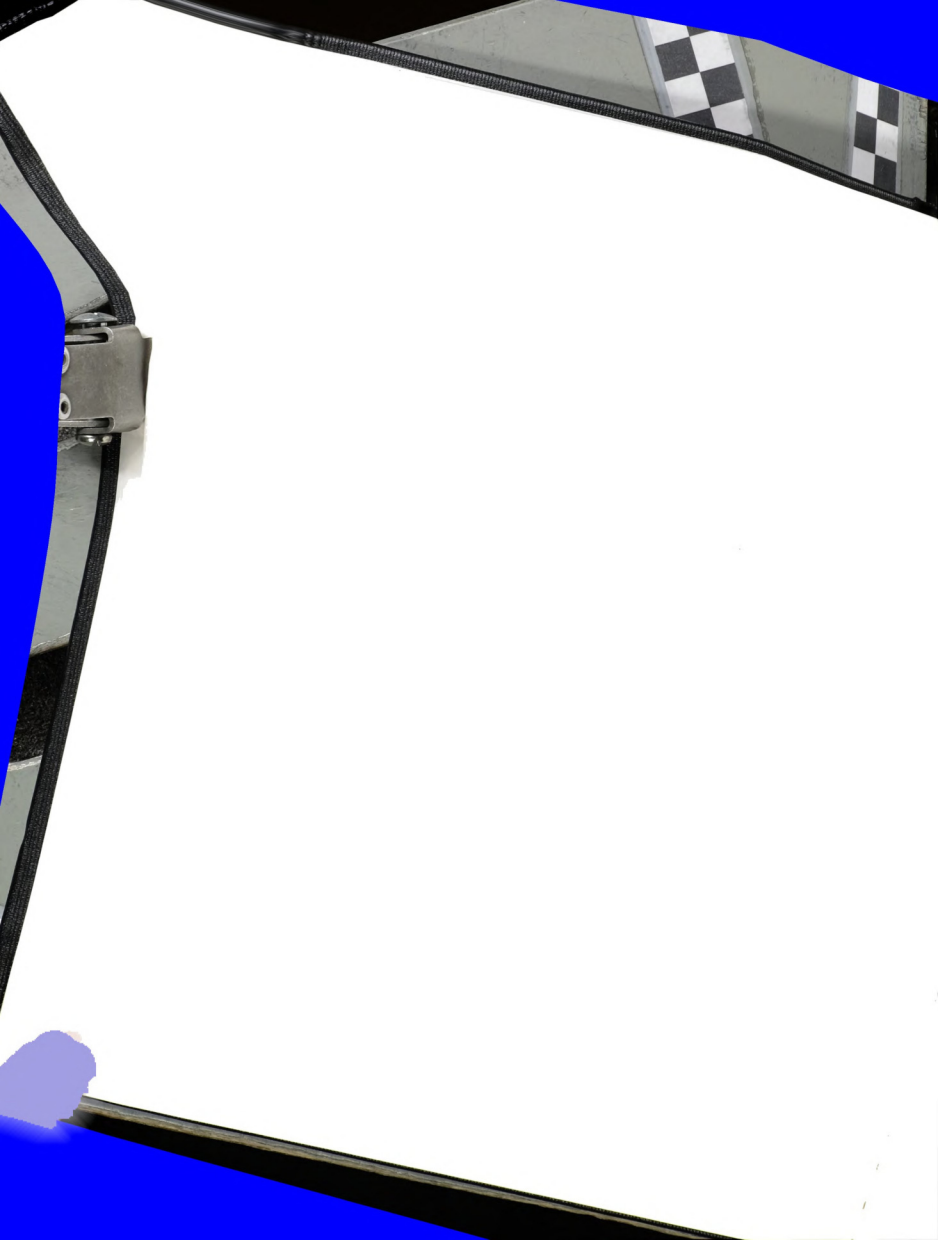
Professional social work organizations and their members felt threatened by the sudden changes and feared the weakening of the standards they had worked so hard to establish.⁵ Professional social work generated conflicts within the ranks of relief workers hired during the New Deal era. Low salaries, poor working conditions and the constant attacks from outside the field angered social workers, some of whom rejected professionalization as a means to address their labor issues. The contest over professional standards culminated in a revolt among some new relief workers, who sought union organization - rather than professionalization - as a means to gain higher wages and job security. Although only a minority of social workers participated in unionization - the Rank and File Movement - many relief workers shared the movement's concerns and frustrations.

The Professionalization of Social Work

Professional social work has its roots in the settlement house and Progressive movements, a critical period in the profession's development. Volunteers serving as "friendly visitors" no longer staffed private social welfare agencies to the same extent;

⁴Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989, fourth edition) 269-270; Winifred Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) 37-38.

⁵John H. Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) somewhere after 107 and before 119.



most agencies began to employ graduates of schools of social work who used the new method of case work.⁶ Social work was largely a feminized profession, a trend that continued in the New Deal agencies. Feminized professions were not only numerically dominated by women, but also practiced professional values different from the more traditional (often male) professions.⁷ Historian Robyn Muncy argues that multiple types of professionalization occurred, centered on gender.⁸ Connected to the types of professionalization were the values the members espoused and practiced, and again Muncy connects these values to gender, rooted in beliefs about the natural abilities of

⁶Regina Kunzel argues that case work was the defining skill or element of the social work profession, and was “a kind of litmus test to separate professionals from amateurs and to advertise their professional status to a skeptical public.” Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 42; Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 57-58, 75-76.

⁷Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 8-10, 68-70; Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 72. Margaret Rossiter analyzes the experiences of women entering both male- and female-dominated professions, as well as the strategies they employed. See Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 55-65. Clarke Chambers argues that social work was a profession “created by an equal partnership of women and men working in coalition.” His argument may hold true for those women in national leadership positions, but I am not convinced it was true at other levels. See Clarke A. Chambers, “Women in the Creation of the Profession of Social Work,” *Social Service Review* 60 (March 1986) 6. See also Walkowitz, *Working With Class*.

⁸Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion*, xiii-xiv . The standard work on the history of professionalization is Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976). Bledstein’s work actually documents the culture of *male* professionalism, with no attention to gender and minimal attention to those professions termed “female.” For his description of professional knowledge, see pages 86-92.

women and men. Male professional values centered on expertise, competition, education and research. Among the values Muncy connects to female professions is the trend toward “popularizing” expert knowledge, an extension of the notion of women as educators. Perhaps more important was need to pursue a professional path with the primary goal of service.⁹ Female professions, like social work, were service professions that capitalized on the “natural,” nurturing qualities of women much like nursing or teaching. Muncy connects this to the need to justify women’s professional role in the context of traditional notions of what was appropriate behavior for women. A 1982 essay also argues that feminization occurred in professions “because there was a ‘fit’ between economic need and cultural conceptions of gender roles.”¹⁰ As with other feminized professions, this notion of “natural” abilities would be one that would be difficult to erase.

By the 1920s social work had begun to take on the characteristics of a profession: formal schools, professional organizations with membership requirements, and

⁹Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion*, 21-22. Muncy notes that while male professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, also included the idea of service, it was more abstract and directed toward the “public interest” rather than helping a specific group or individual. She also argues that in the early days of social work, female professionals relied on wealthy benefactors for support, and thus had to interpret or “sell” their work to laypeople. They also had to persuade clients that their services were necessary: “At precisely the time when those traditional male professions were seeking to increase their fees and status by emphasizing esoteric knowledge, women were creating professions that depended on the cooperation of lay people.” (20)

¹⁰Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Nancy Tomes, “Women in the Professions: A Research Agenda for American Historians,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (June 1982) 283; Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 118-120.



publications.¹¹ Most social workers advocated the use of professional social work methods, including case work, and the use of volunteers as the backbone of social welfare agencies declined further.¹² The social worker was no longer a friendly visitor or volunteer Lady Bountiful, but instead was “the ‘scientific’ Miss Case-Worker, an ‘objective’ social investigator.”¹³ The social worker’s job was to help clients deal with issues of social adjustment that obstructed their ability to function in society as needed, but the “objective” part was important; moral judgements were not to be a part of the diagnosis.¹⁴ Social workers only diagnosed the problems, “to indicate limits and possibilities in a systematic way, to point toward a reasoned plan of action.”¹⁵ But one significant continuity existed: Lady Bountiful and Miss Case-Worker were women, and the image of a social worker remained feminine throughout this era of professionalization.¹⁶

¹¹Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 83-86.

¹²Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 103. Mary Richmond’s *Social Diagnosis*, published in 1917, was the primary manual for case work for social workers. See Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 57-58.

¹³Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 87.

¹⁴Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965) 77-78.

¹⁵James Leiby, *A History of Social Welfare and Social Work in the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) 123, 182-183.

¹⁶Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 87. Conflicts between professional social workers and the volunteers who still worked in agencies existed, and often centered on lines of gender and age, as the older women volunteers met their younger, educated “professional” colleagues in social work agencies, as Walkowitz argues.

Social work was not accepted as a profession by all, and many skeptics questioned what social work's expertise was. One critic argued that social work required "no specialized skills; it was a mediating occupation without final authority."¹⁷ Social workers provided information about services, but held no specialized skill that defined them as autonomous professionals. The debate about professionalism, and the anxiety that accompanied it, took place within and outside of social work circles, and gender was very much at the center of such debates.¹⁸

Elizabeth Lunbeck demonstrates the nature of these debates between social workers and psychiatrists in *The Psychiatric Persuasion*. Some psychiatrists (male) saw the social worker not as a professional but as a woman whose nature lent itself to such work, or someone who had the innate qualities to help others resolve their social problems. Such views de-emphasized the professional training and education of social work. In the professional hierarchy, social workers fell below the expert, scientific psychiatrists.¹⁹ Psychiatric social workers argued, in contrast, that they held skills in

¹⁷Quoted in Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920s," *American Historical Review* 95 (October 1990) 1053-1054.

¹⁸Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 48-51, 60-62; Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity," 1053-1054. Barbara Melosh argues that the strategy of professionalization in the field of nursing also was hindered by its lack of final authority; nurses depended on doctors and thus had little professional authority of their own. See Barbara Melosh, *The Physician's Hand: Work, Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

¹⁹Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 37-38; Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 94-95, 167.

social technique, or the ability to diagnose patients in need of social adjustment in ways that a psychiatrist could not.²⁰

As social work developed as a profession, social workers sought to distance their work from notions about natural abilities based on gender. Regina Kunzel argues that the social work profession, in its efforts to distinguish itself from the friendly visitors and volunteers of the earlier era, also was distancing itself from such beliefs about natural abilities and social work. Social work was a profession, and not a “natural” occupation for women, but it was a difficult image to shed.²¹ Social work was also predominantly a white profession, as non-white social work professionals generally worked in agencies that served their own communities. Few African-Americans, Hispanics or other people of color entered the mainstream profession on a large scale until the 1960s, particularly in the south. Those who were hired before that, as was Buelah Whitby, an African-American college graduate, in Detroit in 1931, did not work with white applicants. Her caseload was segregated, as she served only black clients, although white relief workers often worked with black recipients.²²

²⁰Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, 78-79.

²¹Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 47.

²²Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 17, 66, 213; Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 189-190. Formal education for black social workers dates to the 1920s, centered in the School for Social Work at Atlanta University. Shaw argues that the DPW hired Whitby to serve as a mediator with the black clients the department served, and she was assigned to a predominantly African-American district.

Social work persisted and developed the tenets of a profession. By the 1920s, case work formed the core curriculum for the new social work schools that emerged by the 1930s. No social work schools existed in the United States in 1898, but the U.S. and Canada had forty by 1928.²³ The Charity Organization movement organized in the National Board of Corrections and Charities in 1874 - and would reorganize as the National Association of Social Work in 1917. Four years later it had 4,000 members. The American Association of Social Workers, organized in 1921, published its own professional journal, *The Compass*, later *Social Work*.²⁴ The other major professional social work journal was the *Survey*, published by the Russell Sage Foundation and considered to be the voice for social workers, rather than a specific professional organization.²⁵ By the 1920s, the AASW represented between 15 and 20 percent of professional social workers. Usually members were the "elite" among social workers,

²³Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 63; Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State*, 217-222.

²⁴Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination*, 78 Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, 63; Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity," 1054.

²⁵Leiby, *A History of Social Welfare and Social Work*, 120. The *Survey* was first published in 1909 and was connected to several other publications, including *Charities* and *Commons*. Between 1923 and 1948 the *Survey* had two publications, the *Midmonthly* directed at professional social workers and the *Graphic* for a wider audience. See Clarke A. Chambers, *Paul U. Kellogg and the Survey: Voices for Social Welfare and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971) 7; Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 224-225.

The Russell Sage Foundation, founded in 1907, "was the leading private foundation promoting professional welfare research and practice." See Chambers, "Women in the Creation of the Profession of Social Work," 7.

often executives of private agencies or higher-salaries case workers.²⁶ The 1936 AASW directory included primarily social workers from private agencies, including Elsie Redmond, who headed the Family Welfare Society in Marquette. Michigan members who belonged to public agencies included some Welfare Relief Commission administrators (John Ballenger of Detroit and Victor Woodward of Flint) and several people connected to the State Emergency Relief Administration (assistant administrator George Granger, field representative Philip Shafer, director Ruth Bowen and WPA district supervisor Anne Hutchings). Other Lansing members included Katherine Marling, who was case work director of the Ingham County WRC, and case worker Gladys Spaulding.²⁷ The majority of relief workers were not AASW members, and their inability and, in some cases, unwillingness to attain “professional” standards would fuel the union movement among social workers.

²⁶Walkowitz, “The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity,” 1054. Walkowitz notes that such representation mirrors those of other feminized professions, including nursing. See footnote 12, p. 1055. Membership in the National Association of Social Workers held similar requirements, although that organization was more flexible in terms of replacing practical experience for formal social work education. Junior members had to have at least one year of supervised experience, or one year of social work experience, and full members had to have at least four years of experience, unless they were graduates of an approved school of social work. See “Membership requirements before 1930,” National Association of Social Workers Records, Box 5, Folder 46, Membership Applications.

²⁷Jessica H. Barr, ed. *Directory of Members of the American Association of Social Workers, 1936* (New York: AASW); AASW Records, Box 6, Folder 56. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State*, 270. Social workers organized within their specialties - school and medical social workers were the first when they organized their respective professional organizations in 1919. The American Public Welfare Association, comprised of social workers interested in public welfare issues, organized in the 1930s and had several thousand members by the end of the decade. See Trattner’s chapter 11, “The Quest for Professionalization,” for a discussion of the professionalization of social work.

A key reason for the creation of professional organizations was to ensure minimum standards and uniform training within the field.²⁸ A part of the process of professionalization is exclusion - largely through requirements for membership. The AASW reiterated this goal in 1921, when it listed professional standards and training as its key concerns. Initially it required just four years of experience in the field of social work, reflecting in part the varied educational backgrounds of practicing social workers. By 1929 it had instituted much more stringent membership standards. Formal education and social work experience were not enough; for full members, college education in social work, with specified numbers of courses from accredited schools of social work, was required. Although a degree in social work was not required for either full or junior members, the AASW did mandate specific social work training with experience.²⁹ The profession's goal was to require a master's degree in social work. Formal education was to be the key to entrance into the profession by 1932, as was the case for law and medicine. In effect, the stringent requirements excluded many social work practitioners from joining the professional organization.³⁰ Older social workers, like Louise Armstrong, often had only social work experience, but no formal social work education. They were only eligible for membership if they belonged to the AASW before the

²⁸Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, 124-125; Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination*, 78. Psychiatric social workers organized in 1926. These specialized groups, among others, formed the National Association of Social Workers in 1955.

²⁹Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, 131, 136-137.

³⁰Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 90.

requirements changed.³¹ New relief workers, hired only because they had some formal education, were often not eligible.

Professional organizations regulated not only which individuals could hold membership, but also what agencies could be recognized as “accredited” in the social work profession. The Family Welfare Association (later the Family Service Association) was one such organization. Member agencies engaged in family social work, largely through private social work agencies. The FWA provided field service visits to assist agencies in social work practice, as well as to ensure that social work methods met their standards, and they also served as a clearinghouse for social work ideas and information. Annual regional, state and national conferences provided members with opportunities to learn new developments and techniques. The FWA helped agencies develop training programs and provided materials and case work examples. They published their journal, *The Family*, as well as publications related to social work practice. The FWA also assisted with local fund-raising and publicity programs, for example in Community Chest campaigns, to ensure the local agencies’ success.³² Individuals could become FWA “professional” members if they were AASW members and had one year of field

³¹Armstrong was a college graduate (the University of Michigan) but did not hold a degree in social work. The fictitious Miss Bailey from the *Survey* series by Gertrude Springer, was in the same position. In a column about the new relief workers and the AASW, Springer wrote: “Miss Bailey herself was a member only by virtue of such blanketing, and she and a lot of other middle-aged social workers would have to die off before the whole membership measured up to its self-imposed standards.” See Gertrude Springer, “Maybe When We Get Our Growth...” *Survey Midmonthly* v. 74 (May 1938) 170.

³²“New Frontiers in Family Social Work, FWA, Its Purpose, Services and Membership,” 1933, FSA, Box 17, Membership Before 1946, 2-4.

experience in family social work. To accommodate lay people involved in local social work, the FWA had “associate memberships,” intended for individuals with one year of experience with a family social work agency, either through service on committees or boards of directors.³³ As largely an accreditor of private agencies, the FWA recognized the critical role of governing board members, who although they might lack formalized social work training, were an important part of the private social work world. But again, they were not trained professionals and thus could not be full members.

Both public and private agencies were eligible for membership in the FWA, although the majority of member agencies were private. Membership opened to public agencies in 1921, but what usually excluded public agencies was their lack of trained social work personnel.³⁴ By 1931, just eight public agencies nationwide belonged to the FWA.³⁵ Interest in developing “real” social work in public agencies grew during the Depression years, which saw an increase in public agency membership in the FWA and

³³New Frontiers in Family Social Work,” 1933, FSA, Box 17, Membership Before 1946, 6-7.

³⁴Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940) 54; Memo by Joanna Colcord dated November 11, 1940, FSA, Box 17, Folder Membership Public Departments. Josephine Brown argues that professional social work organizations, like the FWA, established their membership requirements for agencies in a way that excluded public welfare departments. Colcord is critical of Brown’s assessment of the FWA’s involvement with public agencies. Brown argues that the FWA did not admit public agencies until 1926, while Colcord notes it was five years earlier.

³⁵Memo to membership committee, dated March 22, 1931, FSA Records, Box 17, Folder Membership - Public Departments. Agencies were in Denver, CO; Jacksonville and Orlando, FL; Chicago, IL; Clarkston, SC; Nashville, TN; Fort Worth, TX; and Madison, WI.

similar organizations. The new federal programs resulted in more interactions between public and private social workers, as well as a marked increase in the number of trained social workers employed in public welfare.

FERA's Social Work "Revolution"

A key goal of FERA - to "professionalize" public welfare to separate politics from relief administration - required the staffing of emergency relief agencies with trained social workers. This was a significant change from the earlier period, when supervisors, superintendents of the poor and other local officials administered relief. Virtually none of those officials had social work training, although many had long served in their positions. Often poor relief was just one aspect of the official's job, and rarely was it a full-time occupation. No qualifications were needed, and thus "anyone" could do it.³⁶ Michigan was no exception. A 1936 study commission on welfare issues, appointed by Governor Frank Fitzgerald, found that most of the local poor relief administrators - either township supervisors, county agents, mothers' pensions investigators, superintendents of the poor, or welfare directors - held no training in social work and were simply the elected official or an employee assigned to the task.³⁷ The study also noted that many of the

³⁶Brown, *Public Relief*, 14; Opal V. Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents* (Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research, 1933) 11-13, 19-22.

³⁷A study of Flint's social services (Genesee County) found that Flint's Division of the Poor - later dissolved under FERA - had eighteen employees, none of whom had training or education in social work. In addition, employees were hired by the City Commission, and thus the department, according to the study, was highly political with short tenures for employees. Hiring trained social workers would have been difficult in such an atmosphere, because of the job insecurity and the level of political influence. The

superintendents of the poor were older - virtually all were over 40. Investigators found ten over the age of 60 in the seventeen counties surveyed. Probate judges tended to be younger, but some were over the age of 50. The report acknowledged that while these members thus had experience, they also were not at the peak of their abilities.³⁸ Education was also a concern, as few officials had formal education, even in high school. Probate judges, elected to their positions, were not required to have any specific training, and some serving on the bench had less than an eighth grade education.³⁹ Saginaw County's Probate Judge, John Murphy, was a candidate for his second term on the Democratic ticket in 1936. He had served as court register for eighteen years, but had no formal legal training and was "sensitive about it."⁴⁰ County agents, often responsible for mothers' and old age pensions, also were found wanting: "County agents present a discouraging picture of grade school education, short service and lack of training and experience."⁴¹

FERA hoped to change this, and was moderately successful. The key problem was the shortage of trained personnel. The money to pay professional social workers was

report found a different situation among the superintendents of the poor, which operated without the political atmosphere "and administration was on notably more competent plane." See "The Development of Community Resources in Flint, Michigan, During Depression Years," Prepared by A.C. Findlay (Flint Institute of Research and Planning, October 1938) 6-7.

³⁸"Local Public Welfare," WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 10, Chapter V, "Present Public Welfare Organization," 81.

³⁹"Local Public Welfare," 81.

⁴⁰"Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936," WRSC Records, Box 6, Folder 7, Saginaw, Probate Judge.

⁴¹"Local Public Welfare," WRSC Records, 82.

provided by FERA, but finding trained workers to fill the greatly expanded case work positions was difficult. As in the case of Louise Armstrong in Manistee County, administrators sought to hire trained workers, but often simply hired educated people, if possible. They might employ nurses, teachers, home economists, or others with a somewhat related education background; many new social workers were young, unemployed college graduates. In addition, some areas refused to hire non-residents, married women or people with another family member employed. They also tried to hire those who needed work the most, sometimes employing staff on a work relief basis which was cheaper and cost effective, but such practices also lowered the quality of the staff. Rural areas, in particular, had few trained social workers on staff in emergency relief agencies.⁴²

The 1936 study commission report revealed that ERA staff were more educated than poor relief workers, although not necessarily in social work. Eleven of the sixteen county administrators surveyed had some college and five had college degrees. Among case work supervisors, eleven had some college and eight were college graduates. Seven had social work experience, three were teachers and the rest had business experience.⁴³

⁴²Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination*, 107-108; Brown, *Public Relief*, 277-279; Raymond L. Koch, "The Development of Public Relief Programs in Minnesota, 1929-1941" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1967) 71-72; Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 126-128. New York, under the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, hired relief recipients to work in its relief agency, but federal programs were not to hire staff on a work relief basis. If qualified, relief recipients could seek employment, but it would not be a work relief position. Not all counties followed the law, as Brown describes.

⁴³"Local Public Welfare," WRSC Records, 82.

Manistee and Van Buren counties both hired staff with college educations of some sort, but Louise Armstrong was the only administrator with formal social work experience. Detroit's case was similar; a 1936 survey found that about 80 percent of the staff had some college education, but only 2.4 percent had undergraduate certification in social work and only 1.6 percent had a graduate degree.⁴⁴ Buelah Whitby, the African-American social worker hired in Detroit's DPW in 1931, was an Oberlin College graduate who entered social work in Detroit after teaching for two years.⁴⁵ Marquette and Saginaw counties also hired relief workers with college education. In a group of twenty relief workers identified through city directories, three quarters had worked in a white collar occupation, including nursing, teaching or clerical work, that required at least some education, or they had recently been students before joining the WRC. Just three (15 percent) had any background in social work, and one of those had worked as a poor commissioner. Two had worked as skilled laborers in either a nearby factory or mining.⁴⁶ Securing staff with some education did not solve the problem that most lacked training in social work, and thus FERA and social work organizations sought to find methods to train case workers in social work methods. Time precluded the preferred professional training - graduate degrees in social work - and instead ERA officials sent workers to

⁴⁴Sullivan, "'On the Dole,'" 180; Cecile M. Whalen, *Tenure, Training and Compensation of Detroit Social Workers* (Detroit: Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research, report No. 149, 1938) 14.

⁴⁵Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 189-190.

⁴⁶The information is derived from analysis of city directories using case worker names from case files. Of thirty-eight identified in the two counties, just twenty had occupations listed prior to their joining the WRC.

summer institutes for short courses and provided semester leaves for staff to attend college. On-the-job training was the most accessible method, and agencies trained staff with in-house programs, office libraries and subscriptions to professional journals.

Held at Michigan State College in East Lansing, Michigan, summer institutes provided intense training for relief workers, and for those living in mid-Michigan in the Lower Peninsula, they were relatively close and accessible. For those in the northern part of the state and the Upper Peninsula, they were much less practical. (A social worker in Marquette faced a 400-mile drive to East Lansing to attend an institute.)⁴⁷ The University of Michigan also offered some courses, both on and off campus. Institutes at MSC dated to the mid-1920s, but served many emergency relief workers once the Depression hit and FERA began. The emphasis was on social case work and investigations, and SERA encouraged workers to attend. Staff who attended the four- to five-day training sessions received their salary but were responsible for their own expenses. More than five hundred attended the 1934 institute.⁴⁸

Josephine Brown, a social worker active in the development of training programs for FERA workers, found the institutes less than adequate training for social workers. In part, she argued, the institutes lacked continuity from year to year, and the mix of students

⁴⁷Social workers in the Upper Peninsula also did not have the Mackinac Bridge (completed in 1957) connecting the Upper and Lower peninsulas of Michigan. Instead, travelers had to rely on car ferries to cross the five-mile span of water. See Lawrence A. Rubin, *Bridging the Straits: The Story of Mighty Mac* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985) 125.

⁴⁸SERA Letter #374, June 5, 1935, SEWRC Papers, Box 1 Folder April to June 1935; SERA Letter # 590, June 4, 1936, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder April to June 1936.

attending, in terms of experience, background and education, made it difficult to plan and coordinate an effective training session in such a short time. Instructors were not always well chosen, and often attempted to cover too much material. Supervised field work was not feasible and the outcome of the institutes was often more confusion: "Practically the only accomplishment of the institutes was instruction in the general objectives of the relief program and in the mechanical details of the administration of relief."⁴⁹ FERA discouraged further development of the institutes in part because of the criticisms noted by Brown, but also because they carried the air of sanctioned professional programs, which they were not.

MSC sought to address the problem of the range of backgrounds and training among the institute attendees by separating them into groups according to their social work experience. Although the 1935 institute centered on case work, as had the 1934 session, the institute staff divided the students into five groups, from the most inexperienced emergency relief workers with little or no experience (and who had never attended an institute) to those who had formal education and significant experience. Another group centered on those social workers in the fields of child and maternal welfare, including mothers' pensions. Within the separate training groups different sessions focused on rural and urban workers, and some centered on workers in private

⁴⁹Brown, *Public Relief*, 280-281; Josephine Brown, "Brief Summary of the Experience of the FERA With Social Work Institutes 'In-Service' Training and Training in Schools of Social Work," October 9, 1936, FERA Records, Social Service Training Program (hereafter cited as FERA SST), Box 1, Folder 1, 1-2. The material on institutes in Brown's 1941 book on FERA is drawn from her 1936 assessment.

agencies.⁵⁰ Institute sessions provided much-needed guidance to new workers, including such basic information as conducting effective interviews and compiling case histories.⁵¹

FERA also provided grants to states to send social workers to schools of social work for a semester of study; the states then determined who was to go from their emergency relief staff.⁵² One thousand students attended more than twenty different professional schools in 1934-1935.⁵³ Officials targeted states with particularly low numbers of trained social workers, and eleven states never participated. Only schools that were members of the Association of Schools of Social Work were acceptable sites of study, because of the lack of time to ensure that other programs were of the appropriate quality.⁵⁴ Maintaining professional social work standards, or protecting the professional status that social work had worked so hard to secure, was a key reason behind the limited number of schools eligible to participate. Many state schools had social work courses in their departments of sociology, or began new programs with the rising demand for social

⁵⁰ "Seventh Annual Institute for Social Workers," July 15-19, 1935, FERA SST, Box 1, Folder: Michigan training.

⁵¹ Course materials, Seventh MSC Institute, July 15-19, 1935; FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan. Half of Kent County's WRC staff attended the 1934 institute for case work. "Outline for Agency Self-Evaluation," August 1934, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

⁵² Letter dated September 18, 1934 from Josephine Brown to Rev. Joseph Husslein, Dean, St. Louis School of Social Work; FERA OGS, Social Work, Box 71, Folder J-Z.

⁵³ Brown, *Public Relief*, 282.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Public Relief*, 282-283. The states that did not participate included Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland and Ohio.

workers, but were not able to participate in the FERA training program. Attendance at all programs of social work - accredited and not - increased during the 1930s.⁵⁵

Despite the obvious benefits of these programs, they only served a fraction of relief workers needing a quick social work education. Surveys of students who participated in the programs also found that while the education was of definite value, it was also skewed toward urban social work; rural workers found the training much less beneficial and received little help in adapting urban case work practices to their rural agencies. The emphasis in most graduate social work programs was private social work. Relief workers, however, needed further training in public, emergency relief work, and the specific policies and regulations that entailed.⁵⁶

Relief workers gained most of their training in their own offices from their supervisors. Training programs ranged in formality from a deliberate set of training steps, including supervised field work and competency examinations, to informal staff meetings at which policies, case practices and social work issues were raised. Field representatives also assisted with the training of new workers.⁵⁷ Kent and Wayne

⁵⁵Brown, *Public Relief*, 283.

⁵⁶Brown, *Public Relief*, 289-290. State officials also warned staff about unaccredited correspondence courses for social work. One was advertised through a Washington D.C. office, but SERA warned relief workers that it was not connected to FERA and was not an appropriate way to secure additional training: "No doubt you would agree that the practice of social work in the administration of relief is not material which can be satisfactorily handled in a correspondence course." SERA Letter #350, April 30, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder April to June 1935.

⁵⁷Sandra Schackel interviewed three former New Mexico relief workers (all women) and found that none had formal social work training. All three learned on the job from supervisors, field investigators and district meetings. Sandra Schackel, *Social*

counties both had formal training programs for their relief workers. Wayne County initiated a worker training program in 1934, providing a series of thirty orientation classes to new workers. Staff also met weekly in small groups for further discussion and training.⁵⁸ By mid-1935, Kent County had a training schedule for all new workers. In addition to an office library and training manual, the staff developed an elementary course that included a series of lectures by supervisors covering a range of topics in social work. Some focused specifically on emergency relief practices while others centered on general social work methods, including interviews, psychiatry in social work, rural problems, and ethics. The course's final stage was a written examination. Kent County's WRC also conducted a rural institute, bringing in outside speakers on rural social work.⁵⁹ A published staff bulletin, weekly staff meetings and district conferences provided an ongoing training system for all relief workers. Kent County's WRC also sought to

Housekeepers: Women Shaping Public Policy in New Mexico, 1920-1940 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992) 160-161. Brown gives very little attention to training on the job, relegating it to one paragraph in her lengthy account of FERA. She also minimizes its quality and argues that such training programs focused largely on emergency relief administration, "and were not considered to be in any sense substitutes for professional social work education." She also, I think, slights the important role these programs played in providing training for social workers who needed such education then, and not several months later in a formal district meeting or institute.

⁵⁸Suzanne Copland, "Detroit's In-Service Training Program," *Social Work Today*, v. 7 no. 5 (February 1940) 19.

⁵⁹"Training Program of the Social Services Division," Kent County Welfare Relief Commission, May 1935; FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan. Staff members contributed 25 cents in alternate months to purchase books for the office library, and all staff members subscribed to *The Family*, the professional journal published by the FWA. See "Outline for Agency Self-Evaluation," August 1934, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

familiarize its workers with the community's resources and businesses. It offered tours of the area's major industries and businesses, as well as local agencies and institutions.⁶⁰

Relief workers were expected to help clients negotiate their way through local community resources, as well as assist with employment, and thus the WRC believed they needed extensive knowledge about their communities. This was also in keeping with social work's belief that welfare agencies were an integral part of the community and its development. Kent County also arranged with an FSA member to offer ten-week training sessions with the "most promising members" of its staff. Meetings were held one morning per week and included practical case work discussions with active case files. Staff members also took a seventeen-week course in family case work at the University of Michigan through an extension program.⁶¹

Training on the job was the most immediate means to teach new workers, and office libraries, staff meetings and bulletins provided on-going training for relief workers. The larger social work profession also recognized the need for more informal education, particularly for those workers new to social work. Thus the *Survey* endeavored to provide some guidance to new workers, from the emergency relief days to the onset of the Social

⁶⁰"Training Program," Kent County, FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan. Seven businesses were included in the tour, and were conducted one afternoon per week for five weeks. Twenty-nine community agencies and institutions, from health and welfare to FERA projects, were visited by groups of workers. The City of Detroit and Wayne County also had formal training programs for their relief workers, covering many of the same topics. Wayne County also dealt with the rural or out-county aspects of relief work. "Intake Outline," City of Detroit ERA, and "Wayne County - Rural and Suburban Division," FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan.

⁶¹"Training Program," Kent County, FERA SST, Box 1, Folder Michigan.

Security programs, through a monthly column written by Gertrude Springer, a former journalist and associate editor of the *Survey Midmonthly* for twelve years. Springer, taking on the persona of Miss Amelia Bailey, a relief case supervisor, wrote a lengthy series of columns covering topics relief workers would encounter on a daily basis. Requests that the *Survey Midmonthly* run ““something in terms of daily experience that will help the new workers see behind the situations they have to meet”” prompted the series. Journal editors planned just five or six articles for the series, which began in the March 1933 issue. Instead the series ran for the next decade.⁶² The *Survey* directed the series at “new workers without extensive training,” intending to provide information to help an inexperienced case worker “meet situations and make the quick decisions demanded when caseloads are unwieldy and supervision limited.”⁶³

Miss Bailey was a single, middle-aged social worker with a background in private social work. She was the case work supervisor for an urban emergency relief agency in the beginning of the series, and most of the articles described various discussions related to relief administration with her case workers and visitors. A fictitious case worker generally brought a difficult case or situation to Miss Bailey for attention, or vented to her about a particularly difficult client or family. The exchange was then followed by comments from case workers and supervisors, interviewed by Springer. The series

⁶²“People and Things,” *The Survey* v. 72 (March 1936) 88-89; Chambers, *Paul U. Kellogg and the Survey*, 143-145. I thank Beverly Stadum for bringing this illuminating series to my attention when I was researching this project at the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota.

⁶³Caption published beside the first article in the Miss Bailey series: Gertrude Springer, “When Your Client Has a Car,” *Survey* v. 69 (March 1933) 103.

attempted to describe relief work at the grass roots level. Through Miss Bailey, Springer endeavored to show her readers the people and situations, in all their complexities and permutations, behind the case files and the relief statistics. Miss Bailey was the “ideal” social worker, in the eyes of the *Survey*. The journal was directed at social workers in general, rather than a specific professional organization within social work, and it had the largest circulation of the social work journals in publication - about 25,000 by 1940. More importantly, the values Miss Bailey espoused - compassion, understanding and trust - were often the exact issues at the center of conflicts in Michigan between SERA and local officials. Her views were those professional values that so incensed officials opposed to the professionalization of public welfare in Michigan. The “ideal” social worker in the eyes of the liberal *Survey*, Miss Bailey’s techniques and ideas would have infuriated many Michigan officials if she encountered them.

The series gained a large and devoted following among *Survey* readers. The editors issued the series in pamphlet form, and by early 1936 three collections of eight articles each were advertised by the journal. The pamphlets cost 30 cents each, although quantity discounts were available, and the journal claimed that 30,000 had been sold by January of 1936.⁶⁴ The “Miss Bailey Says” publications were “among the best sellers of social work publications.” They were required reading for many emergency relief

⁶⁴Caption, *Survey*, v. 72 (January 1936) 16; Chambers, *Paul U. Kellogg and the Survey*, 144-145. *Social Work Today*, the publication of the Rank and File Movement, reviewed the series critically, believing that Springer, through Miss Bailey, did not take the relief problem seriously enough: “The gain in social insight is highly questionable. Perhaps the next crisis in the emergency relief program may remove the humorous curve from the mouth of Miss Bailey.” Review, *Social Work Today*, v. 1 no. 3 (July/August 1934) 21.

training programs, including Wayne County's, and were also used in professional social work schools.⁶⁵ Miss Bailey became the topic of social work group skits and musicals and the mail sent to her prompted editors to continue the series. The changing needs of her readers were reflected in the series, which began as a basic information source on emergency relief and evolved into dealing with more complex issues related to social work, including implementation of the Social Security Act.⁶⁶

The series also illuminates the role of gender in Springer's presentation of social workers. Although detailed profiles of her case workers were not given, no mention of marriages, children, or families was made, suggesting that most of the case workers Miss Bailey encountered were young and single. The relief case worker was a woman, and nearly always referred to as "she." The supervisors and case workers Springer quoted in her series - the "real" staff people she cited - were both women and men, and thus she did not see the field as entirely feminine. Daniel Walkowitz argues that Springer's audience "was the relief worker, a trade unionist who was as likely to be a man as a woman." He sees the concerns of Miss Bailey, although a female, not centered on issues of gender but on issues of labor, and focuses on a 1938 column on the profession to illustrate his point.⁶⁷ But while his argument is valid for that instance, it does not explain why all the

⁶⁵"People and Things," *Survey* 88. A Miss Bailey article was used in a Detroit WRC training program, for example. See "intake outline," City of Detroit ERA, n.d., FERA SST, Box 1, Folder: Michigan training.

⁶⁶"People and Things," 89; one skit was performed by a social work group in New York City in 1935 and another at a 1939 conference in Kansas. See *Survey* v. 72 (April 1935) 127; "Over the Footlights," *Survey* v. 75 (June 1939) 193.

⁶⁷Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 161-163.

fictitious relief workers in the Miss Bailey series were women; the inexperienced social worker, in the author's imagination, was always a "she." The series illustrates vividly the gender hierarchy, analyzed so ably by Walkowitz in *Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity*. Men in social work tended to be administrators and supervisors, to seek to reach the level of "management" rather than worker, while women were concentrated in the lower positions of professional social work.⁶⁸ Women, in Springer's eyes, dominated the entry-level ranks of social work.

Analysis of case workers in Marquette and Saginaw counties reiterates the gender dimensions of the Miss Bailey series. Sixty-eight percent were women, but just eight percent of female social workers were hired as supervisors. In contrast, men were about 32 percent of the social workers identified but 36 percent were hired as supervisors or administrators. More women - about 20 percent - were promoted later in the decade to supervisory positions, but most were not administrators. Both Saginaw and Marquette counties hired male administrators for their WRC, and the Van Buren and Manistee agencies, although initially led by female administrators, eventually were headed by men.⁶⁹

Some Michigan counties embraced - albeit briefly - the professional practices and values of social work, including those espoused by Miss Bailey. Kent and Wayne counties earned membership in the FWA - recognition of their adoption of professional

⁶⁸Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 88-89, 94-95.

⁶⁹The sampling is based upon thirty-eight social workers identified through city directories.

social work methods and staff. Kent County was the first WRC in Michigan to gain membership in the FWA, in 1934; Detroit's DPW (operating as the Wayne County WRC) became a member in 1935.⁷⁰ Other counties also sought membership. Bay and Midland counties both began inquiries in 1939, but a car accident which seriously injured the women pushing for it stalled those efforts.⁷¹ Genesee County sought membership in 1933, through the WRC chairperson and city manager, John Barringer. Barringer was active in the local Community Chest and anxious to have the newly-created public department adopt social work practices. He was in conflict with the director of public welfare, Melton Van Geison, a former clerk with the Buick personnel department. Van Geison's view was similar to the spirit of pre-Depression relief; investigators were to be detectives and relief "should be made hard for the families...in order to encourage them to be self-supporting."⁷² Three years later the agency still had not gained membership, although it was recognized by the FWA as one of Michigan's highest quality public agencies. Reasons seemed to be a change in leadership and personnel, and doubts on the part of FWA field investigators as to the motives for membership. Genesee County WRC wanted the benefits of professional membership, according to FWA investigators, but did

⁷⁰Memo dated January 19, 1937, FSA Records, Membership Folder. Seventeen public agencies held full membership in the FSA by 1936.

⁷¹Rosemary Reynolds, memo dated June 21, 1939, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 57, Bay City Folder; Rosemary Reynolds, Extra Mural Conference, June 21, 1939, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Midland Folder.

⁷²Consultation Visit, Rose Porter, April 28 to May 11, 1933, p.3, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Flint Folder. Van Geison was a formidable opponent, and would lead the fight to preserve local control of welfare - and its punitive nature - in the battle over welfare reorganization later in the decade.

not seem eager to assume the responsibilities and practices that went along with membership.⁷³ Oakland County, in southeastern Michigan, also sought membership in late 1935 but little action is recorded in the surviving files.

Kent County, recognized by some professionals as one of the best Michigan county agencies, did a major turn-around from its anti-social work attitude under Mayor George Welsh in 1931.⁷⁴ First inquiries into membership were made in February 1934, and seven months later the agency was awarded FWA membership. Quick granting of membership likely arose in part from the case work supervisor, Alice Yonkman. Yonkman had worked with the public agency in the early 1920s; she then worked for the Red Cross before the Family Service Association, a private agency and member of the FWA, hired her in 1929.⁷⁵ Yonkman was active in Michigan social work circles and was highly regarded for her knowledge and expertise. FWA field visitors commended her direct manner and also the quality of her case records, which showed “increasing case work treatment and more thoughtful work, and real participation on the part of the client.”

⁷³Consultation Visit, F. R. Day, December 10, 1936, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Flint Folder.

⁷⁴Memo from field representative Howard Hunter to Harry Hopkins, June 1, 1934; Harry Hopkins Papers, Box 58, FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports, Michigan, p. 7. Hunter reported to Hopkins that Kent County’s relief organization was “one of the best in the state,” and credits social welfare activism with leading “an uprising of citizens” resulting in a new city council.

⁷⁵*Polk’s Grand Rapids City Directory* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Directory Company, 1922) 907. From 1922 to 1925 Yonkman was listed as a social service worker, but with no place of employment specified. By 1926 she was a supervisor with the City Social Service Department, and in 1929 began working for the FSA. She disappeared from the city directory in 1935.

Yonkman followed professional case work tenets, but also worked well with her clients, according to field reports.⁷⁶ She had conflicts with some board members, and by 1933 had gained the support of Howard Hunter, head of the Community Chest, to lead the local WRC which was then in the early stages of organization. Yonkman did not voice her intentions then, but later left the FSA to work in the WRC.⁷⁷ Yonkman's formal social work training and extensive experience in both public and private welfare made her an able leader for the agency in the eyes of the FWA. In addition, new staff members had formal social work training and Yonkman was committed to further implementing professional social work standards in the agency.⁷⁸ The key concern of the FWA was the case load size, which ranged from 187 to 230 per case worker. But membership was recommended and the Kent County WRC joined the FWA.⁷⁹

Kent County's three-member commission also was critical in the formula for professional social work acceptance. All three men - a business executive, an attorney and a township trustee - supported professional social work ideals and took an active and positive interest in its development in the public agency. When the commission changed under the revised administrative rules in early 1936, support for a social work

⁷⁶E.M. Weinfurter, "Summary of Contacts," March 19, 1931.

⁷⁷Consultation Visit, Rose Porter, July 17-18, 1933, p. 4-6; Consultation Visit, Rose Porter, June 13-14, 1934, p. 4, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

⁷⁸Rose Porter, Consultation Visit, June 16, 1934, p. 4, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

⁷⁹Consultation Visit, Margaret Wead, October 1934, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

organization continued under Probate Judge Clark Higbee. Case loads declined to between 70 and 130 and although Yonkman left the agency, her replacement had professional social work training.⁸⁰

Dues remained a problem for any public agency seeking FWA membership. State administrator William Haber and the SEWRC forbade the use of state or federal funds for dues, and many cities and counties could not afford the dues, which were \$125 in 1935. Kent County collected its dues from its ninety-six staff members that year; the next year the agency had just thirty-one staff members, who contributed \$50 in dues in 1936 and again in 1937. Interest in the FWA remained strong among staff members and the commission, and the FWA was willing to adjust its dues policy to accommodate public agencies, like Kent County, whose ability to pay was limited.⁸¹ The FWA was more than willing to work with those public agencies that chose to instill professional social work into their programs. But such efforts were not very successful during the 1930s. Just two of Michigan's eighty-three counties actually gained membership, however, and only a handful more sought FWA support. Thus the active drive for professionalization was small and brief, as events would further reinforce by the decade's end. Most county agencies only "professionalized" to secure federal and state funds, and resisted even that.

⁸⁰Consultation Visit, Rosemary Reynolds, November 9 and 12, 1937, FSA Correspondence, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

⁸¹Letters dated September 25, 1936, November 10, 1936, June 17, 1937, Consultation Visit, Rosemary Reynolds, August 14, 1940, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Box 58, Grand Rapids Folder.

Social Workers: Professionals or Workers?

Relief workers were at the heart of debates about welfare administration and later reorganization. Critics argued that no expertise, except common sense and an agency head who had business experience, was needed in relief work, and that social workers were not worth the salaries paid to them. Local officials who opposed the professionalization of relief work argued that they could do the work more efficiently and at a much lower cost. Some business people also shared these concerns. Edward Lawman of Detroit complained to federal officials about the high salaries paid to welfare administrators, in particular. He knew many personally, he wrote, and believed “that many of them are persons with only mediocre ability [who] should be very happy to be on a salary one-half the amount” they were paid. He described himself as a taxpayer, and thus a contributor to the Department of Public Welfare, and pointed to his own practice of allowing relief clients either reduced rents or free rent during hard times as evidence of his character.⁸² Lawman did not see why the work required the wages paid, and such criticisms were rooted in the debate over professionalization, and whether social work was a profession. Relief workers, however, saw their wages and working conditions as grievances to be addressed. The contest over professional standards and labor issues prompted some new relief workers to pursue union organization - rather than professionalization - as a means to gain higher wages and job security. The movement was met with opposition and resistance by many, and social work union activists faced

⁸²Letter from Lawman dated December 12, 1933; FERA State Series, RG 69, Michigan Complaints, Box 140, Folder L.

reprisals and penalties for their outspoken advocacy not only for themselves, but also for their clients.

Social workers were employed largely by private agencies before 1930, and in 1920, about sixty percent were women. A decade later, 79 percent were female. Only the teaching profession had a higher percentage of women.⁸³ Detroit's social work staff was 86 percent female, and also 94 percent white in 1936.⁸⁴ As with many feminized professions, social work paid relatively low professional wages and held little status. Whether the fact that the profession was dominated by women was the "cause" of the low status, or if the low status and low pay deterred men from entering the profession, was debated.⁸⁵ Low salaries continued to be one of several problems relief workers - experienced and not - encountered in the emergency relief period, and yet their salaries were the central part of the administrative cost SERA opponents criticized.

Although social workers were called professionals and expected to have the credentials to work in the profession, social workers did not earn a professional wage, even before the 1930s. Salaries among the "elite psychiatric and medical case workers" in urban areas were about \$150 per month (\$1800 per year), while most social workers, concentrated largely in family and child agencies, earned between \$90 and \$125. Wages

⁸³Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 88; Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination*, 81.

⁸⁴Sullivan, "'On the Dole,'" 180.

⁸⁵Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination*, 81. Other feminized professions underwent similar debates, including home economics, which sought to bring men into the field to increase its status. See Susan Stein-Roggenbuck, "Obstacles and Opportunities: Home Economics at Michigan State University in the Postwar Era." Master's thesis, Michigan State University, 1994, 69-74.



for social workers increased just 3 percent from 1913 to 1926, and most social workers earned slightly less than skilled industrial workers. Translated into a standard of living, Daniel Walkowitz argues that social workers in the 1920s paid \$1,800 per year earned a “bare existence.” The professionalization of social work did not include professional wages, and few social workers were able to live the middle class standard of living.⁸⁶ This continued to be true in the 1930s, when wages rose little and SERA constantly faced criticism about administrative costs and high salaries. Their wages were much more generous than relief grants, as Martin Sullivan notes in his study of relief in Detroit. The average case worker salary in 1936 was \$1,573, more than four times the relief grant awarded to a family of four but still below the “bare existence” described by Walkowitz. An annual salary of \$1,573 was still only a monthly salary of about \$131. Sullivan also notes that twenty percent of the welfare department in Detroit earned more than \$2,500 per year, “nearly twice as much as the average auto worker.”⁸⁷ Those were likely the “elite” of Detroit’s social workers - public and private - including administrators and supervisors. The average relief worker earned much less.

To refute the charges of waste and excessive spending, SERA issued a special report, *Cost of Administration in the Emergency Relief Program* in 1935, and also addressed the issue in its first two annual reports. The reports stated that SERA’s administrative costs were just 8.5 percent of the total amount expended in the first year,

⁸⁶Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 100.

⁸⁷Sullivan, ““On the Dole,”” footnote 68, p. 180; see Whalen, *Tenure, Training and Compensation*, 35, 51. Sullivan mistakenly quotes that annual median income as \$1,673.



and 9.5 percent the second year.⁸⁸ SERA also reported that 6.7 cents of each dollar spent went to pay salaries of employees in the first year (the rest paid for travel, office supplies, and rent), or about 8 percent of the total costs of running the programs.⁸⁹ Case work supervisors, like the fictitious Miss Bailey, earned an average monthly salary of \$127.93, while case workers and investigators earned an average salary of \$89.31 per month in the first year. The average salary for other workers, largely clerical and office staff, was \$85.97.⁹⁰ SERA hiring guidelines set minimum and maximum salaries for all levels of employees in the social service division. Investigators, home visitors and aides were paid between \$70 and \$90; the position required a high school education and a “desire to learn to do social work.” Case workers could earn between \$90 and \$105, and had to either be a college graduate with a year of social work experience, or have two or more years of experience in a related field along with a year of formal social work training. Senior case workers earned between \$105 and \$130 and had to be eligible for junior membership in the AASW; their responsibilities included supervision of other case workers. Supervisors earned from \$120 to \$175. Administrators’ salaries depended on the county’s population, with larger counties having higher-paid administrators. Monthly salaries ranged from \$90

⁸⁸William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing, MI: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1935) 60; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security* (Lansing, MI: 1936) 27; Michigan State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, *Cost of Administration in the Emergency Relief Program* (Lansing, 1935) 7. The latter publication found that administrative costs were just 8.14 percent in the first three months of FERA.

⁸⁹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 61. Comparable figures are not available for the second year.

⁹⁰Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 61.

to \$300. Clerical workers were paid from \$60 to \$100, depending on the level of responsibility.⁹¹ Van Buren County's administrator received \$140 per month (\$1,680 per year) in October 1934, while the deputy administrator and supervisor each received \$130 per month. Case workers received \$80 per month and the stenographer's monthly salary was \$70.⁹²

Low salaries were not the only difficulty relief workers faced; high case loads and cuts in staff also marked the emergency relief period. Funding constraints and criticisms of administrative expenses prompted SERA to request periodic checks on relief rolls, or systematic efforts to reduce the numbers of relief recipients. Reliance on local funding for part of the necessary monies created problems in counties, like Van Buren and Manistee, that failed to provide the needed funds. When FERA was abolished in early 1936, and relief reverted to local communities, relief cuts were accompanied by staff reductions as well. Thus relief workers lived a precarious existence, with little job security and constant pressure to reduce loads and grants.

SERA regularly issued requests that case loads be double-checked to ensure that people receiving relief remained in need. As discussed in Chapter Three, cuts were made during periods of seasonal employment when agricultural jobs were available. In

⁹¹SERA Letter #188, October 16, 1934, FERA SST, Box 4, Michigan - Personnel Folder. Van Buren and Marquette fell in the second tier salary schedule, while Saginaw was in the third tier.

⁹²State Personnel Dept., Salary Schedule, Van Buren County, October 25, 1934; Records of Van Buren County Emergency Welfare Relief Commission (hereafter cited as VB EWRC Records), Archives and Regional History Collections, Western Michigan University, Box 1, Folder 23.

addition, SERA instructed its workers periodically to make sure that those on relief belonged there. An administrative memo in September of 1934 warned administrators that relief rolls were rising, and SERA officials did not think it was entirely due to a rise in need. They saw the increase stemming from three different groups of clients: the first were those who were truly in need; the second group wanted to be on the relief rolls to ensure a work relief assignment when winter projects were announced; the third group sought relief to prevent any need during the winter, even though they might not be in need yet. The latter two groups were the ones social workers were to stop: "The first group, those actually in want, are of course properly on the relief rolls. The other two groups have no place on the relief rolls at this time."⁹³ SERA again asked for a case load review the following May. One order reminded workers that employable people could seek seasonal agricultural work, but another administrative letter in 1935 asked workers to review their entire case load to ensure that those receiving relief were in need.⁹⁴

Public criticism regarding the number of "chiselers" on the relief rolls prompted SERA to undertake a major reevaluation of its case load in December 1934. Every head of household on relief received a letter stating that their case would be closed, and if the person or family was still in need of relief they would need to reapply. Each letter included a two-week grocery order, which would allow the family "that length of time to make other plans." When possible, a different case worker was assigned to those people

⁹³SERA Letter #156, September 20, 1934, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder July to September 1934.

⁹⁴SERA Letter #352, May 1, 1935, SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder April to June 1935.

who did reapply, to avoid any preconceptions about the family. A careful reinvestigation was made, including employment information and bank statements.⁹⁵ Van Buren County's acting administrator M.D. Cook announced the program in a front-page article in the *Hartford Day Spring* in February of 1935, and new case workers were hired to help with the relief roll checks. The WRC scheduled different sections of the county for reinvestigation, dropping between forty and fifty cases each week. Cook said that case workers were not "detectives" and that their role was to help those "in actual need of material assistance."⁹⁶ Cook advised that the WRC was not seeking to deny anyone in need relief, but wrote that "the burden of proof for such need will rest entirely with the applicant...Applicants who have not proven the need for relief will be rejected and so informed."⁹⁷

Cook reported that SERA and the county sought to find three groups of people who did not belong on relief rolls, including the most criticized "chiselers," or those who refused odd jobs or employment because relief was available. Another group were those who had the resources to live free of relief but who lacked the money management skills to do so. In those cases staff would help families learn how to budget their money. The final group were those who have other sources of income but have not taken the initiative

⁹⁵Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 219.

⁹⁶Cook, "Welfare Rolls," 8.

⁹⁷M.D. Cook, "Welfare Rolls To Be Revised," *Hartford Day Spring* February 6, 1935, p. 1.

to secure such aid.⁹⁸ Although not specified, resources likely were aid from ex-husbands or responsible relatives, or benefits through another public assistance program, such as a veterans' aid program. The WRC sought the assistance of local citizens in helping to uncover chiselers and those hiding resources from investigators.⁹⁹ Manistee County, which undertook its own reinvestigation independent of the WRC in November of 1934, also sought information provided by residents. *The Manistee News-Advocate* ran front-page forms for residents to use to report so-called "chiselers." The cases were then reinvestigated by a special committee appointed by the mayor.¹⁰⁰ SERA did not have those techniques in mind when it ordered the relief checks, but apparently did not prevent local agencies from using them, again highlighting the limited power that federal and state supervision could exert. In this case the relief agency's tactics confirmed the most critical evaluations of social control theorists.¹⁰¹ Clients had to "prove" their need and

⁹⁸Cook, "Welfare Rolls," 8.

⁹⁹Cook, "Welfare Rolls," 8; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 219-220. Haber and Stanchfield do not discuss using residents to report on relief recipients in their coverage of this program. See "Anti-Chiseling Group Carries on With Work," *Manistee News-Advocate* November 22, 1934, p. 1 and 8; copy in Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews Folder.

¹⁰⁰"Welfare Group Issues Complaint Call," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, November 15, 1934; Edward W. Pfeiffer, "Your Cooperation Is Needed! Please Help," *The Manistee News-Advocate*, November 22, 1934. Pfeiffer was the editor of *The Manistee News-Advocate*.

¹⁰¹Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993, rev. ed.) 177. The authors argue that professionalism, through social work, did little to improve the dispensing of relief, and assert that although social work was to make the process more humane, the results really were little different from the earlier poor relief days.

agencies encouraged citizens to inform on their neighbors and fellow residents. Although administrators rejected the notion that they asked their workers to be “detectives,” as in the case of Van Buren County, they were asking them to reduce the rolls and putting pressure on them to do so. Such practices were in contrast to Miss Bailey’s advice to relief workers and professional social work ideas, but were institutionalized in the county agency’s policy.

SERA reported that about 15 percent of those cases closed in some counties remained closed upon reinvestigation, although it noted that the reinvestigations in some counties coincided with increased employment opportunities in industry and agriculture. On average, SERA found that between 5 and 7 percent of relief recipients were not entitled to aid, although administrators maintained that many of these cases involved misunderstandings between clients and social workers, rather than willful deceit on the part of the recipient.¹⁰² Van Buren closed 213 cases in the first three months of its reinvestigation - more than 30 percent of the cases the WRC dropped from its rolls. Two-thirds of those dropped never reapplied for relief, and apparently either had the resources to manage or simply did not want to endure the extensive reinvestigation planned by the WRC. Most of the remaining cases simply had “adequate resources,” according to the WRC report.¹⁰³

¹⁰²Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 220.

¹⁰³“Van Buren Cuts 213 Families Off Its Relief Rolls,” *Hartford Day Spring*, May 8, 1935, 1.

Detroit also underwent several investigations to “purge” the relief rolls, particularly under the leadership of conservative mayors intent on removing chiselers from the list of recipients. Richard Reading, elected mayor in 1937, specifically targeted the city’s DPW’s agreement with the United Auto Workers which permitted the union to investigate its members who applied for relief. Reading attacked the system, and used police officers to investigate current welfare recipients’ cases. The practice was attacked by professional social workers, but Reading continued. His crusade did result in closed cases, but found fraud in just one in three hundred cases, and restitution agreements brought in just under \$24,000 - far less than the cost of the investigation to the department.¹⁰⁴

Such investigative crusades placed incredible pressure on case workers to close cases and reduce the department’s number of recipients. Using other city workers as investigators - like police officers - only further hampered the morale and attitude of the social work staff, whose abilities and worth were a major debate during this decade. It also placed them between administrative policies, which they were to enforce, and the clients they were to help. Such a position would result in divided loyalties and alliances between case workers and clients, as in the social worker union movement, much to the dismay of administrators.

Despite efforts to reduce the number of relief recipients, case loads for relief workers remained high. SERA sought to follow social work guidelines which warned against more than 150 cases for each investigator in public welfare work; the New York

¹⁰⁴Sullivan, ““On the Dole,”” 205, 207-211.



Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, which preceded FERA, advised a limit of one hundred. Such numbers were rarely achieved. Just twenty-six of Michigan's eighty-three counties had case loads below 150 in January 1935; the state average, excluding Wayne County, was actually 175. Forty-two counties had case loads between 150 and 250 and thirteen counties averaged more than 250 cases per investigator.¹⁰⁵ In December of 1936, Van Buren County's WRC reported that its case load was 285, not including service only cases, which were about fourteen per investigator.¹⁰⁶ The problem persisted throughout the emergency relief years. When SERA told the Van Buren County WRC that staff numbers had to be cut in 1939, administrator Louise Wilkinson wrote state administrator George Granger that any reductions in investigators and case workers were impossible. Case loads were already as high as seven hundred, and a resolution by the county's WRC reiterated her position.¹⁰⁷ Case loads remained a problem throughout the emergency relief period, and were a focal part of the agenda of the rank and file movement.

¹⁰⁵SEWRC, *Cost of Administration in the Emergency Relief Program*, 10. A study by *Social Work Today* found that the average case load in twenty-three agencies was 129. Case loads ranged from eighty in New York City to 250 in Milwaukee. Ten of the public agencies surveyed were in the Midwest, although the study does not list which cities were included; Detroit likely was one. See George Hedin, "Salaries and Working Conditions in Public Relief Agencies," *Social Work Today*, v. 2 no. 6 (May 1935) 12.

¹⁰⁶Letter from Van Buren WRC to Helen Daley, Field Case Representative, December 30, 1936; VB EWRC Records, Box 1, Folder 10. Service only cases were those that received no material relief, but were eligible for surplus commodities and clothing; clients under the WPA and Rural Resettlement programs were among those classed as "service only."

¹⁰⁷Letter from Louise Wilkinson to George Granger, March 17, 1939; VB EWRC Records, Box 1, Folder 15.

Low salaries and high caseloads were just some of the issues that fueled the rise of the union movement - known as the rank and file movement - in the 1920s and 1930s. Social workers employed in private agencies in New York City were the original organizers of the movement.¹⁰⁸ The movement spread outside of New York by 1932; by 1933 it had thirteen organizations in private agencies in eight cities, including Detroit. It also began to enter public agencies, again in Detroit in 1934, but remained concentrated in the largest American cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and New York City.¹⁰⁹ The movement's leadership began publishing *Social Work Today*, the journal dedicated to trade unionism and the Rank and File Movement, in 1934, and held its first national conference in 1936.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸Rick Spano, *The Rank and File Movement* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1982) 45-47. The Association of Federation of Social Workers, comprised largely of social workers employed by private Jewish agencies, began the drive for organization in 1926. Key demands were higher salaries, health insurance and a standardized case load. The leadership argued that working conditions and low wages prompted a high turnover in staff, which adversely affected the quality of work. The organization did not start out as a union, but eventually evolved into one. It was open to all agency employees, including clerical staff, but not to executives. Communists played a significant role in the development of these unions, but historian Daniel Walkowitz argues that the primary focus of the unions were the day-to-day concerns of agency workers and their clients, rather than Communist ideology. Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 124-125.

¹⁰⁹Rick Spano, *The Rank and File Movement*, 68-69; Koch, "The Development of Public Relief Programs in Minnesota," 264-265; "Rank and File: Detroit and Cleveland," *Social Work Today* v. 1 no. 2 (May-June 1934) 23.

¹¹⁰Leslie Alexander, "Organizing the Professional Social Worker: Union Development in Voluntary Social Work, 1930-1950," Unpublished dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, Graduate School of Social Work, 1976, 84, 86-87.



The influx of new relief workers was one factor in the growth of social work unionism in the 1930s.¹¹¹ Many of these workers could not meet the professional guidelines outlined by the AASW and other professional organizations; the shift in emphasis to formal education rather than social work experience placed professional recognition further out of reach for most relief workers. Low salaries, long hours, poor working conditions, a lack of grievance procedures, and little job security were the chief concerns of relief workers. Public agency workers faced the worst conditions. Many were untrained, but also had the highest caseloads and the poorest working conditions. Professional organizations were not at their disposal, so some relief workers turned to unions to address their problems.¹¹²

Michigan's social work union movement originated in Detroit, and expanded to include four other counties and cities and a statewide organization by the decade's end (see Figure 3). The Wayne County Social Workers' Association formed in 1934, and, like many public agency groups, affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organization in 1937.¹¹³ Concentrated in a minority of public agencies, the union movement nonetheless is significant for the issues it raised and its involvement in critical cases that also attracted

¹¹¹Jacob Fisher, "Trade Unionism in Social Work," *Social Work Year Book, 1937* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1937) 502.

¹¹²Alexander, "Organizing the Professional Social Worker," 64-67; Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 83-85, 136-140. Walkowitz assesses the involvement of the AASW in grievance procedures for case workers, illustrating that for some relief workers, the professional organization did not share their vision of social work.

¹¹³The Wayne County group originally organized as the Detroit Association of Social Workers, but changed its name a year later. See "Directory of Rank and File Organizations," *Social Work Today* v. 2 no. 3 (January 1935) 31.

the attention of labor and civil rights groups. The movement first appeared at the Michigan State Conferences of Social Work in December 1935. Reports in *Social Work Today* noted that the rank and file sessions attracted “real if somewhat skeptical interest” and more than fifty social workers attended the final session. The union movement remained on the state conference agenda in subsequent years.¹¹⁴

One result of the state conference was the formation of a Michigan State Coordinating Committee of Rank and File Groups to serve as a centralized state network of rank and file groups, and to assist other local groups in organizing. The state committee participated in national rank and file conferences, giving Michigan social workers a voice in the national movement.¹¹⁵ It evolved into the Michigan Federation of Social Agency Employees, organized at a state rank and file conference in January 1936 and one of just three state organizations in the Rank and File Movement.¹¹⁶ Twenty-three county public agencies and twelve private groups sent delegations, and membership in the state organization was open to all employees in social agencies in Michigan.¹¹⁷ Formal

¹¹⁴See telegram regarding rank and file movement and the Michigan Conference of Social work, FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T-Z; and “Detroit Salutes the Conference,” *Social Work Today*, v. 5, no. 2 (November 1937) 27. The Wayne County Social Workers Association sponsored a lecture at the conference by Dr. Tucker Smith, President of Brookwood Labor College, in 1937.

¹¹⁵“Rank and File: At State Conferences,” *Social Work Today*, v. 3 no. 3 (December 1935) 26; “Relief; Work; State: Where Workers in Public Agencies Stand,” *Social Work Today*, v. 3 no. 4 (January 1936) 11-12.

¹¹⁶Others formed in Ohio and Pennsylvania. See “Directory of Rank and File Organizations,” *Social Work Today*, v. 3 no. 1 (October 1935) 31.

¹¹⁷“From the Field,” *Social Work Today*, v. 3 no. 6 (March 1936) 26.

unions organized in Washtenaw County (centered in Ann Arbor) in 1935, and case workers in Kalamazoo and St. Clair counties organized rank and file groups in 1936. Agency workers in Dearborn, also in southeastern Michigan, organized in 1939.¹¹⁸ (See Figure 3)

¹¹⁸“From the Field,” *Social Work Today*, v. 4 no. 1 (October 1936) 26; “Trade Unions in Social Work,” *Social Work Today*, v. 6 no. 9 (June 1939) 40.



Rank and File Unions, 1934-1940



Figure 3

Union representatives engaged in negotiations with their respective agencies on several issues, both on behalf of relief workers and the clients they served. Seeking justice for clients as well as the relief workers was a trademark of the social work union movement. The constitution for the Kalamazoo County Federation of Social Workers “provides for the protection of the interest of both employees and clients,” and St. Clair County workers called for “collective action for client and worker security.”¹¹⁹ Detroit social workers aimed to “further cooperative action and mutual understanding between the various divisions within the Department of Public Welfare...and to improve the professional standards of its members.”¹²⁰ Unions also sought to work for improvement of larger social services, such as the expansion of the provisions of the Social Security Act. They protested cuts in travel allowances and pushed for grievance procedures; they also fought for more adequate food budgets for clients when food costs rose steeply.¹²¹ Perhaps the most visible role for the unions was in the defense of the right of social workers to organize, and to participate in the organization of clients. As in industry, union activity could have severe consequences for relief workers, regardless of their experience

¹¹⁹“From the Field,” *Social Work Today*, v. 4 no. 1 (October 1936) 26.

¹²⁰“Directory of Rank and File Organizations,” *Social Work Today*, v. 2 no. 3 (January 1935) 31.

¹²¹Florence Gardner, “Not Without Protest,” *Social Work Today* v. 5 no. 1 (October 1937) 22. Martin Sullivan makes no mention of the union movement among social workers in his study of relief in Detroit, and argues that “At no time during the Thirties did Welfare Department employees in Detroit participate in, or lend overt support to, demonstrations by clients or by radical pressure groups.” While this may be true for many of the DPW’s employees, it is too broad a statement and ignores the efforts of the Wayne County social worker union. Sullivan, “On the Dole,” 180.

or ability. Case workers in both Wayne and Washtenaw counties lost their jobs or were demoted because of organizational activities, and the union, and other labor and civil liberties groups, came to their defense.

Rachel Norber, a case worker for six years in Detroit's DPW, was suspended and then fired for "inefficiency" in 1937. A subsequent investigation by the WCSWA and then the Civil Service Commission found otherwise. Norber was targeted because of her involvement in the union. A WCSWA founding member, she served on the Executive Board and was chairperson of the Grievance Committee. She was suspended on May 17, 1937 and then dismissed from her job on June 11 in a DPW commission meeting not announced either to Norber or the WCSWA.¹²²

The union fully supported Norber and it was at this time they opted to affiliate with the CIO, realizing they needed more help. Two other relief workers also were suspended and "an atmosphere of intimidation and fear of reprisal pervaded the agency." Administrators announced publicly that they intended to purge their offices of lazy staff. The WCSWA fought the suspensions and managed to get those employees reinstated. They sought impartial hearings before suspension and dismissals, as well as the right to participate in the union free of reprisals.¹²³ They did win their fight when the state Civil Service Commission reversed the DPW's action and ordered Norber reinstated, with full pay and no loss of seniority, in November. The WCSWA saw the decision as a victory for professional employee rights, and also gained the right to a hearing prior to

¹²²Gardner, "Not Without Protest," 21.

¹²³Gardner, "Not Without Protest," 22.

dismissal.¹²⁴ The union again battled for overtime pay rights three months later. Staff had accumulated more than 40,000 hours of overtime in two months, but the figure was not accurate, as workers were not allowed to count their first hour and a half of overtime. That practice was reversed after union representatives protested, and relief workers could accrue overtime for extended vacations and for job-related education.¹²⁵

Washtenaw County's social workers engaged in a similar battle with their supervisors after two workers were disciplined in 1935 - one fired and the other demoted. Milton Kemnitz, a supervisor, was demoted to case worker because, his co-workers alleged, of political activities connected to organizing the unemployed and relief clients.¹²⁶ Henry Meyers lost his job for similar reasons.¹²⁷ The WRC issued a statement shortly after the incidents outlining policies prohibiting employees, both on and off work,

¹²⁴Samuel Kellman, "Detroit and Los Angeles Victories," *Social Work Today* v. 5 no. 4 (January 1938) 13-14.

¹²⁵"Detroit Scores a Local Victory," *Social Work Today*, v. 5 no. 7 (April 1938) 22.

¹²⁶Letter from Washtenaw County Rank and File Social Workers to Aubrey Williams, Assistant FERA and WPA Administrator, dated October 8, 1935; FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T-Z; "Michigan Cracks Down," *Social Work Today*, v. 3 no. 2 (November 1935) 3; "Review of Case of Washtenaw County Welfare Workers Discriminated Against for Organizational Activity," Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, Detroit, and letter to Frank Martel, President, Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, from J.H. Bollens, Chairman, Conference, dated November 15, 1935, Wayne County AFL-CIO Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Box 23, Welfare Department Folder.

¹²⁷"Review of Case," and Letter to Martel; Letter from Edith Foster, Regional Social Worker to Elizabeth Wickenden, Asst. Director, WPA, dated January 3, 1935; FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T-Z. I believe the date on this letter is an error; it should be January of 1936, given the sequence of prior events.



from engaging in organizational activities that “might lead to controversial discussions regarding relief policies of the organization, or which might lead to criticism from the general public.” The commission also stated, however, that it was “not opposed to the organization of case workers or other employees.”¹²⁸ The Washtenaw County WRC forbid efforts by case workers to advocate on behalf of clients, or to encourage them to form organizations, but was not necessarily opposed to social work unions.

The case attracted the attention of labor and civil liberties groups, including the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, as well as several other rank and file groups. Investigation by state and federal officials, working with the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights in Detroit and an Ann Arbor civil liberties group, both active in defense of the case workers, found that the WRC “acted in anger” and without the knowledge or approval of the case work supervisor.¹²⁹ At a review of Kemnitz’s case and the charges of inefficiency, clients and case workers supported his work, while public officials, including local mayors, spoke against his performance.¹³⁰ Meyer was reinstated

¹²⁸Memo to “All Employees of the Washtenaw County Welfare Commission,” from C.H. Elliot, administrator, n.d., FERA State Series, Michigan, Box 140, Complaints, Folder T-Z.

¹²⁹Letter from Foster to Wickenden, January 3, 1935 [sic]; “Civil Liberties in Michigan,” *Social Work Today*, v. 2 no. 4 (January 1936) 19.

¹³⁰Similar charges were made against Manistee County administrator Louise Armstrong, who refused to follow the tenets of local officials and instead followed state rules. When pressed to resign, she refused and SERA supported her. The critical difference, apparently, is that she was not attempting to organize relief clients. See Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 188-189; SEWRC Minutes, April 10, 1934, Box 1, Folder 1; “Rengo, Peterson Desire to Quit Welfare Body,” April 12, 1934, *The Manistee News-Advocate*; “Will Act Upon Resignations Late Next Week,” *The Manistee News-Advocate*, April 13, 1934; “Local Welfare Problems Increase,” *The Manistee News-*

as a case worker, but was transferred to Battle Creek.¹³¹ The resolution of the Kemnitz case is unclear regarding his demotion, but he apparently did not leave the agency.¹³²

SERA administrator William Haber believed in the right of social workers “to organize into a union for the purpose of improving their own condition,” and planned to ask the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission to affirm that right. But he believed that the situation here was different, as social workers sought to organize clients to change administrative rules that social workers were hired to enforce, although he did not take a stand on the issue. He did tell union members that they “may rest assured that the entire matter will be presented very sympathetically to the State Relief Commission.”¹³³ He did not support “active participation in the organization of clients by the case worker,” but left the final decision to the state commission.¹³⁴

The rank and file movement remained concentrated in large cities as late as 1938, but had spread to fifteen states, including Michigan, Ohio and Illinois. Public agency

Advocate, November 9, 1934.

¹³¹“Civil Liberties in Michigan,” 19.

¹³²Rank and file members also mobilized against the dismissal of another Washtenaw County social worker, Louise Stellwagen, who was secretary of the rank and file group. The outcome of that case is also unclear, although the circumstances were similar to the case of Kemnitz, who regularly contributed articles to *Social Work Today* about Rank and File activities in Michigan. See “Difficult to Supervise,” *Social Work Today*, v. 3 no. 4 (January 1936) 25.

¹³³Letter from Haber to Frank Martel, Detroit and Wayne Federation of Labor, dated November 22, 1935, Wayne County AFL-CIO Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Box 23, Welfare Department Folder.

¹³⁴“Civil Liberties in Michigan,” 19. The action is not recorded in the SEWRC minutes, which end in April 1935.

organizations tended to affiliate with the State, County, and Municipal Workers of America while private agency groups were affiliated with the United Office and Professional Workers of American - both a part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.¹³⁵ Active in four counties and one city in Michigan, the rank and file movement did strike a chord with social workers, particularly those in public agencies. An important question is why social workers organized in those counties, but not in others, including Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren. Saginaw County is the most puzzling, as the area did have a union presence in the auto-related factories and also had organized protests among work relief recipients. But no evidence of an organization of relief workers is apparent.

Roadblocks to social work unions in general were significant, and other factors also limited their growth in Michigan, including ideological conflicts between labor organizing and professions, the high turnover in relief agency staff, and regional hostility to union. As a profession, social work seemed to some in direct conflict to labor organizing. Unions were for workers, not professionals. The rank and file movement sought to reconcile those apparent contradictions, creating a new social worker identity, according to Daniel Walkowitz, "The Professional Worker."¹³⁶

¹³⁵"Directory of Trade Unions in Social Work," *Social Work Today* v. V no. 9 (June 1938) 24; Jacob Fisher, "One Year of the CIO in Social Work," *Social Work Today* v. V no. 9 (June 1938) 21. Two agencies joined unions of the American Federation of Labor. See "Addenda to 'Directory'", p. 36, same volume.

¹³⁶Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 119-120.



In addition to the conflict with professionalization, unions organizing relief workers often were not dealing with people who had a long-term commitment to the field. Many relief workers, often white and middle class, were teachers or nurses, and thus returned to their own fields when those job prospects improved. Among a sampling of social workers in Marquette and Saginaw counties, about half remained in the social work field after 1940, instead opting to return to other jobs. The elimination of federal funds for relief in 1936 also resulted in cuts in staff. Civil service merit requirements, instituted in 1936, resulted in qualifying examinations for all relief employees. About 12 percent of those examined failed to qualify for their positions, and thus lost their jobs, adding further to the turnover in relief workers.¹³⁷ A majority of relief workers were women, and thus arguments related to the difficulty in organizing women workers, and also the problems women faced in unions as well, are significant.¹³⁸ The demographics of relief workers thus played a role in limiting union development.

Regional hostility to unions and also to social workers further complicated the picture for social work organizing. Some regions of Michigan, such as the mining district

¹³⁷“State Organization for Public Welfare in Michigan,” March 1937, Welfare and Relief Study Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 4, p. 211-212, 221. Another 5 percent of those examined failed to qualify for their current position, but passed tests for a position with a lower classification.

¹³⁸For a review of this debate, see Alice Kessler-Harris, “Where Are the Organized Women Workers?” in *U.S. Women in Struggle: A Feminist Studies Anthology* eds. Claire Goldberg Moses and Heidi Hartman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 110-133 and Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Rethinking Troubled Relations Between Women and Unions,” same volume, 166-188. It is unclear how gender played into the social worker unions, particularly in relation to the role of women and their access, or lack of access, to positions of leadership in the union movement.

of the Upper Peninsula, which included Marquette County, and also southwest Michigan, including Kent County, were hostile to labor organizations in general. While Detroit had an active labor movement on several fronts, Grand Rapids and Marquette did not, thus further hampering the growth of a labor movement among social workers.¹³⁹ A final factor was the hostility against professional social work, to which the Rank and File movement was allied to some degree, prevalent in many counties. Relief workers and social welfare policies were under attack throughout the decade, as Chapter Six details. At the same time relief workers argued for higher salaries as professionals, opponents advocated the removal of social work from relief administration entirely, because of the high salaries. New Deal measures protecting labor unions and workers, and the successful sit-down strikes in Flint against General Motors, only heightened the hostility of many to labor rights and exacerbated fears about Communists in unions.¹⁴⁰ Given the barriers to social work organization, in Michigan and elsewhere, individuals willing to risk their jobs in uncertain economic times likely were the exception rather than the rule.

Regional representatives minimized the influence and appeal of the Rank and File Movement, but many relief workers, including one woman employed in Kent County's

¹³⁹Larry Lankton, *Cradle to Grave: Life, Work, and Death at the Lake Superior Copper Mines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 211-212; James J. Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed: Community and Union Activists in the Industrial Heartland* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 58-63.

¹⁴⁰Labor issues were a major debate in the 1938 elections, and some historians believe that Governor Frank Murphy's support of labor rights and the General Motors' strikers cost him the election that year. See Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 510-511; Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1995) 530-531.

WRC, shared the frustrations and concerns articulated by the Rank and File movement.¹⁴¹ Tired of the constant criticism heaped on the wasteful administrative costs of the emergency relief organization, as well as her own low salary, an anonymous female social worker wrote an article, directed at SERA Administrator William Haber, voicing her concerns and frustrations in her “Vademecum fur Herrn Haber.”¹⁴² Forwarded to Haber by William R. Kirchgessner, Kent County WRC Administrator, the paper covered many of the issues raised by both critics and supporters of professional social work. It also presented the picture of a woman who was not only supporting herself, but also other family members as well; her situation contrasts sharply with the popular image of a single social worker with no family responsibilities. She also mocked the theories of labor relations espoused by government officials but practiced so little with their “professional” workers. Although she makes no mention of the Rank and File Movement, she voiced many of its concerns.

The author pointed out that although administrative costs were constantly said to be too high, or that money was wasted when workers arrived late to work, it ignored the reality that most social workers, at least in her office, made up “this shortage by overtime work at the ratio of at least an hour of overtime to every minute lost. Is there ever any mention of the hundreds of dollars’ worth of services that the State gets gratis in this

¹⁴¹Edith Foster reported that the rank and file group, although active in state conferences, was generating “little interest...even in Detroit.” See Foster to Wickenden, October 21, 1935.

¹⁴²The title is a mixture of German and Latin languages, and translates loosely into “a manual for Mr. Haber.” The author intended Haber to see this as a guide to the relief workers’ labor situation. I thank Patricia Rogers for her help in translation.

way?"¹⁴³ While industrial workers earned overtime pay, social workers received nothing, because they were professionals. She also noted that although an untrained visitor could not hope to earn more than \$80 per month, supervisors told relief workers that "millions of families not only lived on that amount but have lived very well." The author computed her own budget, including utilities, rent, laundry, taxes, food and insurance, at \$93 per month, and noted that this amount did not include medical costs, household goods, clothing, "or that 'other living' which is supposed to make life endurable."¹⁴⁴ Although social workers earned much more than their relief clients or work relief employees, they were not living well, according to the author. As Walkowitz argues, she could not participate in the middle-class consumer culture, despite her "professional" status.

She also mocked the need for continued reading and studying, usually using books borrowed from the office or library: "naturally no matter how good a book is, we can't afford to buy it." Social workers were not true "professionals," as they did not have the earning power to afford the tools necessary for their jobs. Social work texts, the author continued, recommended by supervisors, confirmed the low salaries earned by relief workers. Social work texts, she argued, taught that any family earning up to \$1,500 was classed at the "poverty and subsistence level," and they also noted that a family income of \$2,500 was only "a very moderate one. It permits few of the luxuries of life, even for

¹⁴³"Vademecum fur Herrn Haber," William Haber Papers, Box 33, Folder MSERA-4, p. 1.

¹⁴⁴"Vademecum fur Herrn Haber," p. 2.

families of only two or three persons.”¹⁴⁵ Many social workers, single or not, fell into these wage categories. Again, the author was a woman who presented herself as a key part of the family income, although we learn nothing of her personal circumstances.¹⁴⁶

Social workers were also contrasted with laborers and skilled workers, who had earned the right to unionize, to bargain collectively, and to pressure their employers to provide them with certain wages and benefits. Here the author echoed the sentiments of the Rank and File movement, which ultimately believed a social worker alliance with industrial unionism was the best means to further their cause. Transferring the labor rights earned by industrial workers into the field of social work became a key goal.¹⁴⁷ After all, industrial workers could earn overtime pay and also negotiate wage increases, and the Department of Labor supported and pledged to protect their rights. Such negotiations could offset the rising cost of living, as reported by the federal government. But “what has the government done to enable its own employees to meet this ‘steadily rising cost of living’ ...nothing at all.”¹⁴⁸ Social workers in the relief organization had no security, as personnel were shifted if not cut in the face of pressure to reduce administrative costs. Reductions in staff necessitated increases in case loads, and “the

¹⁴⁵“Vademecum fur Herrn Haber,” p. 3.

¹⁴⁶The relief workers interviewed by Sandra Schackel also helped support families; the income was a critical part of the family economy. See Schackel, *Social Housekeepers*, 160-161.

¹⁴⁷Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 123-124. Social workers in the Rank and File movement argued that they were, indeed, employees and not professionals.

¹⁴⁸“Vademecum fur Herrn Haber,” p. 5.

government that promises to demand 'security' for the wage earner either blindly or blandly ignores the condition of its own workers." Perhaps, the author continued, it was better to be treated, as labor was, as "my friends" rather than as "one of the family," which is what social workers were.¹⁴⁹ She dismissed the criticism of the public as an excuse to keep social worker earnings down, arguing that educating the public could be done, and "who knows better than the Administration the value of good propaganda, and who knows better how to use it."¹⁵⁰

The paper was signed "by a white collar worker who is getting a trifle hot under the collar." The social worker also had the support of her supervisor, the county administrator. Not only did Kirchgessner mail her article to Haber at his Ann Arbor university office, he also recommended it in a cover letter written on the WRC's letterhead: "I think it is rather enlightening as to how most of the employees of the Relief organization feel about the salaries paid to them." Not only did it reflect feelings, but also fact, according to Kirchgessner, noting that "there are probably many janitors earning more money per year than a lot of...employees of this so-called 'emergency' organization."¹⁵¹ Why no union existed Kirchgessner does not discuss, although, as noted, Kent County was not an area that welcomed unions, but the sentiments of the Rank and File Movement are evident.

¹⁴⁹"Vademecum fur Herrn Haber," p. 6.

¹⁵⁰"Vademecum fur Herrn Haber," p. 7.

¹⁵¹Letter to William Haber from W.E. Kirchgessner, dated March 1, 1937, William Haber Papers, Box 33, Folder MSERA-4.

The article caught the attention of William Haber, who acknowledged that salaries were inadequate, and wrote that he had “no defense for what has been, at best, a haphazardly developed salary classification.”¹⁵² SERA reports also described relief worker salaries as low and case loads high.¹⁵³ Haber defended the SERA, arguing that administrators and the commission recognized the low salaries and never pretended that they were adequate. They considered reclassifying all employees and raising salaries, but each time they did they “were hit back by a staring deficit, by the opposition of public opinion, and similar obstacles.” He admitted the author was correct in that an education campaign could have been waged, but “the inertia was terrific, and the pressure of immediate things to be done, great.”¹⁵⁴ Haber also thought that a union might have helped to overcome that inertia. He believed in the right of social workers to organize, as discussed earlier, but opposed their alliances with relief clients.¹⁵⁵

Recipients of relief had a different viewpoint about salaries and case workers. Some saw the case worker as an overpaid, nosey investigator and, like other critics of the program, did not see the need for “professional” workers. Houghton County’s relief recipients organized protests about the administration of relief, and historian James Lorence argues that these protests “revealed deep worker resentment against welfare

¹⁵²Letter from Haber to W. E. Kirschgessner, Administrator, Kent County WRC, March 3, 1937, p. 2, William Haber Papers, Box 33, Folder MSERA-4.

¹⁵³SEWRC, *Cost of Administration in the Emergency Relief Program*, 10-13.

¹⁵⁴Letter from Haber to Kirchgessner, March 3, 1937, p. 1.

¹⁵⁵William Haber, “Social Security in Transition,” *Social Work Today*, v. VI no. 9 (June 1939) 22-24.



bureaucrats whom they perceived to be hostile towards the clients they served.”¹⁵⁶ Some recipients also resented the income case workers earned in comparison to the grants given to both direct and work relief clients. Jobs with the county emergency relief agencies were not categorized as work relief, and thus were not open to those most in need unless the applicant was qualified for the position. They were considered “professional” positions, and were not part of the work relief structure. Sandra Schackel argues that New Mexico recipients saw the money paid in salaries to case workers and clerical employees as money diverted from direct or work relief. Some Houghton County residents shared this view, arguing that the \$65 monthly salary earned by ten welfare investigators could be better spent on clothing for relief recipients.¹⁵⁷ Another common complaint was that while a work relief recipient’s earnings might be cut from \$44 to \$22, the office worker continued to draw the full pay. In the case of women’s work, little enough money was spent on projects for women, compounding the problem. Schackel argues that “some white women benefitted at the expense of poorer, nonwhite women.”¹⁵⁸ While Schackel’s study focuses on New Mexico, and thus the issue was between the hiring of white, middle-class women and poorer, less educated women of color, a similar argument holds in Michigan. Race certainly was a factor in those counties with people of

¹⁵⁶Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed*, 86.

¹⁵⁷Letter from Emil Kangas to Harry Hopkins, dated December 20, 1934, FERA State Series, RG 69, FERA State Series, Box 140, Folder G-H. Kangas also complained about the unfair treatment of relief recipients, and the favoritism practiced by case workers in granting relief and clothing allowances.

¹⁵⁸Schackel, *Social Housekeeping*, 149.

color, but class was also significant. The minimal requirements for a case worker - a high school education and preferably college and some social work experience - excluded many relief applicants. While the requirements for clerical workers were less tied to formal education, few women outside the white middle class held the skills necessary to obtain a job as a stenographer or bookkeeper, let alone an investigator or case worker.

Amanda Lorensen held a particularly hostile view of the emergency relief agency and the administration of relief. Lorensen, a divorced mother of six children, two of whom lived at home, was a constant critic of the Saginaw County social welfare programs. She wrote numerous letters complaining about the size of her grants, her ex-husband's failure to pay court-ordered alimony, and the personnel in the social welfare agency. Visits, reported several of the caseworkers assigned to her, consisted of "continuous complaints."¹⁵⁹ They argued that she often withheld information about income or alimony when it was received, and few of the caseworkers trusted her. She had received relief beginning in 1933, supplementing the earnings of her older children. Most had left home, and she was dependent upon public aid. A college graduate who had taught elementary education for three years, she had been a file clerk in the county's WRC, but was discharged in 1936. Lorensen maintained it was because she was eligible for Aid to Dependent Children; agency officials reported that she was unable to do the job.¹⁶⁰ She reapplied and complained to several officials, including the governor. She

¹⁵⁹Saginaw County ADC Case C7300045, quoted from case history dated March 19, 1940.

¹⁶⁰Employment application dated July 27, 1938; Letter from Ella Lee Council, field representative to SERA, August 15, 1938, Case C7300045, Saginaw County ADC

wrote that she had been given high praise for her earlier work, and couldn't understand "why Mr. Howlett [county administrator] should lay me off and keep on his negroes, it is more than I can account for."¹⁶¹ As a white woman, she believed she deserved first consideration for employment. As an educated woman, she would have been an attractive candidate as a relief worker, let alone a file clerk, but clearly the WRC staff did not agree, although the reason was not clear.

Lorenson also criticized the young women who worked in the office, and had nothing good to say about any of the case workers she encountered in the five years she received aid. Her experience, age and education placed her above these young women, in her view, and she deeply resented that they had such control over her life through the relief program, first under the WRC and later through ADC:

It would be impossible to state on paper the suffering I have undergone at the hands of young girls who have no interest in older people. A girl who is single and spends most of their [sic] time smoking cigarettes in a rest room has no right to dictate to older people who have a college education.¹⁶²

The relief workers did not need these jobs, and were indeed working for amusement and had no children to support: "I was given a pension of \$32.97 to care for two children and myself for one month, while [they] draw no less than \$80 for pin money."¹⁶³ She wanted

Records, State Archives of Michigan, Reel 4531.

¹⁶¹Employment application dated July 27, 1938; Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC, reel 4531.

¹⁶²Letter from Lorenson to SERA, Lansing, dated July 28, 1938; Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC, reel 4531.

¹⁶³Letter from Lorenson to SERA, Lansing, dated July 28, 1938; Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC, reel 4531.

a job, preferably with the WRC, or a larger grant, and wrote that she would not take anything less simply “because of some young girl’s whims.”¹⁶⁴ She did not see case workers as women with families to support, as the author of “Vademecum” identified herself, but rather as single young women benefitting from employment in a “poor man’s institution” at the expense of those in need.¹⁶⁵

Gender factored into other recipients’ views as well. A Van Buren County applicant wrote several letters to Michigan Governor Frank Fitzgerald because he had no patience or use for the women in the WRC office. Case workers found John Sheets eligible for food orders for a single man, which was \$1 per week, but that was the limit of aid approved for him. He had received \$650 compensation for an amputated arm, and also had a son in Chicago with whom he could live. Sheets told the case worker, a woman, that they needed to pay his room and board and food until he was eligible for an old age pension. He was refused and the case rejected because he would not accept the aid offered.¹⁶⁶

Sheets first contacted SERA and Fitzgerald about his need before he applied for relief, according to the WRC. He told Fitzgerald that he was not able to work and that he

¹⁶⁴Letter from Lorenson to Dora Heilman, supervisor, December 30, 1940, Case C7300045, Saginaw County ADC, reel 4531. She did not receive the increased grant, as she was already receiving the maximum grant of \$24 under state law.

¹⁶⁵Letter, July 27, 1938, Case C7300045, Saginaw ADC, reel 4531.

¹⁶⁶Case history, March 24, 1936, Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3 Folder 3.

was entitled to relief: "Now I can't live on snow balls or grass."¹⁶⁷ He claimed that he had no money left from his arm injury award, and insisted that that was a "truthful and honest statement. I am not begging, never did, never stole a cent."¹⁶⁸ He was an honest laborer who had earned help. He refused to take no for an answer, and the office workers also would not budge, even when his son wrote that he could not support his father.¹⁶⁹ It was his attitude that he had a right to relief that alienated case workers from his plight, although office regulations apparently prevented them from paying his room and board. Case workers believed he was trying to get something for nothing, and should still have insurance money to live on or he could go and live with his son; the people he listed as references reported that he should have money left. Sheets wrote Fitzgerald that he was not begging - and he never would: "Beg I never will. It would [please] this lipstick and powder puff office here to [sic] well."¹⁷⁰ A former salesman who had divorced twice, Sheets believed the women in the office - who oversaw the mechanisms of relief - were the problem. Thus he turned to male "higher authorities" although it did him little good.

Relief workers operated in a difficult position during the 1930s. They faced criticism on two major fronts: from the recipients they helped and the local officials in

¹⁶⁷Letter to Fitzgerald dated December 27, 1935; Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3 Folder 3.

¹⁶⁸Letter from Sheets to Fitzgerald, dated March 13, 1936, Case 8315, VB ERA Records, Box 3, Folder 3.

¹⁶⁹Letter from son to agency dated February 1, 1936, Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3 Folder 3.

¹⁷⁰Letter to Fitzgerald dated March 13, 1936, Case #8351, VB ERA, Box 3 Folder 3.

their communities. Relief workers also were not full members of the profession in which they worked. For many, true membership in the profession was a college degree out of reach. Relief workers also dealt firsthand with recipients angry at administrative rules, intrusive investigations and inadequate budgets, but had few means at their disposal to address those problems. Some turned to unions, but more often they labored as individual workers in their own agencies, rather than as a coordinated group allied with their clients. A similar point can be made about relief recipients, who most often voiced their approval, and anger, at the relief administration through individual letters and complaints, as did Lorensen and Sheets. The case files analyzed in the next chapter show their side of the story, and reveal the deep chasms that often existed between the social worker and the client. The recipients' viewpoint presents another narrative of the relief story in Michigan in the 1930s.

**“I Can’t Make a Go of It”:
Recipients Negotiate Relief in the 1930s**

Chapter Five

Ronald Little and his wife, Mary, applied for emergency relief in Van Buren County in Michigan in late 1938. The young couple had managed to scrape by until that time, even though Little had been laid off from his factory job with Welch’s Juice Company earlier that year. He had found odd jobs and his father, who was the deputy sheriff in Lawton, where they lived, had also helped. But his father also did not have steady work and his sheriff’s earnings were small. Little, who had a wife and a three-year-old son to support, finally had to apply for help. Their savings were gone and they needed money for food. A case worker approved orders for groceries and fuel, and Little continued to seek work in the area. Little was fortunate; three months later he was rehired by Welch’s on a part-time basis. In a letter to the caseworker, Little wrote that although it was not full-time work, he thought they could get along, and thanked her for the agency’s help. The case was closed and the family had no further contact with the emergency relief agency; apparently Little was able to find a full-time job.¹

Little’s case, which was relatively routine and straightforward, represents several important points about relief, unemployment and the Great Depression in Van Buren County, and in Michigan. Little obtained relief not only for himself, but also for his family. Case workers planned his aid around his family’s needs, viewing Little as one part of a family unit. As the male head of household, he was the logical person to obtain

¹Case 1465, Van Buren Emergency Relief Administration Records, Box 2 Folder 5.

employment. They also considered the ability of other family members outside his household, like his father, to contribute to his support. Like many of Michigan's relief recipients in the early years of emergency relief - before 1937 or 1938 - Little suffered from unemployment. But he was also a relatively short-term relief recipient. He had not received aid before his 1938 application and only received relief for a few months.

Relief in the 1930s in Michigan provided many families and individuals with much needed assistance at a time when want and hardship were widespread. Families and friends could not be counted on to help, as they likely had little to spare either. Savings were drained and resources stretched to their limits as families sought to survive the Depression years. Michigan relief recipients welcomed the programs initiated by the federal government, but not all agreed with the programs' administration or policies. The process of applying for and receiving relief entailed a maze of interactions and negotiations on the part of both recipients and case workers, who were the key players in relief administration at the grass roots level. Recipients were active agents in that process. Little, although fortunate to only need relief for a short time, was the person who told the case worker he was employed and would no longer need help, and willingly provided the information she needed to process his application. Little's case worker respected him and his work ethic, and actually thought he might need relief longer than he anticipated, and had no problem extending it if necessary. In her eyes, his willingness - and eagerness - to obtain work made him "worthy." In turn, he was uncomplaining and desperate to get off relief as quickly as possible. He also was more than anxious to resume supporting his family. In short, he shared many of the white, middle-class values

and ethics of his case worker, and thus there was little room for conflict in their relationship. Not all cases followed that trend.

Social workers administered relief within their own nexus of ideas about race, ethnicity, class and gender, and how such characteristics affected one's ability and responsibility to find work, care for children and thus be "worthy" of state aid.

Generalizations are hard to find, as each case is marked by its own unique make-up of individuals, family relations and circumstances. Instead, both case workers and recipients operated in an area limited by funding availability, federal and state regulations and the economic and social context - including an often segregated labor market - in which they lived, in addition to the personal prejudices each carried into the relationship.

This chapter first profiles relief recipients in Michigan and also in Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties, to give a picture of who received relief and why. It then turns to the interactive process of case work, and the negotiations that drove that process. Although recipients' efforts did not always yield the results they wanted, they did influence and affect the relief process. Recipients also had a new arena in which they could register complaints and seek help. Before the New Deal, relief was a local concern, and if one did not find satisfaction from one's township supervisor or superintendent of the poor, one was out of luck, unless a private agency existed that could offer assistance. The county board of supervisors was usually the highest authority for appeals. But with the Welfare Relief Commission and the State Emergency Relief Administration, recipients had more avenues of protest. Perhaps the method used the most was the lodging of complaints, both verbal and written, to agency employees, supervisors and if

those failed, to “higher” officials, regarding their treatment at the hands of WRC employees. Ironically at a time when many local officials desperately fought to remove the state and federal government from relief administration, recipients took advantage of the involvement of those governmental levels to write to elected representatives, New Deal officials, and even their governors and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Those letters, in conjunction with other case file materials, form the core of their viewpoint in this chapter, and show decidedly that some recipients asserted their right to relief as citizens, workers and parents. They were not asking for a handout, in their view, but for assistance that they had earned.²

Relief Recipients: Who Were They?

Recipients of relief in Michigan in the Depression had a range of experiences and a variety of attributes, but some trends emerge when one examines the statistics collected by relief agencies. The surviving case files of the Van Buren County Emergency Relief Administration, in conjunction with the categorical aid case files from Saginaw and Marquette counties, provide a close picture of relief in these counties. Although limited by the number of surviving records, these case files still are a valuable resource in

²Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 138-139, 294; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 252-253; Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 142-143, 149-151. Edsforth and Cohen argue that the Depression’s severity, and the accompanying demise of corporate welfare programs and limitations of other welfare networks, prompted workers to turn to the federal government, and the New Deal, for answers.

understanding New Deal relief. Analysis by county reveals regional differences based on Michigan's diverse economy, as well as how race, nativity, class and citizenship affected who received relief, and also their ability to get off the relief rolls. The jobs available through work relief programs, including the Works Progress Administration, National Youth Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, provided employment until a job in the private sector could be found. Finally, the case records show the myriad of reasons people sought relief, and the entrenched need that had little to do with the nation's floundering economy. These cases vividly demonstrate the importance of the Social Security Act's categorical aid programs, despite their limitations.

The case files of the three counties reflect different relief populations, although all received some type of aid during the emergency relief period. It is also important to remember that the case files for Marquette and Saginaw counties are categorical aid records. Thus while they deal with recipients of emergency relief, they also are among those classed as "unemployables," and thus represent a different pool of relief applicants from those depicted in Van Buren County's records. Those, in contrast, represented general relief cases, and not necessarily individuals who would qualify for either ADC or OAA after 1936. But although not specifically ERA case files, many of the categorical aid recipients received ERA or work relief at some point. A third of Marquette County's categorical aid recipients received ERA before 1936, and another 20 percent received work relief. Likewise, ERA was important for Saginaw County's ADC and OAA recipients before 1936. A third of OAA recipients received ERA and another 1.4 percent had been on work relief. The numbers are even higher for the ADC collection. More

than half received ERA before ADC, and another 9 percent had a work relief assignment - either CCC, NYA, or WPA - for themselves or someone in their household. Although these collections are a different sampling from the Van Buren cases, they still represent emergency relief, albeit among the unemployable, in Michigan.

The percentage of Michigan families receiving relief during the first year of FERA ranged from a high of 16.8 percent to a low of 9.6 percent. The worst of the relief problem centered in the Upper Peninsula by 1933, rather than in the industrial cities, which faced their most difficult times in the first years of the Depression. As seen in Table 8, Marquette was among those counties with more than 50 percent of its residents on relief during the month with the highest caseload; July of 1934 saw 57 percent of Marquette County residents receiving relief. Its average for the year was 34 percent. Also hit hard was the northern Lower Peninsula. The continued decline of the lumbering and mining industries, which in turn affected the railroad and retail industries, were the biggest factors. Poor quality farm land, in addition to a pool of inexperienced farmers, also contributed to the problem. Saginaw and Van Buren counties were among those with the lightest relief load; Saginaw's highest caseload month was 11.9 percent, but more than half of the year found its relief load under 10 percent. Van Buren's highest month was 13.2 percent, but its year-end average was just 7.1 percent. Both were in areas - the "thumb area" on the east side of the state near Saginaw Bay and the southern agricultural counties - that tended to be the lowest in relief loads. Agricultural counties tended to have lower relief loads than other areas, in part because families could often fall back on subsistence farming even if they could not produce a profitable cash crop.

Wayne County's peak was 16 percent and Genesee County's peak 15.3 percent, but their annual averages were 10.9 and 8.8 percent respectively. Kent County's highest caseload included 20 percent of its residents, and its annual average was 16.6. Although the industrial counties suffered a smaller percentage of residents on relief, their overall numbers, due to higher populations, of relief recipients were larger.³

Table 8 Percentage of residents on relief

County	% relief recipients in highest month - 1934	% relief recipients in highest month 1935	Monthly average - 1934	Monthly average - 1935
Genesee	15.3 (Dec.)	16.9 (Dec)	8.8	11.6
Kent	20.1 (Dec.)	22.7 (Jan.)	16.6	20.8
Manistee	21.0 (Nov.)	23.0 (Feb.)	15.5	20.1
Marquette	57.4 (July)	32.9 (Dec.)	34.1	29.3
Saginaw	11.9 (Dec.)	12.6 (Feb.)	8.4	10.3
Van Buren	13.2 (Dec.)	17.7 (Feb.)	7.1	13.3
Wayne	16.0 (Dec.)	15.3 (Dec.)	10.9	11.1
State of MI	16.8 (Nov.)	17.8 (Dec.)	12.9	14.6

Source: Years in the table refer to the first two fiscal years of FERA. Thus 1934 refers to July 1933 to June 1934, and 1935 refers to July 1934 to June 1935. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Appendix Table 7; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 304-305.

The trends continued the next year, with the Upper Peninsula again leading the state in relief numbers. Marquette's relief load remained high among the state, but declined from the previous year's highs. Its peak month reached 32.9, far less than the

³William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1935) Figure 3, 9, 11-12; Appendix Table 7.



previous year's high, but its lowest month (July) still had 26.5 percent of its residents on relief. Wayne County was the only other county to see a decline in its relief peak, but its average monthly caseload actually increased.⁴

Race also affected who received relief, although opinions on why varied.⁵ In general, the percentage of African-Americans receiving relief was larger than their share of the population in Michigan. Most African-Americans who received relief were in urban areas with populations of more than 2,500. Blacks accounted for 8 percent of all relief recipients, but about 29 percent of all blacks in the state received relief. Whites comprised 91.4 percent of relief recipients and other non-white people, including Mexicans, accounted for the remaining 0.6 percent.⁶ Both Marquette and Van Buren counties were almost entirely white; Van Buren County's 1930 census information listed just 1.4 percent of the population as black, and Marquette had no non-white relief

⁴Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Appendix Table 7; William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security* (Lansing, 1935) 304-305.

⁵Harvard Sitkoff argues that decentralized administration of many of the New Deal programs translated into severe discriminatory practices, particularly in the South. See Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 49. See also Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 217, 223-224. It is difficult to document the extent of discrimination in the WRCs in Michigan, because it is impossible to determine how many non-white applicants were denied relief at all, or were not permitted to complete an application. While SERA prohibited such practices, local administrations could often institute such policies without the state's knowledge. The treatment of non-white recipients - those who did apply and receive relief - is addressed later in this chapter.

⁶Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 77-80.



recipients among the case files analyzed. Just one of Van Buren County's cases before 1940 involved an African-American family. Saginaw County's population was more diverse, however. Non-white residents (African American, Mexican, and Native American) were 6 percent of the 1930 population, but were 10 percent of the relief population in the 1930s, according to the case files. Blacks were the largest group, accounting for 70 percent of the minority case load in the sampling. Mexicans or Mexican-Americans comprised 23 percent. The remainder were Native Americans.⁷ SERA reports acknowledged that unequal job opportunities were a large reason for the racial differences among relief numbers in Michigan.⁸ People of color had fewer job opportunities in the labor market and thus were concentrated in low-wage, unskilled occupations. As discussed in the first chapter, they were among the first laid off and fired during economic downturns and were among the first to suffer unemployment when the Depression began, and case workers also commented on the limited employment opportunities available both to people of color and to non-citizens.

Foreign-born residents, both citizens and non-citizens, also tended to receive relief in greater numbers than their population. In Detroit, foreign-born residents received relief in greater proportion when compared to their populations, as was the case in the pre-Depression period in county institutions. A SERA study of Detroit relief rolls found that foreign-born whites comprised 43 percent of the heads of families receiving relief,

⁷People of color were 10 percent of the case files analyzed for both ADC and OAA (N=593). They comprised a larger share of the ADC files (13.5 percent) as compared to the OAA files (3.5 percent).

⁸Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 77-80.



although the 1930 census reported 39 percent of family heads as foreign-born. Native born whites represented 31 percent of all heads of families receiving relief, but were 53 percent of family heads in the 1930 census.⁹ Although statewide figures are not available, similar trends are seen in the categorical aid programs in Marquette and Saginaw counties and in Van Buren's ERA files from the 1930s (see Table 9). Van Buren's population in the 1930 census was 10 percent foreign-born, and 13 percent of the case files represented foreign-born recipients. Marquette County's 1930 census figures show 22.8 percent foreign-born, but they accounted for 58 percent of the surviving ADC and OAA case files from the emergency relief period. Of the foreign born, most (80 percent) were naturalized citizens. Saginaw County's foreign-born population in 1930 was just 9.1 percent of the population, but made up 27 percent of the categorical aid recipients. (Of the foreign-born, 68 percent were naturalized citizens.)¹⁰

⁹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 80-81. The Detroit study, based on one month of relief in 1934, is the only statistic available on citizenship and nativity on Michigan relief rolls.

¹⁰*Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. III* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931) 1138-1140.



Table 9 Foreign-born recipients

County	% Foreign-born in 1930 census	% foreign-born in 1940 census	% foreign-born in case file sample	% foreign-born who were U.S. citizens
Marquette	22.8	15.8	59	81
Saginaw	9.1	9.7	27	68.5
Van Buren	10	9.1	13	68

Source: *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. III* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931) 1138-1140; *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Vol. II, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943) 787-788.

Occupation also factored into the relief picture. For the first year of FERA, in a survey of fifty-five counties, unskilled laborers accounted for more than 75 percent of the heads of households receiving relief. Skilled laborers comprised another 17.8 percent. White collar workers were just 6.5 percent of heads of households on relief, and nearly half (45.6 percent) of those were clerical workers.¹¹ The second year saw a shift to a more even distribution of occupations of employable relief recipients. Skilled workers (including building, construction, manufacturing and other industries) accounted for 18 percent of relief recipients, and semi-skilled workers (including some in the automobile industry) were another 22.3 percent. Unskilled laborers were 22.1 percent, and about a quarter of those were farm laborers. White collar workers comprised about 7.6 of the total, and more than a third of those were clerical workers, and another third were from sales (including retail), real estate and insurance. Domestic service workers were another

¹¹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 68.



6.4 percent and farmers just 4.4 percent.¹² Twenty percent of those surveyed in March 1935 fit into none of the above categories because they did not have enough experience in any one occupation to be classed as such. Most were young, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, who likely were unable to find work when they left school. One quarter of the inexperienced group included workers older than twenty-five, and more than 90 percent of those were women, many of whom were entering the workforce because of the depression.¹³ Again, women were at a disadvantaged position in the workforce, and work relief projects offered few opportunities.

Data from the case files of Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties follows the state trends relatively closely, but also reflected the local economies regarding industry and employment, as well as gender and racial differences (see Tables 10 and 11). Mining was a primary employer in Marquette, although laborers sometimes farmed small tracts of land to supplement earnings. Saginaw and Van Buren county recipients farmed in greater numbers than the state average, and unskilled laborers were a significant group in all counties. Women worked in traditional female fields, particularly domestic work, laundry and sewing, as well as taking in boarders. In all three counties housewives accounted for less than half of all female applicants; most women also identified themselves as wage earners. Most were from working class families where supplementary wages were needed to make ends meet at some point in their lives. They

¹²Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 63-64.

¹³Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 64.



did not see their identity solely as the family caretaker, but also as a wage-earner, as was the case in other counties.

Marquette County's male applicants were concentrated largely as miners (44 percent) or general laborers (37 percent). None were listed as skilled workers, and just 11 percent worked in farming, although some miners also farmed. Farmers in Marquette County tended to own at least some land, ranging from 40 to 120 acres, and often supplemented their agricultural earnings with other work.¹⁴ Seven percent were corrections officers at the nearby prison. Female applicants were primarily either housewives (46 percent) or domestic workers (38 percent). Just 8 percent were in white collar work and 4 percent worked in restaurants.

Table 10 Male occupations of emergency relief recipients

Occupation	Marquette	Saginaw	Van Buren
Laborers/unskilled	37	42	31
Miners	44	NA	NA
Farming	11	30	31
Carpenters	NA	12	NA
Skilled	NA	4	18
White collar	NA	5	13.7
Other	8	7	6.3

¹⁴One of those owning a farm had deeded his land to his son, but still lived in the home with his son and family.



Table 11 Female occupations of emergency relief recipients

Occupation	Marquette	Saginaw	Van Buren
Housewife	46	44	33
Domestic service	38	27	19
Boarders	NA	8	14
White collar	8	5	14
Factory	NA	4	5
Farming/ag	NA	6.5	NA
Other	8	5.5	15

Saginaw County's male applicants again were primarily either laborers or engaged in farming or agricultural work. Thirty percent worked in farming and 42 percent were laborers. Slightly less than half of those in farming (44 percent) owned some portion of land. Twelve percent were carpenters and just 4 percent were skilled workers. Just 5 percent of male recipients worked in white collar occupations. Women again tended to be in more traditional female occupations, although 6.5 percent were in farming and some did own their own land. Housewives made up the largest group, at 44 percent, with those doing some form of domestic work (day work, sewing, or laundry) accounting for 27 percent of the female occupations. Eight percent took in boarders and 4 percent worked in local factories. Just 5 percent were from the white collar occupations.

Race and citizenship, most evident among the case files in Saginaw County, reveal different occupational patterns (see Table 12). Non-white women were more



heavily concentrated in the domestic work field, with 47 percent listing that occupation as compared to 27 for all female applicants. Just 20 percent of the foreign-born women worked in some kind of domestic work. Thirteen percent of non-white women took in boarders, as compared to 8 percent for all women recipients, but just 3 percent of foreign-born women earned income from roomers. No woman of color listed factory work or white collar work as their primary occupation, and just two percent of foreign-born listed those.¹⁵ Clearly non-white women faced fewer employment options, which translated into less chance of earning enough income to free themselves from relief.¹⁶

Table 12 Race, nativity and occupational segregation for Saginaw female recipients

Occupation	All women	Non-white women	Foreign-born women
housewife	44	32	49
domestic work	27	47	20
boarders	8	13	3
factory	4	0	2
farm/ag	6.5	0	9
white collar	5	0	2

In Van Buren County, among the male applicants (77 percent of the total pool), most were either farmers (31 percent) or laborers (31 percent), with four listing both; they

¹⁵Those numbers would go up in the early 1940s, when local factories began to hire non-white women (citizens).

¹⁶The numbers of foreign-born were not a significant portion of the case samples to provide satisfactory data.



were likely farm laborers.¹⁷ Those two occupations accounted for nearly two-thirds of the cases involving male applicants. But only about one third of farmers owned their own land; most either rented land or worked as a laborer for another farmer. Skilled workers made up 18 percent. White collar work involved 13.7 percent of the cases, a higher percentage than the state average. Other occupations included foundry workers, welders and machinists, carpenters, sailors, blacksmiths, and truck drivers. Women listed far fewer occupations and all worked in traditional “female” fields. Fourteen percent took in boarders (and one also ran a restaurant at one point) and 19 percent worked as domestics. About 14 percent were students (one student had worked as a waitress) and just five percent were in factory work. White collar work comprised another 14 percent (although one also listed waitress). Housewives comprised about a third of the female applicant cases, but a third of those also listed another occupation. Again, a majority of women did not identify themselves solely as housewives.

The sex of the applicant for relief tended to vary according to the program under study. Not surprisingly, women predominated in Saginaw County’s ADC records before 1940, but men outnumbered women in Marquette County as ADC applicants. One explanation for the Marquette data may be that a majority of the surviving ADC files concerned married couples, and not single, divorced or widowed women or men.¹⁸

¹⁷Not all farmers owned their land. Some engaged in share farming and one was a migrant farmer.

¹⁸One possibility is that the county denied aid to women who were separated, divorced or deserted, but given other evidence related to Marquette’s WRC, that seems unlikely. This is one instance where the sample is simply too small to draw definitive conclusions.



Overall, women outnumbered men in Saginaw County's ADC and OAA records, while men accounted for 53 percent of all recipients of aid among Marquette County's case files. Seventy-eight percent of Van Buren County's ERA case files concerned male recipients of aid, while 22 percent were women.

A significant number of recipients were married, although only 18 percent of Saginaw County's ADC recipients were married when they applied for aid. But nearly half of all Marquette recipients (47 percent) and 88 percent of the ADC recipients were married, and 42 percent of Saginaw's OAA recipients were married as well. Nearly two-thirds of Van Buren's relief recipients were married (62 percent), although the percentage was much higher among men, where 75 percent were married. Just 17 percent of Van Buren's female applicants were married. The second largest category was widowhood, for men and women, as seen in Table 13.

Table 13 Marital status of relief recipients

County & program	married	divorced or deserted	separated	single	widow	widower
Marq.	47	3.6	9	9	24	13
Saginaw OAA	42	4	4	8	25	9
Saginaw ADC	18	21	21	22	37	0
Van Buren ERA	62	1	6	8	11	12



The numbers reveal that although married and widowed women, long defined as the most “deserving” recipients of mothers’ aid, comprise more than half the Saginaw ADC pool, nearly half were divorced, deserted, separated or even never married. As will be argued later in this chapter, case workers found the type of family less significant than the dynamics operating within the family.¹⁹

Relief generally was extended to families, rather than individuals, although the types of families varied. Cases that involved single persons comprised about 12.6 percent of all cases the first year, and that percentage increased to 14.6 the second year. The average monthly caseload of families receiving relief during FERA’s first year included about 13 percent of Michigan’s population, and that number rose to 14.6 percent during the second year.²⁰ If the individuals within those families are counted, the largest age group receiving relief included children under sixteen. In the first year of FERA, 41 percent of all relief recipients were children, or about one-sixth of the state’s population in that age group. About 15 percent of recipients were ages sixteen to twenty-four, and about a quarter were ages twenty-five to forty-four.²¹

¹⁹Linda Gordon analyzes the long-term stigma of single mothers of all types in welfare history, and also documents the early bias against separated, divorced, deserted and never married mothers. ADC’s early advocates remained silent about the latter groups of women, but in Michigan they did receive aid. See Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 26-29, 105, 280-281.

²⁰Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 65; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 19.

²¹Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 66. Projections in the second report were that the figure remained about the same in the second year of FERA. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 77.

County statistics confirm that most recipients were in families, although that is less true for OAA recipients. Eighteen percent of Marquette County's OAA recipients and about 20 percent of Saginaw County's OAA recipients had no children. Many did not live with their children, even if they had them. The absence of children eliminated a major source of support for older people, and their numbers on the relief rolls is not surprising. Needless to say, all ADC recipients had children, although about 12 percent of Saginaw's recipients received aid for relatives, including nieces, nephews, siblings and grandchildren. Fifteen percent of Van Buren County's emergency relief recipients had no children.

Although numbers fluctuated, generally unemployable cases - or those cases which had no employable person in the household - accounted for less than a quarter of the case load.²² Unemployable people were either those who were too ill or elderly to work, or those whose home responsibilities, such as the care of children, precluded paid employment outside the home. (Many opted instead for home work, such as laundry or sewing, or day housework, easily done while children were in school.) A combination of improved industrial and economic conditions and expansion of the WPA later in the 1930s, with more jobs available in Michigan, reduced the numbers of unemployed, although it never resolved the unemployment problem. Unemployables were to be helped through the categorical aid programs. A clear lesson of the Depression was the need for

²²William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security* (Lansing, 1936) 57-58; *Unemployable Persons on the Emergency Relief Rolls in Michigan* (Lansing, 1935) 7.



more stable relief for that population. The ADC and OAA programs were designed to provide that help.

Unemployability, either through ill health or age, appeared in a surprising number of cases. In Van Buren County's ERA case files, 24 percent of the cases analyzed were categorized as "unemployable," in which the household contained no person - male or female - able to take a job. Age was the key factor in this category. Just 8 percent of those unemployable individuals applying for aid were under the age of 50; one case involved tuberculosis and the other inflammatory rheumatism. Both recovered and eventually returned to work. Half of the unemployable cases were between the ages of fifty and sixty-nine; old enough to suffer the infirmities of age but too young to qualify for an old age pension in Michigan under its initial law, which set the age of eligibility at 70.²³ Forty-two percent of the unemployable applicants were age seventy or older. Twenty-nine percent had pending old age assistance applications when they applied for relief; they simply needed aid to assist them until they received their OAA. Two-thirds of the unemployable group were men, about half of whom were married. The other half were either widowed, separated, or had never married. Half of the female unemployable applicants were widows, and a quarter were married.

Virtually all of the OAA cases in Saginaw and Marquette counties were unemployable, or at least those recipients were unable to work full time. Nearly a third of Marquette County's ADC recipients (31 percent) also were unemployable because of ill

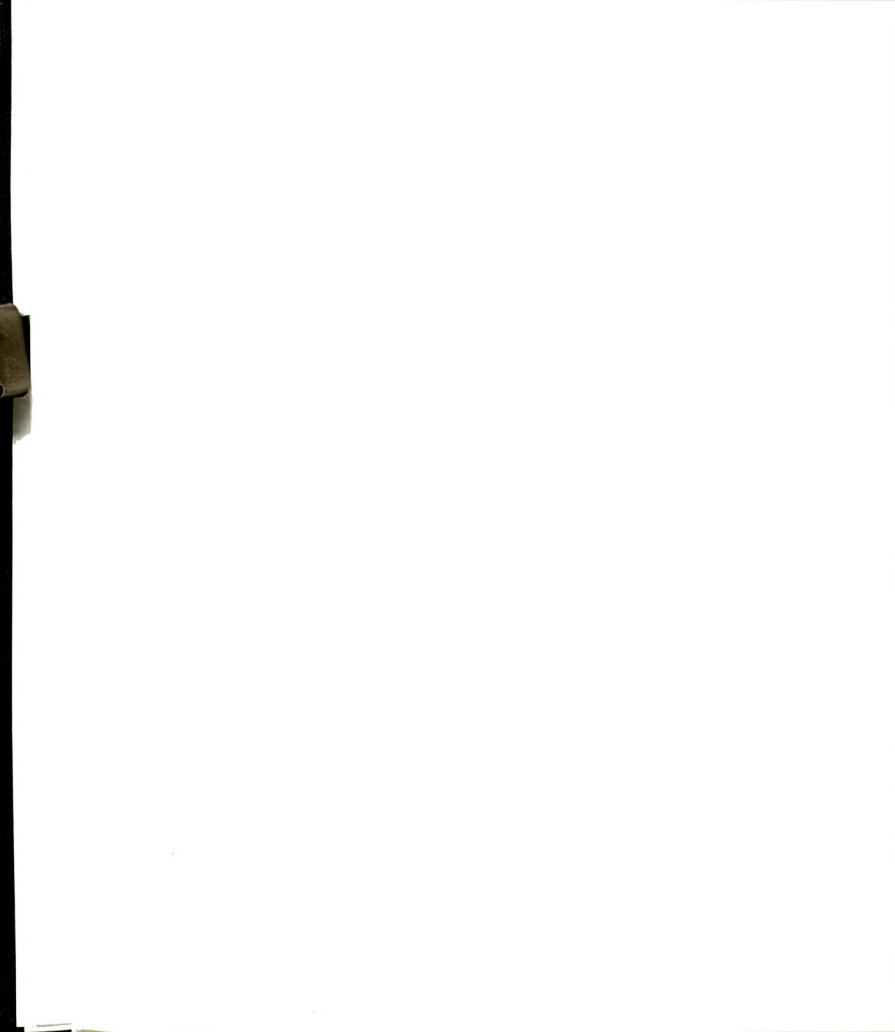
²³Public Act 237 of 1933, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1933) 379.

health. A smaller portion of Saginaw County's ADC recipients (just 6 percent) were unemployable because of ill health, but 16 percent had health problems that affected their ability to work full time. Nearly half of the latter group suffered from tuberculosis; one of the parents had tuberculosis, a disease not found among Marquette's recipients. A quarter of the tuberculosis patients were Mexicans or Mexican-Americans.

The goal of relief programs, and the rationale for hiring social workers, was to enable people to leave the relief rolls, to restore them to self-support, if possible. The reasons for closing cases reveal how recipients freed themselves from the relief programs. Richard Little, introduced at the beginning of the chapter, found employment and left the relief program relatively quickly, but not all were able to do so. Some cases did not include recorded outcomes; the case history just ended, perhaps because the family no longer needed aid or because they left the county and did not tell the case worker. Again, distinctions between the emergency relief cases of Van Buren County and the categorical aid programs of Marquette and Saginaw must be remembered. Particularly for the OAA cases, self-support was unlikely. Most cases involved permanent infirmities or simply old age, and thus recipients were likely never to work full time again. Thus the analysis of those case files reveals more about the OAA and ADC programs of the Social Security Act in their early years, and again underscores the degree to which the economy played little role in some people's need for relief. Long a local problem with little documentation, the difficulties faced by dependent mothers and the elderly become painfully clear.

Work relief programs proved to be an important means for people to leave the direct relief programs until jobs opened up in the private sector. Half of the Van Buren emergency relief recipients found employment, either in the private sector or on a works program, and many also qualified for either ADC or OAA. Twenty-seven percent of the Van Buren cases listed private employment as the reason for closing the case; in one case a son secured a job to support the family. Another 3 percent found “unsteady” employment, but their case was not reopened so someone in the family likely was able to find full-time work. Sixteen percent received WPA assignments, and in two of those cases it was for a son in the household. One wife worked on a WPA job until her husband was able to work, and then he was assigned to a WPA project. Another person refused WPA and the case was immediately closed. Three percent received assignments on a National Youth Administration project (two were students), and one case included a CCC assignment for a son. The works programs proved critical for Van Buren residents, or at least the 23 percent who were able to leave the direct relief rolls to secure some type of public work. For those recipients, work relief provided interim employment until a job was found in the private sector.

The categorical aid programs of the Social Security Act also were important to a significant portion of Van Buren’s relief population. Twenty-seven percent of the cases analyzed qualified for either OAA or ADC, and most were transferred to OAA, which began in Michigan in early 1936. One of those eventually went to the infirmary and another to a nursing home years later. The other three percent received ADC (one moved as well) and two others likely received ADC, although it is not clear from the record.



Thus about a quarter of the cases continued to receive aid under the SSA, indicative of the entrenched welfare needs that became so evident during the Depression years. Four percent of the cases, including one of the ADC cases, moved out of the county and thus their cases were closed. Employment or a return to family were the key reasons behind such relocations.

The records of Marquette and Saginaw counties show stark differences in the two categorical aid programs. In both counties the chief reason for closing an OAA case was the death of a recipient: two-thirds of the Marquette County OAA recipients' cases were closed when they died and 80 percent of the Saginaw OAA cases ended with the recipient's death. Most OAA recipients in those two counties received government help for the remainder of their lives. Another 18 percent of Marquette County's clients were institutionalized in a mental hospital until their deaths, while 7 percent in Saginaw shared that fate. Fifteen percent left the Marquette County OAA program because they had the means to support themselves, either through family members or the sale of assets, often a home or farm. Nine percent of Saginaw's OAA recipients left the program when relatives were able to support them, and another 4 percent found other means, often through the sale of assets, to regain their independence from the government programs.

In contrast, ADC recipients had a range of reasons for closure. Saginaw County, which had the largest sample available, is the most effective means of analyzing the program.²⁴ More than a third of the ADC cases were closed when a family member -

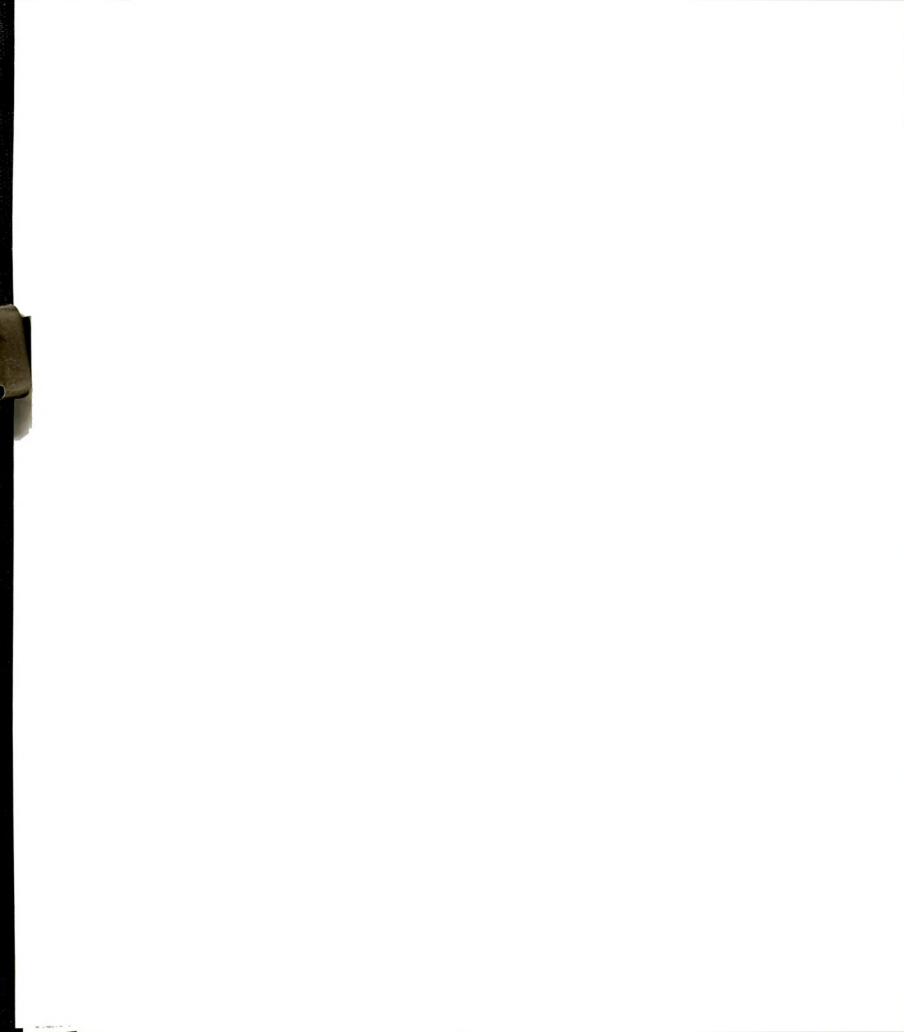
²⁴Only sixteen of Marquette County's ADC files for this period survived, making it impossible to draw definitive conclusions regarding the ADC program.

either a parent or child - found employment sufficient to support the family.²⁵ Thirteen percent found other sources of income, usually from more than one area, including alimony, part-time work or a military allotment from a son or other relative. In 16 percent of the cases the children reached the maximum age and thus were no longer eligible for ADC, and another 7.6 percent stopped attending school. Another 9 percent remarried, and their spouses earned enough to support the entire family. Less than 3 percent of the cases resulted in an unsuitable home finding or the removal of children, either because of neglect or delinquency.²⁶

The analysis of the case records reveals the regional variations in economic opportunity, and how race, gender and class affected those opportunities. Labor market segregation, including discrimination against people of color and non-citizens, affected how some were able to leave the relief rolls. People of color and the foreign-born, particularly those who were not U.S. citizens, faced more limited opportunities, particularly in Saginaw County, helping to explain why their numbers were higher than their rates of population. It also vividly demonstrates the importance of the long-term New Deal programs, including WPA and the categorical aid programs; far fewer people would have left the direct relief program without work relief, OAA, or ADC. Need was

²⁵Thirty-five percent of the cases listed private employment as the reason for closing the case. Employment of children accounted for 15 percent, employment of the mother comprised another 15 percent, and in 5 percent of the cases a husband was again able to work.

²⁶The statistic does not show a lack of interest in the morals of ADC recipients, although case workers in Saginaw County seldom listed that as a reason to close a case. Moral concerns were an issue in 4.4 percent of ADC cases in Saginaw and 18 percent of Marquette's ADC cases. Case workers reviewed all homes with a moralistic lens.



not simply a function of the poor economy; other factors also entered the equation and some, including the elderly and those with dependent children, turned to the Social Security Act's programs for help.

Negotiating the Application Process

Applying for relief was not easy for many people in the Great Depression. While some historians argue that the stigma against "the dole" declined during the New Deal years, many people still were extremely reluctant to seek aid.²⁷ Applicants, like Richard Little, generally went to the county welfare relief commission office, or one of its branch offices, to apply for aid. An intake worker took the basic information, and then assigned the case to a case worker, who then conducted the interview in the applicant's home. The process of applying for relief was intrusive and required providing information about a range of issues related to an individual's or family's circumstances, both personal and financial. Such information included property ownership, bank account listings, debts, and employment history, and case workers also interviewed family members inside and outside of the household to determine their ability to help. Proof of residency and citizenship information also was required, and case workers computed a monthly budget to determine the amount of relief needed, which was then offset by any income sources the family had. Budget items included shelter, clothing, food, and utilities. Medical care,

²⁷Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Random House, 1993 rev. ed.) 176-179; Martin Edward Sullivan, "'On the Dole': The Relief Issue in Detroit, 1929-1939" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1974) 152-153.



such as medicine, medical supplies or a doctor's visit, could be included, but institutional medical care was a local obligation.²⁸ Thus applicants sometimes dealt with both the WRC offices and local poor relief officials to gain the benefits they needed.

The contents of the case records are a treasure trove of information about recipients, social workers and the administration of relief in this period. Case records varied from a single application and a case history of just a few pages to several applications, a lengthy case history spanning years and voluminous correspondence from the recipient and agency. The amount of detail in emergency relief and categorical aid case files depended on the length of time on relief, the level of participation of the recipient (did they write extensive correspondence or request a hearing) and also the level of complication in the case (did it involve other agencies or family members outside the household).

Case files generally contained at least one application form detailing the basic information about the applicant and his or her family, including names, ages, and employment status. The application process also included a disclosure of assets, and applicants signed a release form permitting case workers to contact area banks. If any

²⁸Louise V. Armstrong, *We Too Are the People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company) 62-63; Doris Carothers, *Chronology of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration*, Research Monograph VI (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937) 7-9; William Haber and Paul Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1935) 70-71; *Michigan Emergency Relief Administration Budget Manual* (Lansing, 1937). The manual outlines the formulas used to determine food allotments for families of different sizes, and includes additional allowances for pregnant and nursing women and also for lunches for household members working outside the home. The manual was compiled by SERA home economists and professionals at the Merrill Palmer School in Detroit.

household members were working, wage checks were done to determine specifically how much the person earned. Case workers verified birth and citizenship records, as well as age, particularly under the ADC and OAA programs later in the decade.²⁹ The initial contact resulted in a one- to two-page accounting of the family's situation, centered around the applicant, usually the head of household. Case workers recorded the home condition, family background and education, statements about household members and relatives, employment history, health and whether the family attended church. Some workers also included a client's statement, or encouraged applicants to help determine what they thought was the best plan for themselves, particularly in the ADC and OAA cases later in the decades. Emergency relief case workers recorded the attitude toward relief and ended their histories with a worker's summary and suggestions, as well as a report on collateral information: what did the applicant's references say about their need for relief? As noted, township supervisors were often consulted. It was the case worker's job to present a composite picture of the family, and then to determine the best course of action, ideally with the recipients' input, to resolve their difficulties, economic and otherwise.

Once the initial case history was recorded, and if the family was accepted for relief (or ADC or OAA later in the decade), case workers conducted periodic visits to update the information and review the applicant's need for relief. Case workers instructed recipients to notify them of any change in their situation, particularly if they

²⁹Age and citizenship were defining factors in the old age pension program, which began in 1933 under Michigan's first old age pension law. Non-citizens could not receive relief, and one had to be 70 years of age.

secured employment or another source of income, but also conducted their own investigations to ensure that those receiving aid continued to need it. After each follow-up visit, case workers recorded brief entries in the histories, recounting what they saw and if any change in relief was needed. They also recorded referrals made to other agencies or increases or decreases in benefits. Often, they made a simple notation of “no change.”

Case records, as discussed in Chapter Four, were the key feature that distinguished the poor relief records from the “professional” emergency relief files. Poor relief records often simply included a name, date and aid granted. Some poor superintendents used a basic form to collect financial and family information, but many did not. The absence of information makes reconstructing poor relief from the recipient’s viewpoint next to impossible in the detail allowed through case files. The goal of case work was to collect and analyze the family’s information beyond what the immediate material needs of the recipient were, such as a grocery order or fuel, to attempt to address the larger “problems” that prompted the family or individual to seek relief in the first place. Social workers were to use this information to help families get back on their own two feet, using the available resources in the community.³⁰ The result was a more detailed, comprehensive account in many cases of the family’s circumstances, an account of great value to historians.

³⁰Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 126-127; Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 62-63.



The exchange of information, in the initial home visit and all subsequent follow-up visits, rendered case work a negotiation from the beginning. Recipients told case workers only the information that they wanted to share, and framed their narratives in ways they thought might best result in aid. Case workers also filtered the information through their own perspective, and their case histories - supposedly containing objective facts important in the diagnosis of the family's problem or need - included many subjective assessments. Many social workers commented on the lack of education or desire to work on the part of clients, or on the shortcomings of members of their families, even after one brief visit. Racial, ethnic and class biases were also evident. Social workers often found it impossible to remove their own judgements from their work.³¹

Despite their limitations, social worker case files reveal not only the bare facts of the case record, but also the implementation and practices of social welfare policy as well as the recipient's narrative. Case histories certainly are recorded by the case worker who has his or her own "filters" in what is reported, thus affecting what he or she ultimately writes, but they also contain some of the recipients' viewpoint. Social workers occasionally recorded quotations from the recipient, or summarized feelings or actions which can lend insight into their experiences.³² Some applicants wrote letters to the agency or to higher officials expressing their views on the emergency relief program, some positive and others negative. They appealed to case workers, supervisors, elected

³¹Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 137-139.

³²Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, 13-18. Gordon provides a very insightful discussion of the pros and cons of case files, and what they reveal about both the social worker and the recipient.



representatives, governors, and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt for intervention in their case. The letters, usually referred back to the local WRC, were often deposited in the case file, and the letters enable the historian to read their words firsthand, free of the case worker filter. In some cases, the exchange of correspondence is included in the case record, providing both viewpoints or the interactions of the case worker and recipient, and sometimes the agency supervisor or field investigator. Regina Kunzel argues in her study of unwed mothers in maternity homes that agency records, with the narratives by the young women, were “the linguistic means by which the women made sense of their experience.”³³ Through these narratives the young women, stigmatized by those who helped them, sought to construct their own meaning of their experiences, which is also true for relief recipients in the 1930s. Recipients, as this chapter will show, engaged actively in the granting of relief in varied ways, and did not always accept the “diagnosis” of the social worker assigned to their case. Instead, they offered their own narrative of their experiences, often in contrast to the one rendered “objectively” by the case worker, and put forth their own justification of their need for relief.

Categories and Classifications

In her analysis of female criminals in France, Ann-Louise Shapiro argues that policy makers and criminal experts feared the spread of crime, or the contagion of female

³³Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 103.



criminal behavior through popular literature and reporting.³⁴ A similar argument can be made for the New Deal relief programs, and the accompanying fear of the “contagion” of dependence, through a variety of mediums. Many people who participated in the decade’s welfare debates - both within social work and outside of it - feared the spread of laziness and a reluctance to work, or the creation of a permanent class of dependents. Dependence was not new in the 1930s, but its meaning had changed in the previous decades. By the Depression years, dependence increasingly was linked to character, or a lack of it, rather than simply to someone who was outside the paid labor force. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon argue that by the turn of the century, dependency came to mean welfare dependency, and was no longer just an economic condition but a moral and psychological problem; in short, dependence stemmed from individual character flaws, rather than structural hierarchies - often linked to gender and race - in the labor market or larger society. By the Depression, such views only fed fears that relief programs would create a permanent dependent class.³⁵

Such fears about dependence manifested themselves in the Social Security Act, which, as noted in Chapter Three, created a two-track welfare system rooted in the ideology of the family wage and the male head of household as the chief breadwinner. At the time of its inception, the SSA, and the ADC and OAA programs, sought to provide

³⁴Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siecle Paris* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 29-32. Shapiro examines women and crime, and what fears about female crime revealed about the larger culture. Her cogent arguments are also relevant for social work.

³⁵Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Signs* v. 19 (Winter 1994) 320-322.



aid for “good” dependents: mothers (who were “dependent” in their households) who had lost the spousal support and thus were eligible for state help, or the elderly poor with no means of support. As Fraser and Gordon argue, ADC recipients were “good” dependents but not entitled to full support, as social insurance recipients were, and thus had to undergo means testing and state supervision to ensure need, a process for “searching out the deserving few among the many chiselers.”³⁶ The relief process, before, during and after the Great Depression, had to be complicated, stigmatized and intrusive to discourage relief applicants - in order to prevent the contagion of dependence - no matter what the larger economic and employment situation. Relief was not an entitlement, but remained charity and welfare, even for the “good” dependents like needy mothers.³⁷

Social workers were key agents in the containment of dependence; they were to help restore recipients to self-support through their intervention and case work analysis, but a major criticism of the New Deal programs was that they destroyed individual initiative and independence. Although social workers were to be objective and avoid judgements related to their clients, such was not always the case. The debate about the ability to be objective in any circumstances is contested among professionals of all types, including historians, but the case files analyzed here show clearly that often case workers

³⁶Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency,” 321. The authors argue that “Aid to Dependent Children occupied the strategic semantic space where the good, household sense of the dependency and the bad, relief sense of dependency intersected.” (323)

³⁷The association between “good” dependents and ADC waned, of course, as the century progressed, as ADC mothers - especially the single, black mother - became the symbol of all that was wrong with the American welfare system. Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency,” 323-327.



were unable to ignore their prejudices and perceptions when interviewing their applicants. Historians using varied types of case records, from maternity home case files to court records, have argued that the rise of professionals, in this case social workers, resulted in a greater tendency to categorize.³⁸ A part of the case worker's job was to "diagnose" the problem facing the applicant or family, whether it be unemployment, ill health, or some other reason, and then to help them formulate a plan to address the problem. In essence, the goal of social work was to "fix" the recipient's problem or problems, to make them conform to society's expectations, which varied depending on who the applicant was (an employable male head of household, a son or daughter, an unemployable elderly OAA recipient, or a mother alone with dependent children). Categorizing only heightened the likelihood that social workers would make judgements about recipients' character and behavior, in the context of their often white, middle-class world.

Case workers' presentation of the applicant and his or her family, as described in the case record, was funneled through several channels that affected what the final picture was: who asked the questions and what the questions were, what the case worker deemed important enough to record, the nature of the relationships between the case worker and client and between case worker and supervisor. That process required social workers to make some judgments about the character and ability of the applicant. Case records, as Regina Kunzel argues, reveal much about the social worker, perhaps even more than the

³⁸Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 133-134; Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes*, 18.



applicant.³⁹ The relief case records reveal that social workers made definite links between certain behaviors and backgrounds and an individual or family's ability to leave the relief rolls. While some groups were exempt from this, particularly "deserving" dependent mothers and the elderly OAA recipient who would never work again and had no family to help, most others were not. Such assumptions centered on the family background, including class and education, as well as their race or ethnicity. Case records from Saginaw County, in particular, with its more diverse population, abound with references to "high type" African Americans, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Native Americans. But social workers also made such comments about class as well, and those appear more through the records of all three counties. Case workers entered the homes of racial and ethnic minorities with very different expectations than those of white homes, and often referred to those who were lacking as "typical" for the larger group, and when making recommendations for the family often included the opinion that the family would not be able to overcome the shortcomings of their racial or ethnic status. Working class families or individuals who did not conform more closely to white, middle-class expectations, and who might never be able to, also were criticized by the case worker. "High type" clients tended to follow middle-class housekeeping standards and child-rearing practices, and also usually held a high work ethic.⁴⁰ As mentioned in Chapter

³⁹Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 7-8; Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes*, 52. Shapiro makes a similar argument about the multiple voices in the production of a criminal court record.

⁴⁰Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (New York and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 8, 126, 149-150.



Three, social workers found these “high type” cases to be the exception rather than the rule.

Joanne Bates, the African American mother of six introduced in Chapter Three, was one such “exception.” In addition to her willingness to work to support her children, and free herself of the need for relief or ADC, she was also a good mother. Case workers commented on her concern for her children, who never caused trouble. A WPA housekeeping aide job freed her from the relief rolls, and in the closing entry, the social worker noted that Bates was “an intelligent mother with plenty of common sense. Unlike a number of mothers in the colored district, she attempts to exercise discipline and control of her children.”⁴¹ Donna Porter also earned the admiration of case workers for her mothering skills. She had six children - three by her first marriage - and was pregnant with another when she applied for ADC in November 1938. Case workers described her as “an unusual type of woman. She has a gracious, friendly manner, talks exceptionally well and is above average in intelligence.” The case worker also noted that the husband was the same, “a high type of negro.”⁴² Porter directed the church choir and was active in two Parent-Teacher Associations for her children. The case was closed in 1940 when her second husband secured a construction job, but was reopened that November when he was laid off. Porter found herself pregnant again, and was discouraged as she had hoped to find work too, but she was “a good mother in every respect,” and the work would wait,

⁴¹Case C7300168, reel 4533, Saginaw ADC Records, case history dated May 19, 1942.

⁴²Case C7300088, reel 4532, Saginaw ADC Records, case history from January 11, 1939.

according to the case worker.⁴³ She helped to support her children when possible, was active in their schools and activities, and put aside paid work when it was not feasible. Porter had the baby in October, and also was sterilized at the same time. Although the case worker made no comment on this, other than to note the surgery, one wonders if limiting her child bearing through such a permanent means was also a part of being a “good mother,” especially as an African American.⁴⁴ Another case worker called Porter “a leader and a type of person who could do a lot for her race.”⁴⁵

Housekeeping skills also factored into the assessment of a client, particularly among applicants that were racial or ethnic minorities. Denise Parish, an African American mother of three, had migrated from the south with her husband. He deserted the family and she received poor relief and a mothers’ pension before the depression. She later received emergency relief, and was transferred to the ADC program in December 1936. Case workers noted that she was always honest with the office and considered worthy. Her house was “spotlessly clean,” and she wanted work rather than aid. Parish accepted a job unloading freight cars, although the case worker doubted the ability of the 45-year-old woman to last long at such heavy labor. She had to quit and return to ADC, but the case worker noted that the family was doing well: “These are high type negroes

⁴³Case C7300088, case history from May 20, 1941.

⁴⁴Case C7300088, case history December 5, 1941.

⁴⁵Case C7300088, case history November 27, 1942. Porter eventually led the drive for the hiring of black women in Saginaw’s defense factories, and was one of three women hired in 1943 as welders - the first women to hold such a job.

and very attractive.”⁴⁶ Her work ethic (including a willingness to take any kind of job) and housekeeping standards helped earn her the praise of case workers.

Native Americans also did not fare well in the eyes of case workers. Although only a small fraction of the total case load, Native Americans often were categorized as “typical Indians,” unwilling to work, lazy and untidy. One case worker, who also adopted racist stereotypes when working with his other minority clients, described one Native American man who applied for aid as a “typical Indian, works when he feels like it, which is almost never.” The man was sixty nine years old when he applied for aid, and although his health was fair, he likely was not able to work as he had twenty years earlier.⁴⁷ In another case, a young Native American woman, seeking a divorce from her white husband, lived with her father, a chief in the local tribe. The case worker noted that the father had “a reputation of being a fairly good Indian, but rather shiftless.”⁴⁸ Another case worker noted in one visit to a Native American woman, a thirty-one year old widow with four children, that the house was clean but that there were mice, and the woman did not notice them. He also commented that they were “typical Indians, both in appearance and attitude, being quite suspicious of the Visitor.”⁴⁹ One of the recipient’s earlier case

⁴⁶Case C7300087, reel 4532, case history June 7, 1940, September 21, 1942, and June 19, 1945.

⁴⁷Case A7301293, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3004, case history from April 17, 1937. The man had separated from his wife in 1927 and had lost touch with his five children.

⁴⁸Case A7300517, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4540, case history from August 6, 1940.

⁴⁹Case C7300962, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3000, case history June 16, 1941.

workers was one whose case histories regularly included racist statements. It is little wonder that the families distrusted the visitors assigned to their case.

The inability to care properly for one's children, to manage one's finances or to keep one's house clean according to middle-class standards was connected to racial and ethnic minorities, and such expectations extended beyond race to ethnicity and citizenship. Eva Perelli was an Italian immigrant who came to Marquette in 1912. She and her husband, a miner for the Oliver Mining Company, sought relief when he was injured on the job. They received some help through the Italian Benefit Association and the mining company also provided them with fuel during the winter. Neither was a citizen, although both had started the naturalization process. Both were dismayed at needing to apply for emergency relief, but had no alternatives. Case workers found the husband pleasant but noted in the first entry that the wife was "quite untidy." The husband died less than two weeks after they applied for aid, following an unsuccessful surgery. Perelli was left with nine children, ranging in age from one year to eighteen, to care for.⁵⁰

For some foreign-born residents, including Perelli, language remained a barrier between them and their new home. Some spoke very little English, if any, and thus relied upon family members or neighbors to translate the case worker's questions and comments during an interview. Virtually no case workers had any bilingual ability in either Saginaw or Marquette counties. In this case, the township supervisor, or one of the older children,

⁵⁰Case C5200174, Marquette County ADC Records, Box 21, case history March 30, 1937 and April 26, 1937.

served as interpreter. Case workers criticized her inability to manage the family's budget and her lack of housekeeping skills: "It is evident that there is a great deal of waste in this home. Mrs. seems unable to adjust herself to her present circumstances."⁵¹ Accustomed to the resources a full-time mining wage provided, Perelli had difficulty adjusting to the much lower relief budget. Case workers also criticized the food the mother served her children, most likely because she prepared ethnic dishes, and eventually took her off a cash grant and gave her relief in kind - grocery and fuel orders - to ensure that the family received the items they needed.⁵² Case workers had little sympathy for the woman's inability to adjust to her changed class status, and constantly found fault with most of what she did. Perelli also proved difficult for case workers. Alienated by language and custom, as well as by the agency workers' harsh criticisms, Perelli often complained and resisted case workers' attempts to interfere in how she managed her household and family.

Case workers also found fault with ethnic neighborhoods, in this case in Saginaw. Rachel Standnyk, a seventy-seven year-old Russian native, received ADC for her grandson, who was twelve when she was transferred to the program in December 1936. Her husband resented the boy's presence in the home, and threatened that if he did not receive adequate help he would not keep the boy. But the grandson remained, and case workers noted that "the entire house [was] spotlessly clean." The grandmother was an

⁵¹Case C5200174, Marquette County ADC, case history from July 20, 1937.

⁵²Case C5200174, Marquette County ADC, case history from April 25, 1938, May 24, 1938.



able housekeeper and manager, but they were concerned about their neighborhood. They lived in “quite a respectable neighborhood,” but it was also predominantly Russian, noted one case worker: “The people here seem to have rather old fashioned viewpoints and undoubtedly, it is not the best atmosphere for children.”⁵³ Again, white, middle class ideals were missing in the eyes of the case worker, and despite the recipient’s abilities, the ethnic neighborhood in which she lived could work against her efforts to raise her grandson “properly.”

Regulating the American Family

Social welfare programs - during the New Deal and after - were designed to provide aid only when all other avenues of support were exhausted, including family contributions. This ideology of family responsibility mandated that all other avenues of support had to be exhausted before a person could receive public aid. One source of support was the ability of family members - parents, grandparents, spouses, and children - to contribute to if not fully support the family member in need. Although intended to limit state support of families who had other avenues for aid, the enforcement of these provisions at times was a source of conflict, both within families and between families and caseworkers. Those who followed the “family ideal” of support received the compliments of caseworkers. In contrast, families who did not support one another were often seen as “problem cases,” usually because individuals within the family failed to

⁵³Case C7300022, reel 4531, Saginaw ADC Records, case history December 21, 1936, and September 15, 1939.



accept their role, either as a source of financial support or a household manager. In some cases, relatives would leave the household or community rather than conform to social welfare regulations, oftentimes allowing their family members to regain their relief benefits. In other cases, recipients of relief also used this provision to secure the aid of social workers in enforcing their own authority in their families.⁵⁴

The New Deal programs did result in important changes in social welfare, particularly the role of state and federal governments in funding relief. A key argument of this dissertation, however, is that significant continuities also remained in relief administration despite the federal and state governments' increased participation. The responsible relative clause was a part of the social welfare system that dates to the older poor laws enforced in many states and local communities before 1930. This clause is also found in laws which enabled states, including Michigan, to participate in New Deal programs.⁵⁵ Michigan, like many states, was engaged in extensive debates about social welfare, and this debate culminated in 1939 legislation which reorganized Michigan's

⁵⁴Mary Odem describes the latter trend in her study of age of consent laws in California. Odem argues that parents used age of consent laws to control their daughters' behavior when traditional family controls failed. See *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

⁵⁵See Public Act 146 of 1925, Chapter 1, sections 1-21; Public Act 258 of 1937, Section 30-331; Public Act 280 of 1939, Section 76-77. The Welfare and Relief Study Commission also addressed it in their report, noting that too little emphasis was placed on enforcing the responsible relative clause. Some counties in their study did not do enough, although Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren all enforced it. See "Local Public Welfare," n.d., WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 10, p. 96; Isabel Campbell Bruce and Edith Eickhoff. *The Michigan Poor Law: Its Development and Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936) 3, 10, 26, and 31.



welfare programs. The law was a compromise between new ideas about social welfare, and more traditional practices. One “traditional practice” which continued was the responsibility of relatives to support their extended family. Policy makers and caseworkers viewed the family as a unit in its application for relief, and expected specific family members to fulfill certain roles - including financial support. This ideology of family responsibility was an extension of the idea of the family wage and the male breadwinner; if the usual breadwinner (husband or father) was not able to support the family, then the burden fell on other family members. The first target, if possible, was the husband or father, but he was not the last.

Social welfare agencies did not have the legal authority to enforce support, but could reduce, eliminate or deny relief aid if applicants or recipients - or members of their families - did not conform to the agency’s rules. Such actions often harmed the family members most in need of aid, such as dependent mothers or elderly OAA recipients, who often had the least power or authority in their family to encourage other family members to pay their share as defined by the social welfare agency. The court system, both criminal and probate, was the avenue recipients had to use to enforce support from family members, a path many were reluctant to take. Thus the two public bodies - relief agencies and the courts - were key players in regulating family relations in public welfare in the 1930s. Rather than targeting a specific family type as a problem to be solved, they focused on the dynamics within the family as something to be “fixed” or rehabilitated. But the efforts to enforce support often yielded unintended results, including exacerbating family conflicts, if not creating them, and prompting the departure of family members



from the household. The responsible relative clause resulted in negotiations, and sometimes heated conflicts, between caseworkers, recipients and their families.

Child support or alimony, usually from the fathers, was the major source of support checked for ADC recipients. Fathers again were the key breadwinners, and that responsibility did not end if they were no longer living with their children. Before case workers would even begin to investigate ADC applications, mothers who received no alimony or child support at the time of application had to file a complaint of non-support with their local prosecuting attorney. Enforcement by the prosecutor varied from county to county and case to case, but recipients had to initiate the process of securing alimony to receive ADC. If the court did not order alimony, or if an estranged or ex-husband did not pay it, the woman could receive ADC, but she had to file the complaint. Sarah Forbes hoped to avoid the courts to get her husband to support her, but when it failed, she filed a complaint so she could receive ADC. When her husband stopped paying alimony, case workers increased her grant to make up the difference.⁵⁶ This case was quite typical of ADC cases of non-support.

In general relief cases during the early New Deal years, enforcement also occurred with married couples. In those cases, fathers or husbands were not, in the eyes of case workers, fulfilling their responsibility to support their families. Husbands not supporting their families were problems to be fixed. Some applicants and recipients rejected the case worker's analysis of their need, and instead asserted their own version of events in letters

⁵⁶Case C7300142, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4533. This case was quite typical of ADC cases of non-support.

to case workers, supervisors and state officials - including the governor. In their eyes, the agency, and not the applicant or spouse, was the problem.

The case of Michael Rhodes, the only African-American applicant in Van Buren County, was one such example. While case workers saw him as a problem, Rhodes and his family found fault with the agency, and wrote numerous letters of complaint about the aid they received. The oldest surviving application for aid is dated December 13, 1934, although it is not Rhodes's first. At that time, he had nine children, eight of whom lived at home with Rhodes and his wife, Ethel. The children's ages ranged from the youngest at age four to the oldest son, Clifford, at nineteen. (Rhodes's oldest daughter was twenty-six and married.) Clifford was sent to a CCC camp, thus providing the family with some income. They also received some direct relief, including groceries, surplus commodities, and clothing. But Rhodes was not satisfied, and he and his daughter wrote to Governor William Comstock on more than one occasion. They complained that what they received was not enough to support the family, and accused the welfare office of being "criminally unfair to the citizens of Van Buren County".⁵⁷ Others, the Rhodes wrote, received more than their share while their own family suffered with too little. In their view, the family believed that they were entitled to more than the agency had approved, and were determined to see that they received their fair share.

This was a particularly difficult case for the welfare workers, in their eyes, and Rhodes's "record is well known in this office," according to Louise Wilkinson, the

⁵⁷Case 14014, letter to Governor William Comstock, dated May 3, 1934, VB ERA Records.

office's administrator. He had received the relief due to him, in the agency's viewpoint, and his problem, she wrote, was that he was not willing to work and wanted something for nothing. The family received some blankets and surplus commodities to supplement the son's CCC income, but his income was high enough to limit what else they could receive. Rhodes was not given coal orders, because able-bodied men were expected to cut their own wood, which he would not do. Rather than do it himself, Wilkinson continued, he would keep one of his sons (usually the eleven or twelve year old) home from school to do the work. "I have investigated him personally, as he has made such a fuss, and so have two of my case-workers...and we all reached the same decision."⁵⁸ In response to another complaint by Rhodes's daughter, Wilkinson ended her letter with the hope that it was coherent, "as we are indignant here over the case, as we are sure we have taken care of the case adequately."⁵⁹

But Rhodes was not going to give up. He asked for an investigation of the office, telling Governor Comstock that the welfare office was not paying heed to his complaints: "I have not been able to take care of my family. I am perfectly helpless without something to do you referred my letter to the Welfare and [it] landed in the waistbasket [sic] at

⁵⁸Case 14014, letter from Wilkinson to State Emergency Relief Administration Director William Haber, dated March 29, 1934, VB ERA Records. In his letter of March 20, 1934 to Comstock, Rhodes complained that his neighbor, who only had two in the family, received a fuel order for coal, but his family of ten received none. Wilkinson noted in her reply that his neighbor was a "widow with children, and of course we supplied her with coal." She noted that Rhodes, as all able-bodied men did, could cut his own wood.

⁵⁹Case 14014, letter to Haber from Wilkinson, dated April 17, 1934, VB ERA Records.

Hartford so please tell me what to do or send someone with authority.”⁶⁰ Rhodes argued that it was not that he was unwilling to work and support his family, but that he was unable to do so.

The social workers disagreed with Rhodes’s lack of ability to care for his family; from their perspective, he was making no effort to support his wife and children. When his family fell ill with scarlet fever, he immediately applied for aid, despite the fact that his son had just received his CCC wages of \$25. He claimed to have been injured, but was not, according to case workers. In short, to the agency workers, and to the state officials called in to assist, Rhodes simply refused to work for his family. The workers’ indignation and sarcasm were creeping into their letters to the state office:

As far as we know, and our knowledge of this case is rather extensive (as yours must be by this time), Mr. Rhodes...never has been injured so he was unable to work; the hardest work he ever did was bringing fourteen children into the world...Almost everyone who has been a case-worker for us has tried to settle his case, but he just won’t stay settled.⁶¹

Rhodes’s case documentation ends in July 1934. Either he gave up his fight to receive his perceived share of welfare aid, or the documentation of the remainder of his case does not survive. The nature of his illness was never specified, and his file contained no documentation from medical personnel regarding his inability to work. Such documentation was common in many cases which involved unemployable or disabled individuals. Because the agency had no “proof” of his inability to work, he was perceived

⁶⁰Case 14014, letter to Comstock from Rhodes, dated May 3, 1934, VB ERA Records.

⁶¹Case 14014, letter to Opal Matson, SERA, from Wilkinson, dated July 13, 1934,

to be able-bodied and thus expected to play a significant role in the family's support, including cutting his own wood and finding employment. His extensive correspondence with the agency and other state officials allows us to see his own narrative of his family's relief experience, rather than simply the case worker.

A reluctance to take work to support the family is a shared issue for many of the "problem" cases. Alfred Cross, who lived in Decatur in southern Van Buren County, lost his WPA job because he did not appear for work for five days, and subsequently sought relief from the WRC. He told the worker he could not make it though the snow storm to work during that time, and thus lost his position. The caseworker suggested areas where he might find work, noting in her case file that the recipient was "somewhat allergic to work and caseworker does not feel he made a great deal of effort to get through the storm." He was employable, she continued, and believed that "there is no reason why he cannot adequately care for his own family."⁶²

This was also the case for Lee Klein, whose family lived in South Haven. A high school graduate, Klein was an accountant by trade, but had not worked in his field for several years. He was working in Chicago, but had not sent any money home. This prompted his wife, Marilyn, to apply for relief in March 1935 for herself and her two children, ages nine and eight. She was working part time at a local cafe for her meals, but was earning no other income.⁶³ The problem identified by the caseworker was not Marilyn, who was willing to work more, but rather her husband. Although employed, he

⁶²Case 10129, case history, p. 2-3, VB ERA Records.

⁶³Case 13252, VB ERA Records.

was not sending any money to his family. And, although “capable and smart,” he was “unable to hold a job for any length of time.” The township supervisor, consulted on the case by the social worker, said that the family did need relief, but that the husband should be “made to work.” He added that “there is something peculiar about a man who is competent yet cannot hold a job once he gets one.” This was a husband not fulfilling his duties to his wife and children, as diagnosed by both the case worker and the local supervisor.⁶⁴

Marital conflict often compounded such cases. Edward Martin, a native of Lacota in northern Van Buren County, often refused to provide his wife, Eva, with money from his pay, and would remain away from home for long periods of time. Eva had supported the family by teaching, and hoped to secure another job soon. When she applied for relief in January 1936, her husband had moved in with his parents in South Haven, where there were more opportunities to work. Her parents had assisted them all they could, and would apparently need relief for themselves if they continued much longer. The caseworker recommended direct relief for the family, including groceries, fuel, and clothing until the husband or wife secured work.⁶⁵

But the enforcement of support went far beyond spousal support, and also extended to other family members. Children also were expected to provide support for

⁶⁴Case 13252, VB ERA Records.

⁶⁵Case 11101, VB ERA Records, Box 2, Folder 6. Eva Martin applied for relief on January 15, 1936, and the family continued to receive aid through the spring. Eva told the worker in April that the couple was having marital problems, and that her husband was not providing her with any money. Eventually he returned and secured a WPA job.

their parents. Regina Schultz, a 41-year old mother of four, began receiving a mothers' pension from Saginaw County in 1931, after her husband died of a heart attack. Schultz's youngest child was two, and she also cared for her elderly mother. She supplemented her mothers' pension with domestic work and sewing, and fortunately had a place to stay in her mother's home. Schultz's case was transferred to ADC in 1936 when the Social Security Board approved Michigan's temporary administration plan.⁶⁶

Case workers found Schultz to be an excellent housekeeper and mother; her children were her major concern. As her children grew older, they began to supplement her ADC grant with part-time jobs. Her siblings also assisted with the care of her mother. Although she continued to receive aid until 1947, the grant was reduced in consideration of her children's earnings from part-time jobs. And despite her lengthy partial dependence on public aid, case workers saw this case as a model for social welfare programs. Her children never balked at helping support their mother, and she eventually lived with one of her married children. The case worker who closed the case in July of 1947 wrote, "The situation in this home is one that is really beautiful. The children are obviously fond of their mother and she of them. The grandmother is a welcome and loved member of the household." The elderly family members were not a burden to be foisted onto public assistance; instead they were to be cared for by the younger generation.⁶⁷ Schultz's case clearly followed the "family ideal" of support, and thus received the compliments of case workers. Social workers viewed her case as a reason for

⁶⁶Case C7300182, Saginaw County ADC, reel 4534.

⁶⁷Case C7300182, quote from case history from July 18, 1947.

the ADC program, despite her lengthy participation in the ADC program. Her children eventually supported her, and supplemented the family income at a young age. She raised them to be independent but also accept their familial responsibility, and thus reduced her long-term dependence on the state.

Families who worked together and accepted responsibility for other members were not only white, middle class widows, as Schultz was. Women in this category often were seen as the most “deserving” of America’s poor, but women in other categories could also be a part of this “model” group. This is not to say that marital status, race, and class were irrelevant, but positive family relations could, in some sense, overcome other factors that might contribute to a negative view of a case or family. Positive family relations - which followed the white, middle-class model - could result in what was described earlier as a “high type” applicant. Divorce, desertion or illegitimacy did not carry the stigma in 1930s Michigan social work that is found in earlier periods.⁶⁸

Minorities and non-citizens did receive aid from the state social welfare programs in the depression, although not in proportion to their rates of unemployment. And case workers entered homes of Mexicans, African-Americans and the foreign-born with different expectations than in those of white homes. In a sense, minorities and lower-class whites had to “prove” their worth in ways that other families did not. But some did, and

⁶⁸Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, 36-41. Mink argues that mothers’ pensions were linked to Americanization; minority and lower-class women who received aid in the 1930s, despite their race, marital status, etc, followed white, middle-class notions of “family.”

exhibiting family relations of harmony or unity, which conformed to white, middle-class notions of family, was one such way.

Marcella Hernandez of Saginaw was a recipient who did “prove” herself to case workers. A Mexican citizen with one daughter, Hernandez suffered from tuberculosis, the same disease that killed her husband in 1930. She spent six years in the local sanitarium while her sister cared for her daughter, Beatrice. She was released in May 1938, although not fully cured, and applied for ADC. From the start, she impressed the case worker “as being exceptionally honest and trustworthy and was most anxious to cooperate.” She lived with her sister and brother, who had supported the family with a job at the Saginaw Foundry. He had been laid off, prompting her to seek ADC for her daughter.⁶⁹

The application was approved, and Hernandez received aid for the next six years. The daughter was an average student but received excellent citizenship marks, and a caseworker in 1942 referred to her as “a high type Mexican girl,” again overcoming the racist stereotypes held by case workers.⁷⁰ The mother returned to the hospital briefly in 1944, and again the sister cared for her child. When the woman was released, her daughter secured a part-time job to help her mother, who could also only work part time. When she finished high school in 1947, Beatrice planned to secure full-time work and support her mother, whose health still precluded more than a part-time job. In fact, the social worker saw this as a model case, one which served as “a good advertisement for

⁶⁹Saginaw County ADC, Case C7300010, case history from May 5, 1938.

⁷⁰Saginaw County ADC, Case C7300010, case history from January 16, 1942.

the ADC program.”⁷¹ Again, the lengthy partial reliance on public support was not a problem, and neither was the woman’s race or citizenship status. Rather, it was the family network and feeling of responsibility - illustrated through the sister and brother’s willingness to help their sister with child care and financial support, and later her daughter’s assumption of part of that responsibility - which made this a model case. The ADC program enabled the mother to care for her daughter, who grew up to be a responsible and self-sufficient adult. Beatrice’s willingness to support her ill parent precluded other long-term support for her mother at that time. Case workers and recipients worked together to make the program work, but a key factor in their successful relationship was the mutual respect and trust that existed between the case worker and the recipient.

Not all cases followed the responsible relative rule willingly or without protest. Some parents refused to hold their children responsible for their support, arguing that they had their own lives to prepare for. Others simply did not have the authority in their family to encourage or persuade their children to play a responsible role in the family. Case workers closed cases where relatives, often children, were able to support family members, according to agency rules, even if they did not provide the necessary support. For those recipients, their only recourse was to turn to the Probate Court system to enforce their children’s legal obligation to support them. Once the court intervened and ruled, case workers could then reinstate aid if the children did not comply. As with

⁷¹Saginaw County ADC, Case C7300010, case history from May 8, 1947.

alimony and the criminal courts, recipients had to initiate a complaint through the court system to render themselves eligible for aid.

Many families were extremely reluctant to take such steps against their children, and only a very small fraction of the relief cases filed petitions for support. One case in Saginaw County involved an African-American widow with four children. Joan Yates, a 71-year-old native of Mississippi, was initially denied OAA in late 1936 because she had two employed men (a son and son-in-law) living with her, and she also lacked the proof of age and residency required for a grant. She applied again in 1937 and was approved. Case workers again investigated her children's ability to help in 1939. A daughter, Lillie, and her husband and four children lived with her but only had resources for themselves. Another son, Warren, also lived there, but told Dora Heilman he could not help his mother. He had debts to pay and was separated from his own wife. Heilman wrote that he would "never be responsible for his mother's support."⁷² Subsequent investigations took place, and two years later another case worker found Warren earning \$190 per month; his contribution, using the agency's formula, covered the budget deficit. The case worker, after consulting with supervisor Heilman, closed the case and referred Yates to the probate court. Yates came to the office and told the case worker she could not take her son, whom she called "a whiskey head," to court, and it was not fair for "this agency to expect me to rely on him for support." He again refused to help her, but her case remained closed. With no other options and no other children to help, Yates reluctantly

⁷²Case A7301193, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3003, case history, April 12, 1939; April 18, 1939.

filed a petition for support with the probate court. The court found that because of the shutdown of local factories employing the woman's children, support could not be ordered.⁷³ The woman reapplied, but died one month later before her case had been investigated. Because she had not been an approved OAA recipient, no burial allowance was permitted.⁷⁴

Yates reluctantly did what case workers required her to do: file a petition for support, although she believed Warren would never support her, even with a court order. Heilman even observed this years before, but regulations demanded such steps. The end result was that she reapplied for OAA, but it was too late. She had gone without support for four months while the case worked through the courts, and died before she could be reinstated. Although likely not the intention of policy makers or the case workers, she endured great grief in her final months for no reason. Enforcing family support did no good in this case, and only caused Yates more pain.

In cases where support was ordered but not paid, case workers increased grants, within budget limits, to make up the difference. Dale Foyer's two sons were to pay him a monthly amount, but ceased to do so two years after they began. Another hearing resulted in another order to pay support, but they failed to comply. Case workers then

⁷³Case A7301193, case history from August 11, 1941; August 24, 1941; November 24, 1941; December 15, 1941.

⁷⁴Case A7301193, case history from January 19, 1942 and February 20, 1942.



increased his grant to compensate for the lost money. Foyer had done his part, and thus the agency was able to increase his grant.⁷⁵

Some recipients encouraged social workers to enforce the clause, and believed that their relatives should contribute to their support. Some recipients asked social workers to send letters to relatives not living in the household, or to visit those living in the community. Their hope was that social workers representing a governmental agency might influence relatives in ways that family members could not.⁷⁶ Soliciting the aid of the caseworker to enforce support, however, did not necessarily imply positive feelings toward the agency. Amanda Lorensen, introduced in Chapter Three, was a constant critic of Saginaw County's relief administration, but that did not prevent her from seeking the help of the social workers to enforce the support law. She turned to them to collect the alimony payments her ex-husband owed, and also sought their aid in garnering support from her single son, Olsen. He was 24 and employed at Saginaw Auto Sales, earning \$24 per week in May 1941. But he was spending his money on his girlfriend, who was an ADC recipient. Lorensen questioned the woman's right to aid, as she believed she was still married. Lorensen thought that her son's money should be going to her, his mother. At her request, the social worker visited her son, who refused to help his mother, or his father. He had no use for either parent, and only agreed to provide support for his sister,

⁷⁵Case A7303663, reel 3022.

⁷⁶Historians analyzing case file records have found that the recipients of aid or regulation often employed those services in ways never intended by policy makers. See Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 49-52; Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, 164-165, 234-235, 293-295. See also Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl" Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).



Evelyn. But he preferred to help her directly, rather than through his mother. The social worker was able to negotiate with Olsen some support for the family, but not in the way that Lorenson had hoped.⁷⁷

Although not the intention of the responsible relative law, its enforcement resulted in many conflicts within the same household, often involving adult children living with their parents and younger siblings. The conflicts usually centered on the amount of a child's wages that had to be budgeted as family income. When determining a recipient's eligibility for aid, social workers computed a family budget based on the needs of all the household members. They then offset that amount with any other support the recipient had, such as income from a part-time job, boarders, alimony, or family earnings. For children and parents living in the same household as the parents, case workers considered 60 percent of the person's income from private employment as family resources, after deducting for employment and personal expenses. If a family member was employed on a public works job (such as WPA, CCC, or NYA), caseworkers considered 100 percent of the income as family resources; as a public works project, the assignment was granted to provide for the support of the entire family.

Relatives reacted in different ways to the investigating and budgeting procedures used by social workers. Some denied that they had the ability to provide, or simply refused to allow the social welfare agency to investigate their finances. Such an investigation included checking the wages or salary earned by the relative, which alerted

⁷⁷Case C7300045, Saginaw County ADC Records, reel 4531, case history from May 20, 1941; June 23, 1941.

employers to the fact that family members were in need of public support. Some relatives resented this intrusion, and preferred to have their relative's case closed or they left the household rather than undergo such an investigation.

Case 218 in Saginaw County was one such case. Marian Rose, a widow since 1929, had received a mothers' pension and emergency relief before qualifying for the ADC program in December of 1936. Her son, Frank, was in the CCC and later was employed on a National Youth Administration job while still in high school. He later worked on WPA before joining the army in 1941. At that point, a married daughter and her husband moved into the woman's home. As members of the household, their income fell under the responsible relative rule. The son-in-law resented the intrusion, and told the caseworker "not to monkey around with his wages." They planned to move, and would not be there long.⁷⁸

The case worker gave them two weeks to move; if still in the household, their income would be included in the budget and the grant adjusted. In the meantime, the caseworker sent a wage check form to the son-in-law's employer. When she returned to the home just under three weeks later, the couple was still present. Their contribution was set at \$62 per month, which covered the family budget. She did not formally close the case, although she told the recipient and her family that she would because of their ability to help support the woman. She hoped the threat to cancel the grant would prompt them to leave the home, and held the ADC check at the office.

⁷⁸Saginaw County ADC Case C7300218, reel 4534, quote from case history June 30, 1941.



The daughter questioned the agency's practice in a letter to the state department of welfare, dated September 16, 1941 - two months after the checks were held. She argued that she and her husband should not be held financially responsible for her mother. Her husband's job was for their needs. "I think it is your place to wright [sic] and tell them to send them checks immediately to my mother for when my husband married me he didn't marry the whole fambley [sic]."⁷⁹ She rejected the agency's belief in family responsibility, arguing that her husband was not responsible for her family; he had his own family to care for. They did acquiesce to the rule in the end, and moved out two weeks after she sent her letter, but enforcement of family responsibility created unpleasant tensions between generations over who was entitled to support first.

When social workers enforced the responsible relative provisions, the recipient often paid the price, either through unpleasant family unrest or financial hardship. In this case, the mother was caught in the middle. According to the caseworker, she wanted the couple out, but they would not leave. Because of their presence, she was not receiving her grant and could not depend on her son-in-law to contribute. She wrote a letter to the state office in August asking for her check. A widow with one son already in the army, she pleaded with state officials to send a check, or "I will be out on the road bcuse [sic] I don't got no muney [sic] coming in to live on."⁸⁰ In the efforts to enforce the responsibility of relatives to help family members, social workers neglected the immediate needs of this woman. In this case, however, the case worker did not formally

⁷⁹Case C7300218, letter in file, dated September 16, 1941.

⁸⁰Case C7300218, quote from case history, August 4, 1941.



close the case, but merely held the checks from the family. Although Rose did not receive aid for that period, a definite hardship, the case worker did save her the further delay of reapplying.

Rose did not have the control in her household to force her daughter and son-in-law to help out, although she wanted them to leave. But she also needed ADC for her other children, and sought the assistance of the state office in restoring her grant.

Although the case does not reveal overt family conflict, such conflict is present in the subtext of the history, and likely the agency's persistence exacerbated the problems. But in other cases, the lack of control was more overtly demonstrated, and in those instances, social workers geared the family's aid toward enforcing familial control. Because Rose was not able to gain support from her daughter's family, the agency attempted to do so, acting as the parental authority.

Carol Donovan, a widow in Van Buren County, lived with her two children, George, age 19, and Ida Mae, age 17, over an old store in Bangor. It was "a poor place to live," and had no indoor toilet or running water, but it was clean and neat. She applied for relief on May 1, 1935, when her failing health precluded her working as a domestic. She had also received a mothers' pension, which her domestic work supplemented, but lost it when the county stopped paying them. George was employed at a CCC camp, but was not providing any money for his mother, contrary to the program's goal of support for families. One of the references Donovan provided stated that "the son took most of what his mother received, and she gave him too much whether it was food or money." Not only was the son lax in his support of his mother, but she appeared to have little sway

over his actions.⁸¹ The case worker suggested providing groceries until the son sent money home. She believed the “boy should be kept working,” and away from home, “so he would have to get along by himself.” She expected George to help support his mother, and designed the family’s relief around that expectation.⁸²

Donna Barker, also a Van Buren County resident, faced a similar situation. A divorced mother of two, Barker watched her grandchildren while her daughter worked, earning \$3 per week. She also had worked during the fruit season, but had been unable to secure work when the season ended. They could not live on the wages she earned from her daughter, and her son Frank, age 22, was not employed. Barker was not the problem; she “tried to impress worker with how badly she felt about applying for relief, and how she has always tried to keep off relief.”⁸³

The case worker identified unemployment as the problem, as well as the lack of control that Barker had over her son, Frank. According to the township supervisor, “that boy is too lazy to do a thing.” He had had some farm work, but had made little effort to secure other employment. As with the Donovan case, the social worker recommended work relief for the son, and also provided fuel and groceries until he was paid. Barker had little control over her son, but the agency could attempt to control him by providing him with a public job to support his mother, thus removing her from the direct relief rolls. The responsible relative clause enabled the agency to do so.

⁸¹Case 5008, VB ERA Records.

⁸²VB ERA Case 5008.

⁸³VB ERA, Case 5228.

The presence of employable adult children in a household receiving categorical aid under the Social Security Act (such as ADC), as in Sandy Eckett's case in St. Charles Township in Saginaw County, endangered her ADC grant. A widow with six children, Eckett's three eldest children - all over the age of 17 - were reluctant to take employment to help support the family. Walter had two WPA assignments, which helped cover the family's budget, but the other two sons, and later an older daughter, were less cooperative. Another son refused a CCC assignment in October 1940, and none made any effort to register at the local employment office. Case worker Harry Cartwright pressured them to search for employment, and when they failed to make the effort, he canceled the ADC grant. Cartwright believed the sons "want to sit around on live on [their] mother's ADC grant." Using the responsible relative clause, the caseworker attempted to prevent the sons from living off money intended for minor children..⁸⁴ The family wrote a letter to the bureau supervisor, arguing that they had no winter clothes, only one person was working (Walter on WPA), and they could not get along. They argued that there was no work. Bureau Supervisor Dora Heilman replied that they had the WPA income, and there was no evidence that any of the children had seriously sought employment: "Your problem is really that they need work and we believe they can find it if they try."⁸⁵ Thus the case remained closed; the bureau's view was that three

⁸⁴Saginaw County ADC Case C7300478, case history dated October 14, 1940.

⁸⁵Letter to family from Heilman, dated October 18, 1940. Saginaw ADC Case C7300478.



employable sons and one employable daughter could support the family of seven, particularly with a base income from WPA.

The family reapplied for ADC in February and March of 1941 and August of 1945, but never received a grant. At each application, caseworkers found little evidence of effort made to secure work, and refused to consider an application until all adult children updated their registration files at the employment service. Caseworkers refused to provide ADC for a family that had employable members when they believed that job opportunities did exist. The ADC grant was for the younger children in the family, and they saw this case as a situation of the older children seeking to live off the money intended for their younger siblings. In fact, one caseworker noted in her comments in February 1941 that the refusal of the elder children to seek employment was actually “contributing to what could be considered an unsuitable home.”⁸⁶

The experience of Eva Perelli, discussed earlier in this chapter, reveals similar trends. Her eighteen-year-old son, Frank, would not take on his share of the responsibility for the family’s support. The case workers encouraged him to get a job and even spoke to supervisors at the Oliver Mining Company, where his father had worked, about possible employment in November 1937. The case worker also certified him for WPA, although he never took a job, and also required that he register at the employment office. Three months later he still had no job, and the case worker noted that she planned to tell him “that it is necessary for him now to assume some responsibility in the support of the family.” A month later she followed that with a letter telling Perelli that her grant

⁸⁶Saginaw ADC Case C7300478, case history dated February 20, 1941.



would be canceled if Frank did not reapply for WPA.⁸⁷ The woman came into the office two days later shouting and complaining, arguing that she could not get Frank to work or manage his behavior.⁸⁸

Social workers could enlist other public agencies' help in securing support for applicants. When 67-year-old Diane Strand of Saginaw was referred to the WRC for an OAA grant in late 1937, her son, David, lived with her and worked part time at the local Chevrolet parts factory. From the beginning she worried about him, telling the case worker he was irresponsible. Strand, a widow since 1926, was in poor health and suffered from asthma; she could no longer work as a domestic and laundress and relied on her son and OAA for support.⁸⁹ Her son's arrest for lewdness a few months later involved the police, who asked the case worker to stop Strand's OAA grant. They argued that Strand used it for her son, relieving him of his responsibility to care for her. The case worker found that the police had also threatened Strand and her son with loss of her aid. Investigation found that David Strand earned \$14 per week, although he was only employed part time, which was more than WPA wages. He also had a car, and refused to

⁸⁷Case C5200174, Marquette County ADC Records, case history from November 29, 1937; December 9, 1937; March 22, 1938; and April 21, 1938.

⁸⁸Case C5200174, Marquette County ADC Records, case history from April 23, 1938.

⁸⁹Case A7302543, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3015, case history from November 18, 1937. Strand had received relief on and off from 1931 to 1936, supplemented most likely by her own earnings and those of her son.



get rid of it. They were told the grant would be canceled, and returned later with an attorney, to no avail.⁹⁰

The case worker consulted officials at the Friend of the Court office, and all agreed it was better to enforce the son's responsibility to support his mother, and that she could apply for emergency relief in the meantime. Diane Strand did not agree, and protested the closure in a letter to supervisor Dora Heilman. She had no money and questioned the power the case worker and the agency held over her grant: were they "the judge and jury?" The case worker apparently had told her she had spoiled David, but Strand refuted this, writing that she had to leave him alone often after she was widowed to clean houses to earn a living. He had to take care of himself, she wrote, at a very young age.⁹¹ Her complaints did not result in reinstatement, but David was given a WPA assignment and later obtained full-time employment with Chevrolet in Saginaw.⁹²

The social workers' persistence in attempting to get adult children to work to support their mothers likely annoyed the family and made the children's attempts to avoid work more difficult. Such persistence might result in eventual support, as with David Strand, or just exacerbate already difficult family relationships. In some cases, state regulation of family responsibility prompted family break ups, as members of families left

⁹⁰Case A7302543, Saginaw OAA Records, case history from March 21, 1938.

⁹¹Case A7302543, case history from April 26, 1938; Letter from Strand to Heilman, dated June 1, 1938.

⁹²Case A7302543, case history from June 23, 1938; December 9, 1938. The complaints did result in state officials asking Heilman for a report on the case, but they were apparently satisfied with the handling of it.



their homes or communities to avoid financial responsibility. Some children accepted public employment, but rejected the program's rule that they relinquish all of their wages to the family. Rather than accept the employment, some left the home and sometimes the area. Frank Perelli moved in with his grandparents to escape the harassment of the case workers and their insistence that he find work.⁹³ Cynthia Wright's son refused to accept a WPA assignment if it meant supporting the entire family. He saw that income as his, regardless of the source, and refused to "work under those conditions." He had had a previous WPA assignment, and resented his \$38 per month wages going to the family. The caseworker informed him that if he did so, he would be removed from the family's food budget and receive no aid. He relented and agreed to be recertified. But one month later, Burton left the city before his recertification went through, and the case worker had to increase the ADC grant to compensate for the lost wages.⁹⁴

Family members who secured private employment, and lived in the household applying for aid, did not face the same rules governing public employment. Their contribution was set at 60 percent of their income (after deductions and employment

⁹³Case C5200174, Marquette County ADC Records, case history from April 25, 1938. Frank later returned and case workers found not only that he was living at home but also was employed full time; the grant was canceled the following May. The case files reveal continued conflict between the family and the case workers over his support. In July 1939 the woman again applied for aid while Frank was on vacation, as he was their support. She saw the agency as her avenue for aid when he was not there. The request was denied, and the case worker noted that it was "not our responsibility to keep the family or pay their expenses while her son takes a vacation." Case history from May 8-9, 1939; July 20, 1939.

⁹⁴Saginaw ADC Case C7300200, case history from August 16, 1939 and September 18, 1939.

expenses). But some refused to do even that. Rachel Raney, a black woman whose husband deserted the family in 1932, had supported her three children with a WPA sewing job in Saginaw. She was cooperative and caseworkers admired her efforts to keep her family intact. In February 1939, after her WPA project ended, she applied for ADC. She wanted to stay home with her teenage daughter, whom she believed needed her supervision. She received aid until January 1941, when her eighteen-year-old son's placement in a CCC camp reduced her grant. Case workers found her son employed at the Gun Plant in August, and a wage check revealed that his income, under the 60 percent rule, was sufficient to care for the family's needs. But Garland Raney refused those terms, and was gone one month later. Raney finally received her grant in mid-October; meanwhile she was trying to support her family by doing occasional housework, for which she earned \$1.50 per day.⁹⁵ Again, she was caught in the middle of the social welfare agency's bid to enforce family obligations, and she and her two younger children suffered.

Combining court-ordered support with pressure from case workers also prompted children to leave home, rather than support their parents. But in some cases that did not result in any change in the grant award. Pauline Ristav, a 45-year-old widow with six children, faced conflict with several of her children over their support for her and their younger siblings. A recipient of ADC before her husband's death from tuberculosis in late 1938, Ristav's case was closed at one point because of sufficient income, likely from her older children. She wisely invested her insurance money in a home. Her son, Avery,

⁹⁵Case C7300279, Saginaw County ADC Records, reel 4536.



left home because of the amount he was expected to contribute. His mother went through the probate court, which ordered him to pay \$3 per week support. She told the case worker that before that he had a good relationship with her, but the court support soured it. Her 18-year-old daughter, Laurie, worked part time and contributed \$4 per week room and board. She later balked at paying \$60 per month, computed on the basis of her higher factory wages; she was expected to contribute 60 percent. She only would pay \$8 per week room and board, and argued that as her brothers did not pay, she would not.⁹⁶

Laurie moved out rather than pay the ordered support, and her mother refused to go through the probate court again; it had caused her enough grief with her family. Without a court order for support, Laurie was not obligated to pay the support. Case workers did not decrease the woman's grant for her younger children, ages six and ten, as she had endeavored to enforce support and other children were helping, most likely. But when the case worker received word that Avery claimed his mother as a dependent on his draft form, in the hopes of getting an exemption, they held her ADC check to investigate. If Avery claimed he was supporting her for draft purposes, the agency would eliminate the ADC; it was his responsibility to support her. He apparently did not claim her as a dependent, and the state office, when asked, allowed the ADC to continue despite the ability of relatives to help, because they were not successful in enforcing support.⁹⁷

⁹⁶Case C7300548, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4540, case history from December 28, 1939 to February 4, 1942.

⁹⁷Case C7300548, case history from March 16, 1942 to January 25, 1944. The case was closed February 10, 1944 when the woman and her younger children obtained employment.



Again, efforts to enforce support only increased family friction and resulted in Ristav losing what little help her children had provided.

In some cases family members refused to allow social workers to contact relatives about support. James and Ellie Stern lived with their son, who was employed at Saginaw's General Motors foundry. They had deeded their home to him, in exchange for his support. Stern did receive a small OAA grant, as their daughter-in-law was an invalid and the couple owed a large debt from her medical bills.⁹⁸ Case workers suggested contacting their daughter to see if she could help as well, but the son said he would assume full support, rather than have her investigated. The case was closed, but the father wrote to then Governor Murray Van Wagoner, pleading for reinstatement; his son could not do it all. The state requested a report from the WRC, and then suggested a small grant: "it seems that a good deal is being expected of the client's son...he is carrying a heavy financial load without assuming the full support of his parents."⁹⁹ The case worker explained that the local agency believed the son deserved help, but that he refused the relative investigation, and thus the case had to be closed. The state officials backed off in agreement, but wrote the family suggesting that they allow the agency to contact the daughter, noting that she would not be expected to help if she was not able to. The father wrote another letter, pleading for help; clearly the son, and not the father, was reluctant to permit the agency to contact his sister, despite the hint that she would not be expected to

⁹⁸Case A7301106, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3002, case history from July 30, 1936 and April, 1937.

⁹⁹Case A7301106, Letter to governor dated February 6, 1942; reply from state Bureau of Social Security dated March 27, 1942.



do much. Eventually the son was drafted to serve in World War II, and provided for his family through a military allotment. The OAA case remained closed.¹⁰⁰

Property ownership was a problem unique to OAA cases. Property transfers to children were relatively common, and did not always remove eligibility, as in Stern's case, depending on the income of the children who received the property. The property transfer usually was in exchange for a life lease, or the right to live there and be supported by their children. Carl Janetzka, a native of Czechoslovakia who had become a citizen, received a rather small OAA grant - just \$2.50 per month - for clothing and incidentals. He had lived with his son and daughter-in-law for more than a year, since his wife had died, and they got along well. When the case worker found that his grant was for "pocket" money, rather than essentials, and also found a deed transfer, she closed the case. Under the terms of the property transfer, it was up to the son to provide for his father, and he had sufficient means to do so.¹⁰¹ Janetzka was in a few months later, seeking a WPA job as he needed clothes and did not want to ask his son. The case worker told him he had already paid for the clothes with his land, and that his son was legally obligated to provide for him. Although the case worker was legally correct, the

¹⁰⁰Case A7301106, case history dated April 14, 1942; April 15, 1942; and January 20, 1943.

¹⁰¹Case A7301375, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3005, case history from September 2, 1938; December 2, 1939; and May 1940.

deed transfer did not leave Janetzka feeling independent, or able to ask his son for items he needed.¹⁰²

Not all cases involving property transfers and parental support were so amiable. In that case, the son did not protest his responsibility to his father, but others did, often exerting extreme stress and hardship on their parents along the way. John Arnold, who had farmed just west of Saginaw, began receiving aid in late 1935 because of ill health, and later was transferred to the OAA program. He lived with his son, George, a farmer. His small grant covered clothing and medical care, as his son's wife was rather ill and their income did not cover all he needed. His son did see his father's care as his duty, and continued to provide for him although the other children did not contribute.¹⁰³ A year later, his son asked him to leave and he planned to move in with his daughter, but later moved to Bay City to live with a brother. Prompted by a comment by the brother, the case worker found that Arnold had deeded his property to his son, and the terms of the agreement included a life lease, space for a garden, medical care and burial. After consulting with the state office, the case worker closed the case, as Arnold was never entitled to the original grant.¹⁰⁴ The son immediately protested, arguing that his father did not know what he was talking about, but was chagrined when the case worker told him that his father had said nothing about the deed. The tragedy was that the son refused to

¹⁰²Case A7301375, case history from August 9, 1940. The man died two years later.

¹⁰³Case A7300761, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 2998, case history from September 13, 1938.

¹⁰⁴Case A7300761, case history from July 25, 1939 and September 5, 1939.



take Arnold in again, and asked him to leave for good. The case worker intended to visit the son, but nothing was recorded. Apparently Arnold stayed with his brother until his death three years later at the age of 90.¹⁰⁵

The Justification for Relief

Recipients put forth their own arguments outlining their need, and right, in some cases, for relief, and voiced those viewpoints in interviews with case workers and in letters to a variety of officials. Connected to the rhetoric they used to justify their need and right to relief was their attitude toward relief. While some historians argue that this signified a demise of the work ethic, others see such trends as an assertion of citizenship rights by recipients of aid.¹⁰⁶ This study reinforces the latter argument. Recipients often connected their entitlement to aid to their need for help; they needed assistance through no fault of their own, and thus were entitled to some relief. They invoked their rights as workers, taxpayers, citizens and mothers in their efforts to gain the aid they saw as a right. With the passage of old age pensions and later the federal OAA program, the waters became even murkier - the line between pension and assistance blurred further, as many elderly in need of help, and their children, saw the state assistance in their later years as a right they had earned, and not something based on need. Likewise, some saw

¹⁰⁵Case A7300761, case history from September 11, 1939.

¹⁰⁶Linda Gordon connects the meanings of welfare to the values one holds about the welfare state: "whether as an unfortunate, emergency necessity, as a charity to the disabled or lazy, or as an aspect of citizenship." She argues that many reports of a rising sense of entitlement were based upon assumptions rather than research. See Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 246-247.



ADC as a continuation of the mothers' pension, or "widows'" pension, although of course "pension" was a misnomer. Despite the efforts of early social reformers to have motherhood recognized as work worthy of state support, ADC remained a means-tested program, with inadequate grants. Lengthy dependence on public aid was not enough to earn the criticism of case workers, but social workers often found attitudes that centered on a right or entitlement to aid problematic.

Not all applicants saw relief as their right, and in fact many, like Richard Little, avoided it as long as possible and sought to get off it as quickly as possible. Applying for aid generated a range of responses from applicants; some avoided it at all costs, seeing the public admission of a need for help as the greatest stigma, while others had fewer inhibitions about seeking relief. James Carver and his wife, Emily, who lived in Bangor in Van Buren County, did not want relief but had no choice. He was 71 and she was 65, and neither was able to work. The case worker noted that they "appeared to be progressive and ambitious and terribly humiliated to have to ask for welfare." A former salesman, Carver had been ill and undergone surgery recently, and they had to apply for aid when their money and groceries were gone in February 1935. They also owed medical bills, and their four children were unable to help.¹⁰⁷

While Carver could not work because of his health, many other applicants who were employable voiced their preference for work relief over direct relief. But some potential relief workers did not want to apply for relief in order to gain a work assignment, as they did under FERA. The Civil Works Administration did not require

¹⁰⁷Case 5184, VB ERA Records, Box 2, Folder 1.



applicants to qualify for relief in order to be eligible for jobs, although many relief recipients did work on CWA projects. But FERA projects did require relief certification, much to the chagrin of some unemployed workers. Members of the Detroit chapter of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America resented the relief application process in a letter to Harry Hopkins: "The questionnaire one has to fill in is outrageous and takes away any self-respect one has left." They argued that Roosevelt, and the New Deal, had "no desire or intentions to make all of us paupers. We trust that you will seek an opportunity of restoring non relief workers, to work and thus enable them to remain self respecting citizens."¹⁰⁸ The Kalamazoo Federation of Labor shared the Detroit group's opinion, calling the investigations too "personal" and the ERA "too inquisitive."¹⁰⁹ For skilled workers, in this case, applying for relief was stigmatizing and degrading; they were not asking for a handout, but for a job for which they were ably qualified.¹¹⁰

Some applicants saw relief as their right as American citizens, an entitlement owed to them, as had Michael Rhodes of Van Buren County. Allen and Martha Green, longtime residents of Van Buren County, shared that view and caused much distress in

¹⁰⁸Letter from United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Detroit chapter, to Harry Hopkins, dated June 18, 1934, RG 69, FERA NGSS, Michigan Complaints, Box 140, Folder C.

¹⁰⁹SERA Administrator Diary, February 12, 1935, William Haber Papers, Box 33.

¹¹⁰Boston's unemployed protested vehemently when CWA workers were taken only from the relief rolls. A direct violation of FERA rules, Mayor James Curley defended his actions, arguing that reducing the welfare rolls was more critical. See Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 185-186.



the WRC office with their complaints and demands. They had received relief from the county for fifteen years before approaching the WRC office in May of 1935, and had come to see such aid as their right, according to the case worker assigned to their case. Green was 75 and Martha was 68 when they applied for emergency relief. No one doubted their inability to hold a full-time job; Green, a farmer, earned some money doing odd jobs, but could not do more. But their attitude, which was unpredictable, and their view that relief was a right angered the social workers, who labeled them “a decided problem case.” Their longtime dependence on relief of some kind was not the key problem. Instead, their belief that relief was a right owed to them, combined with their complaints that they were not given enough, contributed to the “problem” designation assigned to them.¹¹¹

Deidre O'Donnell, who lived in Negaunee in Marquette County, shared a home with her sister, brother and niece. She had supported herself as a seamstress and domestic worker until 1932, but was no longer able to work full time. She began receiving OAA in the summer of 1937, but had received grocery orders from the WRC occasionally since 1934. Her brother and sister both worked, but unsteadily and her brother drank much of his earnings. They also were putting their niece through her teacher's training in Marquette. The two sisters, in particular, were very bitter towards the entire relief structure, including the WPA and WRC, and other social agencies. They believed that they had lived as honestly as they could, and now did not have enough, and

¹¹¹Case 5010, VB ERA, Box 2, Folder 2. For a fuller discussion of interactions between case workers and recipients, see chapter 5.



it was time for the government or someone “to step in to help out as we deserve it.”¹¹² They asked for increases, and got some when possible, but their feelings toward the agency did not change. In fact, O’Donnell believed that her activism on behalf of her grant would help others who followed her; she was an activist, in her mind, for all potential OAA recipients: “She undoubtedly feels that OAA is her right and does not have the relief concept of it.” But the case worker also acknowledged that they certainly needed the grant.¹¹³

Children sometimes argued on behalf of parents, demanding higher grants. Mary Royce, who lived in Saginaw, had supported her family by operating a rooming house. Age and ill health stopped that, and she began receiving aid in 1933. She was transferred to the OAA program in 1936. She and her daughter wrote letters to numerous officials, requesting more funds. Royce wrote the state welfare department in March of 1936, asking for the maximum grant, under law, of \$30 per month, rather than the \$16 they received, although no one in Michigan received the full amount because of a lack of funds.¹¹⁴ When the case worker sent a letter asking her daughter if she was able to contribute to her mother’s support, as a responsible relative, she said she had already done enough. Caring for her mother had put her on county aid, she wrote, and her mother

¹¹²Case A5200620, Marquette OAA Records, Box 26, case history from July 20, 1937.

¹¹³Case A5200620, Marquette County OAA, case history from August 28, 1939. O’Donnell’s sister and brother died before she did, and she eventually entered the Orchard Rest Home in Marquette, because of senility, in 1951. She died two years later.

¹¹⁴Case A7301082, Saginaw County OAA Records, reel 3002, letter dated March 25, 1936.

“is entitled to the pension. I will write to the President of the United States and see what he says about it as my son works on PWA and gives me all he can.”¹¹⁵

The daughter did not write to Franklin Roosevelt, but did send a letter to Governor Frank Fitzgerald, arguing that her mother needed a larger grant:

I am a widow and a very small woman and I can't lift her around. My son has to stay around the house to help care for her. I wish you would please give her more so we can properly care for her, as I am living off the county through no fault of my own. Hoping you will increase my mother's grant.¹¹⁶

The letter was forwarded to local supervisor Dora Heilman, who again informed the daughter that the grant was the maximum they could give. Two weeks later the mother died.

Some recipients challenged welfare workers to try to live on the grants they awarded. Herman Gunderson, a native of Germany who became a citizen, had farmed all his life. He retained a life lease on his land, which he had deeded to his children. Because of income and farm produce from his crops and livestock, his grant was reduced by \$1 to \$13, after another recent deduction. Angry, he wrote to state welfare officials in 1938 that there were three people in the household to feed, and asked if they could live on \$13 per month: “Just try it and see or in other words I will change with you. You give me your check and I will let you have mind ‘till the first of the year.”¹¹⁷ He too demanded a monthly grant of \$30, but was refused. The problem, according to the case worker, was

¹¹⁵Case A7301082, letter from daughter to agency dated July 1, 1936.

¹¹⁶Case A7301082, letter dated March 1, 1939.

¹¹⁷Case A7300424, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 2995, letter dated July 29, 1938.



that he expected the grant to support the entire family, including his wife and niece, when it was only for his needs.¹¹⁸ Again, Gunderson believed the pension was to replace his earnings and support his family, and was not a needs-based program. He had earned it.

Rachel Woods, who lived in Saginaw, was one mother who saw ADC as a pension, and her status as a widow and mother entitling her to an ADC grant. Woods, widowed in 1934, had eight children, five of them under the age of nine when she lost her husband. She began receiving emergency relief in 1931 and a mothers' pension after her husband died. She supplemented her ADC grants with income from roomers.¹¹⁹ When her oldest son, Donald, was certified for WPA, her ADC grant was cut, as his income covered much of their needs. Woods protested that her son should not have to give all his money to her, despite the rules regarding public work relief, and Donald also lodged his protest by quitting his job the day after they received notification. Woods blamed case workers for the entire incident, arguing that they did not tell her they would reduce her grant. When Donald was later charged with theft, she blamed the agency, because they would not let him keep his earnings.¹²⁰

Case workers tried to explain that Donald could have kept part of his earnings if on WPA, and that her current budget on ADC was larger than either WPA or a mothers' pension, but Woods did not agree and embarked upon "her usual tirade against this office

¹¹⁸Case A7300424, case history from May 13, 1939, and July 9, 1941.

¹¹⁹Case C7300354, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4537.

¹²⁰Case C7300354, case history from June 16, 1938; February 21, 1939; and March 14, 1939.



and the visitors.” She wrote to Governor Fitzgerald, seeking help. “I can’t make a go of it,” she wrote, and wanted him to intervene on her behalf. “I really can’t afford to send this letter. Every penny counts for me.” Her children were her chief concern: “I can’t give up because of my children and my husband is dead and I want to live honest.” The governor’s reply informed her that the state was short of funds for the ADC program, and there was nothing he could do.¹²¹ She filed for a fair hearing, but achieved nothing through that, as case workers had followed the agency rules. Case workers recorded that she did not understand the need-based purpose of ADC; Woods argued that the state should care for her children because she was a widow.¹²²

Woods fell ill in late 1939 and the Probate Court provided a housekeeping aide and the local Associated Charities helped with clothing: “Everything possible is being done to keep Mrs. [Woods] at home and the children from going to the Children’s Home.” Apparently Woods saw relinquishing her children to a home as a last resort. Unfortunately her health did not improve, and she died of a heart attack in May of 1940. No relatives were able to take the children, who became wards of the court.¹²³ As long as she was alive, Woods fought to make the ADC program provide for her family, to enable her to be home for her children. As a widow and mother, she believed she was entitled to the support she lost when her husband died.

¹²¹Case C7300354, letter from Woods to Fitzgerald, dated February 20, 1939; reply dated April 17, 1939. Similar letters were exchanged on September 7, 1938 and September 21, 1938.

¹²²Case C7300354, case history from April 18, 1939 and January 26, 1940.

¹²³Case C7300354, case history December 6, 1939 and May 27, 1940.

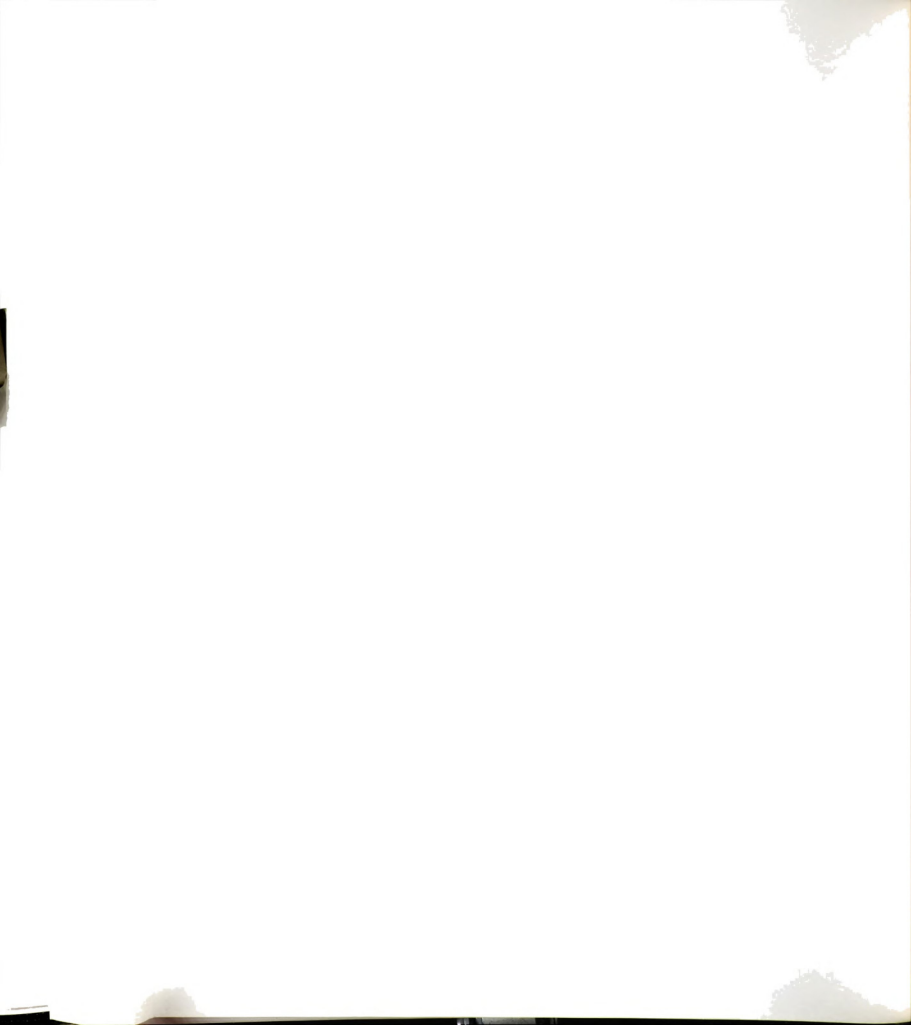


Recipients often pointed to the problems of combining paid work and motherhood as reasons to accept ADC over employment, again using the rhetoric of advocates of mothers' pensions and the ADC program. Joyce Lawrence, who was separated from her husband, sought an increase in her grant in 1940 because she had lost her job in Saginaw. The loss coincided with her employer receiving correspondence from the relief agency (likely a wage check form), although Lawrence did not blame the office: "I know you wouldn't say anything to make me lose my job." She found another job, but it did not pay as well and entailed fewer hours of work. She wanted to be home with her eleven-year-old daughter, who had been ill with rheumatic fever:

I don't think it's right for a child to be alone so much. I hope you will reconsider my case. It is a shame to think that a poor little child has to lose her health and live a lonely life for I am only working to get my bills paid so I wouldn't have them to worry about.¹²⁴

Lawrence had applied for ADC the year before, prompted by her child's illness, which was thought to be tuberculosis at the time. She had a long work history in restaurants and motels, as her husband had left and never supported her or their child. She criticized herself for waiting so long, but it was responsibility as a mother with a sick child that finally brought her to the relief office: "That is why I asked for help. I should have asked sooner but shunned taking charity until I saw the condition of my daughter." The case worker visited, but could not increase her grant under the budget guidelines, and suggested she seek better employment. A month later, her grant was increased when the

¹²⁴Case C7300049, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4531, letter dated June 21, 1940.



restaurant that employed her closed. She preferred to be home more, as her daughter was reluctant to go to school if she was not there.¹²⁵

One Saginaw recipient aptly named her ADC grant a “child’s pension” in one letter to the public agency. Josephine Baxter, a divorced mother of a seven-year-old son, received ADC for two years before remarrying. She left her husband one month later when she discovered he had three daughters by a previous marriage; she also said they were abusive towards her and her son. She returned to her husband a few months later, she wrote, because she had no other options. Her \$24 monthly grant (the maximum for one child) was not enough to support her child, even when she lived with family, but she did not plan to stay with her husband: “I will have to go sooner or later because I can’t stand his girls and him abusing me...the boy isn’t his and he won’t support him and every childs in title [sic] to a child’s pension.”¹²⁶ ADC provided some help, but not enough to permit her to leave an abusive marriage. She was not seeking aid for herself, but for her son. She eventually was reinstated to the ADC program, but had to rely on temporary relief until she had been separated from her husband for the required one year.¹²⁷

¹²⁵Case C7300049, case history from July 11, 1940 and August 15, 1940. A year later she found a job at a lunch counter, and her case was closed permanently.

¹²⁶Case C7300049, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4539, letter to agency dated May 29, 1940.

¹²⁷Case C7300049. Concerns about Baxter’s ability to care for her son arose shortly after, and case workers sought to have the mother undergo a psychiatric examination. Her child was later removed from her home because of neglect, and placed with the Catholic charities.

In some cases, neighbors spoke out for recipients, again arguing that their friends deserved the government “pension.” Christine Jordon, who had two of her four children still at home, lost her ADC grant in August of 1940 because her son was employed full time and easily covered the family budget. Separated from her husband since 1927, Jordon often told case workers (and others) that she was a widow, likely realizing that it added credibility to her need in the eyes of some. A resident of Chesaning in Saginaw County, Jordon’s ill health precluded her from working, and thus she relied on her ADC and her older son for support. She was evasive about her son’s income, telling case workers that he paid \$5 per week for room and board. When a wage check revealed otherwise, she did not protest the closure, but her neighbors did. In a letter to the governor, they wrote that Jordon’s pension had been taken away, and “she does not know the reason.” They, too, called her a widow, either because they believed she was or like Jordon, used it as a rhetorical tool. They argued that their neighbor had to keep her son out of school because she had no clothes for him. She deserved a pension because she was a widow “with one boy to send to school and she is not able to work and has no income.” They also invoked partisan politics in their letter to Governor Van Wagoner, a Democrat: “Now we are expecting you to investigate right away. We are Democrats and we helped you get into office so please help us.” The governor’s reply noted that the rules must be followed, and Jordon did not regain her grant.¹²⁸ Josephine Baxter’s

¹²⁸Case C7300422, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4538, case history from August 12, 1940; August 16, 1940; letter to governor dated April 16, 1941.



neighbors also spoke out on her behalf, hoping to prevent the removal of her son from her home; two wrote letters to the governor, seeking intervention, to no avail.¹²⁹

Beth Lawson, a Birch Run housewife who separated from her husband in 1934 and divorced him six years later, thought the state - through the courts or the social welfare agency - could do more to ensure that her husband paid his court-ordered support for their three children. All were under the age of five when she applied for emergency relief after he left; she later was transferred to the ADC program.¹³⁰ The courts did arrest her husband for non-support, and he spent thirteen months in the Ionia prison. He continued to lag in his support payments, particularly after he was laid off WPA and subsequently disappeared.¹³¹ Lawson looked for work, but could not find a job that enabled her to provide adequate child care and still pay their bills, according to a letter she wrote to the district supervisor. Frustrated with the system, she thought the state's resources could find her husband and make him pay the three years of alimony he owed. As the children's mother, she wrote, she needed to be home to take care of them, as the oldest was just eleven. Until they did enforce support, they owed her an adequate grant:

Anyway, as long as the state can uphold the children's father, I feel the state of Michigan should contribute to [the children's] support...Until I find employment with enough wages to care for my young children as they should be, I'll expect assistance.¹³²

¹²⁹Case C7300506, letters dated August 1, 1942.

¹³⁰Case C7300387, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4537.

¹³¹Case C7300387, case history from September 12, 1940; March 13, 1941; March 13, 1942.

¹³²Case C7300387, letter dated July 1, 1942.



As a mother whose ex-husband, and provider for her children, was not doing his job, Lawson believed the state should fill the void. She was not asking for help, but arguing that she was entitled to an adequate grant.

Supervisor Dora Heilman wrote that the welfare agency was not supposed to enforce support, and that they also wanted the support paid. They did increase her grant, as she had found no work. She eventually attended a defense training program in the hopes of securing a factory job, which she did the next year. Case workers commended her on her “good planning,” and when she wrote to tell them she had a job, she thanked them for all their help. Her wages, combined with a military allotment from her ex-husband, allowed her to leave the ADC program soon afterwards.¹³³

Social Workers as Advocates

Despite her differences with social workers, Beth Lawson still expressed gratitude for their help during her time on ADC. Social workers were not always an intrusive, negative influence in the lives of their clients. At times, applicants to Michigan’s relief programs asked the social worker to step in to help them control their family members, as in Lorensen’s case described earlier, or to intervene with other welfare agencies, thus rendering the state an ally in their family relations. Although many recipients complained about their grants, such complaints often rested on regulations and funding limitations, issues out of the control of the individual social worker. Some recipients sought help

¹³³Case C7300387, case history from October 19, 1942; December 8, 1942; and February 15, 1943.



from the case worker, seeing him or her as an ally rather than an adversary. Case workers provided valuable help in negotiating other support services in the community.

Social workers often referred recipients to other resources if they or their agency was unable to fulfill all their needs, and at times they intervened with the agency to ensure that recipients received the help they needed. When James Townsend, a resident of Buena Vista Township in Saginaw County, needed medicine in 1939, his case worker sent him to his township supervisor. Medical aid remained the responsibility of local welfare officials during the emergency relief period. The township supervisor refused to authorize the medical aid, because the man was on OAA; the supervisor apparently believed that he could use his grant to pay for the medicine. Upon hearing this, the case worker promised Townsend she would speak to the supervisor, most likely to explain to him the limitations of OAA.¹³⁴ No further mention is made in the record of the medicine, possibly because the case worker was successful and it was no longer a concern.

Social workers also recognized that the budgets they computed and the grants they recommended were seldom enough to provide fully for their recipients. Poor health only compounded the problem, as in a case in Saginaw County. Louise Walter's daughter, Betty, suffered a severe hemorrhage and the case worker suspected tuberculosis, although an exam and X-ray proved him wrong. But he did think that the low budget contributed to the problem, as he thought the daughter and mother's poor health were "caused by

¹³⁴Case A7301432, Saginaw OAA Records, reel #3006; case history dated September 12, 1939.



improper and insufficient nutrition,” due to the lack of funds in the household. He convinced the township supervisor to provide additional aid, but it was still not enough.¹³⁵

Diana Watson, widowed in 1931 with three children in Saginaw County, had received a mothers’ pension and emergency relief before ADC. She stretched her aid - the maximum grant possible - as far as possible, according to case workers, but still did not have enough. They referred her to the Department of Social Welfare for supplemental aid. Her sacrifices for her children prompted her own case of malnutrition, according to case workers, and supervisor Dora Heilman, in a rare criticism of the program she administered, told state officials the problems the low grants were causing her clients, like Watson, “because she has literally starved herself to feed [her children] properly.” Watson was not alone, wrote Heilman:

Mrs. [Watson] is only one of our ADC mothers with hopelessly inadequate grants and we are unable to find enough community resources to adequately take care of them...We hope that in the near future something can be done about the ceiling grants which work such a hardship on mothers and children.¹³⁶

Heilman, and her employees, recognized the limitations of the program they administered, but had little power to change it.

Social workers also helped recipients who were not eligible for help through emergency relief or later the categorical aids under the Social Security Act, but who had no means to support themselves. This was particularly true for women who raised their

¹³⁵Case C7300469, Saginaw ADC Records, reel #4539.

¹³⁶Case C7300255, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4535, letter dated September 26, 1941.



children or grandchildren on ADC, but when the children reached the maximum age, the women faced destitution. While many were able to find part-time income to supplement their ADC grants, some were not able to work full time. Most were unable to work because of age or health, but were not old enough to qualify for OAA. In these cases, social workers referred them to their local relief officials, such as the township supervisor, or to the county DSW after the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act. Sarah Matson suffered from severe arthritis and work was not an option for her. She began receiving ADC for her son in 1939, but when he reached the age of eighteen a year later, she was short on options. He was recovering from pneumonia and blood poisoning and was unable to work temporarily, and her deceased husband's small veteran's pension for her son was just \$3.50 per month. The case worker referred her to the county DSW, sending a letter explaining the case and recommending aid.¹³⁷ Hannah Schneider also faced similar circumstances when her children reached the age of eighteen. She had supplemented her grant with some income from livestock and farm produce, but she was not able to produce enough for full support. The case worker again sent a letter to the township supervisor seeking aid, and also recommended the woman apply for a WPA position.¹³⁸

Case workers sometimes helped non-citizens who faced restricted employment opportunities because of their alien status. Hilda Weber was a divorced mother of a two-year-old son when she applied for aid. A native of Germany, she never obtained

¹³⁷Case C7300338, Saginaw ADC Records, reel #4537.

¹³⁸Case C7300440, Saginaw ADC Records, reel #4538.



citizenship. Her ex-husband did not have a job, and thus she had no support. When she needed a tonsillectomy two years later, the county denied her, telling her to get a job. She would have to pay for child care, and only factory work paid enough. As a non-citizen, no one would hire her. Thus she was caught; she needed employment that paid enough to enable her to obtain care for her child, but had limited options because of her lack of citizenship, circumstances that county officials failed to see. At the encouragement of her case worker, she started the citizenship process, unsure she could afford the fees, but eventually did and obtained factory work, leaving the ADC program.¹³⁹

When Juan Gortez, a Mexican citizen and sugar beet worker, was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1938, his family began receiving ADC while he recovered in the Saginaw County TB Hospital. His wife, a Mexican-American woman born in Texas, cared for their children on the ADC program and with domestic work until he recovered. But upon his release, he found himself unable to secure employment as he had no citizenship papers. His case worker and bureau supervisor Dora Heilman contacted local churches and community members to help with the process. As a result, he became a citizen and found a good factory job that enabled him to support his family.¹⁴⁰ The case worker

¹³⁹Case C7300184, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4534, case history from July 13, 1939; October 1, 1941; August 20, 1942.

¹⁴⁰Case C7300444, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4538, case history from April 3, 1939; November 10, 1940; December 10, 1940.



referred to the family as “high type,” again a model Mexican family that disproved the stereotypes so common among the agency staff.¹⁴¹

Recipients sought to maintain an active role in the planning of their cases. They spoke out when they felt wronged, and often rejected the case worker’s or the agency’s assessment of their need, or lack of it. They did not see themselves as dependents spreading their “disease” in American society, and many believed that their own circumstances or behavior entitled them to state aid. While they exhibited a range of reactions to the relief process, and a variety of justifications for aid, they were agents in that process. They took full advantage of new avenues of appeals, including officials in state and federal agencies. The recipients’ narratives of relief contrasted markedly with the picture painted by local officials, described in the next chapter. Local officials depicted state and federal regulations and requirements, including the hiring of professional social workers, as the key problems with emergency relief. County supervisors, superintendents of the poor and other proponents of home rule saw themselves as the last defense against a monster centralized government intent on subverting the democratic process and local autonomy. Only in defeating the monster could home rule advocates prevent the spread of dependence, and they mobilized effectively in the late 1930s to do just that.

¹⁴¹The family was well liked by the entire community, as evidenced when their home burned down in 1943. All four children died in the fire, and a collection produced \$1,000 for a new home for the couple. The case worker recorded: “In spite of all the hardships they endured they held to their purpose to rise above the level of itinerant beet worker and to make a place for themselves as respected citizens.” Case C730044, case history summary from August 29, 1947.



**“The Right to Rule Ourselves”:
A Contest for Local Control**

Chapter Six

“We have not shirked our responsibility,” E.H. Hoddenott of Lenawee County told the Welfare and Relief Study Commission in 1936. “We want that which the constitution of this nation says we could have, the right to rule ourselves, and will fight for it....That is the feeling of the people, and I know it is intense because we went along with the set-up for four or five years, but we feel the emergency is over.”¹ Hoddenott’s remarks at the November 10, 1936 hearing of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission were greeted with applause from his fellow township supervisors; the “set-up” to which he referred included the State Emergency Relief Administration and the county welfare relief commissions. While careful analysis of the hearings’ contents reveal a range of viewpoints regarding state and local control of relief as well as the effectiveness of the State Emergency Relief Administration, Hoddenott’s comments represented the most vocal opinions of local officials voiced during the welfare debates in the 1930s.

The debates over relief administration focused on competing narratives about emergency relief and its administration. At the center of these competing narratives were basic philosophical differences about which level of government should administer relief (and how) and what training or experience was needed for those directly investigating relief requests. Fears of the centralization of government and a loss of electoral representation, in conjunction with anti-New Deal views, fueled these debates. Rhetoric

¹Minutes of November 10, 1936 hearing in Lansing, Welfare and Relief Study Commission Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, p. 62.



often focused on the idea of an invasion of local communities by the federal and state governments, and the key players in that invasion were social workers. Social workers, and the gendered values they practiced, became a symbol of all that local officials despised in centralized relief administration. A coalition of township supervisors, county officials and superintendents of the poor, and the organizations that represented them, successfully fought efforts to remake general relief from a local to a state program run by professional social workers. Professional social work enjoyed a brief and ultimately unsuccessful career in public welfare in Michigan in the 1930s; by 1940 social workers primarily administered the categorical aid programs under the Social Security Act: Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind.

The end of FERA in December 1935 signaled a shift in welfare policy in Michigan and other states. Federal funding for direct relief had ceased when FERA shut down, but relief continued with local and state monies.² With the federal government out of the general relief picture, the landscape changed markedly. Michigan's State Emergency Relief Administration began to accede to demands from township, city and county officials to allow them more say in the administration of relief. With the loss of federal funds except for the categorical aids programs of the Social Security Act (Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind), SERA had to have local contributions for general relief programs. It no longer could withhold federal money for relief if county commissions did not cooperate, and thus lost its major bargaining chip in

²Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940) 301. FERA officially ended December 31, 1935.



negotiations for relief contributions. SERA, state officials and Governor Frank Fitzgerald sought change on two levels: the first centered on the immediate need to adjust relief with the end of FERA, and the second - the appointment of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission - sought to deal with long-range welfare reform in Michigan. The place of social work professionals, hired through a civil service merit system, was at the center of both avenues of change. But although social workers and relief workers were in large proportion women, very few women participated in the debates about welfare reorganization. The study commission included just two women, and virtually all township supervisors and superintendents of the poor, and the organizations that represented them, were men. Some women were found in the latter group, but the debate as evidenced was by men and about men, and in general centered on a rejection of the “female” professional values practiced by social workers.

The extreme hostility evident in the WRSC minutes and hearings, and the legislative debates and subsequent 1938 referendum, again point to larger trends in Michigan and the nation at this time. Fears about the centralization of the government, in conjunction with opposition to the New Deal, were a critical part of the opposition’s views, as well as a belief in the sanctity of local power and the importance of the community. Local relief administration - the responsibility to care for the needy as communities deemed appropriate - was a long-held principle of American society, and retaining that responsibility, and power, was an “affirmation of the ideal of community”



to many local officials.³ The debates over welfare reorganization saw the convergence of several issues, including who (business experts or professional social workers) was best qualified to administer relief and thus contain the contagion of dependence; opponents of reform spoke often of their fears of the spread of reliance on “the dole.” These debates started at the local level in the early days of the depression, and only intensified with the New Deal programs, the WRSC and the 1938 referendum. Other strands of thought would also factor into the debates, including anti-intellectualism (linked to the rejection of professional social work), hostility to the New Deal, and anti-Semitism, but the fears of centralization of authority were the primary concerns that in part explain the vehemence of opinions that would emerge in the next three years.⁴

The end of federal funds forced some short-term changes in how SERA operated, and Governor Frank Fitzgerald, elected in 1934, sought immediate change on behalf of local officials’ demands in early 1936.⁵ He appointed the WRSC in April, but it would

³Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin & the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 144.

⁴Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 416-417; Michael S. Clinansmith, “The Black Legion: Hooded Americanism in Michigan,” *Michigan History* v. 55 (Fall 1971) 244-246. Clinansmith describes the murder of a WPA worker by the Black Legion in Detroit, an extreme manifestation of anti-New Deal views.

⁵“Relief Power Return Asked,” *Lansing State Journal* April 30, 1936, p. 1-2. Fifteen counties, including Saginaw, met with Fitzgerald after he sought input from county officials on the issue of relief administration. They demanded a return of relief administration control to local governments. Fitzgerald, SERA officials and representatives of the Michigan State Association of Supervisors agreed to the SERA administrative changes. WRSC Report, “State Organization for Public Welfare in Michigan,” March 1937, p. 186-187, WRSC Records Box 5, Folder 4.

take time for the group to conduct its study and formulate recommendations. Local officials demanded immediate change, and by June 1936, SERA, working with Fitzgerald, revised the composition of county commissions to enable more local input and control. SERA only appointed one of the three members of the county's welfare relief commission, instead of all three as was the case under FERA. The county board of supervisors selected the other two; one was either the chair of the board, or another supervisor chosen by the chair, and another member recommended by the entire board. Supervisors finally gained some representation on the WRC, an issue of conflict from the beginning. A major goal of the shift was "to secure greater public support and interest in the administration of relief."⁶ Governor Fitzgerald, through an executive order, created a civil service merit system for employees and a qualifying examination for all current WRC employees. Fitzgerald and proponents of the change hoped to keep politics out of relief, which had been a goal of FERA, but Fitzgerald also supported a greater local role in relief administration.⁷ Eventually he would be a vocal proponent of local control, campaigning on that issue in 1938.⁸

⁶SERA planned to have the current WRC chairperson continue in his or her position. SERA Letter #589, June 4, 1936; SEWRC Papers, Box 1, Folder April to June 1936; "State Organization for Public Welfare in Michigan," p. 186-187.

⁷Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 409; George F. Granger and Lawrence R. Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan* (Lansing, MI, May 1939) 12. This was the third report of the Michigan State Emergency Relief Administration.

⁸"Fitzgerald Lashes at Centralization," *Lansing State Journal* July 29, 1938, p. 14; "Fitzgerald Heads the Speakers Scoring Present Laws," *The Evening News* July 29, 1938, p. 1 and 10; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 484-485.



Counties reacted in mixed ways to the proposed changes, but most eventually followed the lead of the State Association of Supervisors. In the most extreme, they rejected the new rules and would not participate, instead advocating a wholesale return to the pre-Depression system of relief, while others accepted the compromise as a short-term solution to Michigan's welfare situation. Van Buren County refused to appoint its representatives to the WRC, passing a resolution at its June 23, 1936 meeting calling the changes a "gesture." Instead, the county's supervisors wanted "the abolition of the State Emergency Welfare Relief and all state aid for direct relief and welfare [to] be allotted through the county authorities." The same resolution had been adopted by several other counties in Michigan, including Saginaw.⁹ The association initially fiercely contested the merit system and the proposed changes, with one member's views echoing those of the Van Buren officials: "For the last three years we have been regimented and told if we did not obey orders, state relief would be withdrawn...This new relief commission reorganization is just an attempt to pass the buck to the supervisors. I wouldn't belittle myself by being a member of the commission."¹⁰ The association, and subsequently Van Buren officials, did an abrupt about-face after a meeting with Fitzgerald, who strongly endorsed the merit system and persuaded the officials to accept the compromise. The association approved the changes on a 51 to 13 vote, with Van Buren representatives

⁹*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, June 23, 1936, p. 16-17; "Proposed Relief Plan Is Rejected By County Board," *Hartford Day Spring*, June 24, 1936; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County*, June 22, 1936, p. 4.

¹⁰Quoted in "Supervisors Hit At Merit System," *Lansing State Journal*, June 26, 1936, p. 4. The quote was by Norman Wiener, mayor of Albion, Michigan.

voting for the change while Saginaw was among those opposed. Three days later Van Buren's supervisors reversed their position, appointing their two members of the WRC, following the supervisors' meeting in Lansing.¹¹

Saginaw's board of supervisors, despite some firm opposition to the changes, particularly the implementation of a civil service system for employees, also appointed their own members following the Lansing meeting. The board members had passed a resolution the week before calling for full local control of relief administration, with state grants-in-aid, as Van Buren supervisors had, but accepted the new system.¹² Saginaw's WRC members did not favor the new system, however, and resigned even before the changes were implemented. WRC Chairperson Clement Quinn, who would have remained on the commission under the new set-up, also resigned, along with Elsie Mershon and Frank Greenfelder. Members feared the infusion of politics in the relief process, and resented the lack of input from welfare relief commissions across the state regarding the proposed changes.¹³ The state appointed another person to replace Quinn, and the supervisors appointed their two representatives before the end of the month;

¹¹"Merit System Finally Wins," *Lansing State Journal*, June 27, 1936, p. 1 and 5; "Supervisors Accept New Relief Plan," *Hartford Day Spring*, July 3, 1936; *Proceedings, Van Buren County*, June 29, 1936, p. 19. Mecosta County also refused to appoint any members, but held firm; the state eventually appointed all three members to the WRC. See Minutes of November 10, 1936 hearing, Welfare and Relief Study Commission Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, p. 21.

¹²"Merit System Wins: Bois of Saginaw Chief Objector," *Saginaw Daily News*. June 27, 1936, p. 1 and 4; *Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, June 22, 1936, 3-4, 9; June 27, 1936, 17.

¹³"Relief Board Resigns in Protest: Revised Setup Under Attack," *Saginaw Daily News*. June 18, 1936, p. 1 and 4.



administrator Lucius Howlett remained in his job.¹⁴ The county WRC apparently had little support among the supervisors. Although their resignations meant little, as only Quinn would have remained, they did voice their own objections to the changes implemented.

Marquette County, which had withdrawn from the State Association of Supervisors in 1932, sent no representatives to the Lansing meeting and quickly appointed its WRC members in June 1936.¹⁵ Marquette County was among those counties that had cordial relations with SERA, and although it would later favor some local control, its supervisors showed remarkable support for the state emergency program. They repeatedly filed or ignored requests from other counties to pass resolutions endorsing full local control and the abolishment of SERA, such as the one passed by Saginaw and Van Buren counties.¹⁶ Supervisors endorsed SERA and their WRC in late 1935, adopting a resolution recommended by its executive committee that “the Marquette County Board of Supervisors cooperate with the State Emergency Relief Commission to

¹⁴“Kendrick Confirmed as Relief Board Chief,” *Saginaw Daily News*. July 2, 1936, p. 1.

¹⁵Marquette County’s supervisors voted unanimously to withdraw from the association in 1932, just one year after rejoining the association. The supervisors, like many in the Upper Peninsula, believed the association held little interest in issues related to the UP; its focus on southern Michigan alienated it from its northern colleagues. “Marquette Supervisors Vote to Rejoin State Association,” *Daily Mining Journal*, January 22, 1931; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, January 20, 1932, p. 80; June 22, 1936, p. 365.

¹⁶A similar resolutions was passed by Manistee County. See *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Manistee County*, October 16, 1936, 478; *Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, June 26, 1936, p. 16-17.

the fullest extent.”¹⁷ As an Upper Peninsula county, Marquette was more distant from Lansing and the State Association of Supervisors, even when it was a member. The high rates of relief in the Upper Peninsula, including Marquette, made state funding of relief critical; local funds would not be enough. Marquette officials were not entirely happy with the specifics of the administration of relief, but in general its supervisors supported the system and continued to contribute relief funds to the WRC. They appeared to link the state’s right to supervise with the funds it contributed. Marquette’s Arthur Jacques, also a member of the WRSC, often advocated that position.

Manistee County’s supervisors also endorsed the changes, appointing Warren Graves, employed by a local lumber company, and Dewey Loomis as their representatives on the newly organized commission. Loomis had been a long-time critic of emergency relief, arguing that local officials could better administer the funds.¹⁸ The two men were to serve with then-current chairperson, Joseph Fisk, a local business owner. Like Van Buren County officials, they favored complete local control, but were willing to accept the compromise.¹⁹ But the administrative changes signaled the end of Louise Armstrong’s tenure as relief administrator. The commission did not necessarily have the power to remove Armstrong, the controversial administrator whose 1938 book provoked

¹⁷*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, November 13, 1935, p. 333 and 335.

¹⁸*Proceedings, Manistee County*, v. 13, July 1, 1936, p. 432; “Graves, Loomis New Members of Relief Group,” *The Manistee News-Advocate*, July 1, 1936; “Two Approved as Members of Relief Group,” *The Manistee News-Advocate*, July 15, 1936.

¹⁹*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Manistee County*, v. 13, October 16, 1936, p. 478.



such controversy in the county, but she resigned. Administrators now had to wage a public relations campaign to sell the system to local officials, and a regional official warned Armstrong that “everything must now be done to satisfy the Supervisors.” Armstrong wrote that such a campaign “was a good deal like trying to sell a tribe of cannibals on the idea of becoming vegetarians.” Armstrong had no good words to say about the two appointees, linking them to past problems and scandals related to the involvement of local officials in relief. She resigned before they officially took their positions.²⁰ Manistee County’s supervisors and other local officials were vehemently in the home rule camp, and Armstrong simply did not believe she could work with them, or vice versa.

The changes appeased the local officials for the short-term, and for the most part relations between the counties and SERA improved. Although temporary measures to administer categorical aid grants were approved (see Chapter Three), Michigan still faced the task of complying long-term with the provisions of the Social Security Act in its state welfare administration. Efforts in 1935 to reform welfare did not succeed as the legislature failed to pass either of the two major bills introduced.²¹ A major overhaul of the state’s welfare system was needed, and with that task ahead, Governor Fitzgerald appointed the Welfare and Relief Study Commission in April 1936, asking the eighteen-

²⁰Louise V. Armstrong, *We Too Are the People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938) 467; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 407. Fine presents Armstrong’s viewpoint uncritically in his analysis of Murphy’s tenure in office.

²¹Arthur Dunham, “Public Welfare and the Referendum in Michigan,” *Social Service Review* v. 12 (September 1938) 418.

member group to recommend changes in Michigan's welfare system, if needed, after a careful study of the existing system. The commission was to examine Michigan's welfare system, criticized for its redundant and overlapping agencies, and to attempt to consolidate and simplify the welfare programs, "as well as to give greater service to the indigent and needy persons in the state." The Social Security Act also necessitated changes in Michigan's welfare administration if the state was to qualify for categorical aid grants to help dependent mothers, the blind and the aged. The commission held its first meeting April 20, 1936, at the Hotel Olds in Lansing.²² The commission's report would form the core of the 1937 welfare reform legislation; the dissenting minority report, and its proponents, would organize the successful 1938 referendum to defeat the legislation. Thus the commission and the reaction to its findings framed the final welfare reform debates of the decade.

Fitzgerald appointed the commission members, who represented a range of occupations and perspectives on social welfare. The group included local officials (both city and county), business owners, members of the state's existing welfare commissions, current state officials, and medical professionals. Commission members included Kent County Probate Judge Clark E. Higbee, Marquette Mayor Arthur Jacques, who also would chair the county's WRC in 1937, SERA administrator William Haber, state welfare department director Fred Woodworth, Secretary of State Leon Case and William Norton, chair of the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission. Harold Smith,

²²Minutes of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission, April 20, 1936, p. 4; Welfare Relief Study Commission Records, State Archives of Michigan, Box 1, Folder 1; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 411-412.



executive director of the Michigan Municipal League and state budget director, was chair of the commission.²³ Arthur Dunham, a professor of social work at the University of Michigan, eventually directed the study.²⁴ Other members included Oliver Gibbs, an Oakland County Board of Supervisors member; William Thomas, Kent County Superintendent of the Poor; William Gallagher, chair of the State Hospital Commission; Lenore J. Buckley, a member of the Crippled Children's Commission; Harry Taliaferro, president of the American Seating Company in Grand Rapids; and Clarence Weiss, personnel director of Packard Motor Car Company. The commission also included funeral director Ralph Chisholm, attorney Melba Levin-Rubin, and physicians Robert Ashley and Stanley Insley.²⁵ The commission hired Fred Levi as executive director. Levi, a former Michigan resident, was an engineer and also held a degree in public administration.²⁶ Opponents of the WRSC would make much of the fact that he had worked on an unemployment commission in New York, characterizing him as an outsider with no business in Michigan politics.

²³Smith was a Republican, but was known to have voted for Eugene Debs in 1920 and Roosevelt in 1936. He later was appointed head of the federal Bureau of the Budget by Roosevelt. See Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 269.

²⁴Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 420.

²⁵WRSC Minutes, April 20, Membership list; Box 1, Folder 1 and Box 9, Folder 1. Norton was head of the Children's Fund of Michigan and had headed the Detroit Community Fund (later the United Way) from 1917 to 1930. Levin-Rubin and Insley were from Detroit, and Ashley was from Wyandotte.

²⁶Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 418.



The 1936 commission was not the first to evaluate the state's welfare system. Two commissions - the Commission on Public Relief and Care and the Child Welfare Commission - were established in 1917 and the former was extremely critical of Michigan's system and recommended sweeping changes in local welfare administration, including the abolition of the superintendents of the poor. The report's criticisms were similar to those found in later commissions, including the WRSC: local officials were often untrained political appointees who made only superficial efforts to investigate relief applications or coordinate aid with other agencies.²⁷ Another investigation took place in 1931, resulting in the published report, *Local Relief to Dependents*, by Opal Matson, who reached similar conclusions.²⁸ Matson focused on eight counties and conducted interviews with local officials as well as business people; she also visited all county infirmaries and interviewed the personnel in charge.²⁹ Matson's report outlined the development and status of Michigan's welfare services, and was critical of the overlap in agencies and duties as well as the lack of trained personnel. She recommended a county unit because most relief activities, including mothers' pensions, county infirmaries and

²⁷"Preliminary Report of Commission to Investigate Public Relief," February 22, 1917, copy in WRSC Records, Box 3, Folder 8; Emma O. Lundberg, *State Commissions for the Study and Revision of Child-Welfare Laws*, U.S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 131 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1924) 47-49.

²⁸"State Organization for Public Welfare in Michigan," March 1937, WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 4, p. 20-22.

²⁹Opal V. Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents* (Michigan Local Government Series, September 1933) 17. Counties included Antrim, Roscommon, Cass and Kent in the Lower Peninsula and Luce, Iron, Chippewa and Houghton counties in the Upper Peninsula.



juvenile programs, were organized on that basis. Most counties used the county unit for all their welfare programs, including outdoor relief, but she questioned the people employed to administer that relief: "there seems little reason to make the most serious and most costly service a local matter administered by untrained and often uninterested persons." She recommended county welfare boards with trained executives, and the abolishment of superintendents of poor and the removal of all welfare administration "from the hands of the supervisors and city welfare directors."³⁰ No action followed the report, in part because of the establishment of FERA and the state and county administrative agencies under that program. Commissions to study welfare in Michigan were not new, but action following them was rare. The 1936 commission would be different.

The WRSC quickly hired a staff and undertook a thorough study of all aspects of Michigan's welfare system, including SERA, the crippled children commission, the OAA Bureau, and a detailed study of welfare services in seventeen counties in Michigan. The local survey was similar to Matson's earlier work, although the WRSC staff sought to study a broader range of counties in greater detail. The commission also held four public hearings in Lansing, Detroit and Muskegon to gain input from local officials and other interested people and also met with state officials in charge of the various departments

³⁰Matson, *Local Relief to Dependents*, 69. The WRSC state report cited in the previous footnote listed the Matson study as "an excellent and still current picture of local public welfare administration."



related to welfare.³¹ Once the commission had an understanding of the current welfare system, members began to debate how best to change the system.

The Welfare and Relief Study Commission completed its final report only after much dissension and debate. Key issues centered on the amount of state supervision over all aspects of welfare (not just the federally-mandated programs), the hiring of “qualified” personnel (i.e. professional social workers and a civil service system) and the assessment of the existing system of welfare, including the superintendents of the poor. From the first meeting WRSC members William Thomas, a Kent County superintendent of the poor, and state welfare department director Fred Woodworth advocated returning to the pre-Depression system and allowing local governments the right to determine their welfare administration. Woodworth believed that “people of the counties should have the type of government they want,” a view that Thomas shared.³² Woodworth argued that the old system had served Michigan’s welfare needs for 100 years, and thus could certainly continue to do so.³³ Thomas argued consistently throughout the commission’s six months of meetings that welfare “can best be administered, in my mind, as it is now efficiently

³¹Dunham, “Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan,” 420-421; WRSC Minutes, April to December 1936, WRSC Records, Boxes 1 and 2. Counties included Gogebic and Delta, in the Upper Peninsula; Hillsdale and Eaton, representing diversified agriculture; Kalamazoo and Jackson, for diversified industry; Isabella and Montcalm, oil resources; Kalkaska and Montmorency, for cut-over-recreation; Saginaw and Oakland, high urbanization; Mason and Oceana, fruit; and also Allegan, Genesee and Ingham. “Local Public Welfare,” n.d., WRSC Records, Box 5 Folder 10, p. 18-20.

³²WRSC Minutes, August 21, 1936, 48-49.

³³WRSC Minutes, September 18, 1936, p. 12.



and economically.”³⁴ Woodworth and Thomas were also the most vocal critics of SERA and the job its county agencies did during the previous three years. Thomas was openly critical of SERA Administrator William Haber, another member of the commission, and argued that local officials could have done the same job more effectively with one-half to one-third the cost.³⁵ Woodworth and Thomas were the home rule advocates on the WRSC, voicing many of the fears outlined earlier, including the centralization of government and a hostility to the New Deal. Opponents of welfare reform later took up their arguments to defend local administrative control.

Michigan’s welfare system prior to its 1939 reorganization consisted of nine agencies at the state level, including the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission and SERA established in 1933. The State Welfare Department, created in 1921, included a director and deputy director, both appointed by the governor. The department included three commissions, all served by non-salaried members: the Corrections Commission, the Welfare Commission, and the Institute Commission; the state welfare director had no voting power on any of the commissions. The director of welfare also oversaw the old age pensions (and later the OAA program) prior to the 1939 law. Michigan also had a Crippled Children Commission, State Department of Corrections, State Hospital Commission, and the Michigan Child Guidance Institute.³⁶ Local welfare systems

³⁴WRSC Minutes, August 21, 1936, 47.

³⁵WRSC Minutes, August 21, 1936, p. 50.

³⁶Arthur Dunham, *The Michigan Welfare Reorganization Act: An Analysis* (Lansing: Michigan Conference of Social Work, October 1939) 10; “State Organization,” WRSC Records, Box 5, Folder 4, p. 36.



contained another nine agencies, including the County Superintendents of the Poor, which oversaw the county infirmary; the township supervisors who administered outdoor relief; the Probate Court (mothers' pension, dependent/neglected/delinquent children, and hospitalization); and county welfare relief commissions. Some counties had soldiers and sailors relief commissions and juvenile detention homes as well. The WRSC study found a total of 1,976 state and local agencies involved in public welfare administration in Michigan's eighty-three counties.³⁷

The WRSC argued largely between two possible administrative structures at the state level for public welfare: one department (including prisons and mental hospitals) or three separate departments (mental hygiene, corrections, and public assistance).³⁸ The commission eventually favored three commissions and departments, and recommended that structure in its final report.³⁹ The report also recommended state supervision of local agencies, through the state department of public welfare, arguing that "sound statewide

³⁷Dunham, *The Michigan Welfare Reorganization Act*, 12; "State Organization," WRSC Records; Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 421-423.

³⁸Arguments for the single department included simplicity and consolidation, which also would facilitate coordination between the different agencies and reduce overhead costs. Proponents also argued that the problems related to welfare services - "defectiveness, delinquency, mental ailments, crime and dependency" - were interrelated. Arguments for three departments held that the three major areas were distinct enough and large enough to warrant separate administrative structures. Each field required different kinds of expertise and finding one person qualified to oversee all would be difficult. The proponents of the multi-department plan also argued that the "historic basis for associating 'charities and corrections'" was gone, and linking those two to the care of the mentally insane was also more rare. "Michigan's Organizations for Public Welfare Services," WRSC Records, Box 3, Folder 8, p. 2.

³⁹"State Welfare Organization," WRSC Minutes, July 20, 1936, Box 1 Folder 2; *Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission* (Lansing, December 1936) 7, 12-17.



programs require statewide minimum standards and a blending of state leadership with local autonomy and initiative.” Federal regulations for the Social Security Act’s grants (Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance, and Aid to Blind) also required state supervision if the state was to qualify for funds.⁴⁰ The hiring of qualified personnel, through a civil service merit system, was recommended for all state welfare employees.⁴¹

WRSC staff, led by secretary Arthur Dunham, a University of Michigan professor of social work, undertook extensive investigation of local and state welfare programs. In addition to reports on state institutions and departments, based on institutional visits and interviews, staff members examined the seventeen counties through personal visits and interviews with local officials. They read boards of supervisors’ minutes and reviewed annual budgets, as well as laws relating to welfare, and recommended a wholesale revamping of the welfare laws and system: “It became clear very early in the study, however, that no adapting of the existing system would result in a twentieth century public welfare program. No amount of reshaping of the tools would enable them to be used effectively.”⁴² The WRSC staff report on local welfare was highly critical of the existing system, as described in chapters Two and Three of this dissertation. Its authors argued for a trained staff that operated outside the realm of politics; it also advocated a county unit system, rather than the township system used by some counties. It also

⁴⁰*Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*, 23.

⁴¹*Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*, 24. See also Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 412-413.

⁴²WRSC Records, “Local Public Welfare,” Box 5, Folder 10, 22.

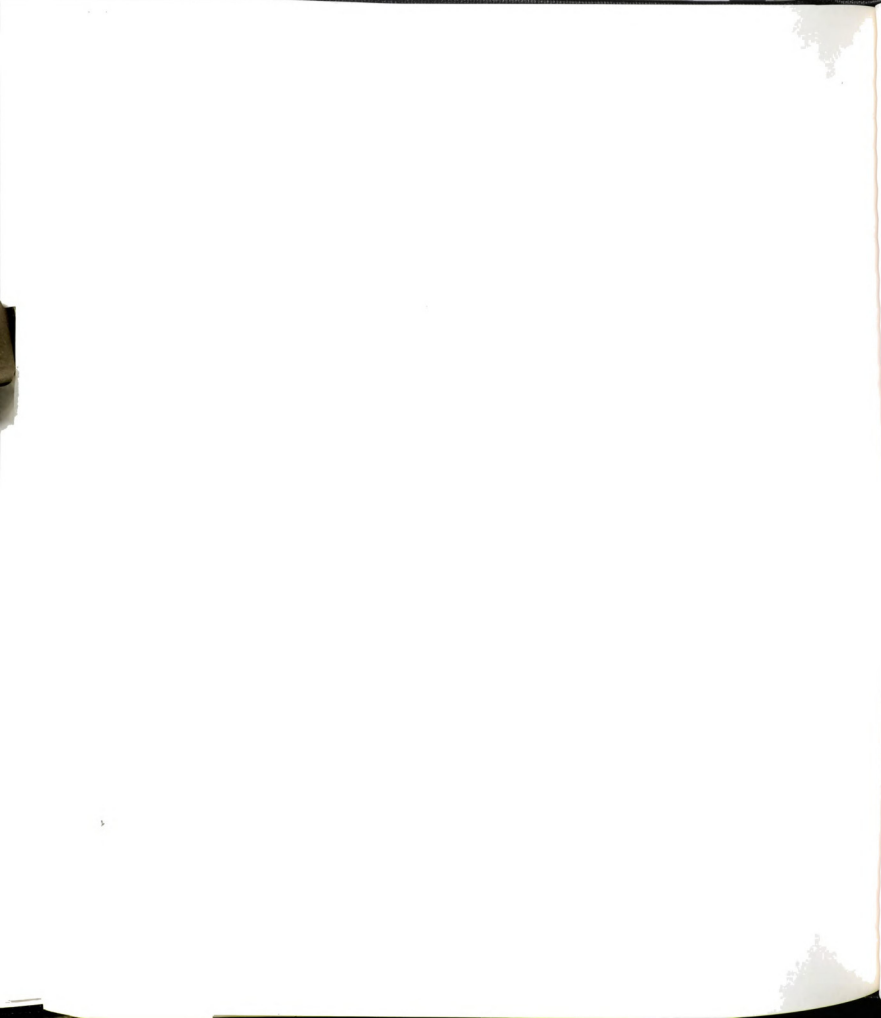


recommended consolidating all welfare programs, including OAA, direct relief, medical and hospitalization, institutional care, and soldiers and sailors' relief into a single county agency subject to state supervision. The staff report's key recommendations centered on hiring qualified personnel (trained social workers), the use of professional social welfare practices and coordination of social welfare programs. The authors rejected the argument that local officials, as residents, knew their fellow citizens best and could best assess their needs; that simply was not enough, as "too often familiarity breeds contempt."⁴³ The staff recommended replacing the old welfare system at the local level with professional social workers and methods, with state supervision and a civil service merit system.

The report ultimately recommended a single, integrated county department of public welfare, governed by a three-member board: one member appointed by the state and the other two by the county board of supervisors, as was the system in place following SERA's administrative revisions in mid-1936. The county board of supervisors could opt to appoint a member of their board, if they wished; supervisors were eligible under the report's recommendations.⁴⁴ The county DPW would oversee all aspects of welfare, including the county infirmary, categorical aid programs (ADC, OAA, and AB), medical care and hospitalization and direct relief. The department would be administered by a welfare director, who also would serve as secretary to the county social welfare board. Personnel would be selected through a civil service merit system. The recommendations called for abolishing the emergency welfare relief commission,

⁴³WRSC Records, "Local Public Welfare," 181-182.

⁴⁴*Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*, 26.



soldiers' and sailors' relief commission, county old age assistance board and investigator, and the offices of the superintendents of the poor and the county agents.⁴⁵ The report argued that the problem with the existing system was the training and qualification of the personnel running it, not "the indifference or insincerity on the part of the individuals."⁴⁶ The report's language sought to soften the blow to township supervisors and county superintendents of the poor, who had administered relief in Michigan for decades. Consolidating the existing multiple agencies into a single agency was the goal, with the addition of the civil service system for hiring staff. But the ensuing debates among the commission members about local administration were the most divisive. While most members agreed that SERA, and the 1933 law creating it, had to go, they disagreed on whether other revisions were necessary. The two sides had such basic and fundamental disagreements - the effectiveness of the old system and validity of professional social work methods and the SERA - that finding a common ground became more and more impossible.

WRSC member William Thomas attacked the local report on more than one occasion, disputing its portrayal of the old relief and demanding to see details about the criticisms. As a superintendent of the poor, he likely felt personally challenged by the criticism of the existing system and of his colleagues. He refused to accept that perhaps not all poor relief administrators were like him, as suggested by other commission members. Staff did outline in their reports specifically which county official generated

⁴⁵*Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*, 8.

⁴⁶*Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*, 27-30, 34.



which criticism, but he did not accept them: “you can’t tell me that in those counties where the superintendents of the poor or other agencies have worked they haven’t been conscientious and haven’t done remarkably good work.”⁴⁷ Thomas also was critical of the use of civil service exams, calling them a “damn fool lot of questions.”⁴⁸ By the commission’s end, he was critical of the commission itself, often asserting that a few members decided issues for the whole.⁴⁹

⁴⁷WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, November 20, 1936, p. 61. In addition, records related to the county superintendent of the poor in Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren counties show dissension and a lack of harmony related to poor relief. Complaints were issued and acted upon, and the state welfare department began an investigation of Saginaw County’s superintendents of the poor in 1931. The state issued a report critical of the county’s poor department, county farm operation and mothers’ pension program. Specifics in the report alleged misuse of funds of the county agent, duplication of salaries and per diem rates paid, duplication of investigations by the county agent and mothers’ pension investigators, and a lack of follow-up investigations of mothers’ pension cases. The state welfare department’s final report, released in January 1933, found no criminal wrongdoings, but did cite negligence and incompetence on the part of the specific staff members. One was Cassius Stewart, the retired superintendent of the poor who also served as county welfare agent. In his position for eighteen years, Stewart resigned in July 1931, just a few months before the initial report by the state department. State investigator Arthur Webster stated that the inefficiency occurred in the last five or six years, indicating that it was not criminal but due to Stewart’s advanced age and declining health. See “County Poor Fund Quiz Looms Before Board,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 24, 1931; “Poor Fund Inquiry Left Up To Prosecutor,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 27, 1931; “Stewart Resigns as Poor Director,” *Saginaw Daily News*, July 19, 1931; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County, Michigan*, January 11, 1933, 52-64.

⁴⁸WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 10, November 20, 1936, 24, 75.

⁴⁹The commission voted on various aspects of the report when a quorum was present. A majority of those members present, but not necessarily a majority of the entire commission, was needed to approve specific recommendations. Thomas often argued that a majority of the full commission should be necessary to pass any recommendations.

Thomas pushed early and hard for public hearings on the welfare issues, and the commission held four such hearings: two in Lansing, one in Muskegon and another in Detroit. Hearings were held only in the southern part of Michigan for the most part, thus limiting the numbers of county officials who could easily attend. The hearing held in Muskegon was the furthest north, coinciding with a meeting of the Michigan Municipal League; none were held in the Upper Peninsula. The November 10, 1936 hearing in Lansing was held specifically to coincide with the State Association of Supervisors' meeting, thus offering any county with representatives attending that organization's meeting to present their viewpoint. Although Thomas characterized local officials as overwhelmingly in support of local control and the old system, the hearings' minutes reveal a slightly different picture.⁵⁰ Some officials who testified clearly agreed with Thomas; they preferred the existing system, minus SERA and the county WRC, and believed that local officials could best administer relief. But others saw benefits in the ERA system and while they wanted to retain some local control, they did not want the old system - or its responsibility - back.

Twenty-six people representing seventeen of Michigan's eighty-three counties spoke at the hearings held October 22, 1936 (Detroit) and the following day in Lansing. Just eight of those (31 percent) voiced complete opposition to change, instead advocating a return to the old system, in agreement with Thomas and Woodworth. Sixteen (61 percent) wanted a new system, a mix of the emergency program and local control. Some

⁵⁰Hearing transcripts survived only for the two held in Lansing and the Detroit hearing; the Muskegon minutes are not available.



advocated continuing the communication between case workers and supervisors, whose knowledge of their residents could be tapped on a case-by-case basis. While many voiced certain objections to aspects of SERA's administration, some also saw positive changes evolving. Four (15 percent) favored consolidation of some kind, but did not necessarily reject the old system's staffing, including the superintendents of the poor. None spoke specifically against consolidation into a county unit.⁵¹ The hearing held with members of the supervisors' association is also revealing. Although the association went on record in stark opposition to a more centralized system, just one third of those supervisors who testified (six of eighteen) before the commission advocated a wholesale return to the old system, a percentage similar to the previously mentioned hearings. Ten (55 percent) favored a new system that blended local and state control and supervision. Some argued that if counties were to accept state and federal funds for welfare, they needed to accept some supervision and control. Statements against SERA and for local control tended to generate applause during the hearings, but in actuality many participants did not share the extreme negative views voiced by Thomas and Woodworth. Some appreciated the efforts by SERA to remove politics from relief, and believed that it had worked well.⁵²

The State Association of Supervisors' committee on welfare voiced the association's viewpoint through a resolution, with its own vision of welfare reorganization, to the WRSC through Thomas on November 20, 1936, soon after the

⁵¹WRSC Minutes, Hearings held October 22, 1936 and October 23, 1936; Box 1 Folder 8.

⁵²WRSC Minutes, Hearing held November 10, 1936, Lansing; Box 1, Folder 9.

hearings. The resolution called for a merging of the emergency welfare relief commission with the state welfare department to eliminate duplication, with a local relief commission of three to five members, appointed by the supervisors, to supervise all aspects of relief. The local relief commission would handle all hiring and fix salaries, with minimal state supervision. The association's position followed that of the home rule advocates, siding against the centralization of relief.⁵³

Those who opposed state control of any kind were adamant. For many the problem was SERA's administrative structure and the "expensive" case workers it hired. Social work was a target both in commission meetings and hearings. The criticisms reflected feelings of anti-intellectualism and opposition to university-trained officials (and social workers), including William Haber.⁵⁴ Again, Thomas and Woodworth were the most vocal opponents of social workers on the commission. Woodworth saw them as too interfering, and noted "that unless we watch, social service workers will supervise the lives of those people after they get their pensions."⁵⁵ He also believed that people were more able and willing to fool case workers, again because they did not know the residents well. Instead, the supervisors were the ones to do the job: "I am convinced that at least one third of the welfare recipients wouldn't have the nerve to tell him the 'cock and bull'

⁵³WRSC Minutes, November 20, 1936, WRSC Records, Box 1, Folder 10, p. 4.

⁵⁴Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 417.

⁵⁵WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 6, September 18, 1936, p. 17. Woodworth referred to OAA recipients in this statement.

story they would tell the Emergency Relief Administration.”⁵⁶ Experienced local officials were better qualified than “‘immature and inexperienced students of sociology and psychology’ and by ‘young folks fresh from school’ who lacked the experience and ‘mental reserve’ to resist the appeals of the undeserving poor.”⁵⁷ Thomas commented in one meeting that he “would like to see the person educated at the University of Michigan who can take over the duties [of superintendents of the poor and supervisors]... You would only have an administration building filled with employees.”⁵⁸ Thomas targeted the University of Michigan deliberately, directing the barb at Haber and Dunham, both on the university’s faculty. Thomas implied that social work would only create a large expensive system to administer relief, rooted in academics at the expense of local officials. Another supervisor agreed, arguing that the demands for professional social workers were “to keep the parasitical social workers in jobs and build up a huge bureaucracy.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶WRSC Minutes, Box 2 Folder 1, December 16, 1936, p. 47-48.

⁵⁷Quoted in Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 416.

⁵⁸Thomas also criticized Washtenaw County, following a comment by Harold Smith that his experience as a supervisor did not mesh with Thomas’s vision of cooperation and harmony. Thomas apparently made a comment about the county’s location (the University of Michigan is in Washtenaw County) and professors. Smith replied: “As far as I know, we have only one professor on the Board of Supervisors so I don’t think...appreciate the accusation.” (The tape apparently was unclear and thus the transcript only contained partial comments at this point.) WRSC Minutes, August 21, 1936, WRSC Records, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 48, 54.

⁵⁹Quoted in Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 417.

Anti-Semitism also appeared in the larger debates, although not in the context of the hearings or commission meetings, when one supervisor commented that “a bunch of kike social workers...will be coming up her[e]...and telling us how to run our own affairs.”⁶⁰ Anti-intellectual, anti-university, and anti-Semitic views also were voiced by legislators who criticized Haber and social workers in general during the debates over the WRSC bills in 1937. Sidney Fine argues that such views also appeared in earlier debates about civil service reform and unemployment insurance, and were directed at the most feared Jewish social worker, William Haber, who was a key player in those issues as well.⁶¹ Again the hostility toward educated social workers, and Haber in particular, is hard to overstate.

Thomas and Woodworth both argued that case workers were too willing to add to the relief rolls, thus feeding rather than containing the contagion of dependence, and that fiscal responsibility was not a high enough priority: “The only criticism practically that I have got...is that the case workers who have gone out have, perhaps, been too over-anxious to put people on relief who really shouldn’t be.”⁶² Another complaint was that case workers encouraged people to seek relief rather than work, especially in agriculture. Edward Foster, a farmer/supervisor from Washtenaw County, argued that he could not find hired help, because people preferred relief. He did not specify what he paid for

⁶⁰Quoted in Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 417.

⁶¹Quoted in Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 417. Although Haber was a target of those in the anti-social work camp, he was a professor of economics.

⁶²WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 10, November 20, 1936, p. 60.

wages, as relief grants were certainly not generous under any standards, but he did point to the social workers as the main problem: "I think if this thing were put back where it belongs and the men who administered welfare were interested in decreasing the load rather than increasing it, perhaps the farmer could get some help."⁶³ Saginaw County supervisor James Graham echoed this view, noting that farmers in his township had not been able to find help. He did not blame the social worker, instead pointing out that the social workers likely did not realize that farm work was available.⁶⁴

Officials voiced similar criticisms in their interviews with WRSC staff for the local report. Duplication of services and cost were the key problems for Saginaw Township Supervisor George Emerick, who did not testify at the hearing but was one of several Saginaw County officials interviewed by WRSC staff for the local study that so angered Thomas. He also echoed the views of Woodworth and Thomas when he said that social workers were overgenerous, and "took in everyone." As representatives of the poor department, he said, "we have to be harsh with some." The latter sentiment was shared by Kochville Township Supervisor Harry Allington, a farmer who had led the township board for thirteen years. His first words to the investigator were that "he

⁶³WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, November 10, 1936, p. 46. This issue also came up in legislative debates, again critical of Haber, who, it was charged, "educated his clients not to work, that his associates and he favored a 'big standing army of welfare clients' in order to keep their jobs, that the state needed a relief organization that was not dominated by 'carpet-bag professors and their like,' and that Haber had been on six different state payrolls, most of them concurrently, which was inaccurate." Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 417.

⁶⁴WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 8, October 23, 1936, p. 139.



wished welfare was out of existence.” He also believed the WRC took on cases for which he would not provide relief, which resulted in greater costs.⁶⁵

Social workers, many of the comments argued, were too “soft” in their administration of relief, and were unable to spot people seeking help when none was needed. Business expertise was key, local officials argued, because welfare administration was a business. Social workers had a role to play, but not in the administration of relief, according to Melton Van Geison, president of the State Association of Superintendents of the Poor.⁶⁶ He was not opposed to social workers in total, he told commission members, but believed their role should be confined to the “problem families in the localities...to work amongst those problem families and try to build their morale, rehabilitate them, and do whatever work becomes necessary in the social line.” But welfare administration should be along business standards, and “I firmly believe in my opinion that the social worker should not be given one dime of money in the administration of that department.”⁶⁷ Controversy in Manistee County over Louise Armstrong’s memoir of her years as relief administrator also revealed that social workers were not the chosen relief administrators of many home rule advocates. In her memoir,

⁶⁵WRSC Records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7, Folder 6, Saginaw County.

⁶⁶Melton Van Geison worked as a city poor commissioner in Flint in 1932, was secretary of the poor commission in 1935 and was secretary of the poor commission in 1938 and 1939. He would be named to the new County Social Welfare Board by 1941. See *Polk’s Flint City Directory* (Detroit: R.L. Polk & Company, 1932) 668; 1935, 770; 1938, 24; 1941, 22.

⁶⁷WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 8, October 22, 1936, p. 24.



Armstrong describes township supervisors as local dictators or czars, who remind her of people “who graciously accept[ed] a gift with one hand, meanwhile picking the donor’s pocket with the other.” In her view, they wanted the federal and state funds for relief, but with complete control over how those dollars were spent: “It was a case of trying to milk the cow dry, of trying to get every nickel they could ‘while the getting was good.’”⁶⁸ Her title, “We Too Are the People,” and the book’s contents allied her with the people her office served, rather than the county and city’s leadership.⁶⁹

Armstrong’s characterizations of the county’s people and leaders prompted Dr. Kathryn M. Bryan, a physician and long-time resident of Manistee, to write a 20-part rebuttal series entitled “We Too Know the People” in the *Manistee Examiner*. Her title pointed to her personal knowledge about her community and those who lived there, and was a deliberate twist on Armstrong’s title. Relief and politics were not the focus of her series, but she addressed both on occasion. She offered a very different picture of county officials.⁷⁰ She wrote that the county’s politicians were generally “well-intentioned and

⁶⁸Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 159.

⁶⁹Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 137. Armstrong’s harsh judgements also extended to some segments of the county’s population at large. She categorized the clients, at least in her mind, as worthy and unworthy, and commented extensively on class, ethnic and racial “tendencies” regarding behavior and the need for relief. She found much of the county’s population backward and “primitive”: “In all frankness - the citizens of this county were in general a mediocre to low-grade, unprogressive and relatively unintelligent community, but...I know that there were many of them who could have been of a much higher grade than they were, if only they had had the chance.” Thus although she directed her harshest criticisms at local officials, the average resident - especially in certain areas - did not fare well.

⁷⁰Armstrong Papers, Box 1, Reviews, Folders 6 and 7. The *Manistee Examiner* was a weekly publication that survived for just a few years in the 1930s. It was



interested in the public welfare.” She suggested that Armstrong’s social work perspective, and not the shortcomings of county officials, were really behind the hostility in the book: “A militant county supervisor, adhering to what he believes to be the right, can easily become the object of vilification by those whose pet theories he may oppose.”⁷¹ Those “pet theories” referred to the principles of social work and centralized relief administration that SERA practiced and that most “home rule” advocates, including Bryan and the local officials she defended, opposed. Most of Armstrong’s targets, Bryan wrote, suffered attacks in her book because they “opposed the policies of the author.”⁷² In Bryan’s eyes - and also those on the home rule side of the welfare debates - the conflicts were about policy differences, and not character flaws on the part of local officials in Manistee County. Again, social work was at the core of the disagreement.

Many critics of the centralization of relief and professional social work - and the New Deal programs in general - lamented the effects of emergency relief programs on American values of self-support and independence, again infused with gendered and racialized values. Integral to concerns about a growing preference for relief over work was the fear of a contagion of dependence raised in the previous chapter. Both direct and work relief came under attack by critics of the emergency relief programs. Emergency

apparently unable to compete with the community’s other major newspapers, the daily *Manistee News-Advocate*, and the bi-weekly, *Manistee County Pioneer Press*.

⁷¹Kathryn M. Bryan, “Seventh Article In The Series, ‘We Too Know the People,’” *The Manistee Examiner*. Although the newspaper has been lost, the Manistee County Historical Society has the bulk of the Bryan series.

⁷²Bryan, “Seventh Article.”



relief programs fostered dependency among Michigan residents, critics argued, with too little emphasis on helping the unemployed become self-sufficient.⁷³ Opponents tended to favor more traditional relief practices - often more punitive methods - to ensure that "the dole" did not become a habit. Woodworth argued that people lost the ability to support themselves through the Works Progress Administration, and now needed to be retrained to work: "We cannot give them jobs where they stand and lean on their shovels."⁷⁴ Again linked to the idea of contagion and uncontrolled spreading, Woodworth likened WPA, and the federal relief programs, to a narcotic or an addiction, arguing that "we had better put in a little cure."⁷⁵ Relief prompted people to say "'give, give give,' and [relief] is spoiling the morale of a great many of the people, knocking the self-reliance completely out from under them," according to Midland County supervisor Otis Whitehead.⁷⁶ A Calhoun County supervisor lamented the demise of charitable donations and a willingness to contribute to private welfare programs and to help others; instead, former

⁷³Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 416; Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs* v. 19 (Winter 1994) 320-321. Fraser and Gordon argue that by the late nineteenth century, dependency was increasingly a character flaw, rather than signifying subordinate relationships grounded in family or economics. By the Progressive and New Deal eras, the meaning of dependency "was fundamentally ambiguous, slipping easily, and repeatedly, from an economic meaning to a moral/psychological meaning."

⁷⁴WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 6, September 18, 1936, p. 11.

⁷⁵WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 6, September 18, 1936, p. 11. Woodworth's comments foreshadowed later emphasis on welfare dependency as an addiction, or "habit" that needed treatment. See Fraser and Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependence," 325.

⁷⁶WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 6, October 23, 1936, p. 106-107.



contributors told people to go to the state. The spirit of taking care of the community, he feared, was disappearing.⁷⁷ And some indicted not only relief clients who were willing to take all that was handed, but also local officials; emergency relief “meant well, but it encouraged a bunch of chisellers.” Local officials were also there, the supervisor argued, to “grab all we could.”⁷⁸

Gender operates as a subtext in these hearings and the debates over who could best administer welfare. Social work symbolized the federal and state interference in local relief, and to many, that social worker was a female, or espoused decidedly female professional values. No one named social workers as female, but they all envisioned the more efficient local officials as men: supervisors and superintendents of the poor were men; business was the domain of men and relief was a business and needed to be administered as such. Conflicts over gendered professional values are evident. Social work’s emphasis on service, compassion and cooperation - largely female professional traits connected to feminized professions, according to historian Robin Muncy - ran counter to the male professional values articulated by many who opposed the emergency relief programs and employing professional social work in the administration of relief. Social workers coddled relief recipients, while local officials would not. Instead, in their narrative of relief, the male values of efficiency, individualism and self-help were more

⁷⁷WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, 1936, p. 9.

⁷⁸WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, November 10, 1936, p. 113.



appropriate for welfare administration.⁷⁹ For local officials, the male alternatives were more about common sense and masculinity, or having the fortitude to say no when someone was trying to get help when they did not need it.

Van Buren and Saginaw counties offered mixed views at the hearings. Van Buren County superintendent of the poor Benjamin F. Scamehorn testified at the October 23, 1936 WRSC hearing, endorsing local control and claiming to speak for the county officials, "that they are standing pat, that the administration of relief shall be returned to local authorities."⁸⁰ He disputed earlier remarks by the county's WRC chair, Benjamin Clark, that the county put no money into relief. Instead, he argued that the county did contribute some to the ERA, but also funded other services - hospitalization, medical care and the county poor farm and infirmary - for a total of about \$65,000. Administrative costs for that amounted to about \$2,000, he argued. He criticized the waste of the WRC, and stated simply that "we are taking care of Van Buren County."⁸¹

⁷⁹Robin Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) xiii-xiv, 8-10, 68-70; Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Nancy Tomes, "Women in the Professions: A Research Agenda for American Historians," *Reviews in American History* 10 (June 1982) 283; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 416-417. Fine provides a succinct discussion of the contrasting philosophies of the two views on relief administration, but while he documents the negative views held by local officials of social workers, he does not argue a gender dimension existed to the arguments about economy and efficiency. He does persuasively connect the opposition to state and federal intrusion to anti-New Deal feelings, as well as anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism.

⁸⁰WRSC Minutes, October 22, 1936 hearing, p. 124. The hearing transcript erroneously lists Scamehorn as Scamehauser.

⁸¹WRSC Minutes, October 22, 1936 hearing, p. 124.

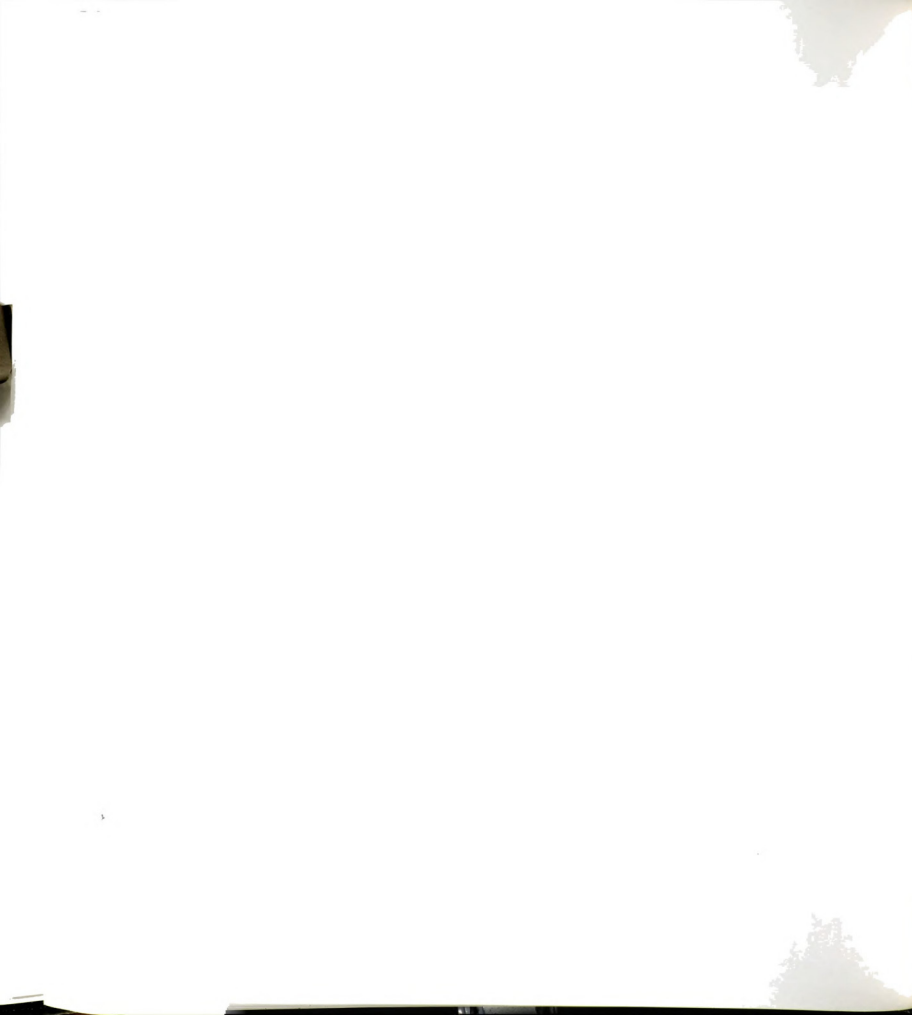


Clark presented a different picture of the county supervisors, although he believed that the exclusion of the supervisors from the WRC early on was a huge mistake that only created ill feelings; supervisors were asked to contribute county funds to an organization in which they had no control and little input. Clark preferred the 1936 commission set-up, with local officials selecting two of the three members, but he opposed the supervisors taking complete control of relief. He did not believe they truly represented the county's population, in particular the business interests. Although he was careful in his criticism, he clearly did not think the supervisors capable of administering relief effectively.⁸² He saw the WRC as "a non-political organization which is trying to do a tough job in the most efficient possible manner." The key remaining problem was duplication, in his view, and a consolidation of all relief into a single county unit would solve that problem.⁸³

Representatives from Saginaw County also testified at the October and November hearings, although Charles Bois, the county chairperson and a vocal proponent of local control, did not. Others who spoke included township supervisors James Graham and Lewis McNally (Graham also was the county agent who investigated old age pension cases before the WRC assumed the case load), and superintendent of the poor Arthur Hauffe. Graham's comments were supportive of supervisor participation, as they knew the people best in his view, but he also commended the cooperation of the WRC and local officials. His comments the previous month to WRSC staff members compiling the local

⁸²WRSC Minutes, October 22, 1936 hearing, p. 117-118.

⁸³WRSC Minutes, October 22, 1936 hearing, p. 119.



study suggested a single county organization to administer welfare, with supervisors “used as a point of view,” but not necessarily as the persons administering relief. But he also said in the same interview that supervisors should be the ones to issue relief, thus making his comments a case in contradictions.⁸⁴ Graham’s colleague on the board of supervisors, Lewis McNally, argued that supervisors already had power, and were “the king bee, I would call them, of the township. In other words, they write the orders, so there isn’t anyone that gets aid from 27 townships unless the supervisors write the order.” He didn’t see how they could wield any more power.⁸⁵ But he believed supervisors should continue to be involved in the administration of relief, largely through representation on the county welfare board.

Superintendent of the poor Arthur Hauffe spoke strongly in favor of local control at both the hearing and in his interview with the commission staff. He echoed Hoddenott’s statements that the emergency was over and “all relief should be turned back to the supervisors.”⁸⁶ He commended the cooperative relationship between the WRC and other county officials, but clearly wanted relief returned to the old system. He was much more critical of the WRC two months earlier in his comments to the WRSC staff in September, and shared Thomas’s negative view of the commission’s purpose and

⁸⁴“Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies,” 1936, WRSC Records, Box 7, Folder 7, County Agent interview.

⁸⁵WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 9, November 10, 1936, 43. McNally also served on the county WRC, appointed the previous summer after the changes instituted by SERA.

⁸⁶“Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies,” Box 6, Folder 7, Hauffe interview.

practices: "We are keeping up with this study of yours...we know all about what you are after and what will be recommended."⁸⁷

Not all who testified before the commission opposed social work or a change in welfare administration from the old system. Some supervisors, while they had quibbles with how the WRC handled relief and wanted to be consulted on cases, did not want to take full responsibility for it. Berrien County (southeast of Van Buren County) supervisors submitted a resolution arguing for just what the WRSC eventually recommended: county departments run by civil service staff under a state department of welfare. Supervisors worked well with the emergency relief staff, and did not want the job back.⁸⁸ Homer Noble, who served on the Livingston County WRC, agreed, and believed that the key to better administration was the case worker: "The case worker...is the very genius of this new set-up, and ought to be continued at all possible extent." It was time to end the superintendents of the poor era, he argued, and to use the better investigation methods of the case worker.⁸⁹ Similar views appeared in the interviews conducted by WRSC staff. Spalding Township Supervisor David Young, of Saginaw County, was a supporter of the

⁸⁷"Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies," Box 6, Folder 7, Hauffe interview. Hauffe's extremely negative attitude could in part have stemmed from his own difficulties with the county. The superintendents of the poor had been under attack from some members of the board of supervisors, although to no avail; Hauffe retained his position. See "County Poor Superintendents Under Attack," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 24, 1935, p. 17; "Superintendents of Poor Refute Reese Charges," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 25, 1935, p. 18; "Hauffe Given Vote of 40-3," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 29, 1935; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County*, October 24, 1935, p. 99; October 25, 1935, p. 111-112.

⁸⁸WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 8, October 22, 1936, p. 141-143.

⁸⁹WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 8, October 22, 1936, p. 140.



WRC and SERA. He used to have relief recipients work off their aid in a township woodlot, but ceased that practice after the WRC opened. The new agency saved him a lot of work and time, and he voiced no complaints about its operation.⁹⁰ Few were as vocal in their defense of the case worker as the latter examples, and their ideas definitely represented an extreme in the spectrum of views on welfare reorganization, but the hearing transcripts do not present a picture as described by Thomas and Woodworth. County officials vehemently opposed to SERA and social work were vocal and visible, but were not the majority.⁹¹

Thomas and Woodworth led the opposition to the WRSC's final report, issued in December 1936, and Thomas announced his intention to author a minority report even before the commission had finalized what would become the majority report.⁹² While the majority report recommended a single agency with state supervision over all relief, the minority report recommended state supervision only for the categorical aid programs, as required under federal law, but for the return of all relief administration to the counties. State funds appropriated for relief should be allocated to the counties to be "administered by responsible elective State and County officials," according to the minority viewpoint, and those funds would "be adequate when relieved of the burden of maintaining the

⁹⁰WRSC Records, Sampling Survey of Local Relief Agencies, 1936, Box 7, Folder 6, Saginaw County.

⁹¹This trend also is evident in the sampling surveys conducted in the case study counties by the WRSC staff. While some shared the negative views of Thomas and Woodworth, others did not.

⁹²WRSC Minutes, Box 1, Folder 12, December 3, 1936, p. 103; *Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*.

tremendous and wasteful organization now maintained by Emergency Relief.”

Signatories of the minority report believed that local administration, without state supervision, would be far more economical than the majority’s recommendation.⁹³ The minority report also advocated that the county welfare commission, appointed by the county board of supervisors and comprised of between three and five members, would oversee all aspects of relief, including the federal categorical aids, but only those federal programs would be subject to state supervision. County officials would select and hire all staff, without a civil service merit system, and also fix their salaries.⁹⁴ The minority report, presented by Woodworth, was adopted by the State Association of Supervisors January 27, 1937, at the organization’s annual meeting in Lansing, with only 2 of the 402 delegates dissenting. The resolution called for local control of relief and minimum state interference as outlined in the report, and soundly rejected the philosophy and specifics of the WRSC report.⁹⁵ Again, beliefs about the importance of local control, through locally elected officials, were apparent. Centralized relief administration was too far removed from elected officials, thus subverting the democratic process. The two reports set the stage for the passage of the 1937 welfare reform legislation package, and the reaction against it.

⁹³“Minority Report,” *Journal of the House*, January 28, 1937, p. 136, in WRSC Records, Box 13, Folder 7. The minority report was included in the *Journal of the House of Representatives*, as it was not published in time to be included with the majority report.

⁹⁴“Minority Report,” p. 137.

⁹⁵“Supervisors Ask Tax Sale,” *Lansing State Journal* January 29, 1937, p. 12.



Four commission members refused to sign the final report, including Thomas, Woodworth and Oliver Gibbs. Two of the four opponents were local officials (Gibbs was an Oakland County supervisor and Thomas a superintendent of the poor) and along with Woodworth were vocal proponents of local control. Dr. Stanley Insley, of Detroit, did not sign the majority report but also did not endorse the minority report. His criticisms centered more on medical relief, funding and the state administrative structure, rather than issues of local control.⁹⁶ The other key prominent local official, Marquette Mayor Arthur Jacques, fully supported the final report: "It is certainly a wonderful step forward in the matter of handling welfare relief and humanitarian problems in this state."⁹⁷ Jacques firmly believed that state supervision was acceptable if state funds were involved; he did not share the extreme home rule views of Thomas and Woodworth.⁹⁸

Both incoming and outgoing governors (Frank Murphy was elected governor in November 1936, defeating incumbent Frank Fitzgerald) endorsed the majority report, although not directly, in their respective speeches at the inauguration.⁹⁹ The commission drafted eight bills that session encompassing its major recommendations for welfare reform, and all were jointly introduced by a Democratic and Republican senator. They underwent amendments, but eventually passed both the senate and the house, and were

⁹⁶See Letter to Harold Smith from Stanley Insley, December 22, 1936 and February 13, 1937, WRSC Records, Box 9, Folder 11.

⁹⁷WRSC Records, Box 9, Folder 12, Letter from Jacques to Harold Smith, WRSC chairperson, July 7, 1937.

⁹⁸WRSC Minutes, August 21, 1936, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 45-47.

⁹⁹Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 429.



signed by Murphy in late July.¹⁰⁰ Public Act 257 covered the state administrative structure, while Act 258 detailed the county organization and the ADC provisions. Act 257 created a single state Department of Public Assistance, governed by a five-member commission and headed by a director and deputy director. Supervisory powers over county administration were limited only to those programs which received federal funds (ADC, OAA, and AB), a provision required to comply with the Social Security Act and make the state eligible for federal grants.¹⁰¹ Act 258 called for a single county department of public welfare governed by a board of three: one appointed by the state department and the other two by the board of supervisors. The county welfare board oversaw all aspects of welfare, from operating the county infirmary to administering the categorical aids.¹⁰² The act abolished most existing relief positions, including the superintendent of the poor. Key differences between the commission's recommendations and the 1937 law included the removal of the civil service provisions for staff of both the county and state departments, although state employees would be covered under the recently passed civil service law, and a reduction in state supervision, except in those programs under federal guidelines. The director of the county department also had to be a

¹⁰⁰Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 429-431.

¹⁰¹*Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan, 1937* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1937) 442-443, 445.

¹⁰²Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 418, 421; *Public Acts, 1937*, 450-452. The law permitted district departments of welfare, for small counties, and also allowed cities with a population greater than 300,000 (only Detroit was large enough) to have a separate department from the county.

three-year resident of the county.¹⁰³ Another important change was the participation of supervisors. Boards of supervisors were prohibited, under the law, from appointing fellow supervisors to the county social welfare board, a provision not recommended by the WRSC report. As with the early days of SERA, supervisors were cut out of the relief commission.¹⁰⁴ The exclusion of supervisors from social welfare boards, despite the elimination of civil service requirements for local relief staff, only magnified local opposition to the bills.

The two major organizations representing local officials, the State Association of Supervisors and the State Association of the Superintendents of the Poor, mobilized quickly in response to the new laws. The superintendents of the poor association met the next month in Manistee, moving up their meeting by a week, to begin efforts to fight the new welfare law. The primary purpose was to plan a petition drive for a referendum vote, an effort joined by the supervisors' association.¹⁰⁵ The referendum focused on Act 257,

¹⁰³Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 432-433 ; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 418-419.

¹⁰⁴The law also required that only two of the three members could be from the same political party. The WRSC majority report recommended that social welfare board members not be required to be supervisors, but did not recommend excluding them from eligibility. *Report of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission*, 26. Minnesota's welfare reform law of 1937 allowed supervisors to serve on the five-member county social welfare board, but limited their total participation to three at any given time. The law also allowed counties to organize either on the county or township basis. Another bill, which limited the participation of supervisors to only a minority vote on the board, was defeated. See Raymond L. Koch, "The Development of Public Relief Programs in Minnesota, 1929-1941," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1967) 336-338.

¹⁰⁵"County Poor Assail Welfare Law," *Manistee News Advocate*. August 19, 1937, p. 1 and 5; "Convention of County Poor Chiefs Ended," *Manistee News Advocate*, August



which outlined the structure of the State Department of Public Assistance and its supervisory powers, which were limited to the federally funded programs. The major opposition to the legislative package actually centered on Act 258, which specified the local administration of relief, including the exclusion of supervisors from welfare boards. That act, however, included appropriations for relief and under Michigan law, could not be placed on a referendum for that reason. Since Act 258's implementation was dependent on Act 257, opponents opted to place that on the ballot instead. If they managed to defeat that one, they defeated all of them. By October enough signatures were gathered and the issue placed on the November 1938 ballot.¹⁰⁶

The next eleven months found both sides focusing on the referendum; local officials sought to defeat the new law and proponents of the law, including the majority of WRSC members, sought its endorsement by voters. Proponents organized a Welfare Education Committee, comprised of members of both political parties, in December 1937. They purposely sought to prevent employees of relief agencies from actively participating in the campaign, which might be construed as self-interest on their part, a charge they made frequently against the superintendents of the poor. Their plans included promoting the law by distributing information through numerous organizations, including the Federation of Women's Clubs, the Parent-Teacher Association, and fraternal,

20, 1937, p. 1 and 4; Letter from Melton Van Geison, President, Association of Superintendents of the Poor, to all poor superintendents, July 30, 1937, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 7.

¹⁰⁶Dunham, "Public Welfare and Referendum in Michigan," 434; "Public Act 257 and Public Act 258, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1937) 442-463.



religious and service groups.¹⁰⁷ The committee published a pamphlet, "The Truth About Michigan's Welfare Referendum," seeking to counter what it saw as misinformation circulated by the welfare reform opponents.¹⁰⁸ Members of the group included state and local officials and representatives of organizations such as the American Association of University Women and the State Federation of Women's Clubs. Arthur Jacques and Francis MacDonald, mayors of the cities of Marquette and Saginaw, respectively, were on the state committee, along with WRSC member and Probate Judge Clark Higbee of Kent County. Chairpersons of the Berrien and Ottawa county boards of supervisors also served on the state committee. The committee's chairperson was George Boyd, president of Saginaw Lumber Company.¹⁰⁹

Cities and municipalities - represented through the Michigan Municipal League, which endorsed the law - tended to support the legislation, as it removed the relief responsibility from their shoulders and made it a county concern. Counties also could not charge relief costs back to the local units - cities and townships - as they had in the past.¹¹⁰ The city of Saginaw had already relinquished relief administration to the county in

¹⁰⁷Memo regarding committee formation dated July 21, 1938, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 7.

¹⁰⁸"The Truth About Michigan's Welfare Referendum," September 1938, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 8.

¹⁰⁹Welfare Education Committee letterhead, dated December 14, 1938, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 8.

¹¹⁰Other groups who endorsed the laws were the Michigan League of Women Voters, the Michigan Federation of Labor, social workers, and several Detroit-based organizations. Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 422.

September 1936. The council believed that its relief work duplicated that of the county and that overhead could be reduced through a single county agency. City officials approached the county with its proposal more than a year before the WRSC issued its report. The county agreed, and the city continued to contribute relief funds, but no longer administered relief.¹¹¹ The city council unanimously adopted a resolution six months later seeking a consolidated welfare system under state authority, funded by the state sales tax. Relief had drained the city's coffers for five years, and the city sought financial relief and saw the state as the key means to do so. They wanted sales taxes to fund relief, leaving real estate taxes to fund municipal government, "exclusive of relief."¹¹² The city council wanted the state to take over relief administration, both financially and administratively; local control was not an issue for them. Relief was an expensive headache and they advocated state supervision and local consolidation to reduce costs and the burden on local funds. Other cities shared that view.

Opponents characterized the new law as an attack on local control, and their rhetoric depicted the referendum as a war against centralized government for democracy. While the new law only partially curtailed powers of the local supervisors, they argued, more would likely follow. The organizations representing the supervisors and the superintendents of the poor met in Sault Ste. Marie in July of 1938 to mobilize the final stretch before the November election, and in a letter to all supervisors and

¹¹¹*Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw*, September 8, 1936, p. 150.

¹¹²*Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw*, March 22, 1937, p. 51.



superintendents of the poor, Van Geison encouraged them to send delegates to the convention:

This battle is in defense of local government...It will only be a short time until they will attempt to eliminate the Supervisors entirely, the same as they have the Superintendents of the Poor...Unless we take a definite stand and so decisively whip this attempt of encroachment upon local government, we will soon find all branches of local government under control of some State department. Therefore, it is your duty as public officials to protect the people at large who elect you to office.¹¹³

The extreme rhetoric of war and defense, furthering the argument that the state was seeking to usurp local government and the democratic process, continued at the convention held in late July. Several speakers, including Van Geison and Thomas, assailed the new laws and the WRSC.¹¹⁴ Van Geison and Saginaw County's Charles Bois also spoke to the local Kiwanis Club, demanding home rule for counties.¹¹⁵ Although a non-partisan group, the associations' members were largely Republican, and the meeting was a pro-Republican, anti-Murphy event. Fitzgerald, who later gained the nomination for governor and won the November election, was a featured speaker at the convention, decisively condemning the legislation.¹¹⁶

¹¹³Letter from Melton Van Geison, president of the State Association of the Superintendents of the Poor and chair of the State Referendum Committee of Flint, dated June 23, 1938, *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County*, June 27, 1938, p. 3.

¹¹⁴"Superintendents of Poor Declare War on Social Service Bill," *The Evening News* July 27, 1938, p. 5.

¹¹⁵"Would Scuttle Welfare Law of Michigan," *The Evening News* July 27, 1938, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Sidney Fine argues that Fitzgerald's change of mind on the welfare issue was linked to his desire to remove Melville McPherson, an ardent advocate of local relief

Saginaw County represented a mixed bag of support for the referendum vote. The city, as mentioned, had already consolidated its relief with the county and was not overly concerned with home rule. Charles Bois, chair of the board of supervisors, was a vocal proponent of local control, as was a majority of the county's governing board. Superintendents of the poor Arthur Hauffe and Catherine Phillion, both officers in the association, also were active participants in fighting to defeat the welfare law. But as noted, the city's mayor, Francis MacDonald, and business owner George Boyd supported the new legislation.

Marquette County's board of supervisors took no formal stand on the referendum, and filed or tabled most communications from other counties seeking support for or against local control of relief. They took no action on the letter from poor superintendent association president Van Geison, calling for delegates to the Sault Ste. Marie meeting; the board of supervisors quietly filed it and moved on to other business.¹¹⁷ Arthur Jacques, the mayor of the city of Marquette, was the key visible player from the county, as a member of both the Welfare Education Committee and a supporter of the WRSC's majority report. Marquette County clearly was not actively working against the new legislation, although as a body it also did not support it either. Not surprisingly, Van

control who distributed McPherson for governor cards at the meeting, from the 1938 governor's race. Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 420-421, 484-485; "Fitzgerald Lashes at Centralization," *Lansing State Journal* July 29, 1938, p. 14; "Fitzgerald Heads the Speakers Scoring Present Laws," *The Evening News* July 29, 1938, p. 1 and 10.

¹¹⁷*Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, July 20, 1938, 13.



Buren County's Board of Supervisors went on record endorsing the minority report early in 1937, although they also took no formal action on the referendum.¹¹⁸

Opponents of the welfare laws ultimately prevailed when Michigan voters defeated the welfare legislation by a vote of 572,756 to 497,569 - a margin of about 75,000 votes - in what the *Detroit News* called "the most hotly-contested" proposal on the ballot.¹¹⁹ The election attracted the largest number of Michigan voters in a non-presidential election; about 53 percent of Michigan voters cast ballots in 1938, as compared to 33 percent in 1930.¹²⁰ The 1938 election was hailed by many political experts as a test of the New Deal, and a majority of Michigan voters did not give it passing grades. They re-elected Republican Frank Fitzgerald, governor from 1934 to 1936, ousting Democrat Frank Murphy, the former Detroit mayor who had defeated Fitzgerald two years earlier. Republicans not only won the governorship, but also gained control of both the state senate and the house of representatives.¹²¹

¹¹⁸*Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, March 23, 1937.

¹¹⁹"Referendum on Act 257, P.A. 1937," WRSC Records, Box 2 Folder 8; "Welfare Act Appears Lost," *Detroit News*, November 9, 1938, p. 1.

¹²⁰"Fitzgerald Lead Increasing With Third of Precincts In," *Detroit Free Press*, November 9, 1938, p. 1; James K. Pollock and Samuel J. Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition: An Areal Study of Voting Trends in the Last Decade*, University of Michigan Governmental Studies, No. 10 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1942) 23. Michigan voter participation in 1928 was 55 percent; in 1932 it was 63.7 percent, in 1936 it was 67.4 percent, and in 1940 it was 73 percent. No statistics for 1934 are included.

¹²¹Samuel T. McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernatorial Campaign of 1938," *Michigan History* 61 (June) 99; Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 4-8.



Just eleven of Michigan's eighty-three counties approved the welfare laws. Seven of the eleven counties were in the Upper Peninsula and the other four were in the Lower Peninsula, including Kent, Muskegon, Oakland and Wayne counties (see Table 14 and Figure 4). Marquette, Saginaw and Van Buren all defeated the welfare legislation in their county votes, and only Marquette County's vote favored Democratic governor Murphy; Saginaw and Van Buren both supported Fitzgerald. Saginaw had gone to Murphy in 1936, but Van Buren had remained firmly Republican throughout the decade, as had many agricultural counties.¹²² Local offices also followed the state trends as well; all three counties elected Republicans to county offices and the state legislature.¹²³

¹²²"Referendum on Act 257, P.A. 1937;" "County Back in Republican Fold," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1938, p. 1. Kalamazoo County narrowly defeated the law on a vote of 10,610 to 10,060; Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 14, 35, 57. Pollock and Eldersveld define Van Buren as one of fourteen "safe" Republican counties in the state during the 1930s.

¹²³Only the Democratic sheriff survived in Saginaw, and Republicans dominated local offices in Van Buren County. "Straight Vote Elects Van Buren Republicans," *Hartford Day Spring*, November 9, 1938, p. 1; "County Back in Republican Fold," *Saginaw Daily News*, p. 1. Manistee also returned to the Republican camp, after supporting Murphy in 1936. See "Republicans Take Majority of County Offices," *Manistee News-Advocate*, November 9, 1939, p. 1. Only the register of deeds and the treasurer were among Democrats elected in Manistee County.



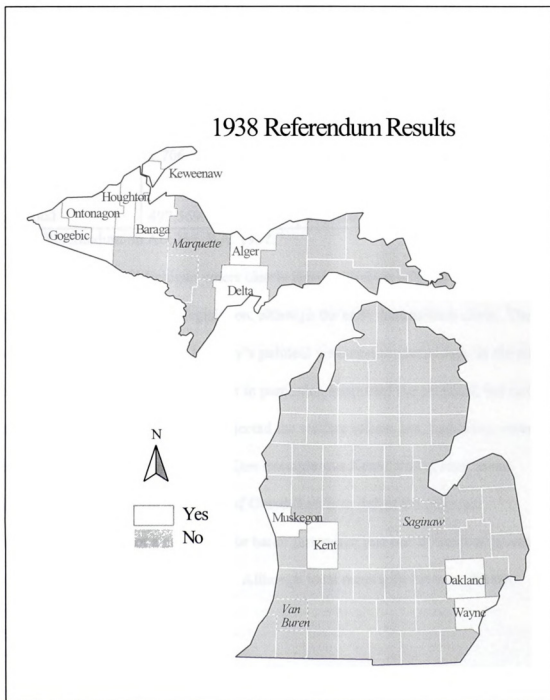


Figure 4



Table 14 Referendum Results

County	Yes	No
Genesee	21,571	26,770
Kent	23,816	22,843
Manistee	1,382	3,131
Marquette	4,275	5,655
Saginaw	9,737	13,643
Van Buren	2,706	5,371
Wayne	234,208	172,643
State total	497,569	572,756

Source: "Referendum on Act 257, P.A. 1937."

The majority of Michigan voters clearly sided with local officials opposed to the changes outlined in the reform legislation, although the early returns were close. The results followed to some degree Murphy's political weaknesses, particularly in the state's rural areas. Wayne County, and Detroit in particular, supported the proposal, but rural voters throughout Michigan soundly rejected the welfare reform law, and urban votes were not able to offset their numbers. One example was Kent County: rural votes overcame a strong showing in the city of Grand Rapids to defeat the proposal countywide.¹²⁴ It was not a good year for ballot proposals; just one of the four presented was approved by voters in the election. Although local races split between the two

¹²⁴McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernatorial Campaign," 104; "City Supports Welfare Shift: Rural Kent Citizens, However, Oppose Amendment," *Grand Rapids Press*, 1. The Kent County vote was 5,044 for and 6,988 against the welfare act.



parties, Fitzgerald won the critical urban center, in contrast to the election two years earlier.¹²⁵

The votes cast for the welfare reorganization law followed the voting trends for governor to some degree, although only 64 percent of those voting for governor also voted on the welfare referendum issue.¹²⁶ The election represented a retreat from earlier Democratic gains in the once solid Republican state. One of the key areas of the Democrats' support in that decade had been the industrial and urban centers, including Wayne and Genesee counties. Murphy, who won majorities in only twenty-one counties, lost enough of the urban vote to lose the 1938 election. Genesee County, the home of Melton Van Geison, the leader of the referendum fight, defeated the welfare act, and also rejected Murphy.¹²⁷ Murphy's other area of support centered in the Upper Peninsula, particularly in the mining districts, which shifted to the Democratic Party in the 1930s. Murphy won all but four counties in the U.P. in 1936, and only lost two more in 1938.¹²⁸

¹²⁵McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernational Campaign," 112; Willis F. Dunbar and George S. May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995) 530-531; Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 151-152, 173.

¹²⁶Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 423.

¹²⁷McSeveney and other historians argue that Murphy's stance on labor unions, particularly his role in the General Motors sit-down strike of 1937, and charges of Communist influence in both labor unions and government, were major reasons for his defeat in 1938. McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernational Campaign," 112; Dunbar and May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, 530-531; Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*, 151-152, 173.

¹²⁸McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernational Campaign," 119; Pollack and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 14.

The election results reveal significant links between the election of governor and the referendum. As noted, the majority of the counties supporting the welfare reform laws were in the Upper Peninsula, and only one did not support Murphy as well as the welfare reorganization act. One historian argues that this shift was in reaction to the Depression and the enormously high relief numbers in much of the U.P.; counties with high relief rates tended to support Murphy and the welfare reorganization act. A study of voting trends also found a link between relief rates and voting trends; counties with a greater need for relief (including the Upper Peninsula's mining, lumbering and fishing areas) tended to shift to Democrats, in part explaining the welfare referendum results. Economic prosperity was slow to return to that region, whose industries were in a downward spiral before the Depression hit. As late as 1938, nearly a third of residents remained on the relief rolls, and thus residents likely saw the new act - with its state and federal money - as a necessary fiscal reality.¹²⁹ Local funds could not support relief and welfare costs, and those counties that needed the most financial help for relief funding tended to support the Democratic Party.

Why the referendum failed is difficult to explain fully, although the fact that just 64 percent of voters casting ballots in the election opted to vote on the welfare referendum suggests that perhaps the issue was not all that important to many Michigan residents, or at least to the one-third who voted in the election but chose not to cast a ballot on the referendum issue. Normally referendums attracted about three-quarters of

¹²⁹McSeveney, "The Michigan Gubernatorial Campaign," 119-120; Pollock and Eldersveld, *Michigan Politics in Transition*, 53, 55-56; "How Michigan Counties Lined Up For Governor in 1936 and 1938," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 9, 1938.

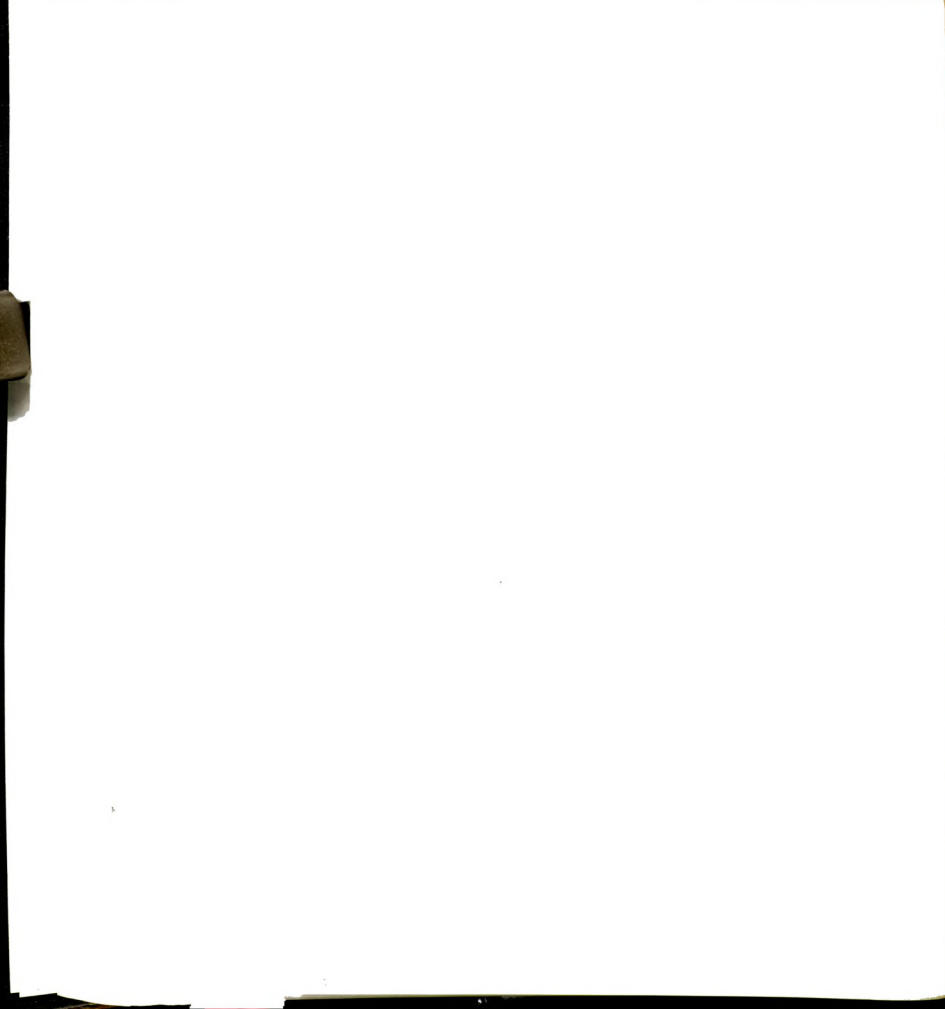
voters who go to the polls, so the welfare count was lower than average. The executive secretary of the Welfare Education Committee termed many of the margin votes - those 75,000 votes between the yes and no sides - as "automatic or uninformed negative votes," and pointed to the large number of affirmative votes as evidence of a "great progressive step in educating the public in welfare matters."¹³⁰ One historian argues that referendums, although intended to bring a greater voice to citizens on specific issues, often served special interest groups, "and [have] required voters to decide issues they only dimly comprehend, if they comprehend them at all."¹³¹ Some believed the issue was too complicated for the average voter to understand, or care about, and thus many cast uninformed ballots. Two Michigan State College professors argued that part of the problem was the information provided by the proponents of the law, the Welfare Education Committee. Their arguments were "'too intelligent,' [were] over the heads of the general public, and [were] not directed at 'underlying emotional beliefs, group ideas, and accepted values of the rural population.'"¹³²

The latter point is perhaps the most important, rather than the elitist view that the general population is incapable of understanding certain policy decisions. While the proponents of the welfare law did not speak to the beliefs and values of the Michigan residents, especially those in rural areas, the opponents most certainly did. Their extreme

¹³⁰Letter from WEC executive secretary John MacLellan to Harold Smith, December 14, 1938, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 8.

¹³¹Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 423-424.

¹³²Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 423.



rhetoric certainly did not match the facts in the issue, and actually distorted what would happen if the legislation stood.¹³³ But in those distortions was, as cited earlier, a “message of real meaning.”¹³⁴ Fears about the centralization of government, and the intrusion of the federal and state governments, are evident in the debates during this period. Some proponents of home rule viewed the Social Security Act, even with the large amounts of money it would bring to the state and the burden it would lift from local communities for categorical relief, as further encroachment on local autonomy by the federal government, because of the strings attached to those funds, namely state supervision. Both Thomas and Woodworth, the key proponents of home rule in the Welfare and Relief Study Commission, stated that they saw the act as unconstitutional, a violation of states’ rights in the regulations that accompanied the money. “I think the grant-in-aid principle is all right but a grant that produces the dictation to the state when you say you have got to do so and so, you are taking certain liberties that are reserved to the state by the constitution,” said Woodworth at one meeting.¹³⁵ Michigan’s compliance with the act’s regulations, even on a temporary basis to receive ADC and OAA funds, was a betrayal to the constitutional rights of state and local governments, in Woodworth’s mind: “We just recently adopted a policy of purchasing submission to the Federal regulations.”¹³⁶ The expanded power of the federal government came at the expense of

¹³³Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 420.

¹³⁴Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 143.

¹³⁵WRSC Minutes, September 18, 1936, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 6, p. 6.

¹³⁶WRSC Minutes, August 21, 1936, WRSC Records, Box 2, Folder 5, p. 50.



the state government, and proponents of home rule argued that it was only the first step in the continued demise of local control.

Home rule proponents were not opposed to all involvement of the federal and state governments in relief, but they wanted that participation to be limited. Again, parallels to other New Deal social movements, and the ideologies and fears they represented, are evident. Huey Long and Charles Coughlin gained their constituencies by advocating an expansion of the role of the federal government, according to Brinkley, but only a limited role: "But it was to be a largely negative, almost passive power. Government was to protect the individual, enhance the vitality of the community. It was not to become an intrusive behemoth."¹³⁷ Likewise, opponents of the 1938 referendum wanted more state and federal government involvement in relief - largely through the funds provided - but did not want those governments controlling how local communities spent the money. Local officials knew their communities best and thus could administer it most effectively. Locally elected officials also were the most immediate elected representatives in the democratic process; to limit their participation would encroach upon that process. As noted, Long and Coughlin tapped into long-held beliefs and fears about the role of the state and federal governments, and lauded the importance of the local communities. Opponents of the welfare reform laws did the same, and were extremely successful in the 1938 referendum, because they provided "one of the essential qualities of any effective political ideology: familiarity."¹³⁸ The themes voiced by

¹³⁷Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 154.

¹³⁸Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 165.



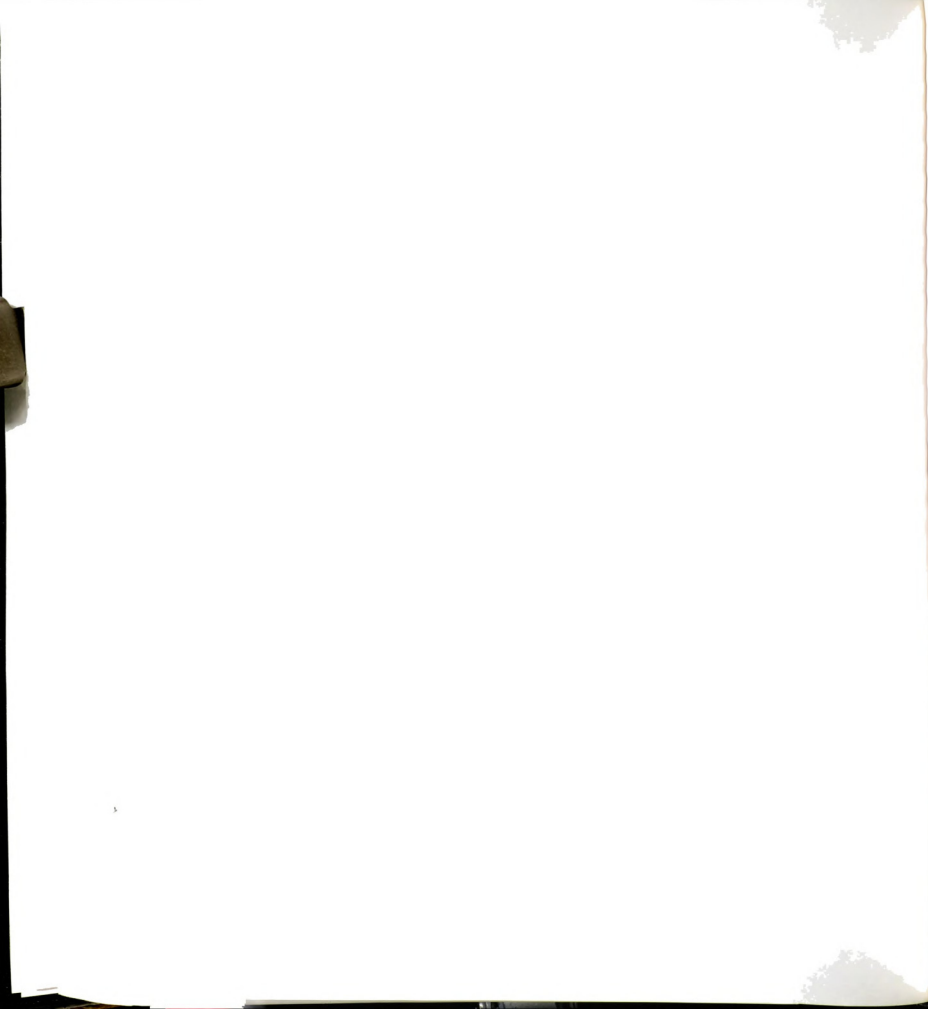
opponents of relief reorganization were familiar to many Michigan residents, and spoke to long-held fears about government and community. The context of a resurgence of relief costs in the recession of 1937 and 1938 and fears about a permanent relief class, coupled with growing disillusionment with New Deal programs, also helps to explain the defeat of the welfare reorganization laws. Many people believed “the emergency is over,” as Lenawee County’s E. H. Hoddenott did.

Implementation of the 1939 Law

The defeat of Act 257, and thus the entire welfare reorganization package of 1937, sent legislators back to the drawing board. At the 1939 meeting of the State Association of Supervisors in January, newly elected governor Frank Fitzgerald promised local relief, and an end to expensive social work theories, “which are impractical and are paid for at a high cost to the taxpayers.”¹³⁹ He did not entirely discount social workers, as they had their place, “but I think that in the administration of welfare relief, more common sense and less socially minded ideas are needed.”¹⁴⁰ Fitzgerald also appointed key home rule advocates to the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, including Oliver Gibbs, a WRSC member who signed the minority report, and Carlton H. Runciman of Kent County. The new commission immediately appointed Milton Van Geison, who had headed the referendum fight, state administrator, to replace William Haber, who had

¹³⁹“Governor Pledges Localized Relief,” *Lansing State Journal*, January 25, 1939, p. 1.

¹⁴⁰Address by Frank Fitzgerald, *Proceedings of the Michigan State Association of Supervisors, Annual Meeting*, January 25, 1939, p. 34.



resigned.¹⁴¹ Five months later the legislature approved Act 280 of 1939, which took effect in 1940.

The new law offered counties different administrative options regarding welfare administration, including full-time working social welfare boards or part-time boards with a full-time director. All counties were to have a county social welfare board, with two members appointed by the board of supervisors, and the third member by the state social welfare commission.¹⁴² Unlike the 1937 law, the 1939 law allowed supervisors to serve on the social welfare board. The critical decision facing counties was whether to adopt the “dual” system or the “unified” system. The dual system allowed counties to create a two-part welfare administration: one executive or board would administer direct relief, funded by state and local funds, with only minimal state supervision, and another executive headed the Bureau of Social Aid, which administered the categorical aid programs under the Social Security Act. The latter was directly supervised by the state and workers were state employees; the former was largely controlled by local officials, who were not bound by civil service rules and were relatively free of state supervision. Under the unified system, counties had an integrated department of welfare, which administered all relief - direct and categorical aids. The department was to be headed by

¹⁴¹*Proceedings, Supervisors Annual Meeting*, January 26, 1939, 49-50.

¹⁴²*Public Acts of Michigan, 1939*, Act 280, Section 46, p. 527.

a director and staffed by people selected under the civil service merit system; state supervision extended to all forms of relief.¹⁴³

In essence, the unified system followed the tenets of the 1937 law and the major recommendations of the WRSC, while the dual system exemplified the concept of local control or "home rule" so loudly defended during the welfare debates. The law also allowed relief to be administered on a township basis, a practice one critic argued was a "relic of the poor laws and of horse and buggy days."¹⁴⁴ The State Association of Supervisors' President Oliver Gibbs, who had served on the WRSC, told the members the welfare law was not perfect, but was better than the one they helped to defeat, "because it places the administration of welfare in the hands of local officials who are in daily contact with the people and who know their needs better than any other group."¹⁴⁵ One historian of Minnesota's relief programs called such laws an "application of the 'partnership' concept of welfare administration," or a sharing of responsibility of administration between the local and federal-state programs.¹⁴⁶ Michigan legislators created a dual

¹⁴³Counties also had up to eight options as to how to organize the relationship between the board and department, and whether to have a full-time board administering welfare or a director and/or supervisor in conjunction with a part-time board. "Supervisors to Name New Welfare Board," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 11, 1939, p. 1 and 4; Gene Alleman, "Supervisors Wrestle With Relief Problem," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 11, 1939, p. 8; Dunham, *The Michigan Welfare Reorganization Act of 1939*, 26-33; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*, 520.

¹⁴⁴Dunham, *The Michigan Welfare Reorganization Act*, 40; *Public Acts of Michigan, 1937*, Section 71, p. 535.

¹⁴⁵"Welfare Law 'Not Perfect,'" *Lansing State Journal*, January 23, 1940.

¹⁴⁶Koch, "The Development of Public Relief Programs," 337-338.

system of administration, and although the New Deal's Social Security Act was a federal program, and many recipients saw a new ally in the federal government, local officials retained a significant role in their administration, and mediated all aid distributed through those programs.¹⁴⁷

Not surprisingly, many counties selected the dual system, opting for a division between those services under direct state supervision and those with only minimal state involvement, which centered largely on direct relief. Again, state supervision coupled with civil service hiring systems - and the use of trained, professional social workers - was rejected. The minimum requirements for the social work administrator position under federal guidelines included at least four years of experience in social welfare, with at least one year in an administrative position. Administrators also had to have at least two years of college education, a portion of which had to be courses in social sciences. One report noted that "it is said on good authority in Lansing that not one county supervisor in Michigan could possibly qualify for the job of relief administrator." The same report argues that the selection of the dual system by a majority of counties was "inevitable" for that reason.¹⁴⁸

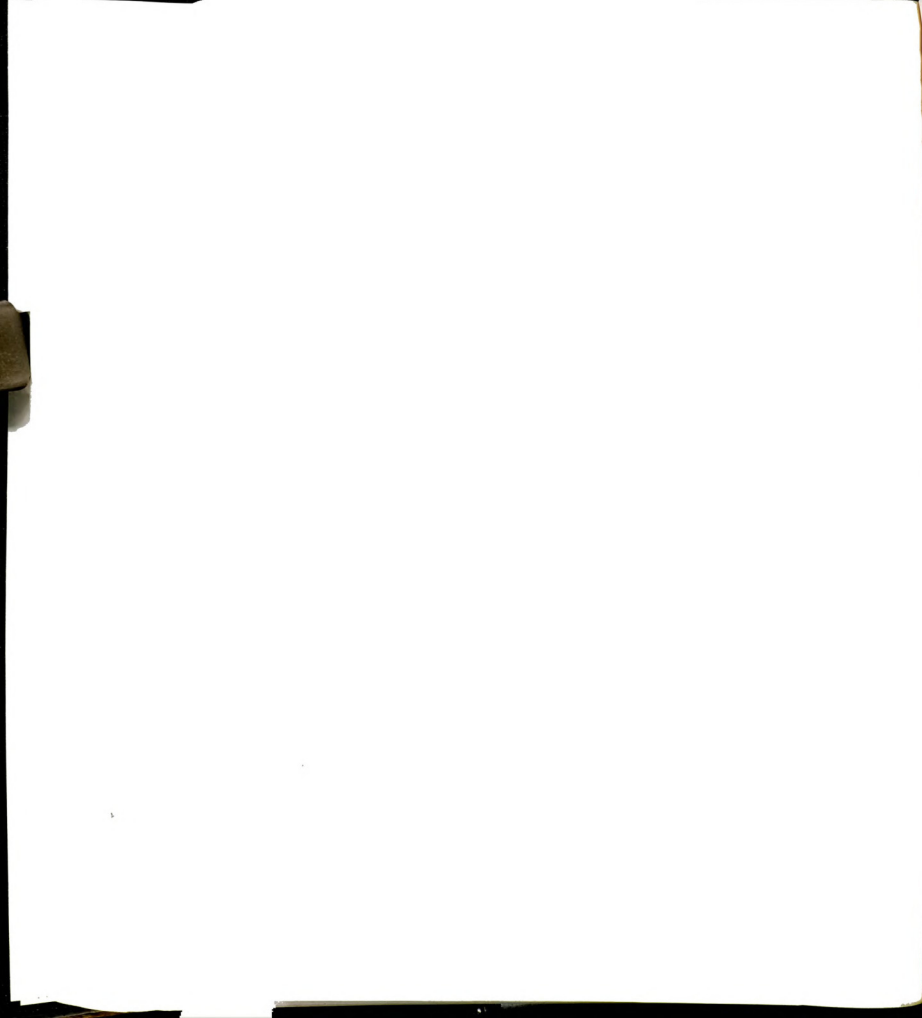
¹⁴⁷Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 294-299. Linda Gordon argues that the Social Security Act, and its differentiations between "entitlements" and "welfare" resulted in two kinds of citizenship: federal and local. The former, largely covering white men, had "higher standards, a bigger tax base to support them - and dignity." In contrast, the latter, which affects largely women and minority men, "are far more vulnerable to political attacks, declining tax bases, and interstate competition." (294)

¹⁴⁸Gene Alleman, "Supervisors Wrestle With Relief Problem," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 11, 1939, p.8.

Manistee, Marquette and Saginaw counties all opted for a dual system, while Van Buren County supervisors surprisingly voted for an integrated department, despite their opposition to state supervision and centralization. Van Buren's decision came on a close 13 to 8 vote and was accompanied by a heated debate; one supervisor pointed out that the decision went directly against the home rule position the supervisors had defended for so long, but the members' votes did not change. A motion to adopt the dual system failed on a 10 to 11 vote.¹⁴⁹ Neither the newspaper accounts nor the minutes record why several supervisors reverted from their hard-line home rule stance, but it may have been in the interests of efficiency. They may have feared that the dual system involved too much duplication of costs, and believed that the board's role in administering relief would be strong enough to retain a local voice. Marquette County's welfare committee recommended the dual system to supervisors because they believed the county's size warranted two executives, dividing the tasks between them. They also recommended a non-partisan board, although that was not required by law, and sought to have the two departments endeavor to avoid duplication. Supervisors adopted the recommendations on a unanimous 36 to 0 vote, also thanking all poor commissioners and the welfare relief commission "for their untiring and unselfish efforts."¹⁵⁰ Arthur Jacques served on the

¹⁴⁹"County Welfare Plan Is Approved," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 18, 1939, p. 4; *Proceedings, Van Buren County*, October 12, 1939, p. 41. The newspaper account erroneously reported the vote results, stating that the unified system was approved 11 to 10; this is one of the few discrepancies I have found between newspaper accounts and the supervisors' official minutes.

¹⁵⁰*Proceedings, Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, Volume 8, September 20, 1939, p. 89-90.

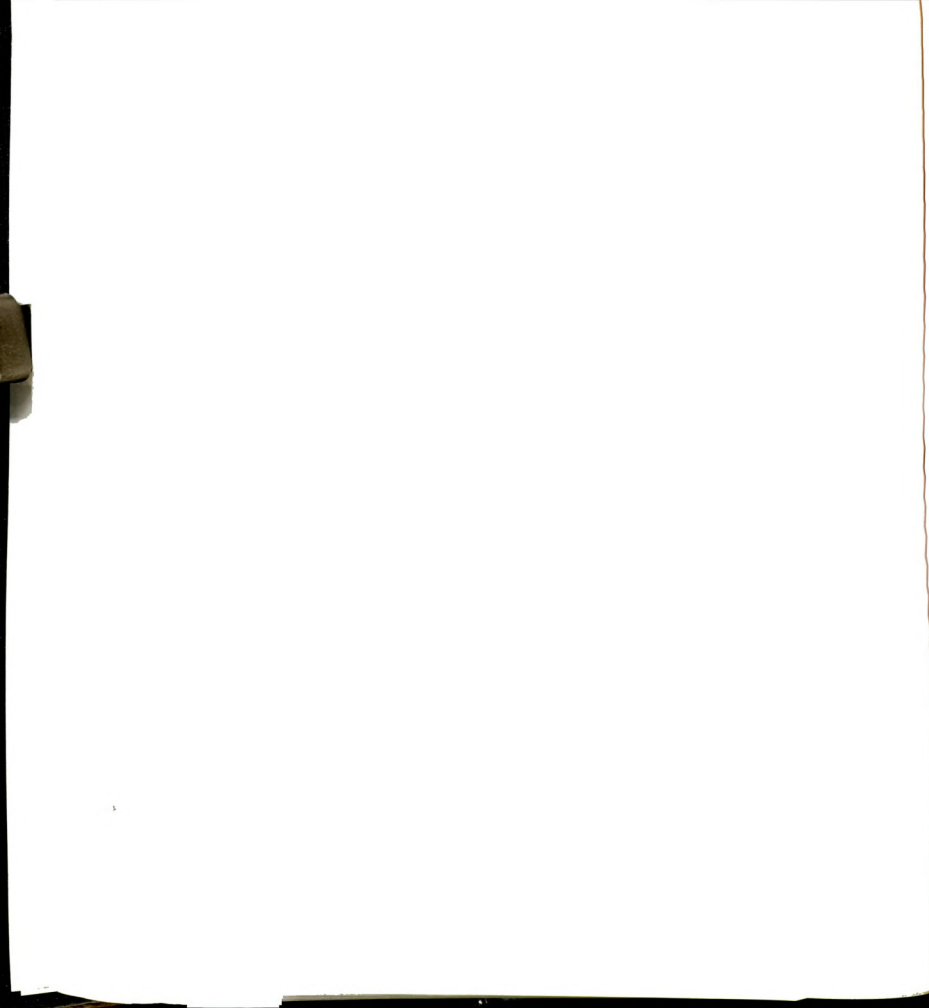


committee which recommended the dual system to the supervisors, and was appointed to the county social welfare board. Other members included K.I. Sawyer, superintendent of the road commission and a major player in the administration and development of work relief. The third member, approved by the state welfare commission, was August Raatikanen, who worked in the logging business. The appointments met with much approval from the local newspaper, which editorialized that the three men were the most able and also ensured representation from all areas of the county.¹⁵¹ Again, cooperation marked the relationship between the various parts of the relief mechanism in this county. Sawyer and Jacques both were active in the emergency relief days, but the supervisors saw fit for them to continue to play a role in relief administration.

Saginaw County - led by the vocal Charles Bois, an ardent opponent of the 1937 law and a vocal supporter of home rule - opted for the dual system but in contrast to Van Buren and Marquette, voted to have a full-time working board, rather than a separate administrator.¹⁵² Saginaw County also appointed Bois, chairperson of the board of supervisors, as a the member of the social welfare board to be endorsed by the state welfare commission. The state required that he resign as chairperson of the board of

¹⁵¹"New Welfare Set-up Plans Discussed," *Daily Mining Journal*, September 21, 1939, 2; "New Welfare Board," *Daily Mining Journal*, September 22, 1939; *Proceedings, Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, September 20, 1939, p. 89-90, October 9, 1939, p. 123-124.

¹⁵²*Proceedings, Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County*, October 9, 1939, p. 49-50.



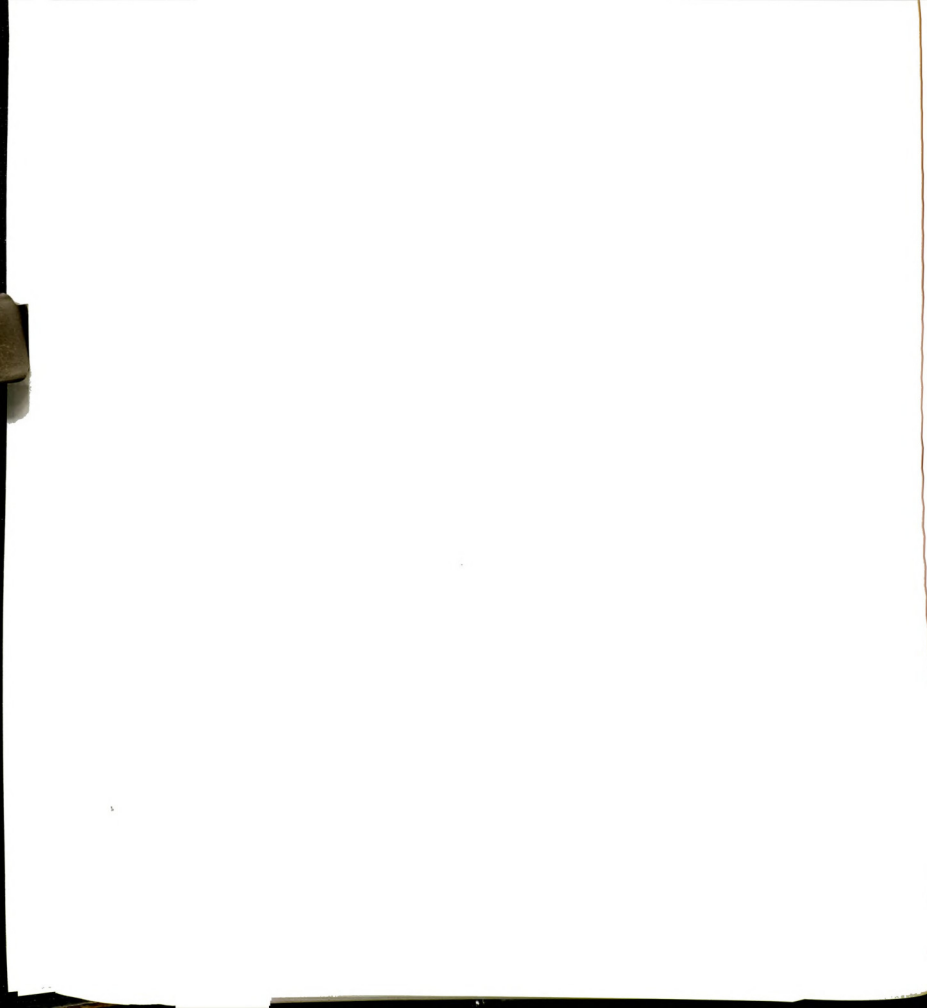
supervisors and then as a township supervisor before they would accept him as their appointed member.¹⁵³

The dual system resulted in two kinds of welfare administration. Many counties, including Marquette, Saginaw, and Van Buren, opted to hire non-professional social workers to head their county departments of public welfare. Marquette County hired a former poor commission investigator, Edward Nelson, as director of the County Department of Social Welfare in 1939. Marquette County did retain its WRC administrator, William Fountain, on the DSW staff, in contrast to Saginaw County, but Fountain had a business, and not a social work, background.¹⁵⁴ In addition to Bois, Saginaw County's board of supervisors appointed Arthur Hauffe, a former poor commissioner, to the county social welfare board, instead of former WRC administrator Lucius Howlett.¹⁵⁵ Van Buren County also did not appoint former members of the WRC

¹⁵³*Proceedings, Board of Supervisors, Saginaw County*, October 16, 1939, p. 110; October 25, 1939, p. 139; "Welfare Post Given to Bois," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 27, 1939. Forty-one other counties selected the same organization scheme in the next year. Just five opted for a full-time working board. Arthur Dunham, Spender R. Gordon, Albert R. Renwick, Margaret F. Gordon, and Edward Dalton, *Public Relief in Three Michigan Counties: The Report of a Study of Public Relief in Houghton, Antrim, and Hillsdale Counties, Michigan* (Unpublished study, Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1940) 48.

¹⁵⁴*Polk's Marquette-Ishpeming-Negaunee City Directory* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Company, 1941) 333; *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, September 20, 1939, 89-90; October 9, 1939, 124. Nelson was the chief investigator for the County Poor Commission in 1937 and was field secretary in 1939.

¹⁵⁵*Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 16, 1939, 108-110. Howlett later was recommended as the director of the categorical aids program, but either did not accept the post or was not qualified under state regulations. Although he had extensive experience in relief administration, it is not clear if he had any formal social work education. See "School Annex Relief's Home,"



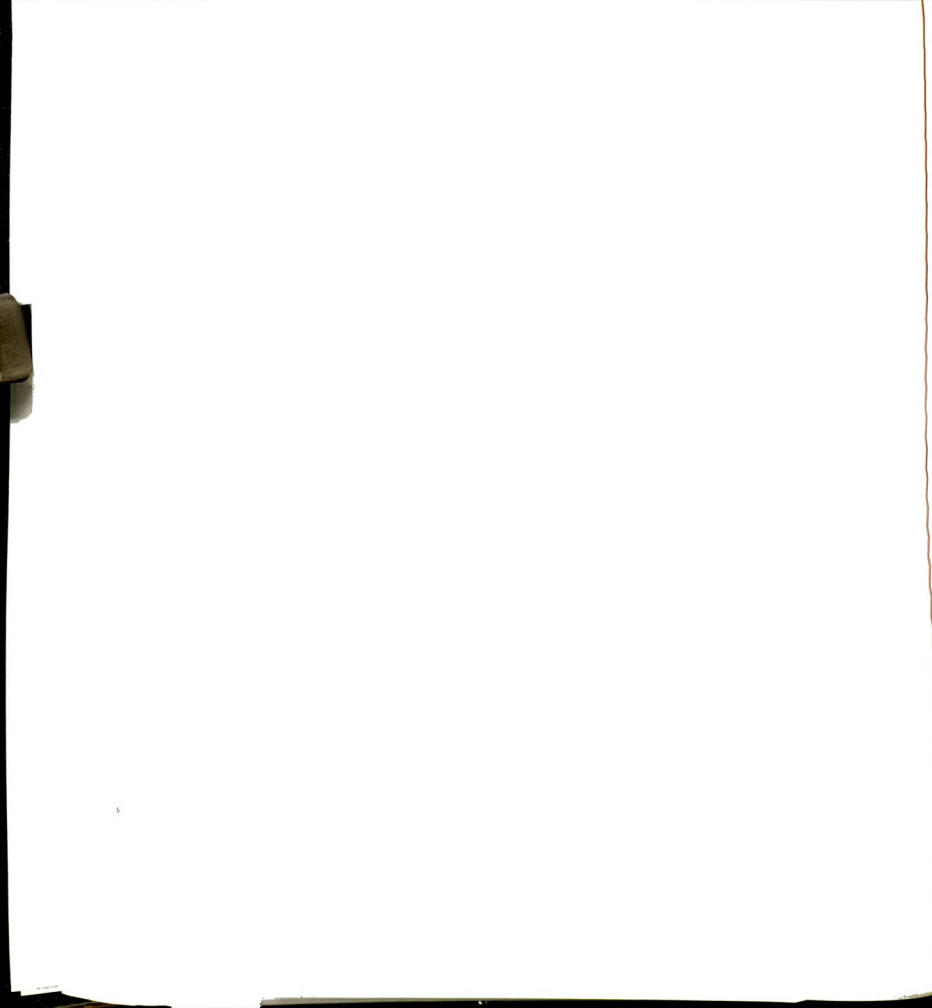
to its new commission, but also did not hire former poor commissioners.¹⁵⁶ Van Buren's social welfare board did retain its county administrator, Louise Wilkinson, under the new system.¹⁵⁷

Kent County's WRC, once considered one of the best in the state, began to return to its pre-emergency relief practices under the new welfare law of 1939. Supervisors appointed Ira Dean, who had been superintendent of the poor in the county for twenty-five years, to the county social welfare board. As with Bois, Dean also served as director of the social welfare department. Other board members included William Thomas, an 83-year-old farmer who was too ill to leave his home at the time of the appointment, and Minnie Sloodmaker, an active member of the Republican Party but with no social work experience. The commission had no interest in Family Welfare Association membership or professional social work, developed during the early WRC years, and informed the

Saginaw Daily News, November 9, 1939. His salary as director of the Bureau of Social Aid (\$1,800) would have been about half the salary earned as WRC administrator, again below Daniel Walkowitz's definition of a "bare existence."

¹⁵⁶*Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Van Buren County*, October 12, 1939, p. 41; October 13, 1939, p. 44; "County Welfare Plan Is Addressed," *Hartford Day Spring*, October 18, 1939, p. 1 and 4.

¹⁵⁷Wilkinson replaced Harold Humphrey in August 1938 when Humphrey accepted a position in Lansing after earning the highest rating possible on the state's civil service examination. A former teacher, she had five years experience as a case worker. Because the county opted for an integrated system, they had to select someone (like Wilkinson) qualified under state and federal guidelines. "Voted \$500.00 for County Relief in August," *The Courier-Northerner*, August 12, 1938; "Supervisors Met Tuesday; Vote January Relief," *The Courier-Northerner*, December 15, 1939.



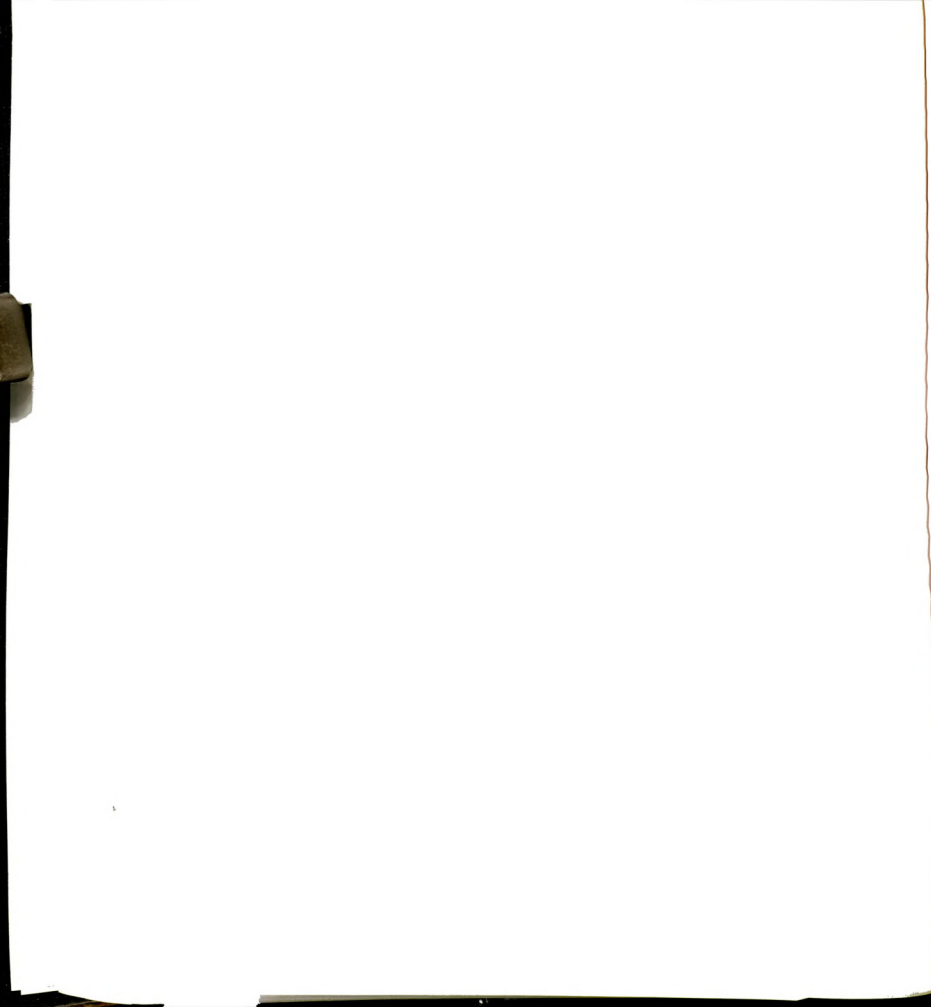
FWA in late 1940 it did not plan to pay dues or remain in the organization.¹⁵⁸ The FWA terminated their membership immediately after, ending the public agency's brief foray into professional social work.

A study of three Michigan counties in 1940 underscored the limited changes in relief administration that resulted from the New Deal programs. The study analyzed the Antrim, Houghton and Hillsdale counties. Antrim was in the northern Lower Peninsula; Hillsdale was a southern agricultural county similar to Van Buren County, and Houghton was in the copper mining area of the Upper Peninsula. Only Houghton County had trained social workers in its county department of social welfare; the other two only followed personnel guidelines where they had to - in the categorical aid programs of the Social Security Act, which had civil service requirements and state and federal supervision.¹⁵⁹ The study's authors argue that in two of the counties - Antrim and Hillsdale - general relief in the post-Depression era was "scarcely distinguishable from the traditional archaic and discredited poor relief system."¹⁶⁰ The chief author was Arthur Dunham, who was a major framer of the WRSC report and the 1937 legislation; his

¹⁵⁸Letter from Ira Dean to Margaret Wead, FWA, December 9, 1940, FSA Correspondence, FSA Records, Grand Rapids Folder.

¹⁵⁹Dunham et al, *Public Relief*, 92, 104, 274-275, 378-380, 400-409, 412-413.

¹⁶⁰Dunham et al, *Public Relief*, 104. Dunham's study is extremely critical of the new law, and blames many of the relief administration flaws on the law, and not the counties that administer it.



criticisms of Michigan's relief programs continued in this study, and he found the 1939 law to be the chief problem.¹⁶¹

In rejecting professional social workers in welfare reorganization, county officials rejected their methods and philosophy, as well as the profession's dominant gender. Experiments in professionalizing public agencies, such as Kent County, did not last under the pressure of local officials. Supervisors wanted control over relief; they wanted to be able to institute regulations to control costs so that relief did not become an out-of-control part of their budgets. Economy and efficiency, and not professional social work methods, were to define relief administration and some counties, including Van Buren and Manistee, believed that relief needed to be stigmatized and punitive to discourage people from seeking it. They disagreed with the values espoused by the social work profession and did not accept the need for case work, training or professional education. Investigations were necessary for relief work, but social workers did not need to be the people to do them. They also largely rejected women. Kent County was among the few that appointed a woman to its commission; most hired men, often with business experience, to lead their county departments of social welfare. Those women in public welfare tended to work in the Social Service Bureau, the county division that administered the categorical aid programs of the Social Security Act.

Again, Manistee County was a case in point. Manistee, like many counties, did not hire professional social workers to staff their agency. The county social welfare board

¹⁶¹Dunham et al, *Public Relief*, 103-104. Raymond Koch that such limited change also is evident in Minnesota's revised welfare program. Koch, "The Development of Public Relief Programs," 441-442.

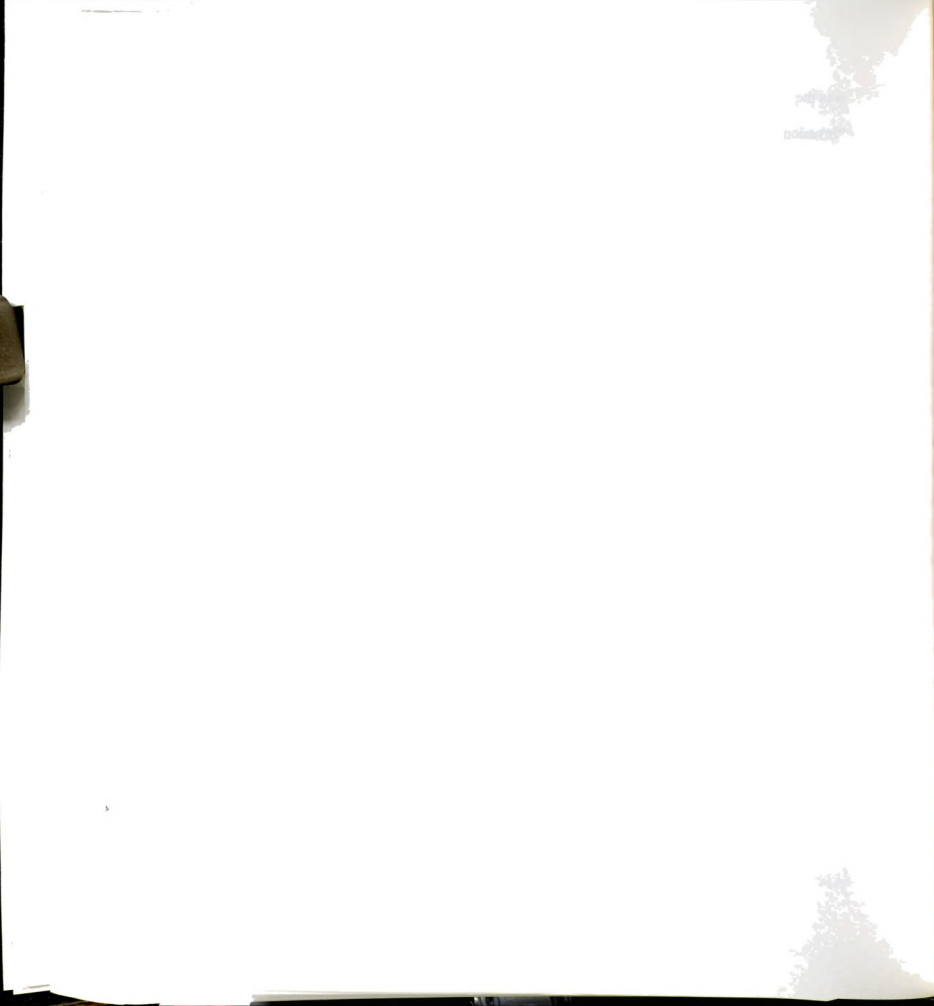
was comprised of former poor commissioner Hugh Kenny, local barber and former county clerk Gus Papenguth, and WRC administrator Ole Hanson, a local businessman. As in other counties Manistee's supervisors wanted control over relief; they wanted to be able to institute regulations - such as no aid if one had a car - to control costs so that relief did not become an out-of-control part of their budget. Manistee County officials largely rejected women, like Louise Armstrong, and the values they associated with both females and social work. Armstrong represented much of what supervisors loathed about emergency relief: trained, college educated "professional" outsiders representing the state government and telling local officials what to do and how to administer relief to their residents. *The Manistee Examiner* described Armstrong's legacy in this way, representing the mixed feelings that local residents felt about this strong woman who would not back down, and also how many home rule advocates viewed social work and the social worker:

We doubt if any other woman in Manistee county history ever held so important a trust, ever was the subject of so great political outcry, or ever stuck to her tasks so quietly yet determinedly. We now see it wasn't Mrs. Armstrong folks were fighting, it was the new state and national policy she represented. Going back to the simile of an invasion, we now realize she was an excellent soldier, winning her battle and consolidating her gains. Whether we admired the cause she was fighting for or whether we abhorred it, we must agree she filled her post well.¹⁶²

The feminized profession of social work enjoyed a brief and controversial career in public relief in Michigan, but did not remain in force after 1939. The actions of Michigan's county supervisors - including Manistee County - suggest that the female social worker

¹⁶²"Listening In," *The Manistee Examiner*, June 10, 1938, in Armstrong Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Box 1, Clippings folder.

was the personification of FERA and SERA in their eyes, a symbol of the government
“invasion” that they feared so - and that they worked so hard to stop.

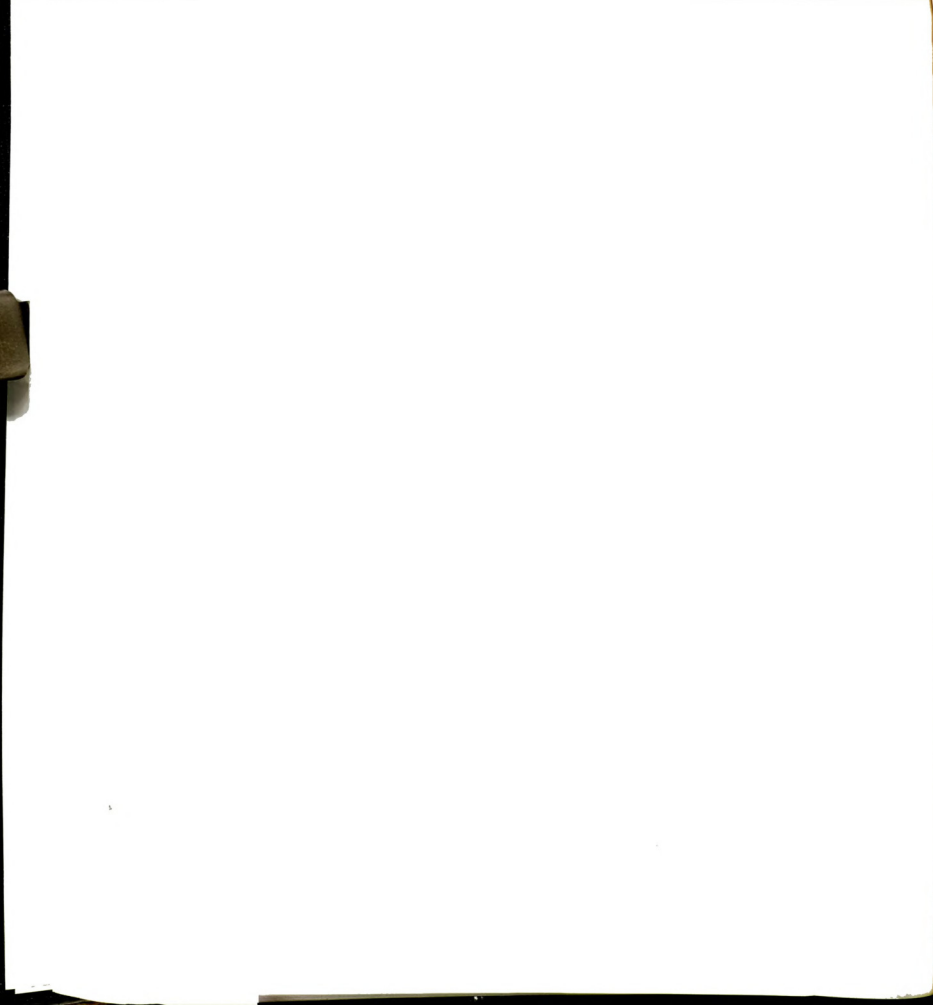


CONCLUSION

Fred Stern, a sixty-five year old farm laborer from Zilwaukee, just north of Saginaw, applied for Old Age Assistance in April of 1938, but case workers would not take his application; they were prohibited from investigating new cases until more funds were appropriated. Stern could not work, and his wife, Hilda, was employed part-time as a cook. He checked again two months later when his wife was hospitalized, but received the same response. He was finally able to apply for OAA in March 1939, but his case was not investigated until October 1, 1940.¹ Like many recipients, Stern waited for months because of funding shortfalls.² He and his wife both were approved for OAA after the initial 1940 investigation, but it is unclear how they managed in the intervening months. Caught in the transition period of welfare reorganization, they likely turned to the local welfare relief commission and then the county social welfare board, but the case record does not show what specific aid they received. Months passed before the categorical aid programs were able to address their need, and their OAA grants were generally well below the maximums allowed by law.

¹Case A7303691, Saginaw OAA Records, reel 3022, case history from April 25, 1938; June 30, 1938; March 29, 1939; June 20, 1940; September 24, 1940; October 1, 1940.

²States had two options when faced with funding limits: they could reduce all grants by a percentage and continue to approve new applications, or they could use waiting lists until more funds became available. Michigan used the latter option. Blanche D. Coll, *Safety Net and Social Security, 1929-1979* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 95.



The 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act, in conjunction with the federal Social Security Act of 1935, shifted the organization and funding of relief, but brought limited change to Michigan's welfare system. The law resulted in a dual system of administration in most counties, with separate departments for the categorical aid programs, governed by federal guidelines, and the general relief programs. Categorical aid programs - funded in part with federal matching grants - were implemented slowly, as in Stern's case, and few grants provided adequate support. In addition, families on WPA, and those who received ADC, OAA, or AB, often could not receive any supplemental aid in some counties, despite the low grants under those programs. Categorical aid recipients continued to be subject to means testing and financial investigation, despite the federal government's role as regulator and financial partner. ADC, OAA and AB were on the assistance track of welfare, and were not administered as entitlement programs.

Federalizing OAA, ADC and AB also separated those recipients from people receiving general relief: those in need who did not fit the categorical aid programs, including the disabled or those too ill to work, but too young to qualify for OAA.³ Funded by local and state dollars, general relief (later to be General Assistance) became the "third track" of welfare, often entirely administered by local officials. Local officials established eligibility and administrative guidelines, and state officials had only limited

³Single women suffered perhaps the worst, as they likely worked in programs not covered by Old Age Insurance (the program now popularly known as social security). Thus their only avenue of support was OAA, or general relief if they were not yet eligible for an old age grant. See Alice Kessler-Harris, "Designing Women and Old Fools: The Construction of the Social Security Amendments of 1939," *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 102, 104-105.

supervision over those programs. Recipients of general relief, for the most part, faced a return to the pre-New Deal practices of poor relief when they sought aid from their local county social welfare boards. Many counties continued to assume that residents who sought relief were likely trying to get aid they did not need, and thus continued efforts to make the process as difficult and demeaning as possible. Relief applicants continued to face a maze of agencies, both public and private, to secure the help they needed. They also did not have the avenues of protest - state and federal officials - as categorical aid recipients. General relief was strictly a local concern, and as was the case in the poor relief system before the 1930s, recipients could appeal to their local agency and township or city supervisor, but had little recourse beyond that.

Despite the victory of home rule proponents in defeating the 1937 legislation and restoring a significant amount of local control to relief administration, not all were happy with the changes. The 1939 law proved disappointing to some local officials, who continued to struggle with the financial burden of relief despite the continuation of federal and state funds. The law had resulted in limited change, in their eyes. They did not have full control over all aspects of relief, including the categorical aid programs. The state, when computing matching formulas for categorical aid grants, did not consider the expenses of the county infirmary, soldiers and sailors relief or medical and hospitalization costs, all programs that continued to be the full responsibility of counties. Local officials also wanted the state to earmark at least one-third of revenues from the 1933 sales tax for local relief. Supervisors attending the state association meeting in January 1940, just

weeks after the new law was implemented, strongly endorsed resolutions on all those issues.⁴

The new law, in creating the ADC program which was subject to federal guidelines, effectively eliminated mothers' pensions, which had been a program funded and administered locally. Some officials resented this shift, despite the accompanying federal funds. Melville McPherson, chair of the state tax commission and a vocal home rule proponent, even advocated a return to locally-administered mothers' pensions, rather than the ADC program with its federal matching funds. He argued at the 1940 supervisors' meeting that more efficient local administration, in conjunction with a larger OAA federal grant, would offset the \$3.5 million ADC grant the state would receive.⁵ Saginaw County's Arthur Hauffe, former superintendent of the poor and member of the county's social welfare board, went even further, advocating a wholesale return to the pre-Depression system. The reorganized relief administration resembled the WRC too much, he argued.⁶ Some local officials were not satisfied with the new law, and both the

⁴"Local Control on Dole Given Dickinson O.K.," *Lansing State Journal*, January 24, 1940; "Supervisors Ask One-Third of Sales Tax," *Lansing State Journal*, January 25, 1940; *Proceedings of the Michigan State Association of Supervisors Annual Meeting*, January 25, 1940, p. 79, 83.

⁵"Local Control," p. 4.

⁶"System No Good, Hauffe Declares; Urges Old Plan," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 30, 1940.



State Association of Supervisors and the State Association of County Social Welfare Boards continued to advocate for increased local control.⁷

Although local officials lamented specific aspects of the 1939 law, they did not mourn the demise of the professional case worker in general relief; social workers were largely confined to categorical aid programs, and as noted in the previous chapter, few counties hired trained social workers to administer their programs. In fact, social workers, who played such a central role in the battle over the 1938 referendum, disappeared from the rhetoric surrounding social welfare and local relief in the 1940s. Kent County's social welfare director Ira Dean, long-time poor relief commissioner, proudly stated that he required only a high school education of his staff, comprised of "nine young fellows about twenty-eight years old." They did not need a college education, he said, and "I defy anyone to pick better trained social welfare workers." He had rejected the help of "the Kent County Social Welfare group" in setting standards and selecting personnel, because "we feel we can pick our own personnel, and we have reduced our administrative costs thirty-one percent."⁸ Many counties reduced their costs by relying on supervisors' recommendations on the eligibility of applicants, rather than having employees conduct extensive investigations. The flaws of the 1939 law did not include the absence of social workers, according to Dean and many other home rule advocates.

⁷The latter organization replaced the Association of the Superintendents of the Poor.

⁸*Proceedings, Supervisors Meeting*, January 24, 1940, p. 46.

Not all counties were unhappy with the new system, although a majority sought a revision of the matching grant formula to include all local welfare expenditures as well as an increase in the state's relief contribution. Both Van Buren and Saginaw passed resolutions similar to the state association's, and Marquette appealed to the state for an increased grant to help with local relief costs.⁹ Ironically, Van Buren County's supervisors, among the most critical of the WRC and SERA in the early years of the New Deal, expressed few problems with the new system. They were the only county among the three to select the integrated relief system, placing their entire relief administration under the state's supervision. Their director, Louise Wilkinson, a former WRC case worker, had to meet civil service requirements to hold her post, but had the board's support from the time of her appointment as administrator in 1938. The county, which had faced a \$75,000 deficit just a few years ago and suspended all poor relief and mothers' pensions, had recovered financially, and the county treasurer told the supervisors at the 1940 budget meeting that the county was in its best financial shape in

⁹*Proceedings of the Van Buren County Board of Supervisors*, December 12, 1939, p.80; "Relief Salary Boost Likely," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 28, 1939, p. 2; "County Asks More Money for Relief," *The Daily Mining Journal*, June 25, 1940, p. 3; *Proceeding of the Board of Supervisors, Marquette County*, June 24, 1940, p. 155.

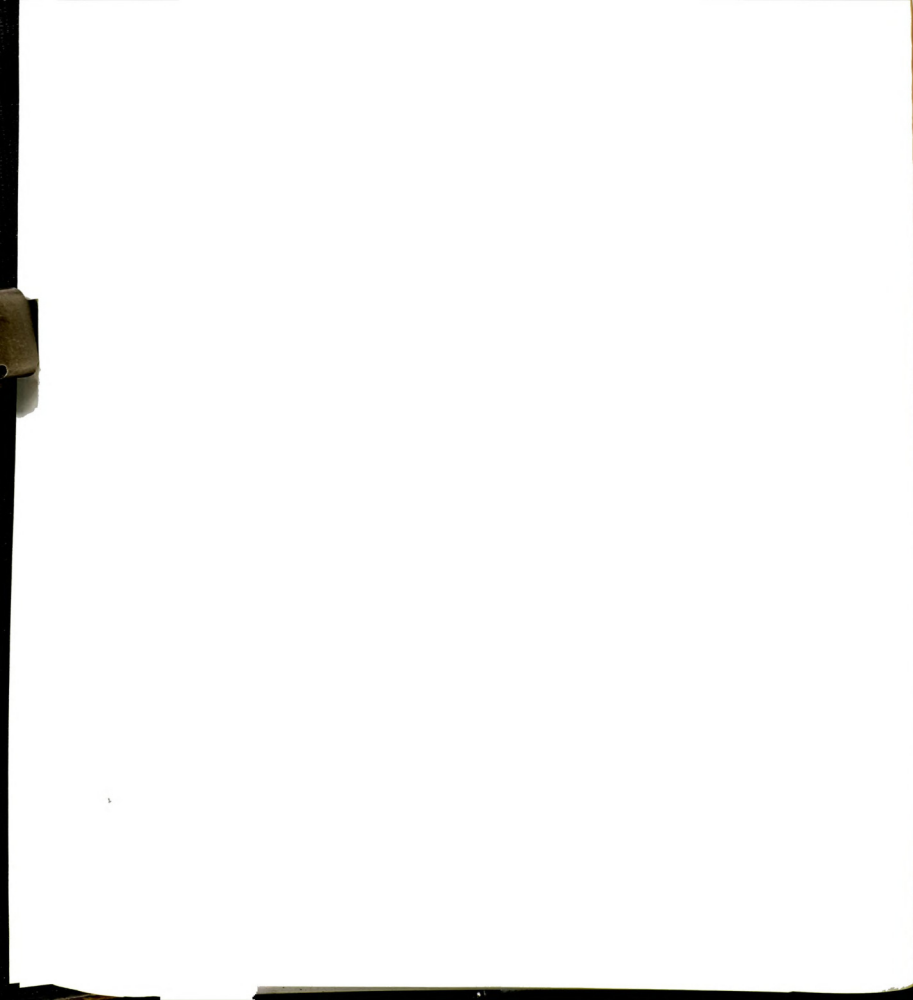


years.¹⁰ Marquette and Van Buren officials did not fundamentally change their relief systems, or their personnel, in the years immediately following the new law's passage.

Many counties, including Saginaw, took advantage of their restored authority over general relief to institute punitive measures to discourage relief applicants, thus reinforcing distinctions between the federal programs and the "third track" of welfare. A key argument for home rule was that local officials could administer programs more efficiently and economically than professional social workers, and thus could more effectively contain the contagion of dependence. Restricting eligibility for relief was a key part of their containment efforts. Saginaw County's Charles Bois proudly told supervisors at the 1940 meeting that Saginaw's board sought "to perfect a system whereby we can catch up to chiselers. We have a Congress...and a Legislature in Michigan...to make laws and we have five million people to figure out how to break them."¹¹ To limit "chiselers," Saginaw County's social welfare board would only grant relief if applicants turned over their automobile license plates; when their need for relief ended, the license plates were returned and they could again drive their cars. Bois also reported that no relief was granted to anyone who owned a telephone; exceptions were

¹⁰"Supervisors O.K. Finance Budget," *The Courier-Northerner*, November 1, 1940, p. 1. Efforts to encourage consolidation of the "dual system" into an integrated department (such as Van Buren County's) began in 1945; one year later thirty-three counties had reverted to that system. See address by Social Welfare Commission member Carlton H. Runciman, *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the State Convention of County Social Welfare Boards and County Boards of Supervisors*, 1946, p. 30.

¹¹*Proceedings, Michigan State Association of Supervisors*, January 24, 1940, p. 43-44.



made if someone other than the applicant paid the bill, but those cases had to be investigated to ensure that the information was true.¹²

Manistee County also used such methods to control relief costs. Faced with a deficit early in their fiscal year, county supervisors refused to grant aid to anyone frequenting places that served alcohol, a practice implemented in Van Buren County two years earlier at the suggestion of administrator Louise Wilkinson.¹³ Like Saginaw County, they refused aid to anyone who owned a car (unless they surrendered the license plate) or a telephone, except for the elderly or the ill.¹⁴ When costs continued to climb, they further restricted eligibility two months later. Recipients had to maintain gardens and supervisors prohibited newly-married couples from receiving relief for a period of one year. The supervisors also denied any supplementation for WPA workers, regardless of their family size, as well as ADC and OAA recipients. They also closed all relief cases, requiring recipients to reapply and be reinvestigated, a technique used in Van Buren County in 1935. The supervisors also told the social welfare board not to exceed budgeted amounts; when the money ran out, relief would stop. They sought more careful investigation of cases before relief was granted, and by January of 1941 the supervisors

¹²In just a few weeks the regulation had garnered one hundred license plates for the board to hold, and another fifty-five applicants refused to give up their license plates, and thus were denied help. *Proceedings, Michigan State Association of Supervisors*, January 24, 1940, p. 44-45.

¹³"Relief Clients Must Cease Spending for Beer," *The Courier-Northerner*, October 14, 1938; *Proceedings, Board of Supervisors, Manistee County*, February 1, 1940, p. 401.

¹⁴*Proceedings, Manistee County*, v. 14, February 1, 1940, p. 401.



also wanted to see regular lists of recipients.¹⁵ Economy and efficiency, as well as fiscal responsibility, again took precedence over the relief needs of residents, as in the emergency relief period, and were the guiding principles of relief administration in many counties.

Saginaw County, despite the optimistic situation described by Bois at the 1940 supervisors' association meeting, faced a difficult year in welfare administration. The first hints appeared when the relief system was initially established; early budget projections called for an additional \$25,000 to run the reorganized system.¹⁶ Repeated requests from the county for additional funds to cover deficits angered city officials, who came to believe that the reorganized system, under county administration, was still too expensive.¹⁷ An effort in April to revert to the county system of relief, rather than the township system then in place, in the hopes of reducing costs, failed on a 25 to 21 vote.¹⁸ The savings promised through local administration by home rule advocates, including many Saginaw County officials, failed to materialize. Instead, the city had spent double the amount in 1939-1940 that it had in previous years, and city officials questioned the

¹⁵*Proceedings, Manistee County*, v. 14, April 11, 1940, p. 408-409; April 12, 1940, p. 411; January 16, 1941, p. 501.

¹⁶"New Relief Setup Adds on \$25,000," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 31, 1939.

¹⁷*Proceedings of the Council and Boards of the City of Saginaw*, January 2, 1940, p. 1 and 8; January 15, 1940, p. 20; February 19, 1940, p. 47.

¹⁸*Proceedings, Saginaw County*, April 15, 1940, p. 38; "Rural Bloc Bans County-Unit Relief Plan," *Saginaw Daily News*, April 16, 1940.



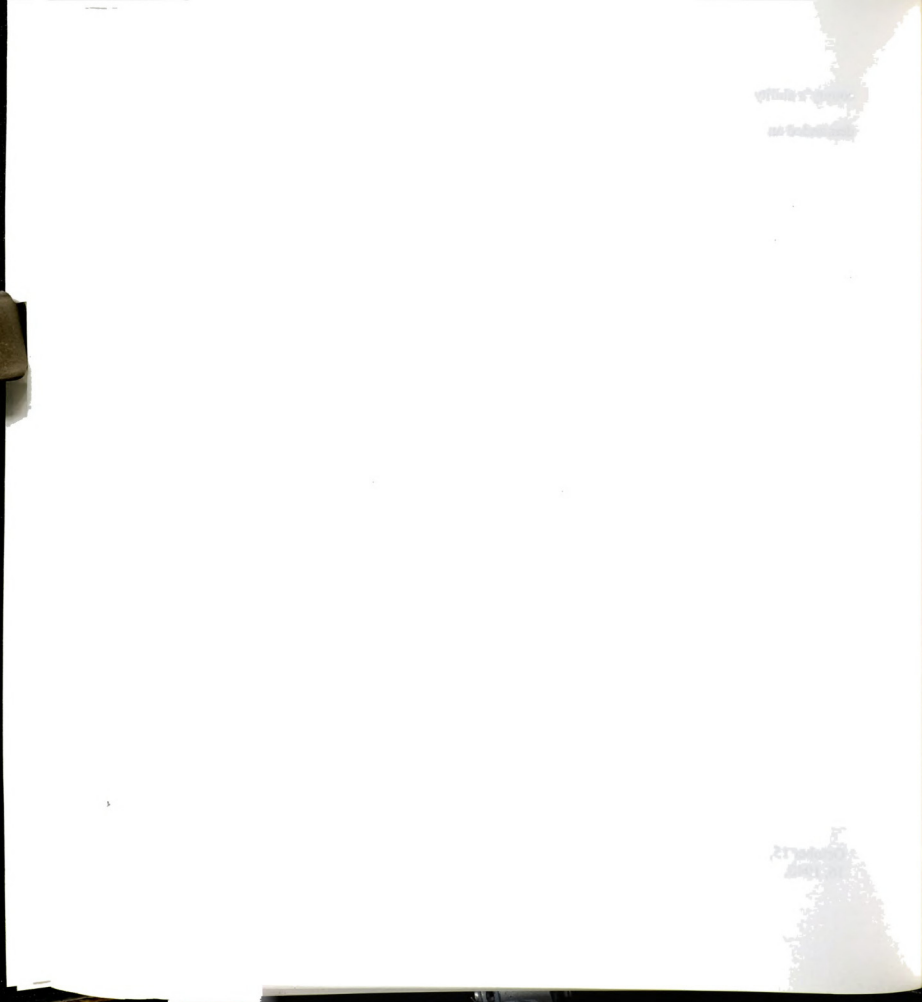
county's ability to administer relief.¹⁹ For the next several months, city officials demanded an accounting of their relief costs, suspicious that they were charged for non-city cases.

Some county officials were not satisfied with the system either. Saginaw Township supervisor George Emerick, a vocal critic of the State Emergency Relief Administration and the county's Welfare Relief Commission, cast the lone dissenting vote against reappointing Charles Bois, former chair of the board of supervisors, to the county social welfare board in October 1940. Bois had led the fight in Saginaw County for home rule and had been a vocal opponent, along with Emerick, of SERA and the WRC. But Emerick did not think the new system was any better - relief was still too expensive: "I stood here a year ago and demanded that we pay the commissioners enough to make it worthwhile for them to spend full time on the job, but they don't do it." He proposed delaying the appointment and seeking other candidates, but forty-four other supervisors disagreed, voting to recommend Bois to the State Welfare Commission as the state's appointee to the three-member board.²⁰ Emerick stood alone on that vote, but his dissatisfaction quickly spread, resulting in a wholesale reorganization of the county's relief system just a few weeks later.

Rumblings of discontent spread to the finance committee, upset at reports that administrative costs for the social welfare board were 25 percent, three times the rate of

¹⁹*Proceedings, City of Saginaw*, July 15, 1940, p. 213-214.

²⁰*Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Saginaw County, Michigan*, October 15, 1940, p. 59; "Fee Retention Before Board," *Saginaw Daily News*, October 16, 1940, p. 2.



the WRC in the 1930s. Committee members called the costs “disgraceful,” arguing that “no business could carry an administrative burden of 25 percent.”²¹ Complaints from city officials, in conjunction with finance committee reports, prompted an investigation of the social welfare board; the investigating committee was originally to report back in January. The board’s bookkeeping and investigative methods were key targets.²² The committee questioned Bois and fellow social welfare board members Arthur Hauffe, a former poor relief commissioner, and George Schultz. Dissension among the three relief board members, accounting discrepancies, and Hauffe’s attempt to circumvent an order by supervisors not to employ married women whose spouses had jobs also were identified as key problems. The committee decided the situation could not wait until January, and recommended reorganizing the relief administration, which included removing Hauffe immediately.²³ Supervisors voted 30 to 14 to remove Hauffe, and then reorganized the

²¹“Relief Budget Costs Scored,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 18, 1940, p. 1.

²²*Proceedings, Saginaw County*, October 22, 1940, p. 94, and October 23, 1940, p. 100; “Inquiry Ordered For Relief Board,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 23, 1940; “More Critics Voice Complaints On Relief Cost,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 24, 1940; “Board Begins Relief Inquiry,” *Saginaw Daily News*, October 25, 1940.

²³“Welfare Chief’s Activity Scored,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 1, 1940; “Probers to Ask Ouster of Hauffe,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 2, 1940. The board of supervisors prohibited the hiring of married women whose husbands were employed in January 1940, and refused to hire Catherine Phillion, a long-time employee of the poor relief department, and Ruth Hall, for the county Department of Social Welfare. Phillion was then supervisor of medical aid, and Hall was a stenographer. Hauffe did not immediately dismiss them because of legal questions, he argued. One supervisor noted, in Hauffe’s defense, that keeping Phillion made sense, as “she knows more about relief than one person in the county,” and other spouses did not lose their jobs. “County’s Relief Chief Dismissed,” *Saginaw Daily News*, November 8, 1940, p. 10; *Proceedings, Saginaw County*, January 10, 1940, p. 68.



entire department. Instead of a three-member full-time board, supervisors established a three-member commission, with one member serving as full-time director. Schulz resigned from the relief board, and supervisors withdrew their recommendation to reappoint Bois. Instead, they appointed two "dollar-a-year" commissioners, in addition to former county clerk Grover Stine as full-time director, to the social welfare board.²⁴ Conflicts with the city continued for several months, resulting in investigations of charges and a reimbursement from the county to the city in July 1941. Disputes ended later that year, and county supervisors unanimously reappointed Stine relief director that fall.²⁵ Saginaw County's intense conflicts over its new relief system were unique among the three counties studied, although it was likely not the only one to undertake changes in the first year of the new system. One criticism of the new law was that it allowed too many administrative choices, but personality conflicts exacerbated Saginaw's problems. Conflicts over relief administration calmed after the 1940 reorganization.²⁶

²⁴"County's Relief Chief Dismissed,"; "Relief Shake-up Shifts System," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 13, 1940; "Supervisors Limit Officers' Fees," *Saginaw Daily News*, November 14, 1940; *Proceedings, Saginaw County*, November 12, 1940, p. 154-156. Stine was hired at a salary of \$2,400; former social welfare board members earned \$2,150, but the county saved the salaries of the other two commission members.

²⁵*Proceedings, Saginaw County*, October 28, 1941, 115. Stine served as relief administrator for at least the next decade; he was director of the State Association of County Social Welfare Boards in 1946. *Proceedings, County Social Welfare Boards, 1946*, title page.

²⁶Public officials later joined private welfare agencies from the Saginaw Council of Social Agencies in establishing a central index of relief and welfare. The Council paid half the cost and the county the other half, implementing a mechanism to facilitate coordination between public and private welfare agencies "Food Stamps Plan Opposed," *Saginaw Daily News*, January 10, 1941.

The New Deal, despite the extensive debates and passage of the 1939 reorganization law, changed social welfare in Michigan only in limited ways. The federal and state governments entered the relief picture as never before, providing funding and supervision over specific programs, but many characteristics of poor relief persisted. Michigan's welfare reorganization did consolidate and simplify certain aspects of the state's welfare system, but also restored control to local officials, who continued to wield considerable power over relief programs. Although their control over categorical aid programs was limited, there are parallels between the two relief systems. Relief remained punitive and stigmatized, with inadequate grants in both general relief and the federal categorical aid programs. Distinctions between earned benefits, or entitlements, (such as old age insurance) and welfare (ADC, OAA and general relief) became entrenched in federal and state policies, with general relief relegated to a "third track" without the benefit of federal guidelines or funds. And politics remained intertwined with welfare administration, as supervisors and other local officials continued to influence investigations and the granting of relief. When Fred Stern sought medical aid from the county's DSW, investigators directed him to his township supervisor, who had to authorize the aid. According to Stern, his supervisor would not help, and was only interested in Stern's vote in the next election. His case worker intervened and Stern's medical care was approved.²⁷ Case workers could run interference for the OAA and ADC clients for supplemental or medical aid through the general relief program, but general

²⁷Case A7303691, Saginaw OAA Records, case history from March 17, 1942. Stern died March 27, 1944.



relief remained closely tied to local officials and politics. The federal programs were administered by local agencies, and thus all categorical aids were mediated through the local administrative structure. The level of interference by local supervisors and other officials depended entirely on who ran the Bureau of Social Aid, charged with categorical aid administration. The partial funding by federal dollars did not make them federally-run programs free of local influence.

In addition, local officials and the organizations that represented them resisted further efforts to integrate Michigan's welfare system; instead they fought to keep the dual system option available to counties. Efforts to encourage integration were met with disinterest on the part of many counties, and the Michigan State Association of Supervisors passed a resolution opposed "to any county integration of welfare administration" in 1943. They also sought to bring the categorical aid programs in line "with the conception of local home rule and self-government," or brought under the control of local officials.²⁸ The state department of welfare - divided into two administrations in the 1939 law, as were most counties - merged into a single department administering all types of welfare in 1949. In contrast, just thirteen of the state's eighty-three counties had an integrated welfare department.²⁹

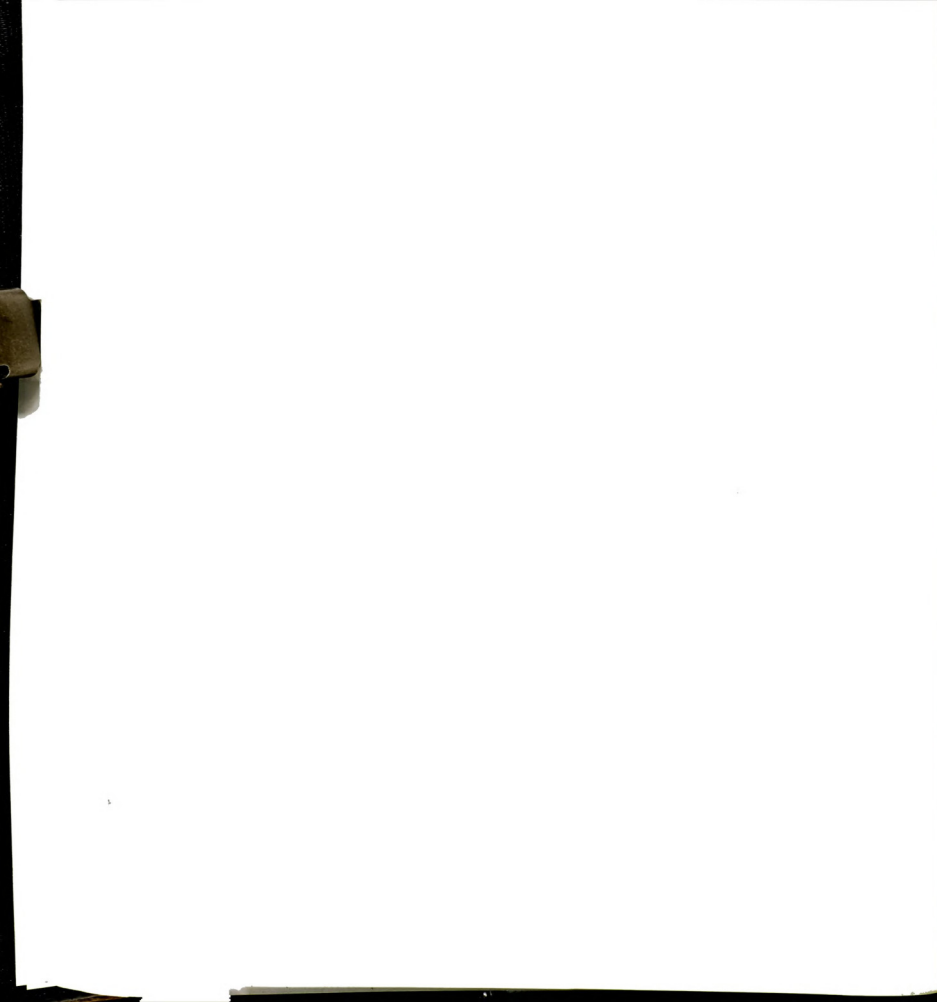
Michigan's relief history also reveals the limits to the "New Deal" order. Local officials rejected that New Deal order in the administration of relief in the 1938 election

²⁸*Proceedings of the Michigan State Association of Supervisors, 44th Annual Meeting, January 26-28, 1943, p. 26, 45-46.*

²⁹*Proceedings of the Annual Convention of State Association of County Social Welfare Boards, August 29-31, 1943, 19.*

and reinforced that rejection with their continued insistence on home rule and local control. They believed that the centralization of the government, either at the state or federal level, was a threat to the democratic process. Local elected officials were accountable to the people who voted for them, and administrators and experts hired to run programs by the federal government were not; thus, local officials should have a central role in ensuring the economic and fair administration of relief. Local officials viewed the 1937 law - which sought to limit the role of local supervisors and superintendents of the poor in the administration of poor relief - as the first step in the dismantling of local government at the township, city and county levels. Their rhetoric of war and invasion pointed to their belief that they needed to defend the democratic process. They believed they had stalled such efforts with their 1938 referendum, but continued to push for the rights of local governments.

Local officials rejected not only the intrusion of state and federal officials in local administration, but also the profession of social work, and the trained social worker. They saw social workers as costly and unnecessary; they fostered dependence with overly generous relief grants and earned expensive salaries. These officials also rejected the gendered professional values of social work, or the values they perceived social workers to practice, including compassion and "coddling." The profession had sought to distance itself from essentialist ideas about the female social worker and innate abilities centering on compassion and nurturing, but the image was difficult to shed. Local officials did not see social workers as trained professionals with a valued objective viewpoint, as social workers sought to present themselves. Social workers were simply too soft in the eyes of



local officials. Supervisors who know their residents could more quickly determine who was in actual need; an expensive and lengthy investigation by a professional case worker was not necessary. Social workers added another layer of administrative bureaucracy which was part of the larger trend toward limiting local governments' rights. To many local officials, social workers symbolized all that was wrong with the New Deal.

Recipients were caught in the middle, assumed to be chiselers and needing to negotiate their way around several welfare agencies to get help. They did not accept such characterizations, however, and presented their own justifications for their need for relief. They argued that they were not asking for a free handout, but that they had earned that assistance as long-time workers, citizens or parents. But administrative rules, and the case workers hired to administer those rules, represented a different narrative. Relief was based upon need, and not an earned entitlement, and state aid was to be the last resort. Efforts to enforce the responsibility of family members to support one another often created or exacerbated conflicts within families. The responsible relative clause was one continuity in both relief systems, and would remain in force for decades, despite efforts to change the law.³⁰ Attempts in 1955 to eliminate grandparents as responsible relatives in all forms of relief, and to remove the responsible relative clause entirely from the OAA

³⁰Grandparents's responsibility for grandchildren's support was revised in a 1953 law. Grandparents only had to care for grandchildren, if necessary, until they became sixteen. *Michigan State Convention of County Social Welfare Boards and County Boards of Supervisors*, September 10-12, 1953, p. 14-15; see Public Act 148, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan, 1953*, 157-158.



program, failed.³¹ The responsibility of relatives remained in place, virtually unchanged, until 1970, in part because local officials supported it and fought efforts to change it.³²

The New Deal did not create the American semi-welfare state, although it did federalize certain parts of the social welfare system. Poor relief was not new, and the services provided through the Social Security Act had existed in different forms before 1935. In addition, this dissertation has demonstrated the many continuities between Michigan's pre-New Deal relief system and the reorganized system established in the 1939 law. The New Deal federalized funding, and instituted some regulation, but also entrenched discriminatory ideologies - including ideas about deserving and undeserving, as well as gender and racial exclusions - into public policy, reflecting attitudes and ideologies also prevalent in American society at large. In many ways, public assistance continued the traditions of poor relief and the spirit of the "poorhouse era" of the nineteenth century.

³¹*Convention of County Social Welfare Boards*, September 7-9, 1955, p.17-18.

³²See Public Act 88, *Public and Local Acts of Michigan*, 1970, 263.



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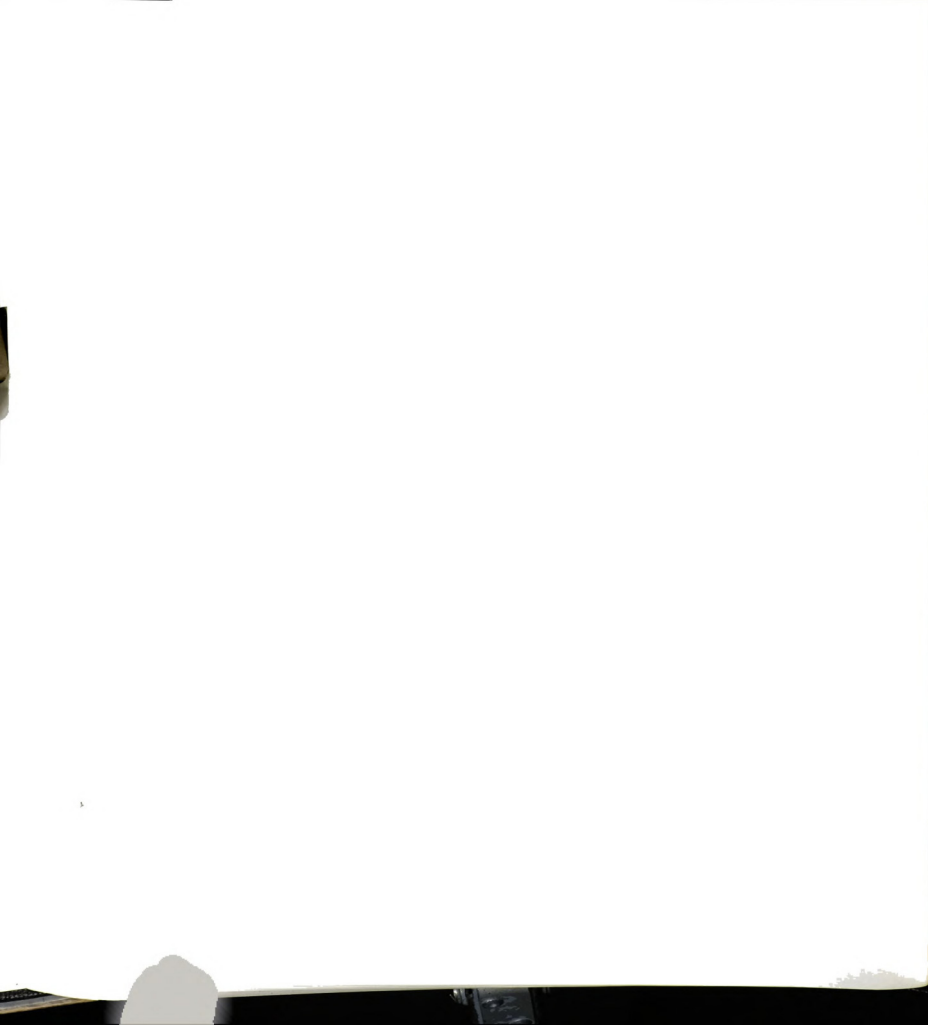
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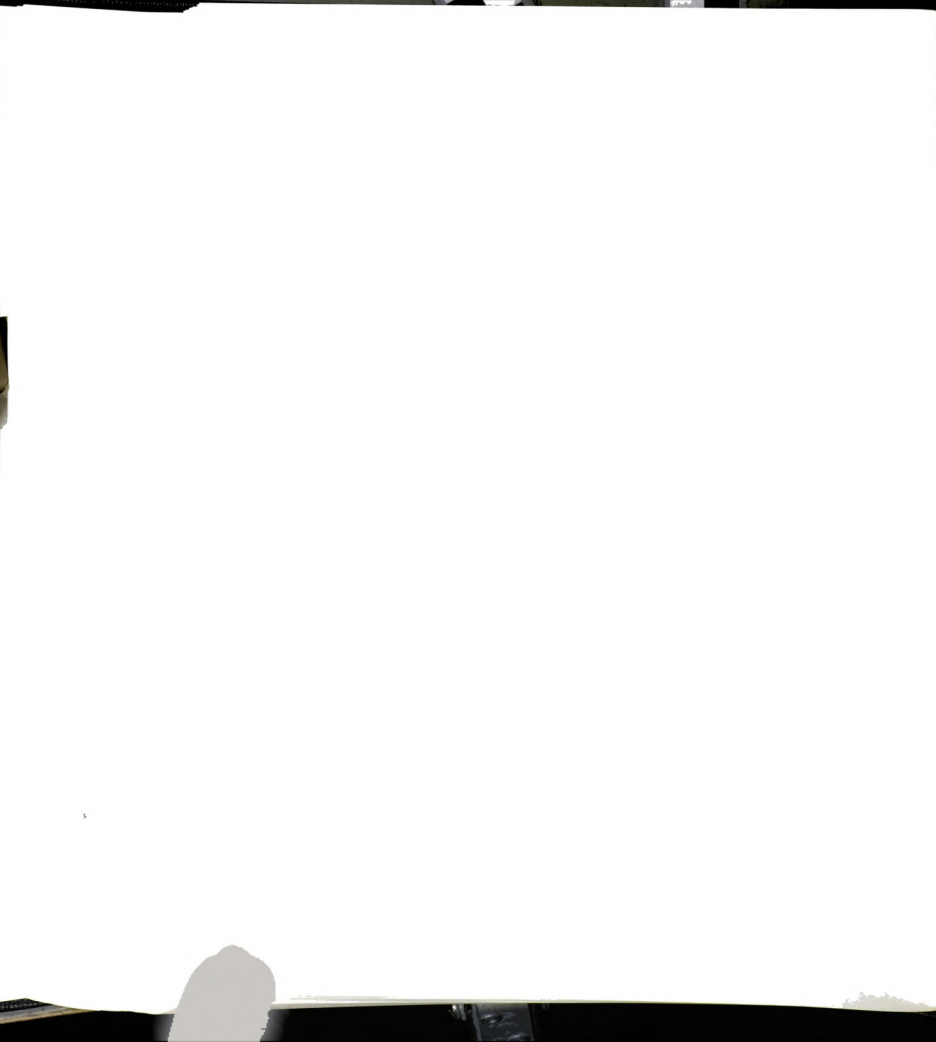


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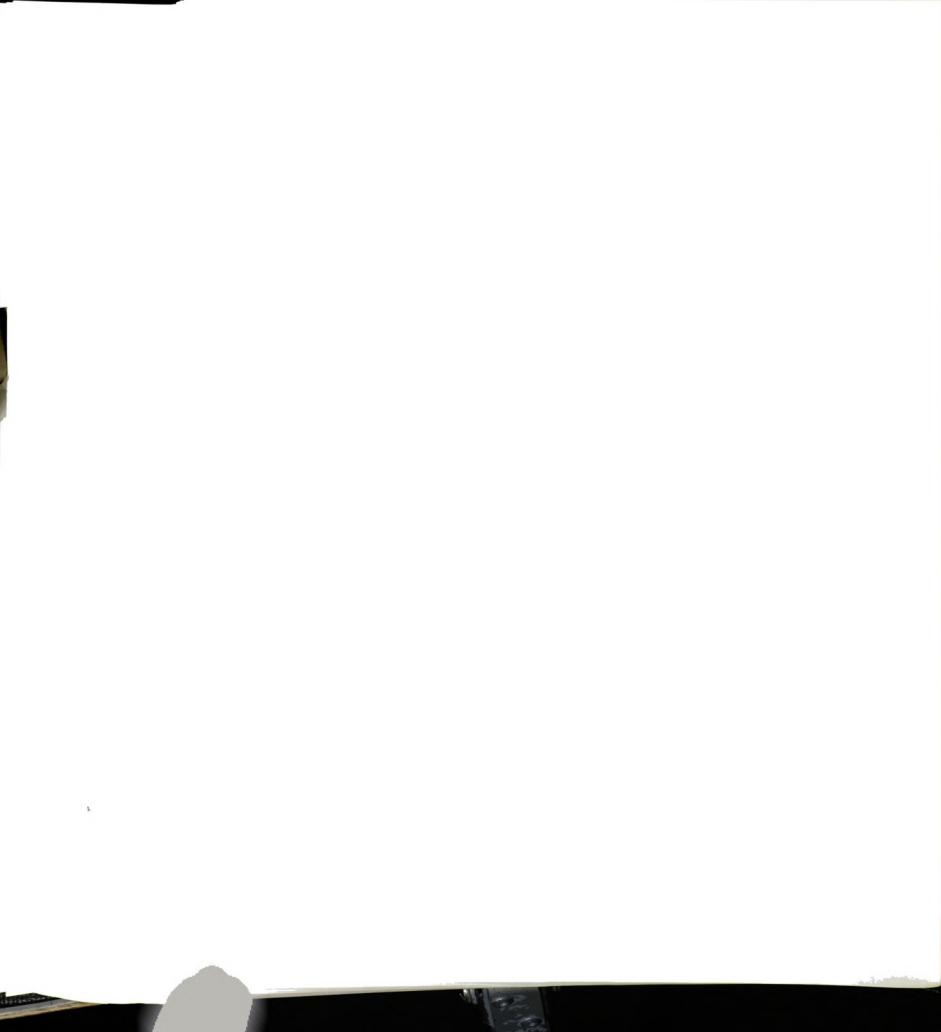
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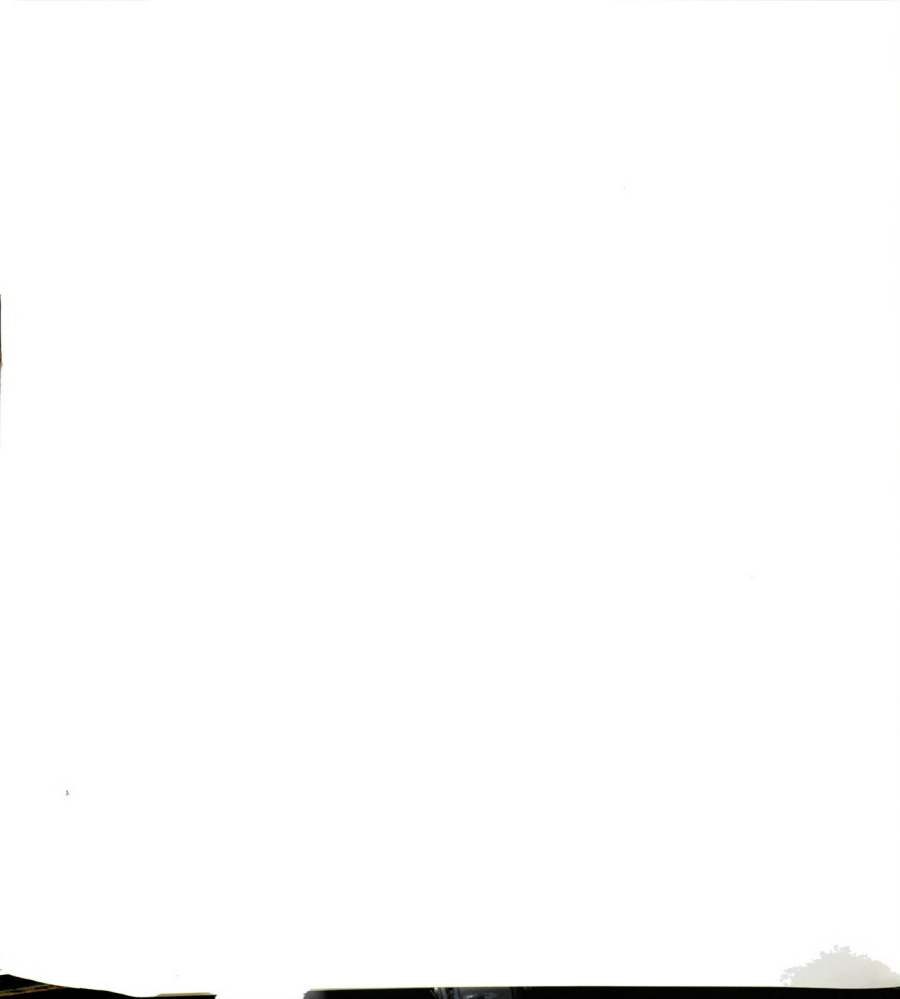
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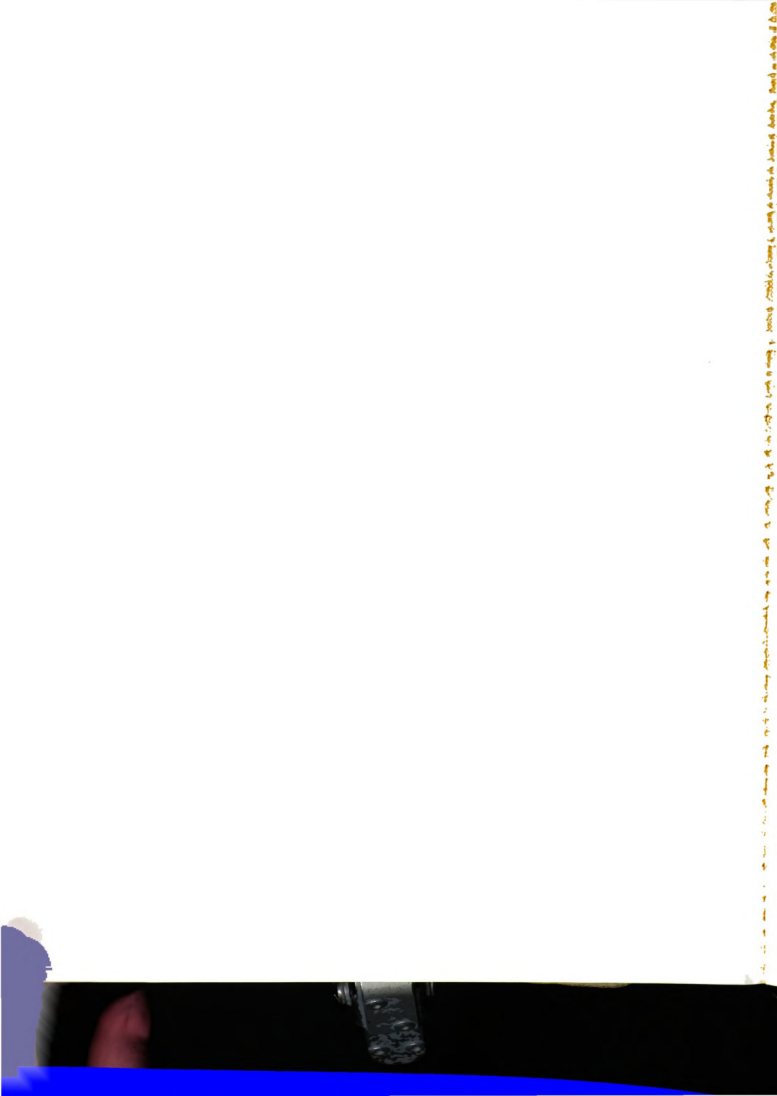
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