

“They Were in Far Too Great Want”: Federal Drought Relief to the Great Plains, 1887-1895

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Homesteading in the late 1800s was not the romantic adventure that popular mythology imparted to generations of schoolchildren. Just under half of the individuals who filed homestead claims in Nebraska, for instance, never proved up on their titles. Most remarkably, homesteaders undertook the challenge without such modern amenities as crop insurance, internal-combustion engines, electricity, or running water—or, for that matter, the promise of federal relief in the face of disaster. Farmers on the plains frontier in the last third of the nineteenth century were true pioneers, living on their own at the edge of civilization with no “safety net” stretched beneath them. These individuals endured the transition from an era that exalted self-sufficiency to one in which the federal government gradually came to play a larger role in the farmer’s economic well being.

What accounted for the homesteaders’ surprisingly high failure rate? First and foremost, there was the environment. In no other region of the United States did the environment so ruthlessly force its inhabitants to adapt their behavior or leave for more hospitable climes. The drought of 1860, which sparked crop failures and starvation, began

a long winnowing process, and those who failed to adjust were forced to find land in more accommodating areas or give up homesteading altogether.¹

Man-made obstacles to homesteading were no less difficult to overcome than the drought. Among them were an outdated and ponderously slow General Land Office, which was often years behind in processing claims, and a haphazard system of land laws, the interpretation of which varied among regional land offices. When farmers could not own their land, they had to lease it from a railroad, a bank, or a land company. Once they had weathered the first year and begun production of commodities, farmers were still at risk of failure in an increasingly competitive international marketplace. The expansion of industry meant the mechanization and expansion of agriculture, but the adoption of mass-production methods that boosted output also drove down prices. These problems, combined with those of monopolies, transportation, protective tariffs, taxes, and machinery costs, put farmers increasingly at the mercy of bewildering outside forces.²

Until the reforms of the New Deal were well in place, disaster relief for farmers was a hit-or-miss proposition, subject to the whims of pork-barrel politicians who often secured votes for relief bills in return for future favors. From 1803 to 1950, the United States Congress passed 128 relief bills in response to natural disasters. Aid during this period fell into three categories. First, Congress might exempt victims from bond payments, import duties, or liability for damages or ease residency requirements for homestead claims. Second, it might provide victims with federal medical personnel, transportation, or surplus military property (clothing, rations, and the like). Finally,

1. Homer E. Socolofsky, "Success and Failure in Nebraska Homesteading," *Agricultural History* 42 (Apr. 1968): 103-86; Joseph G. Gambone, "Economic Relief in Territorial Kansas, 1860-1861," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 36 (Summer 1970): 149-74.

2. Perhaps the best short survey of this dilemma is Theodore Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem and Nineteenth-century Industrialism," *Agricultural History* 22 (July 1948): 156-74.

Congress might appropriate funds for medicine and other provisions, for relief payments or loans to individuals, or for rebuilding public facilities. The first two types of aid dominated early relief bills, while after the 1860s the third prevailed. Federal efforts usually came after local private relief drives proved inadequate.³

During the 1880s and 1890s, the American economy and political system were in flux, but many lawmakers remained wedded to an ideology that strenuously opposed "class legislation," or laws that favored or subsidized one group at the expense of another. The fear that the Constitution was being trampled upon, or an even greater apprehension that "paternalism" would sap Americans of their independence and vitality, prevented Congress and the president from providing direct relief for those in need, and Great Plains farmers were no exception. As historian Sidney Fine pointed out, the notion that the government should "minister directly to the needs of the people by positive action, that it should regulate to any extent the economic life of the nation," was a concept foreign to the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian liberal tradition. Government was instead to be feared as a potentially oppressive agency doing the bidding of special interests.⁴

By 1900, a more progressive spirit prevailed. States regulated utilities and assumed responsibility for the health and welfare of their citizens through public high schools, state health boards, pure food and milk laws, and state

3. Peter J. May, *Recovering from Catastrophes: Federal Disaster Relief Policy and Politics*, Contributions in Political Science, no. 128 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 18-22.

4. Sidney Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), p. 12. Government, at least at the state level, has not *always* been viewed in this manner; it was often seen as a tool of economic growth. See James Willard Hurst, *Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956); Oscar Handlin and Mary Flug Handlin, *Commonwealth: A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861* (New York: New York University Press, 1947); and Louis Hartz, *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

boards to supervise charities. They provided institutional care for the blind, the poor, and the insane. Federal obligations in public health and safety grew more slowly. The creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission to oversee railroad rates and the Agriculture Department as a "service agency" for farmers was the exception rather than the rule.⁵ By 1935, however, with the Dust Bowl raging, there was little doubt that the federal government was the only entity capable of meeting such a widespread agricultural and environmental disaster.

Non-Indian immigrants arrived on the Great Plains in four waves, the first in the late 1850s with the opening of the Kansas-Nebraska Territory. Settlements hugging the Missouri River Valley received their initial test from the plains environment with a grasshopper infestation in 1857-1858 and a drought in 1859-1861. The second wave of settlers pushed deeper into the plains interior, reaching the one hundredth meridian by 1874, just as hordes of locusts swept down from the Rocky Mountains to devour the corn fields of the eastern newcomers.

Crossing the one hundredth meridian, the third wave settled the plains of Kansas, Nebraska, and Dakota Territory beginning early in the 1880s, a time of above-normal rainfall. Explanations for the increased precipitation abounded. Charles Dana Wilber and Samuel Aughey in Nebraska promoted the theory that "rain follows the plow."⁶ Others attributed the climate change to the iron rails of the railroads, which "serve[d] as conductors and equalizers of . . . electric currents," and to the telegraph lines running alongside them that "play[ed] an important part in diffusing electricity through the atmosphere." These factors supposedly prevented the terrifying electri-

5. Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State*, pp. 19-21, 354-67.

6. Robert N. Manley, "Samuel Aughey: Nebraska's Scientific Pioneer," *Journal of the West* 6 (Jan. 1967): 111-12; Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), pp. 42-43.



During the 1880s, a time of above-normal rainfall, homesteaders flocked to the Great Plains, creating a settlement boom and reaping bumper crops of hay and grain.

cal storms of the old days, while also supplementing rainfall.⁷ Such “scientific” opinion sufficed to convince hundreds of thousands to stake claims on the plains.

The first indication that these theories might be wrong occurred in Texas. When the range-cattle industry collapsed in the mid-1880s, droves of eager farmers filled the vacuum left on public lands. Most came unprepared and undercapitalized; the average value of implements per farm in West Texas and the Panhandle, for instance, was

7. *Platte Valley Independent*, 29 Feb. 1870. See also Paul D. Travis, “Changing Climate in Kansas: A Late 19th-Century Myth,” *Kansas History* 1 (Spring 1978): 48-58.

only ninety-five dollars. The first crop grown, corn, was also ill-suited to the climate. A severe drought began in West Texas and the Panhandle in 1885 and would continue, with a brief respite, through 1894. By the spring of 1886, with no rain having fallen since the previous June, wagons began heading east. Settlers left the state in such numbers that officials quietly buried from public view the Texas state census of 1887, which captured the out-migration in black and white.⁸

The remaining residents turned first to local private aid, but conflicting reports of the drought's effects often hampered such efforts.⁹ Dissatisfied with the slow response to aid appeals, judges from ten of the hardest-hit counties assembled in Albany, Texas, in December 1886, carrying sealed reports from eleven other drought-stricken counties. Their subsequent memorial to Congress claimed that owing to crop failures ranging from partial to "absolute and complete," thirty thousand people needed to be fed and clothed for the next five or six months. Any sum less than five hundred thousand dollars would fail to stop the suffering. By placing their claims "before a charitable, Christian world," and thereby repudiating the denials of destitution that appeared in booster-minded newspapers around the state, the delegates hoped to reopen the hand of charity for the unfortunate.¹⁰ After private donations

8. Garry L. Nall, "The Farmers' Frontier in the Texas Panhandle," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 45 (1972): 10-13; J. W. Williams, "A Statistical Study of the Drouth of 1886," *West Texas Historical Association Year Book* 21 (Oct. 1945): 85; Roy Sylvan Dunn, "Drouth in West Texas, 1890-1894," *West Texas Historical Association Year Book* 37 (Oct. 1961): 121-29; Terry G. Jordan, "The Forgotten Texas State Census of 1887," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 85 (Apr. 1982): 403-4.

9. W. C. Holden, "West Texas Drouths," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 32 (Oct. 1928): 110, 113, 115-16. For a general overview, see C. Richard King, *Wagons East: The Great Drouth of 1886—An Episode in Natural Disaster, Human Relations, and Press Leadership* (Austin: School of Journalism Development Program, University of Texas, 1965).

10. U.S., Congress, House, *Distribution of Seeds in Texas*, H.Rep. 3704, Serial 2500, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1887, p. 1. The citizens of Wise County, Texas, also appealed to Congress, asking for a federal appropriation with which to purchase seeds. U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1887, 18, pt. 2:1333.

proved insufficient, settlers turned to state government. When the Texas legislature convened in January 1887, it quickly appointed a Drouth Relief Committee of three "disinterested" individuals to survey the stricken area and draw the necessary warrants upon the treasury to relieve settlers.¹¹

Meanwhile, on 13 December 1886, Democratic Congressman Samuel Willis Tucker Lanham of Texas introduced House Resolution (HR) 10203 directing the Department of Agriculture to distribute seeds to farmers through local relief committees and justices of the peace. The fifty-thousand-dollar cost was to be taken out of funds "not otherwise appropriated."¹² After a month, the Agriculture Committee reported favorably on HR 10203, and floor debate began on 29 January 1887. It was clear from the outset that sympathy for the settlers' plight would not by itself carry the bill. William Lyne Wilson, a fellow Democrat from West Virginia, asked Lanham whether the Texas legislature was in session. In response to Lanham's affirmative reply, Wilson queried, "What is the necessity for Federal appropriation?" The belief that individual states were better able to assess and meet emergencies was a major obstacle to federal aid. Lanham countered his opposition by noting that the bill was not for direct relief but for the purchase of seeds, which would allow farmers to recover with one good harvest. The bill passed the House, but not before members cut the appropriation to ten thousand dollars.¹³

Texas Senator Richard Coke, also a Democrat, became the bill's champion in the Senate. Coke relied heavily on two precedents to make his case for the bill. In 1882, Con-

11. Texas, *General Laws* (1887), chap. 3, p. 2.

12. *Congressional Record*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1886, 18, pt. 1:120. Lanham, a former Confederate officer, had represented the Eleventh District, nicknamed "Jumbo" because it covered ninety-eight west Texas counties, since 1882. Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas*, 2 vols. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1952), 2:26.

13. *Congressional Record*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1887, 18, pt. 2:1156.

gress had approved twenty thousand dollars for a similar purpose when the Mississippi River Delta flooded, leaving thousands in Alabama destitute at planting time. The bill had passed without substantive debate owing to the immediate nature of the emergency.¹⁴ In 1867, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Congress had voted fifty thousand dollars for seeds of "improved varieties" for distribution in the former Confederate states.¹⁵ Thus, Coke argued in 1886, he was not asking for charity, but only "for that which has always been freely granted to others having no greater rights or equities than ourselves. We simply ask that the Agriculture Department may extend its operations to a particular section of Texas with greater liberality."

Coke ran into a storm of criticism, which fell into three categories. The first echoed Representative Wilson's query in the House debate regarding the constitutionality of such a measure under a federal system. George Frisbie Hoar, a Massachusetts Republican, asked whether Coke would be "good enough to state the constitutional grounds upon which he rests the power of Congress to do this thing." "Not at this time," Coke replied. Hoar then retorted, "If we furnish seeds to Texas, where they need them, Texas should furnish constitutional law to us, who need it, especially when we are obliged to vote upon this bill."

Opponents also attacked one of the precedents Coke had cited. Vermont Republican George Edmunds was quick to point out that the cases of Alabama and Texas were entirely different. The Alabama legislature had not been in session at the time of the 1882 flood. Even if it had been, the financially strapped state would have been unlikely to have given the massive aid needed to assist those affected, most of whom were ex-slaves without resources. Edmunds admitted that he had supported the

14. U.S., *Statutes at Large*, vol. 22, Act of 11 Apr. 1882, p. 44; *Congressional Record*, 47th Cong., 2d sess., 1882, 13, pt. 3:2649, 2659.

15. *Statutes at Large*, vol. 15, Act of 30 Mar. 1867, p. 28.

1882 appropriation for flood victims, stating his belief that it was "perfectly constitutional for Congress to give away as much money for such a purpose as it thinks fit; whether it is wise or not is another thing."

The final, and perhaps deciding, reason for opposition to aid was the belief that matters in Texas were not as hopeless as Coke had related. In debate, Republican Henry Teller of Colorado held that unless people in an entire state or region were completely without credit with which to buy seed, Congress had no business voting seed money. This case, Teller concluded, involved "but a little section, one corner of the State. . . . Forty counties is a small portion of Texas, and there are only a few people in them."

Moreover, the misfortune of west Texas pioneers was in no small measure their own fault. Kansas Republican John J. Ingalls noted that agriculture in the region had been "largely experimental." As with Kansas in the 1870s, there had been "an invasion by this population of territory hitherto supposed to be not qualified for agriculture." Despite these arguments, the Senate passed the bill thirty-four to sixteen, with the opposition coming from a core of six southern Democrats, joined by two midwestern and eight northeastern Republicans.¹⁶

Lest it be thought that blaming the victims was a rationalization for penury and inaction common only to lawmakers in a distant capital, a similar sentiment was shared by none other than the head of the American Red Cross, Clara Barton. She toured Texas in January 1887 and reported her findings to President Grover Cleveland, who was anxious to learn the true extent of the situation. Barton correctly laid blame for part of the situation on the false blandishments of railroads in attracting unwitting settlers and on ranchers who were only too happy to see farmers (and their fences) driven off range land. She also,

16. *Congressional Record*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1887, 18, pt. 2:1267-69.

however, placed a good deal of responsibility on the settlers for their own predicament. Many had made "no provisions beyond the wants of the hour," she wrote. "One looked long and generally in vain for some trace of a cellar, or storehouse, or barn, or even the marks of some former hayrick, which might betoken some thought of provisions for the future on the part of the so-called farmers. Pioneer-like, they had wasted what they could not at the moment use." In an attempt to circumvent hostile and competing interests (such as ranchers and railroads) in their own legislature, west Texans had appealed beyond the state's borders for aid. In Barton's view, such appeals, which told of thousands of people starving, were overstated. Her travels convinced her that "no one had starved nor was expected to. They were in far too great want, but not 'starving.'"¹⁷

Barton made her views known and called on the state's citizens for help through the pages of the *Dallas News*. Her relief efforts and publicity campaign persuaded the Texas legislature in February to vote one hundred thousand dollars for relief. However, as spring wore on, even that sum did not appreciably improve the situation. In the end, timely rains, and not state money or the Red Cross, saved Texas farmers.¹⁸

By the time he received Barton's letter, Cleveland had already vetoed HR 10203. "I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution," he declared on 16 February, commenting that in this instance the federal government had no power to relieve individual suffering. "The lesson should be constantly enforced," he wrote in his veto message, "that though the people support the

17. Barton to Cleveland, 19 Feb. 1887, printed in Clara Barton, *The Red Cross: A History of this Remarkable International Movement in the Interest of Humanity* (Washington, D.C.: American National Red Cross, 1898), p. 140.

18. Ibid., p. 138; Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 246-47.

Government the Government should not support the people." In Cleveland's view, federal aid "encourage[d] the expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government and weaken[ed] the sturdiness of our national character."¹⁹ Lanham rose in the House to lead an attempt to override the veto, but the effort failed by a vote of 83 to 159.²⁰

Critics called the veto an illustration of the president's "callousness" and "blind conservatism," a perception that persists with many modern historians. Cleveland's action may better be seen as what historian Richard E. Welch, Jr., has called a "plea of a troubled president anxious to sustain the traditions and values of an idealized past." Cleveland used similar language in vetoing pension bills, warning of a "vicious paternalism" that based loyalty to the government on the receipt of special favors.²¹ As a latter-day Jacksonian Democrat, the president believed in indirect aid for causes that served the larger public good. In the case of agriculture, such programs included those designed to eradicate "noxious insects," "destructive fungal growths," and contagious animal diseases. Direct aid to individuals, though, was best left to private charities and local governments.²²

The fact that the United States had a treasury surplus and two political parties willing to find new ways for disposing of it makes the veto of the seed bill puzzling at first glance. While Cleveland considered the surplus to be a menace to the country's prosperity and stability, his preferred solution was lowering the tariff on American business, a subject to which he devoted extensive time in his

19. James D. Richardson, comp., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 20 vols. (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897-1922), 12:5142.

20. *Congressional Record*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1887, 18, pt. 2:1875-76.

21. Richard E. Welch, Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 14.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

1886 and 1887 messages to Congress.²³ After Cleveland's defeat in 1888, a Republican Congress promptly embarked upon an orgy of spending that squandered the surplus by 1893. Most of the money went to fund Civil War veteran's pensions, no matter how dubious the claim, in order to win the support of this large voting block.²⁴

In contrast to the veterans, the farmers who stood to benefit from the 1887 seed bill occupied a less potent position in American society. With the collapse in the late 1870s of the Grange movement, which had sought to unite farmers for political action, farmers once more retreated into disorganized discontent, where they would remain until the cooperative movements of the early 1900s.²⁵ Farmers also began to suffer a loss of prestige as America became an increasingly urban nation. The isolation, lack of modern conveniences, poverty, and drabness of farm life drove thousands of young men and women to cities. Writers such as Hamlin Garland, Mari Sandoz, and Willa Cather, who had themselves left family farms on the plains, painted a picture of life there as unrelievedly harsh. Despite efforts to address and correct these perceptions, the popular image of the farmer throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained that of "an isolated, ignorant, poverty-stricken country bumpkin."²⁶

Furthermore, as reputable science began to play a role in farming in the 1880s and 1890s, farm failure came to be seen as avoidable through practices such as irrigation

23. George F. Parker, *Recollections of Grover Cleveland* (New York: Century Co., 1911), pp. 102-3.

24. For more extensive treatment of the issue of veterans' pensions, see Donald L. McMurry, "The Bureau of Pensions during the Administration of President Harrison," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13 (Dec. 1926): 343-64, and "The Political Significance of the Pension Question, 1885-1897," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 9 (June 1922): 19-36.

25. For a discussion of the complexities of agricultural organization during this period, see Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 81-152.

26. Gilbert C. Fite, "Flight from the Farm," *Nebraska History* 40 (Nov. 1959): 161.



As agricultural science and mechanization advanced, federal policy makers viewed farmers as responsible for their own fates and left them to fend for themselves when drought struck.

or crop diversification. The Hatch Act of 1887, which provided annual appropriations to fund agricultural experiment stations at land-grant universities, was premised upon the belief that despite America's industrialization, agriculture remained the foundation for a large portion of the economy. Science and education were the best vehicles for advancing this crucial industry, and farmers were to become "professionals," a notion that spread throughout other occupations in the late nineteenth century.²⁷

27. David B. Danbom, "Our Purpose is to Serve": *The First Century of the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1990), pp. 2-3. See also Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), pp. 84-105.

Farmers were also expected to become more businesslike in marketing their crops. Farm journals from the 1870s onward increasingly published crop-price forecasts in the belief that the prepared and knowledgeable farmer would get better prices. By the 1890s, forecasting shifted from specific commodities to the whole agricultural economy, spurred perhaps by the agricultural depression and general economic downturn that began in 1893.²⁸

For all the talk of controlling one's destiny through professionalization, science, and education, many farmers believed themselves to be at the mercy of railroads and other monopolies and viewed such strategies as unrealistic. The Grange, Farmers' Alliance, Populist party, and Nonpartisan League contained at their core the belief that farmers as individuals could not solve their own problems and that political action was needed to persuade the government to change existing economic arrangements. The Populist decade, in particular, marked the last gasp of independent yeomanry before farmers accepted the internationally competitive nature of the modern commodity market.²⁹

As in Texas, farmers in Dakota Territory found themselves forced to rely on their own resources to survive the drought years of the 1880s and 1890s. The Great Dakota Boom that roared through the 1880s had begun to diminish by 1887, and a severe drought in the summer of 1889 brought it to a crashing halt. The dry years would continue through 1896, peaking again in 1894. As early as July 1889, town boosters denied reports of near-starvation in the press, but by late fall the gravity of the situation was clear even to those who had done their best to ignore it.³⁰

28. Adam Ward Rome, "American Farmers as Entrepreneurs, 1870-1890," *Agricultural History* 56 (Jan. 1982): 41-47.

29. Danbom, "Our Purpose is to Serve", p. 3; Rome, "American Farmers as Entrepreneurs," pp. 46-49.

30. Herbert S. Schell, "Drought and Agriculture in Eastern South Dakota during the Eighteen Nineties," *Agricultural History* 5 (Oct. 1931): 163-64; *Yankton Press and Dakotan*, 15 July 1889.

Absorbed in the heady rush of statehood with its attendant elections, constitutional conventions, and prohibition fights, the people, press, and officials of the eastern Dakotas did not want to acknowledge reports of crop failure and starvation. The response of state legislators, even when faced with overwhelming evidence of ruination, was tepid. North Dakota lawmakers rejected a bill that would have loaned farmers one hundred thousand dollars to purchase seed, providing instead a mere twenty-five hundred dollars in direct relief. Of that sum, only \$1138.85 was actually spent. Another law authorized counties to issue their own bonds for the purchase of seed grain.³¹

31. North Dakota, *Session Laws* (1890), chap. 17, p. 98, chap. 152, pp. 449-54; North Dakota, *First Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor to the Governor of North Dakota* (Bismarck, 1890), p. 227. The county bond bill was later challenged but upheld as constitutional in *State of North Dakota v. Nelson County*, 1 N.D. 88 (1890).

In the late 1800s, settlers' hopes evaporated with their crops' moisture, leaving abandoned sod houses to dot the Great Plains.



The South Dakota legislature, forbidden by the state constitution to use public money for direct relief, authorized county commissioners to use county funds to provide the destitute with seed grain. It also directed the governor to appoint a committee to solicit private charity from the more prosperous areas of South Dakota and from large eastern cities.³²

A similar pattern of denial occurred in Nebraska and Kansas in 1890, when drought and hot winds led to a near-complete crop failure in the states' western counties. While touring the West in October 1890, President Benjamin Harrison dismissed the unrest caused by the drought and the Populists' admonitions to "raise less corn and more hell." Harrison told a cheering crowd in Topeka that "a single year of disappointment in agricultural returns should not make you despair of the future. . . . Life is made up of averages, and I think you will show a good average. . . . Kansas and her people have an assured and happy future."³³

Settlers "busted" by drought ignored Harrison and the town boosters who urged them to stay put and stick it out, abandoning homesteads in droves. As reports detailing the distress and subsequent exodus filtered back east, state lawmakers took action. In January 1891, the Kansas legislature provided the state railway commission with sixty thousand dollars for relief supplies and seed grain. The Nebraska State Relief Commission, in addition to private donations, received one hundred thousand dollars from the treasury to purchase relief supplies. In addition to approving another one hundred thousand dollars in bonds for supplies, the Nebraska legislature passed a

32. South Dakota, *Constitution* (1889), art. 13, sec. 1; South Dakota, *Session Laws* (1890), chaps. 47-48, pp. 120-21, chap. 72, pp. 166-68.

33. Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison: Hoosier President*, vol. 3, *The White House and After* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1968), p. 178.

measure allowing counties to issue bonds of up to twenty thousand dollars for relief supplies.³⁴

The drought of 1890 and the accompanying economic and political unrest caused a political realignment across the Great Plains that year. Populists took control of state legislatures in Kansas and Nebraska. Both states sent Populist congressmen to Washington, D.C. (five from Kansas, two from Nebraska), where they joined colleagues (one each) from Minnesota and Georgia. Kansas and South Dakota also sent Populists to the United States Senate. Because their term of office did not begin until 7 December 1891, Populist lawmakers played no role in forwarding relief to farmers until the next year. In the meantime, the outgoing Fifty-first Congress did its best to secure some measure of relief for the drought-stricken region.

Plains Republicans drew up three seed-grain bills in the House. On 2 December 1890, Nebraska congressman George Dorsey sponsored HR 244 calling on the agriculture secretary to purchase and distribute seed grain to destitute citizens of Kansas and Nebraska. Henry Hansbrough of North Dakota introduced HR 248, directing the same action for North Dakota farmers. The House sent both bills to the Committee on Agriculture, from which they were never returned to the floor.³⁵ John A. Pickler of South Dakota broadened the decidedly local scope of both measures with HR 13053, making the "subhumid regions" of the United States eligible for seed grain. Pickler's bill went the way of the others, though, dying in the Committee on Agriculture, where it had been referred on 10 January 1891.³⁶

34. Kansas, *Session Laws* (1891), chap. 129, pp. 218-20; Nebraska, *General Laws* (1891), chaps. 38-41, pp. 297-313. The county bond law was declared unconstitutional on a technicality relating to the manner of calling elections on the bonds. *In re House Roll* 284, 31 Neb. 505 (1891). No county actually passed such a bond issue in 1891. Sam S. Kepfield, "The Nebraska Drought of 1890," *Journal of the West* 34 (Jan. 1997): 50-52.

35. *Congressional Record*, 51st Cong., 2d sess., 1890, 22, pt. 1:39, 109.

36. *Ibid.*, pt. 2:1171.

Congressman John A. Pickler of South Dakota fought a losing battle in the United States House to obtain seed grain for distressed farmers on the Great Plains.



In the Senate, Kansas Republican John Ingalls introduced Senate Resolution (SR) 130 on 2 December 1890, proposing to give \$150,000 to the Agriculture Department for seed-grain distribution in Kansas and Nebraska. The Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry postponed action on the measure indefinitely in favor of an identical amendment to the annual agricultural appropriations bill.³⁷

37. Ibid., pt. 1:16, 237. Ironically, Ingalls would be defeated for reelection the next month by Populist William A. Pepper, partly on the perception that he had not done enough for farmers. Burton J. Williams, *Senator John James Ingalls: Kansas' Iridescent Republican* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1972), pp. 118, 123.

The committee ultimately rejected the amendment, but in the last-minute rush to finish business before Congress adjourned on 3 March 1891, the enrolling clerk failed to delete the seed-grain provision from the final bill. The relief amendment inadvertently became law when the Senate approved the measure in the closing days of the Fifty-first Congress. On 2 March, accompanied by applause from the floor, the House passed a joint resolution to correct the error. Pickler objected to the repeal but was shouted down with cries of "Shame! Shame!"³⁸ The Senate concurred unanimously on the final day of the session.³⁹ Nothing more was heard in either the Fifty-first or the Fifty-second Congress about relief to plains farmers.

Ultimately, as in Texas, it was not any human agency but rather nature that rescued farmers for another growing season. Rains fell late in 1890 and through 1891, producing bumper crops. Crop failures overseas, especially in Russia in 1891 and 1892, provided a ready market for the surplus grain.⁴⁰ The respite was merely temporary, however, for drought resumed in 1892, and 1893 also brought a national depression.

The year 1894 was probably the worst. In the space of a few days in late July, drought, high temperatures, and scorching south winds destroyed most corn and wheat crops. South Dakota farmers harvested only 1.5 million bushels of corn, with yields averaging 4 bushels per acre (in 1893, the harvest of 27.3 million bushels had averaged 30 bushels per acre). Some counties in northwest Kansas reported complete crop failures; Cheyenne County, for example, raised no wheat, corn, oats, barley, or rye in 1894. Corn production in Kansas overall stood at 67 mil-

38. *Congressional Record*, 51st Cong., 2d sess., 1891, 22, pt. 4:3821.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 3919.

40. Harold F. Smith, "Bread for the Russians: William C. Edgar and the Relief Campaign of 1892," *Minnesota History* 42 (Summer 1970): 54-62.

lion bushels—a little over half of the 1893 total and less than a quarter of the record harvest of 1889. Nebraska's 1894 corn crop was less than a third of the previous year's total, falling from 169 million to 47 million bushels. Yields there declined from 26.5 to 7 bushels per acre.⁴¹

As in 1874 and 1890, government officials and the press were slow to acknowledge the extent of the disaster for fear of giving their states yet another "black eye." In fact, some of the legislative actions of 1891 actually limited the state's options in dealing with the drought of 1894. Nebraska governor Lorenzo B. Crounse decided against calling a special legislative session to address relief because the state had reached its indebtedness limit of one hundred thousand dollars with the issuance of bonds in 1891. Instead, Nebraska officials resurrected the private relief commission to distribute supplies that flowed in from across the country. North Dakota passed no relief laws in 1895, having suffered from near-insolvency throughout the decade. An overabundance of state institutions along with a small tax base grown smaller with depression and crop failure made it difficult to meet even basic obligations.⁴²

State measures passed in 1895 to meet the needs of western settlers were almost unchanged from those of four years earlier. The Kansas legislature again put affairs in the hands of the state railroad commission, voting one hundred thousand dollars to carry out relief efforts. As before, counties were permitted to issue bonds carrying 6 percent interest to buy seed grain. South Dakota made no direct appropriations, once again authorizing county com-

41. South Dakota, Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, *South Dakota Agriculture Statistics, 1940 and 1941* (Pierre, n.d.), p. 25; Kansas, State Board of Agriculture, *Ninth Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State for the Years 1893 and 1894* (Topeka, 1895), pp. 33, 234; Nebraska, State Board of Agriculture, *Annual Report of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture for the Year 1894* (Lincoln, 1895), p. 12.

42. *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), 2 Sept., 30 Oct. 1894; Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 226.

missions to provide needy farmers with seed grain. The Nebraska legislature generously approved \$50,000 for immediate relief in February 1895, later earmarking \$200,000 from the treasury for seed and feed while empowering counties to issue bonds for the same purpose. Colorado considered a direct appropriation of \$32,250, as it had in 1891, but the state supreme court ruled that the Colorado constitution forbade charitable contributions to individuals who were not wards of the state.⁴³

Though they now participated in Congressional debates, Populists in Washington, D.C., were unable to obtain federal funds to alleviate the farmers' distress. Underlying their efforts to secure aid was a sincere desire to maintain the viability of small-scale agriculture, cut "corporate welfare," and boost programs such as education that improved the general welfare. In January 1895, Nebraska congressman O. M. Kem, a Populist, proposed a concurrent resolution asking the Agriculture Department to divert to the drought-stricken West a portion of the free sample seeds it distributed annually to congressional districts around the country. The resolution died in the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry.⁴⁴

Another Nebraska Populist, William Allen, attempted to amend the agriculture appropriations bill in the Senate to provide three hundred thousand dollars to purchase seed grain for farmers. Allen chose this tactic rather than introducing a separate bill in hopes of avoiding a veto by Grover Cleveland, who had killed the 1887 seed bill and was back in the White House. Unable to strike a single amendment, Cleveland would be forced to veto the entire

43. Kansas, *Session Laws* (1895), chaps. 242-44; South Dakota, *Session Laws* (1895), chap. 167, pp. 188-91; Nebraska, *General Laws* (1895), pp. 357-59, 445-46, 994-95; *In re Relief Bill*, 21 Colo. 62 (1895).

44. Gene Clanton, "'Hayseed Socialism' on the Hill: Congressional Populism, 1891-1895," *Western Historical Quarterly* 15 (Apr. 1984): 151-52, 156-57; *Congressional Record*, 53d Cong., 3d sess., 1895, 27, pt. 2:910, 926.

bill, an unlikely action. Allen's amendment, introduced and debated on 18 February 1895, provoked spirited debate over the proper role of the federal government in times of distress.

In a passionate plea on behalf of his constituents, Allen told colleagues (not altogether truthfully) that the region's two successive crop failures were exceptional and that despite boosters' denials, the state was experiencing real hardship. "When I am put to the test of choosing between following the wishes of a few real estate men and answering the cries of distress and hunger of my fellow citizens I prefer to take the latter course," Allen declared. Like Coke, he then used the 1882 flood relief bill as precedent, stating that "where some great misfortune has befallen the people of any particular section of the country, which becomes a national calamity, it has been the custom of the Government to extend relief to them." He also noted that immediately prior to debating his amendment, the Senate had approved forty thousand dollars to eradicate the gypsy moth in Massachusetts.

As they had Richard Coke and his bill for Texas farmers, Allen's colleagues bitterly attacked him for offering the amendment. A fellow Populist, William Pepper of Kansas, noted that his state legislature had already voted one hundred thousand dollars for relief. "Our people have taken care of themselves," Pepper said, voicing his belief that the hardship was localized and could be handled by individual states. Allen dismissed the Kansas senator, insisting that the drought and suffering were too general to be cured with such a small sum. He accused Pepper of complicity in prolonging the distress, charging him with being "afraid to speak of it for fear somebody may be offended."

Allen's most persistent critic was Republican Joseph Carey of Wyoming, who warned of the dangerous precedent the amendment would set. "Every time there is a

severe frost or a drought or a fire or a flood in any section of the country," Carey contended, "the people will come to Congress and appeal for a special appropriation." Such actions caused the West "great damage," he claimed, implying that bad publicity would hamper the region's development. To bolster his case against federal intervention in the matter, Carey had Cleveland's 1887 veto message of the Texas seed bill read into the record. Rising to support the Wyoming senator was Tennessee Democrat William Bate, a member of the Agriculture Committee, who professed sympathy for the farmers but insisted that constitutional principle prevail. State and local governments were equal to the task of caring for the stricken farmers, Bate claimed.

Allen dismissed such objections as nothing more than petty politics, reminding Bate of an earlier bill granting the citizens of Memphis, Tennessee, medical supplies and assistance during a fever epidemic. "Whenever the representatives of a certain locality think it ought to have assistance or aid the Constitution is not infringed upon," Allen said. "[B]ut at the moment some other section of the country desires assistance then immediately the Constitution comes into view and immediately there is trouble."

Nebraska's retiring senior senator, Charles F. Manderson, finished off any chance for approval of Allen's amendment. Manderson admitted viewing "desolation" on his last trip home but declared himself embarrassed at Allen's actions. Constitutional objections did not force his opposition; in debate, Manderson stated his willingness to consider "strain[ing] constitutional provisions for the purpose of doing a great good." In fact, he had already done so in voting for the Texas seed bill in 1887. But in 1895, Manderson's pride would not let him approve of Nebraska coming "*in forma pauperis*" to ask the federal government for aid. In the senator's view, the Nebraska legislature could well meet any relief requirements and did not

need "this alms at the hands of Congress." His appeal to local pride was so powerful that Florida Democrat Samuel Pasco withdrew his own addition to the amendment that would have compensated citrus farmers whose orchards had suffered frost damage. The Senate defeated the amendment by a vote of twenty-eight to twenty-one.⁴⁵

Manderson's role in defeating the appropriation earned him the hatred of his constituents. Calling the proposed expenditure "perfectly legitimate," the *Omaha Bee* excoriated Manderson for what it termed his "uncalled-for exhibition of partisan rancor" designed to prevent his Populist colleague from garnering voters' favor. It also had harsh words for the seeming hypocrisy of the Senate in approving funds to eradicate the gypsy moth when it could well have addressed a problem of much wider significance.⁴⁶

In a last attempt to secure some form of aid, South Dakota's Republican senator Richard F. Pettigrew introduced an identical amendment to the annual sundry civil appropriations bill on 28 February, three days before Congress was to adjourn. "These people live upon lands they have taken from the Government," Pettigrew said in presenting his amendment, "and if this assistance is rendered them they will stay there and pay for the land, and others will come and buy other lands of the Government. This appropriation is then not a charity, but is in the interest of economy."⁴⁷ Pettigrew was not alone in implying that the federal government, having opened the semiarid region to homesteaders, subsequently had "a duty to perform in the premises." While admitting that the government had given no warranty on the land, the *Nebraska State Journal* charged that it had become an accomplice to misrep-

45. *Congressional Record*, 53d Cong., 3d sess., 1895, 27, pt. 4:2339-43.

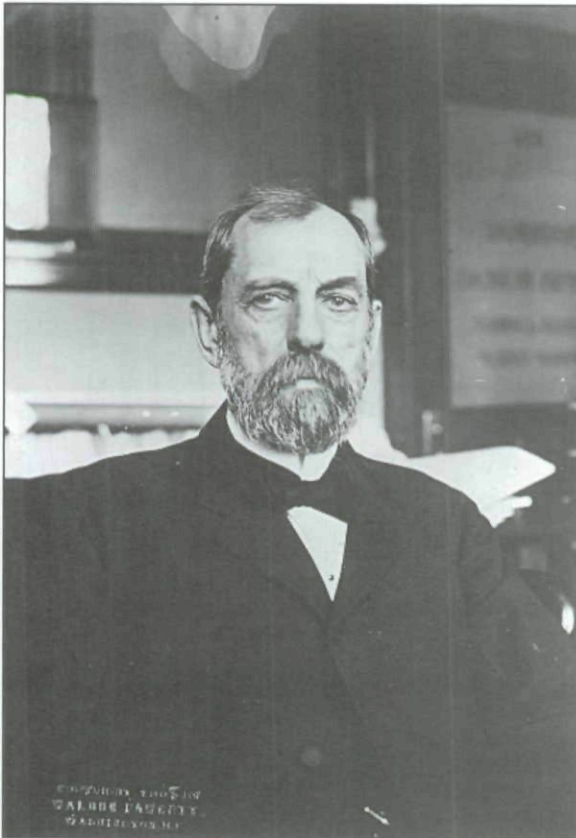
46. *Omaha Bee*, 20 Feb. 1895.

47. *Congressional Record*, 53d Cong., 3d sess., 1895, 27, pt. 4:2882.

resentation in acting on the claims of "over-zealous frontiersmen" who had clamored for the opening of grazing lands to farmers.⁴⁸

Pettigrew's amendment aroused less opposition than had Allen's. Peffer again discounted the need for federal

48. *Nebraska State Journal*, 2 Mar. 1895.



In Senate debate, Richard F. Pettigrew of South Dakota argued that aid to the drought-stricken plains was an investment in the future rather than an act of charity.

money, reminding colleagues that the Kansas legislature had already settled the issue, but he did not formally oppose the measure. The Senate then passed the amendment thirty-one to seventeen. The House, however, objected, and on 2 March a conference committee recommended that the amendment be dropped from the final bill.⁴⁹ Not until 1897, with the depression gone and the overseas market for American grain booming, would plains farmers again know prosperity.⁵⁰ The "Golden Age" of agriculture was about to dawn and without any assistance from the federal government.

Even so, the last third of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginnings of change in how the federal government viewed its obligations to the farmers it had invited onto the public lands of the Great Plains. Although it gave them no direct relief money during the drought and depression of the 1880s and 1890s, the kernel of an idea had been planted. In 1917, the government would provide aid to Montana farmers hit by drought.⁵¹ The Dust Bowl and the New Deal response to it brought a turning point in relations between government and agriculture. By the 1930s, radio, motion pictures, and improved photography had made it harder to hide widespread drought and suffering and deny the need for relief. At the same time, technology also served to subdue the environment. Innovations such as irrigation, mechanization of farm machinery, and genetic engineering put farmers today in a better position than their predecessors to ride out lean years. Ironically, such innovations often came at the expense of smaller operators—a situation aggravated by

49. *Congressional Record*, 53d Cong., 3d sess., 1895, 27, pt. 4:2882-83, 3212; *Statutes at Large*, vol. 28, Act of 2 Mar. 1895, pp. 727-38.

50. Gerald T. White examines the effect the successful marketing of grain had on the nation's economy in "Economic Recovery and the Wheat Crop of 1897," *Agricultural History* 13 (Jan. 1939): 13-21.

51. *Statutes at Large*, vol. 40, Act of 10 Aug. 1917, p. 274.

government-aid programs that ultimately rewarded agribusiness, not the small farmers they were intended to protect.⁵²

Agricultural relief in the late 1800s is but one chapter in the story of farmers caught between two worlds. The old world exalted the Jeffersonian ideal of self-sufficiency and distrusted paternalistic government. The post-Populist future, on the other hand, would see cooperation, lobbying, and government aid play a role in raising farmers from a position of weakness to a powerful political interest group in their own right.⁵³

52. Michael W. Schuyler, "New Deal Farm Policy in the Middle West—A Retrospective View," *Journal of the West* 33 (Oct. 1994): 52-55, 60-62.

53. For an overview of this process, see John Mark Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

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