Introduction

Most Americans regard the Great Depression as a phenomenon that began in 1929 with the stock market crash and continued until the beginning of World War II. On the Great Plains, however, the problems went much deeper, and the hard times began much earlier. An agricultural depression of considerable magnitude was under way by 1923 and continued without a break until 1939. During the 1920s, crops were good, but prices were depressed, and many expansion loans made during World War I were called in but could not be paid. Much of the banking system failed, and many independent farmers and ranchers became tenants.

Thus, the depression of the 1930s hit an area already in bad economic shape. And with it came other horrors—in particular,
South Dakotans Remember the Great Depression

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Tripp County, 5 May 1936
drought. Year after year, the clouds rolled by without leaving any moisture, and the land did not produce. Great plagues of grasshoppers came, stripping the land totally bare in places and, at times, actually eating the paint from houses. Then came the dust storms—great black clouds that turned the midday sun into a midnight black. Dust of a consistency finer than that of face powder penetrated the houses, the farms, and even the souls of the people. Fence lines were drifted over as if with snow. Many people left, but the ones who remained tightened their belts, hung on, and survived, sometimes with the help of the federal government, sometimes in spite of it. Tempered like hard steel by the experience, these survivors took great pride in having endured, but never again would they wholly accept the philosophy of a boom economy nor the idea that government should spend beyond its means. Above all, they remembered.

The interviews presented here were taken from a larger collection of oral histories of South Dakotans. Oral history is human-kind’s most ancient method of gathering information about the past. In modern times, historians have been able to capture and hold these data on magnetic tape and then transcribe and edit them for readers to savor. In this particular case, we gleaned our selections from one of the world’s largest and best oral history collections, located in the Oral History Center at the University of South Dakota. The main advantage of oral history is that it taps the memories of those who have firsthand knowledge of historical events. Because South Dakota is one of the nation’s youngest states, interviewers have been able to discover and retain the experiences of many citizens who were active in the state during its infancy. Each person whose words appear here represents a fascinating mixture of both the typical and the extraordinary characteristics and experiences that reflect the human condition and the special demands of being a South Dakotan.

In preparing the transcripts of these interviews for publication, we sometimes left out certain questions and answers, because, in our opinion, they were of limited historical value and interest. At the same time, however, we never rearranged the parts of any interview. We must also mention another of our editorial policies, although it is bound to be controversial. Unavoidably, spoken language contains verbiage that adds little of substance to interviews. When oral histories are published, such unessentials are usually eliminated for the reader’s convenience. Normally, each such deletion requires the addition of ellipses, but in this case, we decided to include as few ellipses as possible. Although scholars would
probably prefer a plethora of proper dots, we hope in eliminating them to enhance further the experience of the South Dakotans who will read these excerpts, which are basically gifts from a select few to their friends and neighbors. We stress, however, that we have not changed the meaning or context of any interview.*


Emil Loriks served as state senator, Farm Holiday movement leader, and South Dakota Farmers Union president during the 1930s. He went on in the next two decades to serve as a regional administrator for the Farm Security Administration, national secretary-treasurer of the Farmers Union, and president of the Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association, the largest grain-marketing cooperative in the country.

PAUL O’ROURKE: You met [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt once?

EMIL LORIKS: Yes, more than once. We had the Dust Bowl and the depression, the worst depression that this nation has ever seen. I was in the [state] legislature at the time, in the senate. Roosevelt came here by special train to Pierre to view the devastation. [His undersecretary of agriculture, Rexford G.] Tugwell was with him then. It was a great thrill to hear Franklin D. Roosevelt, because we had listened to him on radio, and we thought a great deal of Roosevelt. As he left the platform, I left, too, and Tugwell came along. I didn’t know him, [but] he grabbed me by the coat-sleeve and brought me into the presence of the president in the special car. We spent, I suppose, the better part of an hour with the president of the United States, leaders in the Farmers Union and the Federation of Labor. He didn’t invite anybody else; he didn’t invite the big shots who came to Pierre to see him on that day.

O’ROURKE: Do you think you had a chance, in the thirties, to build up, within the Democratic party, a real party of the people?

LORIKS: Well, we were striving for that. We felt that Roosevelt missed the boat. You sometimes get a feeling of hopelessness—I have at times—because when [the farmers] get back on their feet, they gradually drift back to the old conservative pattern again.

* The preparation of these materials was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.
I know a great many neighbors of mine who remain progressive in their thinking up to now. But some, who became successful, just revert[ed] right back to the old pattern again of reaction.

Gladys Pyle, interviewed by Paul O'Rourke at Huron, South Dakota, 23 June 1971.

Gladys Pyle was probably South Dakota’s premier woman politician. The former teacher was the first female elected to the South Dakota legislature and the first woman to serve as South Dakota’s secretary of state. In 1930, she became the first woman to run for governor of the state and, in the next year, the first female to serve on a state commission. With the 1938 election, she became the first South Dakota woman and the first Republican woman to be elected to the United States Senate. She went on to serve a long term on the South Dakota Board of Charities and Corrections and participate in numerous political and civic organizations.

O’ROURKE: What was your reaction to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal? How did you feel about them?

PYLE: You know, the South Dakota bank failures came ahead of [the] national bank failures, so [we got] stuck twice. There was the crop failure and the bank failure in South Dakota [in the 1920s], and then the national bank failures, which again took South Dakota. So, South Dakota was terribly hit in the depression. Well, I was not an admirer of Franklin Roosevelt; I thought he was not a man of terribly great sincerity. He was what I might call a four-flusher, [but] he did some very good things. He wasn’t afraid to have new things, new deals. I was a great admirer of his wife; I think she’s one of the great women of the United States, or was, and a very humble woman, too. But I thought that when Franklin Roosevelt refused to cooperate with Herbert Hoover, at the end of his term of office, when he wanted to do such things as declare a bank holiday, that he was thinking entirely in terms of politics and not of the good of the country. And I do not feel that he had any right to seek four terms. Even at the time of the third term, he was not up to being a good president. [He] was lamentably under the thumb of other people.

O’ROURKE: Now, when this state was in such bad condition during the thirties, what did you feel the national government should be doing? Did you feel it was spending too much money? What was your solution to the depression?

PYLE: I don’t know if I had a solution. I was just so busy trying to solve the angles that had hit the Pyle family. I never felt that the killing of the livestock was the solution that it was supposed
to be. Possibly, it was because I had such an awful time to identify the pigs that were killed on our own farm, because the man that was operating the farm went through bankruptcy, and I had no records. I had to go to the stockyards day after day to find the men that had hauled the stuff to stock. I was just so concerned about that that I think maybe I was a little blind to some of the more important national issues. But everybody was going through it here. When I saw some of our respected, well-to-do farmers and businessmen manipulating a shovel on WPA, it made [my] heart ache. Not only farm people, but other people, who had always been self-managing, self-supporting, contributing public citizens, [were] just reduced to the point where they had to do anything to earn a living for their family. I ran onto it some in insurance work. So, many men just had to drop or extend their policy. They couldn’t pay premiums, and the suffering was terrible.

O’ROURKE: Your impression was that the farmers were accepting their lot rather quietly?

PYLE: Of course, the state passed the tax contract law, so that everybody who had to let their taxes go unpaid, which meant ninety-nine percent of all the people, were given a ten-year period in which to pick those up, without interest. Many people were able to redeem their farms on that tax contract law. I’m not conscious of there having been any [of] what I’d call agitation. There were meetings, and there were lawsuits.

O’ROURKE: Well, you were really trying to bail out the family’s fortunes in the thirties?

PYLE: We were like everybody else; we were trying to hang on as best we could, and get our taxes caught up, and not lose anything. That was just universal, practically, [among] people who had farm interests. We had [always] had a farm. I think my father bought it in about 1900. So, it was just universal for people to be tightening their belts, you know?

1. Through the Farm Relief Act of 1933, the federal government attempted to raise farm prices by paying farmers to reduce their production of certain commodities. Unfortunately, the bill was enacted after the growing season was already under way, leaving officials little choice but to order the killing of pigs and the destruction of crops in order for the measure to have an immediate impact. Robert S. McElvaine, _The Great Depression_ (New York: Times Books, 1984), pp. 148-49.

2. Created in 1935 as an alternative to direct relief payments to the unemployed, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) supervised the construction of projects like playgrounds, schools, hospitals, and airfields and also provided work programs for unemployed professionals in the arts. McElvaine, _The Great Depression_, pp. 265, 269.

Ben Huggins was a member of a family that homesteaded near Geddes in south-central South Dakota in the 1880s.

STEVE PLUMMER: Did they have pretty bad dust storms, along with grasshoppers, in this part of the country?

BEN HUGGINS: In 1932, you could write your name on any piece of furniture in the house. Our bed [would be] gray at night.

MRS. HUGGINS: Sometimes you couldn’t see. You couldn’t see no road. We had storm windows in our bedroom, and the dust was so thick on the bedspread you couldn’t tell what color it was. We went to bed, [and] the dust was so terrible, you couldn’t sleep. We had to wash every dish in the house.

MR. AND MRS. HUGGINS’ DAUGHTER: The storm windows were so bad in-between [that] it was just like having a black sheet in there, because you couldn’t see through into your room. What feed we had was really full of dirt, [and] we couldn’t get any water. We'd run out to the cisterns, and we'd pump it into a pail with a lid on it. By the time we got back, it was full of dirt, and you couldn’t drink it. You’d never believe how bad it was. . . . It was a terrific storm, all day long. In the morning, the sun came up, [and] it was beautiful. And, [in] about half an hour, the wind was a-blowing, and pretty soon it was blowing harder and harder, and, by noon, it was like this until night.

PLUMMER: They had pretty bad trouble with grasshoppers here in the 1930s?
HUGGINS: The grasshoppers [ate] our corn, and every day you could see they just mowed it off. They cut it off and suck the sap out of the root, [and that] makes it dry up. [If] a bunch of cattle gets in the field and bites off the corn, it’ll grow up again. But after the grasshoppers cut it off, [it’s dead]. If they lit in your garden, the first thing they ate were onions. They’d just eat that onion up and just leave the shell on the ground. There was lots of horseradish in the country [in] those early days, and they killed all of that horseradish.

PLUMMER: Was there any way of stopping these grasshoppers from coming in?

HUGGINS: The county put out quite a lot of poison, but they didn’t use no judgment. They went out and sprayed, [but] the ground was so dry and hot, it’d just dry up. [On] the wheat patches, where that poison stuck on, they got some pretty good kills. But you’d set your water jug out in the field, and the grasshoppers would just set around that cork and eat that cork.

MRS. HUGGINS: I can remember those grasshoppers. They came and stripped the lilac bushes, just stripped them right off. But one Saturday night we were in town, and [we were] just sitting there, [and] pretty quick they were down your neck. They were in your back; they were all over. There was nothing you could do but get out of town and get home. They were just all down in your clothes. They had to close the stores up, and they had quite a time getting the grasshoppers out of all the material and everything they got stuck into. They’d just get right in the door. They’d just come down
and hit the town at night, when the lights were on. They were eating the clothes on the line.

DAUGHTER: We would have a fence post, and there would be lines so thick you couldn’t put your finger on that post.

HUGGINS: And there wasn’t a leaf left on a tree.

Earl Cronkhite, interviewed by John Watterson at De Smet, South Dakota, 6 June 1973.

*Earl Cronkhite farmed near De Smet during the Great Depression.*

JOHN WATTERSON: Was there much dirt in the air [in the thirties]?

EARL CRONKHITE: We’ve seen it so bad that we couldn’t see the clock on the wall or the lights. The dust was so bad that you couldn’t even see across the road. You couldn’t see the linoleum. The window sills were just drifts of dust. That’s the absolute truth. It was just day after day, you know? It would blow one way, and the next day it would blow somewhere else. Some of the fences were full of dirt clear to the top.


*The Boschmas lived on a farm near Springfield during the 1930s.*

STEPHEN WARD: We are talking about the depression. Now, you were living on a check from the government. Fifteen [dollars] a month, did you say? You were farming unsuccessfully, or were you farming at all?

LEONARD BOSCHMA: We started farming in ’28; that was a good year. That kind of put us on our feet a little bit. From then on, it [got] worse, and, about ’34, we didn’t raise a thing. And we had to sell our cattle. The cows that we did keep were just thin bones, you might say. We kept a few, and we would buy feed from Iowa. They’d ship it in from Iowa. That would be baled straw and stuff, with molasses on it or something; but it wasn’t enough nourishment for the cow[s], because they were just a rack of bones. It was terrible. So, we didn’t keep very many. And it was so hot that the heat waves would be fluttering around in front of your eyes. And you couldn’t find a weed or anything to put in the nests so the chickens could lay their eggs. There wasn’t any hay; there wasn’t any straw. There was Russian thistles. They did take these Russian thistles and stack them, and we’d try to feed [them] to our cows. You cut them green and stack them, but there wasn’t any nourishment in them, either. I even tried cooking some of
them, the little ones. The little tiny ones, they said, make good greens. But they weren’t very good. There wasn’t anything. You’d put your radishes in the ground and wet it down. They’d come up, and the sun would just cook them right off the top. And [there were] cracks in the ground, an inch-and-a-half and two inches wide on your yard. You didn’t know where to feed your chickens, because [the feed] would roll down these deep cracks. The ground was cracked open.

WARD: Because it was so dry?
ELLA BOSCHMA: Yeah. Then, what little oats we did have wasn’t good. It was just shells, and the chickens wouldn’t eat that. There were just a few good kernels in that oats.
WARD: Did you ever consider leaving?
ELLA BOSCHMA: No. A lot of people did. No, I don’t think we did, did we?
LEONARD BOSCHMA: Couldn’t.
ELLA BOSCHMA: We didn’t have nothing to leave with. We come to town about once in two weeks.
LEONARD BOSCHMA: We were too poor to get away.
ELLA BOSCHMA: And we never went anywhere. I always say now [that] I’d like to see the young people go and have a few trips while they can enjoy it, because we couldn’t. You get older, and you don’t enjoy them like you would when you were younger. We’d sit out on the porch, and that cloud would come up, and it looked like it was going to rain. The moon would come up over here, and it would just disappear. Every time that moon would come up, it’d draw that [cloud] away. I don’t know why [it did], but we were quite disappointed.
WARD: Were there a lot of people very despondent, do you think?
ELLA BOSCHMA: Not too many. I mean, everybody was in the same boat. There were a few of them [that] almost lost their farm. But most of them were pretty good. I know my niece and husband came over, and I was out in the trees. We planted a lot of little trees. I was out there hoeing around them trees, and they asked, ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘Oh, I’m doing this to keep from going crazy.’ Just keep busy, you know, do something. We’d buy feed in sacks for our chickens; we’d always get the colored ones that were alike, because we made our dresses out of them. We’d get three hundred brown sacks alike, and then we could make a dress. We had a Ladies Aid out there in the little Perkins church. We’d meet twice a month for ten-cent lunches. Well, we couldn’t do that anymore. [We] couldn’t afford that. So, we said, ‘We’ll have
one meeting a month, and we'll pay twenty cents for our lunch; then, we won't have the expense of going [twice].' [At the meeting,] we made pillowcases out of these sacks, and dresser scarves, and everything. Everybody was using that, because there was nothing. You couldn't buy anything, either. That was during World War II. You couldn't buy no pillowcases and things like that. We really kind of enjoyed to see what we could make. They made underwear out of flour sacks; that was the way we had to live.

LEONARD BOSCHMA: Our storekeeper got quite a kick out of it. He says, 'That flour was Pillsbury's Best.' He said, 'There was a lot of girls wearing Pillsbury's Best.'

WARD: Well, do you look back fondly at that period, or do you look back at it as something that just had to be tolerated?

ELLA BOSCHMA: I never really think about it. I'm enjoying life so much now [that] I wish I could add a few more years to it, because we had those years that we couldn't do anything. Now, our life is so far gone that we won't be here very many years. I regret that, because I feel good, and I've enjoyed living in town. We've had a nice life in town. And I enjoyed it out on the farm, too, but I kind of wish we could expand the years a little bit more.

Against great odds, South Dakota farmers plant and cultivate a shelterbelt in the dust of the thirties.
LEONARD BOSCHMA: The people that stayed here were better off financially than those people that moved out, because when you started raising the crops [again], you could buy land cheap for a long time.

WARD: How did you get your source of revenue? I don’t see how you made any money.

LEONARD BOSCHMA: Oh, we didn’t have any money. We got this little compensation [from the government]. We didn’t use that, either, for anything for ourselves.

WARD: Well, what did you live on?

ELLA BOSCHMA: Well, we had a few chickens, and we had a few cows, and we had our own meat and eggs. Groceries was a lot cheaper than it is now, you know.

WARD: These chickens would lay eggs, and you’d sell the eggs?

ELLA BOSCHMA: Yeah, and we would eat the chickens. Of course, it wasn’t the best, but then, I question that myself, when you asked that. I ask myself that now, ‘What did we live off of?’ It would be a terrible thing, I think, now. I don’t know; we managed. We didn’t have an electric bill; we had a kerosene lamp. We just didn’t go; we stayed home. We would buy enough gas to go every two weeks. What would you do now? Everything is gas-heated, electric-heated, and look at the bills we pay every month. If that would happen now, what would you do? See, we could help ourselves [then]. When we moved to town, I said, ‘All right, if you think you can make a living, I’ll move. But here, I can save; I can burn wood.’ I would go down in the pasture, Len and I, and we’d gather wood up, and bring it up; [it was] all the dead wood. We had all the neighbors in our pasture cutting wood, and we sold wood, for awhile. We had haystacks of wood, because all the trees died. I didn’t think they’d ever come back, but they did. There’s a lot of trees in the pasture again. So, we burned wood. We didn’t have cobs, [be]cause there wasn’t any corn. We burned wood and a little bit of oil; toward the last, we got a heater. And we didn’t have it warm in the house. That heater went out at night, and the cookstove went out at night. In the morning, the washbasin would have ice in it. You’d shiver and shiver to get your clothes on and get that fire going so it would be warm. You see, we didn’t burn much that way. That’s the way we managed.

LEONARD BOSCHMA: When was it when we had that snow [that] was this deep?

ELLA BOSCHMA: That was in ’33 or ’34. We had so much snow that winter, it was just terrible. We didn’t get away from the farm for three months at a time. They came out with bulldozers to bull-
doze the road to the house; then, you'd go right that minute. The snow was eight, nine feet high to the garage. You couldn't hardly get the car out. They'd have to bulldoze that snow, and, by the time you got home, the snow would [have filled in] again. You were just lucky to get back home if you went after anything. The gasoline man would come out and fill your tank. We were using fuel heaters at that time. The [fuel deliverers] worked all one Sunday. They were out on a Sunday, because they had come out on Saturday and opened the road. In the spring, that path they made was nice and green, and the rest of the alfalfa field was sort of a dirty green; it didn't grow good. That must have been because it was too smothered; [there was] no air getting in there.

WARD: Well, is that the worst winter you remember out there?

ELLA BOSCHMA: Yeah, I think so, because we would relay our mail; it would come down mile by mile. The farmers would relay it, and we'd get it through this deep snow. And the funny part of that snow was that you couldn't make a path in it. You tried to walk to your neighbor, and you'd get a path, but it was just like flour. You couldn't make it last. And people had to bake their own bread and had to have yeast. A lot of people were out of yeast, bread, and things.

WARD: During the depression, you mentioned these grasshoppers. Now, did they come in at the height of the drought, or were they in every year?

ELLA BOSCHMA: We had grasshoppers more or less every year. They just flew in hordes. My mother had a nice little lilac bush for the house. They came in and just cleaned it up. Then [they would] move on and go somewhere else. They were thick all over. In the heat of the day, they would be on the side of the telephone poles, where the sun wouldn't be. They would be just as thick and close as they could get together. And the chickens ate so many of them that they couldn't eat them all. They lived on grasshoppers, the few chickens that we kept. Remember how we used to go out and poison [grasshoppers]?

LEONARD BOSCHMA: Yeah. We'd go out early in the morning, with what kind of dope?

ELLA BOSCHMA: The smell—it was banana-scented poison of some kind. You could get it downtown. You'd throw [that] in between the rows. Early in the morning, you'd go up and down the rows. You'd kill some, but it seemed like there were more that came. [People] said [the others] came to the funerals.

LEONARD BOSCHMA: [I] used to take water to the field in an old-fashioned jug. I left the jug out in the field, and grasshoppers ate the cork out of it.
On 1 August 1933, a photographer chronicled the aftermath of a grasshopper scourge. The voracious insects stripped the cornfields (below) and ate bark and leaves off the trees (right). Poison accounted for a pile of the creatures, but the damage had already been done.
ELLA BOSCHMA: Yeah. They were just terrible. We planted a potato patch, and I went over to look at it, and the ground was just heaving. And I go, ‘What is that?’ They were just hatching by the millions, little tiny things. It just made the ground kind of weave, and it was all grasshoppers. Len gave up. He said, ‘I’m not going to poison anymore. It doesn’t do any good.’ And I said, ‘Well, I’m still going to poison them.’ So, I’d go out by myself with the team and wagon and poison some more, but it didn’t do any good. I just as well give up.


Arthur McKinstry homesteaded near Bison in the early 1900s and was a horse and cattle rancher.

STEPHEN WARD: Well, I did want to get some of your impressions as [to] how the depression affected you.

ARTHUR MCKINSTRY: [In] ’32, they had crops, but they was no good. I made about forty-five bushels to the acre, spring wheat. I sold it for nineteen cents a bushel. It was tough. A bunch of us went together and go over here in the breaks and mine our own coal. [We would] dig it out of the hill. We'd grind corn for cornbread, used the home grinder. We'd scald wheat for the breakfast food.

WARD: Well, do you think you had it tough, or was it easier than [for] most?

McKINSTRY: I thought it was the toughest [that] anybody could get. But we stayed, and they didn’t. Maybe they had it tougher; maybe they just didn’t have the guts or the stakes to stay by it. A lot of them [were] just losing the land and everything—just quitting—so the government went in and made a government pasture. They bought that land for the grass, strictly [for] grass purposes.

WARD: Well, did you work on WPA at all?

McKINSTRY: Yes, in ’36. I was on grant for a little while there in ’37. I don’t know why they wouldn’t let me on work.

WARD: What do you mean on grant?

McKINSTRY: We just got a check. [That] wasn’t anywhere near as big as you could [get if you] work[ed] on WPA. I think it was about a third as much. In ’34, it was dry, terrible dry, and we didn’t have much hay. Well, in ’35, they didn’t have grass. But, still, we went out and put up hay and horses. In ’37, it rained a little bit in the spring, and the weeds started all over the prairie. I don’t remember how we lived; I don’t know where we got our dollars.
People said the mineral [for the grass] was all dead, [and] never would come back. They said all of our native prairie grass was dead, and, in '37, I kind of believed it. But in '38, why, here was that one little spear; you could find it, if you looked real sharp. But it all come back, every bit of it. It all come back [in] '38 and nine.

WARD: Well, the grasshoppers came through in '36?

McKINSTRY: Yeah, in '34 and '36. Do you know what a Russian thistle is? Well, that's what we mowed for hay, in the fields. In '34, we put it up. In '36, they didn't grow. It was so dry that they didn't grow till way late in the fall. But, in '34, we put up lots of them Russian thistles. Oh, once in a while, you'd find a spear of wheat, just one small, little, short head on it. Yeah. I don't know why a person would stay, when there was no more future here, and the dust blowing.

WARD: But you just decided against [moving]?

McKINSTRY: No. We didn't decide against it, we couldn't. We didn't have a dollar to move us. How were we going to get out? WARD: If you'd have had the dollars, would you have moved? McKINSTRY: I think, if we had had the money, yes, I believe we would have. [But] when it rained, the roof didn't leak, so what more do you want. [We] had a nice warm bed to go to sleep in. What more do you want? A lot of fellows thought they didn't have [it] near as good as we did. We never was cold, never was hungry. A lot of people wouldn't have sat down to a meal that we [had to] eat. But it was good. Darn right, it was good. We're still here. We're alive, [and we've] never, never been hungry. We always had a warm place to sleep. I guess in the cities, in them times, there was a lot of folks who went on bread lines. We never had to do that.

Mrs. Orren Merritt, interviewed by Hugh Ahmann at Whiting, Iowa, August 1970.

*Mrs. Orren Merritt lived most of her life in South Dakota, having settled near Salem with her family in 1896.*

Mrs. Orren Merritt: [In] the winter of '33, Orren worked on the WPA in order to feed his stock and feed his family. Times had got so bad; the grasshoppers and the dry weather nearly took everything. And, then, his horses got distemper, so he wasn't able to work them. He did have one that he would ride to a neighbor's house, and the two neighbors would go together. Some places where they worked the ground was froze so hard that they would have to put on six head of horses or eight head of horses, just to plow. But that's how they worked.
Hugh Ahmann: You know, in [the] 1870s, if something went bad, they'd blame the bankers, or they'd blame the meat packers, or something.

Merritt: The bank did go broke out there. You couldn't draw any money out. We were fortunate, because we didn't have but ten dollars in [it].

Ahmann: So, what year did the bad weather and grasshoppers really start up?

Merritt: In 1934, there was no hopes, whatever, and that wasn't just grasshoppers. It was dry where Orren had planted grain.

Where he had disc'd, the wind just blew the topsoil right off. You could see the marks of the disc in the hard ground, and, before that, they had mowed the stubble grounds. Later on, that had grewed up to thistles for feed for the stock, which was terribly hard on the horses. [Lack of] moisture, that was the great trouble of it all.

Ahmann: I see. And, of course, you owed a mortgage on the farm there. What happened?

Merritt: Just had to turn it back to the government.

Ahmann: Was the same thing happening to everybody else around there, too?

Merritt: No, I don't think so. The old-timers, the ones that had a foothold and their relatives, [stayed]. I was amazed, when we
South Dakotans Remember

went back on a visit, [to see] how far some of those people had come, what they owned. But, you know, with us, the man that bought our place bought it for five hundred dollars. If we could have just hung on and had any hope of it ever raining and getting a crop, it would have made a lot of difference. We were so deeply in debt, we couldn’t [hang on]. We didn’t see how in the world we could keep on there. The hardest thing I ever had to do was to have the kids say, ‘Mama, how many pieces of this can I have?’ or ‘How many spoonfuls of that can I have?’ [It] must have been in ’33 [that] Orren came down here [Iowa] and worked for his brother-in-law. He pick[ed] corn so that we could see our way through. Well, when he come back, he had the old Ford loaded down with canned things that his mother had sent back: popcorn, walnuts, and things like that. That’s how we got through the winter. Then, in the spring, we put the crop in, [and] the wind just simply blowed it out of the ground. What bit of corn there was wouldn’t even make good fodder.

Susan A. White, interviewed by John Stockert, 2 March 1968.

Susan White homesteaded in the Badlands country and taught school.

JOHN STOCKERT: During the 1930s was the drought pretty severe where you were? Would you tell us about those days in your area?

SUSAN WHITE: There was times when it was bad. We sold horses for three dollars a head. There was a whole lot of land that was lost for taxes. We had three of four quarters over there, and we lost it all for taxes and lost my homestead for taxes. And those times I forgot; I tried not to remember. I think, just now, about having not enough money to do anything with, and your home was in danger of being taken from you. We always tried to keep our horses and our cattle. And, then, the government sold our horses. And all that time I never cried at anything that happened until... We had a team of old gray mares that Wayne bought from Kellier.

STOCKERT: Now, Wayne was your husband?

WHITE: Yes. And he paid two hundred dollars for them. He wanted that team, and a whole lot of other people wanted them. So, he went up to Rapid City, and he stayed overnight. He got up in the morning, and he walked by Kellier’s door two or three times. Finally, Mr. Kellier came out on the porch, and he made it a point to walk toward him. He had worked for Kellier, so he knew him. [Kellier] said, ‘What can I do for you this morning, young man?’ And [Wayne] says, ‘I’ll give you two hundred dollars...’ [Kellier]
didn’t say anything for awhile. [Finally,] he says, ‘Well, any young fellow that’d get up this time of the morning to buy a team of horses deserves the horses.’ So, we liked those horses. And when the government took the horses off to be killed, when they led the old gray mare by the door, I did cry a little bit.


Lillie Jencks was a member of a family that moved often on the frontier and in South Dakota. They did not own land during the 1930s but farmed as tenants on shares.

JOHN WATTERSON: Did you have a tough time during the depression?

LILLIE JENCKS: Yeah. That was pretty tough, the depression.

WATTERSON: Did you own a farm?

JENCKS: No, we were renting. It belonged to an insurance company. After the times got better, we bought the farm from them.

WATTERSON: Did they supply you with seed?

JENCKS: No. You had to buy your own seed.

WATTERSON: Did you pay them in crops?

JENCKS: Yeah.

WATTERSON: Do you remember what percentage?

JENCKS: Well, a farmer would get two-thirds [and give the company] only one-third. But you furnished everything for yourself.

WATTERSON: Did the insurance company put any money or materials into your place?

JENCKS: Well, yeah. If they had good buildings, they tried to keep them up. We had an awful big grinder on that farm. I think it was ninety foot long; it was way up in the air. I believe it cost seven thousand dollars to build it. They never got to use it. They just spent too dang much money on it. When we don’t get no crops, you’re just done for.

WATTERSON: You raised your own garden [during the depression]?

JENCKS: Oh, yeah. And I raised chickens, [although] not as many as I did afterwards. But I always had a garden. But we had an awful time, because we didn’t have any water. Out in the pasture, we had a well, and we went out and plowed right close to that well. I had a pretty good garden there, because we put the water on it. But you see, those hot winds came, and your garden was just gone in one day.

WATTERSON: Did you have trouble with grasshoppers?

JENCKS: Oh, I guess we did. I remember we had corn standing up real nice. The next day we went over, and there wasn’t a darn
thing left but stubs. It just doesn’t seem possible. They were just so darned thick on the stalk, it was awful. [They were] big old things; they’d bite on you, and they’d kind of grab you. I said, ‘I never want to see anything like that again,’ [and I] hope nobody else ever had to.


Walter Burke advanced from cashier to president and major owner of the Pierre National Bank (now BankWest), which had been started by his father, Charles H. Burke, a former congressman and United States commissioner of Indian affairs. Curtis Mateer, a member of a pioneer family, was a long-time officer in the bank, a leader in the community and state, and a collector of art and Indian artifacts.

Stephen Ward: The Pierre National Bank, in the depression, how was it able to keep solvent?

Walter Burke: We had built up the confidence of the people. As a result, when the things were shaky, instead of people taking...
money out of our bank, they were taking it out of somebody else's bank and putting it in ours. We kept our policy of not loaning it out where we couldn't get it back. [If] we didn't think they were worthy of [a loan], we'd turn them down. So, out on the street, we really were SOBs.

WARD: So, therefore, you were probably not involved in too many foreclosures, were you?

BURKE: We had none; it's just remarkable.

WARD: Throughout the whole of the 1930s?

BURKE: That's right.

WARD: You must be among a select group of banks in the United States.

CURTIS MATEER: Actually, during that bank holiday, there was an article [that] came out in the Saturday Evening Post. We were one of the first banks that reopened, and our name was listed in this article as being one of the first banks to reopen after the holiday.3

BURKE: After that, one day we got a letter from [a man who had] a big financial consultant outfit in Boston. We got a letter from him personally, [with] a twenty-thousand-dollar check. He said he was worried about the eastern seaboard, and all of his assets and funds were in banks on the eastern seaboard. He didn't know what would happen if we'd get into some more wars. So, he had looked over the country, and he'd selected a few banks to make some deposits in, and ours had appeared very good to him. He wanted to make a deposit of twenty thousand dollars, and he wanted it in the name of [his company]. So, I wrote him a nice letter and thanked him for his confidence in us, but I said, 'The regulations now say that we can't put a corporation in a savings account and pay them interest.' We can put it in there, but we can't pay him interest. So, he probably wouldn't be interested, and I was regretfully sending him back his twenty thousand dollars. So, he came right back, and he said, 'Put her in anyway, without the interest.' You know, he kept that here, without any interest, and increased it to seventy thousand dollars. It stayed here for years and years. But I thought that was remarkable.

WARD: At no time, then, even with all the bank failures, [and] rumors of failures, and so on, did anyone ever really fear the Pierre National Bank would go under?

3. On 6 March 1933, in one of his first actions after becoming president, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared a week-long, nationwide bank closure, or "holiday," to stem the withdrawal of cash by depositors made nervous by an increasing rate of bank failures. By 15 March, about one-half of the banks had been allowed to resume operations. Fon W. Boardman, Jr., The Thirties: America and the Great Depression (New York: Henry Z. Walck, 1967), pp. 64-65.
BURKE: I had one. When these banks were closing all over and things looked bad, I kind of got the idea that gold would be quite an asset. I’m talking about gold coins. So, I wrote up to the Federal Reserve Bank and told them I wanted some gold coins—five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar gold coins. As I remember, they wouldn’t send me what I wanted, but they did send me twenty-five hundred dollars in a little sack. So, I left it in the sack and put it in the safe. So, when Roosevelt ordered all the banks closed, we wouldn’t close. [Bank president J. R.] McKnight and I had everybody leave, and we stayed here with the door unlocked. The people would come in scared to death, and we’d visit with them. Our currency had got down to about twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars. So, I’d give each one, if they wanted it, not over twenty-five dollars, so they’d have some money in their pocket. One day, here came one of the officials up at the statehouse. He came in and took me up in the back room, and he was just shaking. He said, ‘Walt, about all the money I’ve got in my account is what I’ve got in the world. It’s about twenty-five hundred dollars, and what is the situation?’ Well, I said, ‘We’re all right, we’re going to be solvent.’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘isn’t there some way that you could give me that money? I just can’t sleep at night, and my wife is about crazy.’ I said, ‘Well, I just can’t, because I got a little currency here, and I’m taking care of everybody up to twenty-five dollars. I’ll give you twenty-five dollars.’ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I some way got to have that money.’ All of a sudden it occurred to me. I said, ‘Wait a minute. I got a sack down here with twenty-five hundred dollars in gold, and, by God, that’s no good to anybody. I’ll give you that, [and] you write me out a check.’ So, oh, he just relaxed, you know, and he wrote me out a check. He could hardly write. I got this sack of gold, and I put it in his pocket. ‘Walt,’ he said, ‘I’ll never forget this. Oh, you’re just wonderful.’ He was so relaxed, and out he went. The next morning, he come back with the sack of gold, and he said, ‘Walt, I’m a goddamned fool. I’m just nuts. Have you got that check?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I haven’t done any bookkeeping or anything.’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘tear it up. Here’s your gold, and forget it, will you?’ That’s the only one I had.

MATEER: I had a sister living out north of town, and, so, when this happened [the bank holiday], I said, ‘Well, I’ll just go out there and work for them.’ So, I told Mr. McKnight what I was going to do, and he said, ‘No, you’re not. You’re gonna be down here at work at eight o’clock every morning, and we’ll leave at three o’clock.’ And this is what happened, every day.

BURKE: Remember, we got a call from the president of the Federal Reserve Bank? Somebody had reported that we weren’t
closed. So, he called up [and] said he got a report that our bank wasn’t closed, and, by God, he wanted it closed. So, we finally told him we weren’t doing any other business except that the people were coming in here and we were quieting them down, and, by God, that’s what we were going to do. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I don’t want you to do that. I want you to lock up your doors and close.’ And we says, ‘We ain’t going to do it,’ and we didn’t. So, he had to drop it.

WARD: I wanted to ask you about the bank holiday. What was the main idea? Was it to restore confidence?

BURKE: That’s right. You see, everybody was panicky and nuts, and they didn’t know what the hell they were doing. By closing every bank, there was nothing [people] could do, and they got them quieted down. Then, [they] announced that they would examine all of us and open us up. When we opened up, the people could have faith that everything is all right, which turned out to be a hell of a good deal. You see, we were the first ones to open. They examined us every six months, and they write confidential reports, which we don’t see. So, when I was up there afterwards, [I] asked them how in the hell they opened us up so quick. ‘Well,’ they said, ‘We just took the confidential reports of you bankers, and yours was so damn good, we just said, “Pierre National, you go ahead and open up.”’

WARD: You said you’re not quite as conservative as you were. When did your policy begin to change?

BURKE: Well, I’d say we kind of had to change with the times. All of our associates, with the exception of Curt and I, weren’t here when things were so tough. They couldn’t imagine that things [could get] so terrible [that] everybody would go broke, and hogs would be worth nothing, and sheep would be worth a dollar apiece. So, either you got to expand, or stand still and go down. So, ever since we got this younger group in here, we’ve been on an expansion program. Competition and government agencies are tough; so we had to soften up. I’m sure that we [have] got a reasonable number of loans that, in the old days, we wouldn’t even have talked to the guy [about]. I was horrified when the government started making these veterans’ loans for houses with no down payment. Then, when they said they were going to make them for twenty years, I was sure [we’d be ruined]. But you gotta go along with that, and that’s been excellent. It’s always good for the town, good for the people, good for everybody to have a little of your own money in there. Let me tell you a story that you’d be interested in. One morning about ten o’clock, in the bank, we were
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William Bailey was born on a ranch in western South Dakota. His father had been a member of the 10th United States Cavalry—a black cavalry outfit—and Bailey himself was a World War I veteran, a cowboy, rancher, and considerable traveler.

SARA BERNSON: How long did you stay in the regular army?
WILLIAM BAILEY: Altogether, [I was] in the regular army and the National Guard about twenty-one years.

BERNSON: When did you leave the regular army?
BAILEY: 1931. That was during the depression, and, during that time, I traveled around a few places and talked to hobos. They were
telling me what a great time they had. So, when my enlistment was up, I started hoboing around the country. For about five years, I hoboed all over the country. In fact, looking back over my life, there's three cycles of my life I think I really enjoyed: when I was a kid here on the ranch, when I was in the army, and the years I hoboed. The hoboing was a lot of fun.

BERNSON: Now, when you were hoboing, did you stay with the black hobos? Was it segregated?

BAILEY: No. We just rode the freight trains [and] passenger trains all over the country. There was blacks, Mexicans, Indians, and Caucasians.

BERNSON: Did you ever get caught?

BAILEY: No. That didn't mean nothing, being caught. [The] only thing the railroad had against hobos was in the yards. They want[ed] you to get out of the yard. If you was going to catch a train, [you had better] catch it either coming into the yard or going out. They didn't want nobody to get hurt while they was switching trains in the yard. All the time I hoboed, I never knew any animosity between hobos, black or white. The only animosity I saw between hobos was when there was women. Now, there was quite a few women around, and some of the hobos used to molest them. There was a lot of white women that was on trains. They would get in the car or get close to the blacks. They felt the blacks wouldn't bother them, and the whites wouldn't bother them [be]cause the blacks were there. So, they felt they were safe. I met two girls in '33; I was going to Denver, Colorado. I got to a little town called La Salle, and that's where I had to change trains going to Denver. When I got into a boxcar going into Denver, there was two girls in [it]; they'd been sitting there real quiet. This boxcar door was open, [and] I just got up and sat in the door. After it pulled out, they came over to me and started talking. They told me that they had been put off a train, somewhere in either Wyoming or Montana, and then they [had] hitchhiked into La Salle. They said they was going to Chicago, to the World's Fair. It was known as the 'Pageant of Progress', and I had been there. So, I told them where to go and what to look for when they got there. That's the last I ever heard of them, but that's the only time that I remember that the train crew put any women off the train [going] out of town. This was on some little siding, while they were switching or waiting for another train. Have you heard of or did you see the picture The Grapes of Wrath? Well, I read the book and saw the movie several times; I lived a lot of that. I saw a lot of that, especially in California. One time, [I was] in a little place
called Tracy, California. The hobos were there, and there were all kinds of hobos, every race, I guess, there was in the country. The only time I remember seeing a gypsy hobo was at Tracy. The American Legion vigilantes came in the yard, round[ed] up all the hobos, and told them that California was overcrowded. They wanted them out of California. They got all the black hobos over to one side, and they said, ‘You boys get a train and get on out of here. These Mexicans and Caucasians, we’re gonna run them in, because we got to check on a lot of Mexicans.’ Wetbacks was coming across the border, and they were being supported by the Caucasians. These Caucasians would go to the border and bring them over and take them to different fruit farms or vegetable farms. Then they’d get so much for every one that they brought across. So, that’s what they was rounding up.

BERNSON: Now, when you were a hobo, would you do odds-and-ends jobs, just to pick up a little money?

BAILEY: Yes, once in a while.

*The Dust Bowl conditions in South Dakota drove many people out for a new start in the Pacific northwest.*
BERNSON: As seldom as possible, right?

BAILEY: Yes. I got that from when I was a kid here. Hobos used to come through here and get off the train, or maybe the train would stop down here just a little ways, at a place called Dennis [South Dakota]. That was a sidetrack, where they'd walk up the tracks [and] come up here. When they got up there, especially the whites, and found out we were black, they was kind of shy about it. But I never known my mother to turn a hobo down. A lot of them would say, 'Well, anything I can do for you for a little bite to eat, like chop wood, or gather in some wood, or hoe awhile in your garden?' But I never known her to turn them down; she'd always feed them. She said she'd never know when, maybe, one of her boys might become a hobo. During the time I was hoboing, I [would] come home, and, at that time, we didn't have electricity out here in the country. If I'd write her and tell her I was coming this way, she'd leave a lamp sitting by the window, so [I could see] the light. All the trains, when they'd go by, they'd see that light, [and] they'd blow. And to this day, the train crews, day or night, when they go past here, they whistle at me. See, the railroad cuts the ranch almost in two.

BERNSON: Now, when did you stop being a hobo, and why did you stop?

BAILEY: In 1936. You know, the government paid off a World War I bonus. They paid off half of it in '32 and the other half in '36. So when I got half of that bonus in '36, I bought me a car. That's when I started driving over the country instead of hoboing. That's when I stopped hoboing.

Frances Sadowsky, interviewed by Freda Hosen at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 22 August 1974.

Frances Sadowsky is a member of South Dakota's Jewish community.

FREDA HOSEN: What do you remember about the depression years in Sioux Falls?

FRANCES SADOWSKY: During the depression, we lived at 602 South First Avenue, and there were steps to the side of the house. It wasn’t exactly a porch, but it was a nice square landing. This one incident stood out in my mind, particularly, as a child. A man came to that landing and knocked on the kitchen door, and he asked Mother for food; that was one of the first times. My dad had cautioned Mother not to ask them into the house, but to give them whatever they could eat on this landing, because the weather was nice. But Mother gave him food and drink, and he thanked her.
and went his way. When my father came home, he noticed a little mark on the landing, and he showed it to Mother, and I remember he talked about it. He said that the other people that might come will notice this mark, and it means that they will get something to eat. So, that made quite an impression upon me, because, even as children, we were hearing talk of the depression, and people starving, and the lines at different missions, the soup kitchens, and so forth.

Hosen: Something you hear in connection with the depression is the drought of the thirties. They both happened to fall at the same time. Do you remember anything about the very dry weather in those years?

Sadowsky: Yes, I certainly do. The dry weather started in the very hot, dry summer, and we had many hailstorms. It would get so hot; then, suddenly, the air would seem to go dead, and we'd get these gusty winds, and we would get a hailstorm and a heavy rain. It sort of would clear the air, so you felt you could breathe again and also get ready for the next onslaught of dry weather. This went on all during this summer and [into] late fall. It seems to me that the bad came in October. On this particular day, we got up to go our normal routine, and it was pitch black at nine o'clock in the morning and getting blacker by the moment. The next thing you knew, they had to turn the streetlights on. It was as dark as midnight, with the dirt blowing, just like the African desert storm. I really remember my mother taking all the rags we had, soaking them in water, and wringing them out, but putting them on all the window ledges to catch the dirt. [In] that era, we had no double windows, the way we have now.

Hosen: Do you remember the year at all?

Sadowsky: It was in '30 or '31. It was quite an experience to live through.

Samuel A. Twedell, interviewed by Orland Rothlisberger at Valley Springs, South Dakota, 6 August 1974.

Samuel A. Twedell was one of the state's few labor leaders, becoming vice-president and business agent of Local 304 of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America.


Samuel Twedell: Well, the strike at the Morrell plant in Sioux Falls started on March ninth, 1935. I was, at that time, secretary-treasurer and business agent of the union. [The strike was] brought
about, mainly, because the Morrell company refused to bargain with our union. They took the position that they were going to destroy our organization by laying off or discharging all the leaders and those that were engaged in organizing the union in the plant. I might say [that] the layoffs and discharges were prior to the strike on March ninth. The strike, at first, took the form of a sit-down, which was one of the first sit-down strikes in this country. [It was] two years prior to the automobile sit-down strike. We agreed that at nine A.M. certain ones of us would take certain steps that would stop the operations, which we did. From there, we thought that the company would at least sit down and bargain with us over the work stoppage, which they still refused to do.

ROTHLISBERGER: What was the reaction of the plant [workers] who were not members of the union?

TWEDELL: A great majority of them participated with us in the sit-down. I went to the division superintendent and told him that we would certainly clean up the work. We didn’t want to see spoilage or anything of that nature. But we would not do anything to bring about further work that day. The superintendent said that he would take it up with the management of the company, which he did, but we never heard from him. He never reported back to us. So, with that, we sat there all day, and, consequently, thousands of pounds of meat were spoiled. Practically everybody remained all night. Around three-thirty or four o’clock in the morning, the governor of the state [Tom Berry] called me on the plant telephone, and I made an agreement with him. If they would withdraw the National Guard, which was then mobilized and stationed in the Sioux Falls Coliseum, we would vacate the plant and set up our picket lines outside.

ROTHLISBERGER: Were there any attempts, then, on the part of employees, to pass the pickets?

TWEDELL: Not at that time. The plant was completely closed and remained closed for several days, until the company marshalled their forces. [They] were able to get some of the employees organized to march down to the premises and go to work. They had to cross the picket line, then. One of our pickets was very severely beaten by a group of foremen that were trying to get into the plant. They beat him with a gas pipe. He was severely injured, but there wasn’t too much violence at this period; later on, there was. The strike lasted from March 9, 1935, to March 9, 1937. Eventually, I had to [organize a] boycott by the pickets, because the company was able, eventually, to man the plant completely. It came to a head in July [of] that same year, when the company had marshalled a large number of strike-breakers and march[ed] them
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down to the plant, while the battle took place. They were trying to break our picket line completely, and they marshalled possibly five hundred [people], which they called workers. We call them scabs.

ROTHLISBERGER: Now, where did they get these fellows?

TWEDELL: There was quite a bit of unemployment. Even those people that had been working there, they called them together. As I recall the headlines in the paper, fifty-two people went to the hospital. Out of that number, I think eight or ten were union people, and the rest were strike-breakers.

ROTHLISBERGER: Was the National Guard called out again, at this time?

TWEDELL: No. The National Guard, outside of that original morning, took no part in it.

ROTHLISBERGER: The company was able to break the strike, then?

TWEDELL: Oh, no. They didn't succeed. The strike-breakers that they had organized to break our picket lines were turned back. They fled [in] disarray, you might say.

ROTHLISBERGER: You said it went on for two years. How was the company able to continue operations, then?

TWEDELL: Well, at that time, they called the state police. The state police took control of the situation, and the strike-breakers, eventually, were able to get in. We maintained our picket lines, [but] we were never able to stop the people from coming in and going to work. We won our points by the national boycott of Morrell products. It took us a considerable length of time.

ROTHLISBERGER: The National Labor Relations Board, did it play a role in that?

TWEDELL: Yes. Let me go back a little ways on that. The National Labor Relations Act, in the meantime, had been passed, and, as a result of the March ninth sit-down strike, twenty-nine of us were discharged. We were assured by the representative of the National Labor Relations Board that we would take the case to court, and we would win. [He guaranteed that] the twenty-nine people would be reinstated, which we agreed to. I'm a little bit off here on the National Labor Relations Act. It was the National [Industrial] Recovery Act. We had the hearing, and the NRA regional labor board ordered the reinstatement of the twenty-nine of us. But before the orders could be carried out, the act had been declared unconstitutional. That put us back where we were in the beginning. Then, we had to rely on the picket line and the boycott again. That was what brought on the big battle of July 1935. The only thing that brought the company around to discussing this issue with us was the power of the boycott. Their product was being
Seeking better wages and working conditions, John Morrell & Company workers carried on a periodic strike against the meat-packing plant from 1935 to 1937.

boycotted in various sections of the country, and they were not able to sell it. That was the reason the company finally agreed to sit down and bargain with us. They finally agreed that all the strikers should be returned, including the twenty-nine that were discharged originally. Incidentally, you asked me what brought about the strike. I said the discharges of the people, and it was conditions generally, too, that contributed to the causes of the strike. In those days, of course, the packing house was thought of by the general public as a very undesirable place to work, which it was. [There were] no guarantees of anything. Wages were very poor, and I went out of there many weeks with eight, ten, twelve hours [of work]. So, I had to try to feed my family [on very little money]. We were protesting those conditions, and the company took a very dim view of that. The only conditions that we laid down, at that time, was the reinstatement of the strikers, including the people that had been discharged, and that seniority should [be considered]. In other words, if there were to be any further layoffs, it would have to be [from] among the younger people that was working there. They had paid no attention to [seniority], until this time.

ROTHLISBERGER: Management, in agreeing to negotiate, recognized your union as the bargaining agent, did it not?

TWEDDELL: Before they recognized our union as a bargaining agent, we were forced to go to the National Labor Relations Board and request [it]. The first election we lost by a huge majority. It
was an election among the workers to determine whether or not Local 304 should be the bargaining agent. But we were able to get another election within a matter of two or three months, which we won by just [as] huge [a] majority as we had lost the first one. Then the company sat down and bargained, and out of that bargaining has come what we got today.

ROTHLISBERGER: What was the attitude in the community when the strike began?

TWEDDELL: Well, I would say the people, I think, was divided. I think we had our share of sympathizers. Certainly, a lot of the business people were sympathetic.

ROTHLISBERGER: Now, in 1937, the union was recognized as the bargain[ing] agent. Have many other benefits workers enjoy today come [as a result of this]? The fringe benefits are rather considerable now, aren't they?

TWEDDELL: They are.

ROTHLISBERGER: Going back to 1935—there were none?

TWEDDELL: There were none, absolutely none. [There were] no vacations; you never got a vacation. Today, depending on the length of time you work, you could get up to six weeks vacation a year. Of course, the biggest benefit of all is the retirement benefits that have come about over the years. The retirement benefits are very, very good. Insurance and their hospitalization plan [are also excellent]. I have plenty of satisfaction in knowing that I had a little something to do with all that.4


Richard La Roche is a member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe and has been active in tribal government.

GERALD WOLFF: I understand that the Lower Brule accepted the Indian Reorganization Act [IRA]5 in '34. Was there much opposition to accepting it?

RICHARD LA ROCHE: Well, I was just a young boy, but I can remember it. My father was on the council. I think the vote was pret-


5. The Indian Reorganization Act, or Wheeler-Howard Act, attempted to reverse the federal Indian policies of the previous fifty years by ending the process of allotment, allowing tribes to adopt their own constitutions and elect councils, and providing loans for economic development. The IRA and its repercussions will be examined in greater detail in the Fall 1989 issue of South Dakota History.
ty close, but the tribe did accept the Wheeler-Howard Act. The old-timers wanted to hang on to the old ways. Then, at the time, there was a good many promises that the government had made to the people that they hadn't kept. [The people] just didn't believe them anymore.

WOLFF: Did the government send out their people to push for it?
LA ROCHE: Yeah. At the time, there was some young college students [who] came out. They was going around explaining it to the people.

WOLFF: [Did] the opposition ever say that if they accepted [the act] they might lose their lands?
LA ROCHE: Oh yeah. There was a lot of talk; there was stories. They went around and told how the Black Hills was taken from the people. The Wheeler-Howard Act, in itself, was quite a program. At that time, they was talking about building some rehabilitation homes, like public housing. After the Wheeler-Howard Act was accepted, they did build seventeen homes, right at the agency. Now, that was the first promise that they broke in the Wheeler-Howard Act. They claimed they'd build out on the reservation, on the Indians' allotments. They had electricity [at the agency], you know. I suppose that was the reason that they built them all in one place and didn't put them out on the Indians' land.

WOLFF: Was it ever implied [by] these government people who came up and pushed for the IRA [that] if you did accept you could expect a lot more aid than if you'd turn it down?
LA ROCHE: That's right. The reason that I know this is true is that the Crow Creek, who live just across the river from us, they didn't accept it. They're 'Old Dealers,' and we're 'New Dealers.' So, when they were coming through pushing for this, [it] was implied that if we didn't accept it there would be a lot of benefits that we wouldn't get.

WOLFF: That might have turned the trick, too. [That] might have won the majority.
LA ROCHE: Well, I think it did, because in '34 it was rough out here. Everybody carried a pair of soles in his hip pocket made out of cardboard. Then, when that old one wore out in his shoe, why, he'd just sit down, and take out a cardboard sole, and put it in. So, naturally, the people were grasping at any kind of a deal that they could get. Crow Creek turned it down, and, through the years, up till now, they've received just as much or even better than we have.

WOLFF: They tried to make truck farmers and canners out of you. Did it work out pretty well?
LA ROCHE: No, because, you see, a superintendent would come, and he'd say, 'Now, you have land here we'll irrigate; your grazing land's no good.' In other words, 'Sell your cow and buy a plow.' The next superintendent would come in, and he'd say, 'Sell your plow and buy a cow.' By the time you got into the irrigation problem, why, here they'd come with money for cattle ranching. Then you'd let that go and get into cattle ranching. They never really did go through with any of their programs. They'd just start them, and, then, they'd drop off, and create another program.


Grace Highley was a welfare worker and a relief director in western South Dakota during the 1930s.

GRACE HIGHLEY: In 1932, the first federal money came into South Dakota for relief. The county commissioners asked me to go to work for them, making investigations for the first relief money in the county. So, I resigned from the newspaper to go out and visit the homes and see who needed food and who didn't. Of course, we were in the beginning of a drought, and the ranchers had no crops. There was no work for anybody. I remember visiting homes where they were living on bread, and I guess they were butchering beef yet. There was a great deal of poverty. They began a program of surplus foods, green vegetables, and staples, and it was distributed. Then they began the work-relief programs, and that went into WPA and then into the Farm Security [and] Farm Progress and then developed into the state welfare.

JOHN WATTERSON: Now, were you associated with all of these things?

HIGHLEY: Yes. I was first a caseworker; we were called investigators. Then I became county director of the relief program for Fall River and Shannon counties from about 1936 to 1938. Then I became a district supervisor for the west river district, in which I traveled all of the west river district. Then, in May of 1939, they asked me to come in to be state director of child welfare. I thought I couldn't do it, but I ended up staying twenty-one years.

WATTERSON: Now, to go back to your activities in the county in the 1930s, was there anything distinctive about the problem in Fall River County, as opposed to maybe someplace else?

HIGHLEY: I don't think so, as I recall. You see, we had drought for five or six years. I can recall driving from Belle Fourche, to Buffalo, to Lemmon, and down to Philip and never seeing one single cow. There wouldn't have been a bank open in Harding
County, except for the checks that were coming in from farmers and the WPA programs.

WATTERSON: Did people find it hard to accept welfare?

HIGHLEY: I think it was very hard to start with, but when you come to the place where you can't buy food for your family, and where there is nothing except government work or grants, I think men face up to reality and do what they can to survive. I remember in Harding County, when the old-age-assistance program came in. So many of the people there were the original homesteaders, and some of them didn't have American citizenship, and that was required. We would spend days going through the county records to find naturalization papers. Many of those things were very hard for the independent people to accept; until times became so hard, there was no other way of life.

WATTERSON: Now, you were a Republican, and a lot of these programs were originated in Washington by [a] Democratic administration. Did this make any difference?

HIGHLEY: I think that people compromised. I think you attach yourself to something that comes somewhere near your ideal, but, in reality, you reach out and take what you can get, if you need it. I've always respected the WPA program, because I didn't know what it was for people to be dishonest, to take more than they needed, or to ask for it if they didn't need it. I have always said it was my experience that it was the origins [that] put the stigma on WPA; it was not the people who worked in it and needed it. But it was a struggle; it was an ideological struggle.

WATTERSON: Did you encounter any people cheating back in the thirties? Was there much of that?

HIGHLEY: I've never had any experience of it at all, in all of my work. I think there's been a great change in the attitudes of people toward federal programs, toward public assistance, [and] toward social security. I've seen things change from the pioneer spirit of total independence of the cowboy to living in a more complicated society, where the individual is less important and where some people say welfare has become a way of life.
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