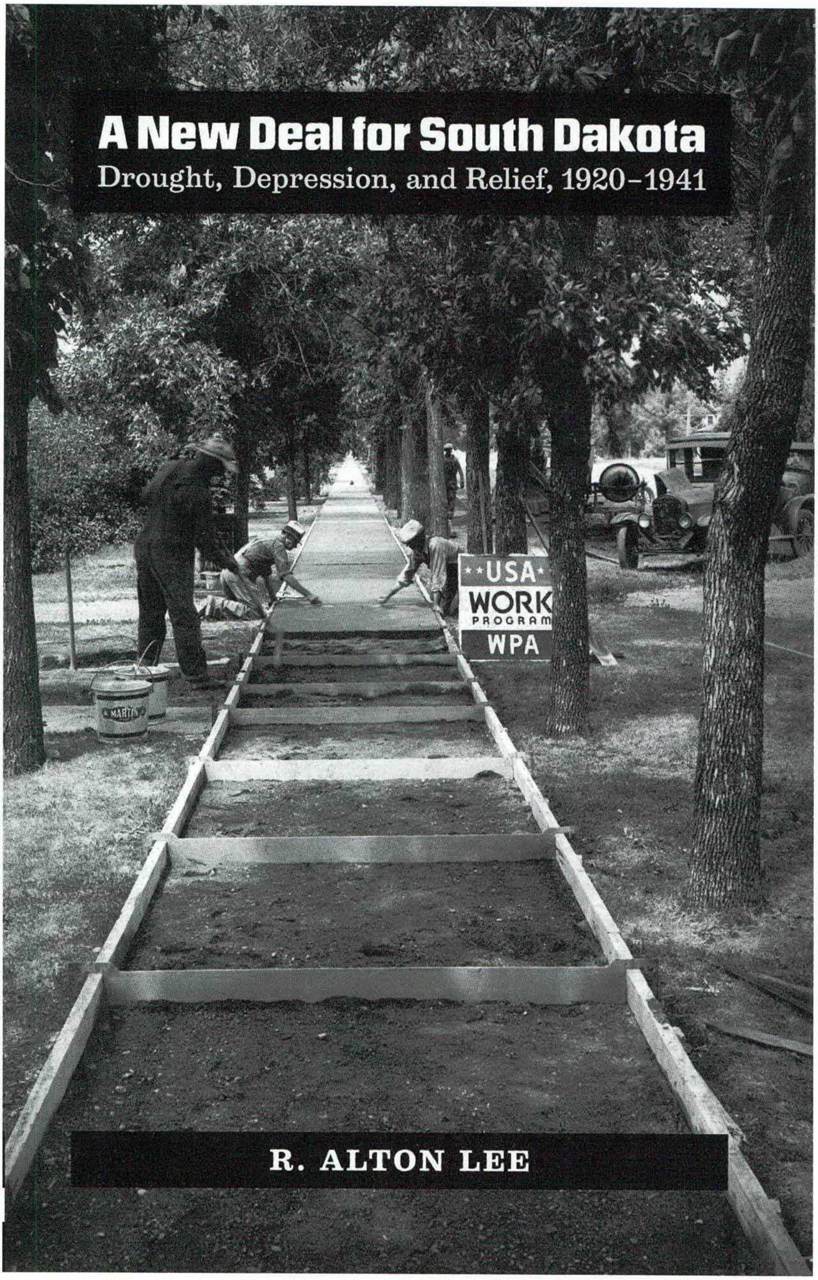
Book Excerpt

A New Deal for South Dakota: Drought, Depression, and Relief, 1920–1941

In South Dakota, drought, grasshoppers, and low commodity prices were the final blows in a long economic downturn that had begun after World War I. As these conditions finally brought the state to its knees during the Great Depression, many South Dakotans left while others hung on with the aid of New Deal programs. Instituted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and administered by politicians like the colorful Democratic governor Tom Berry, New Deal projects supported nearly half of South Dakota's entire population in the depths of the depression.

Federal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration projects expanded the state's infrastructure by building dams, civic facilities, and highways that are still used today. Other programs offered additional opportunities for young people, women, and minorities. The state's political culture harkens back to the Great Depression as well, as South Dakotans rejected their short-lived Democratic government and entrusted the administration of the New Deal to Republican lawmakers such as Governor Leslie Jensen.

In A New Deal for South Dakota: Drought, Depression, and Relief, 1920–1941, *political historian R. Alton Lee examines the effects of New Deal programs on families, farmers, miners, youth, women, American Indians, and others. He evaluates the state's efforts to stave off both starvation and federal dependence as its people endured the worst natural and economic disaster of modern times. Presented here is the book's first chapter, which explores the roots of the Great Depression and its impact on South Dakota.*


A New Deal for South Dakota
Drought, Depression, and Relief, 1920–1941
USA
WORK
PROGRAM
WPA
R. ALTON LEE

Chapter One
Before the New Deal

Miles and miles and miles of flat brown country. Snowdrifts here and there. Russian thistles rolling across the roads. Unpainted buildings going to seed. Hardly a straw stack or haystack for miles. What a country—to keep out of.

Lorena Hickok to Harry L. Hopkins on Winner, South Dakota[1]

During World War I, the government encouraged farmers to plant from "fence to fence" to produce for the fighting forces and to supply a seemingly insatiable European market. "Food Will Win the War" was the rallying cry, so farmers turned out livestock and cereals to their limit and beyond, and prices continued to spiral upward. Some of the increased production came from techniques that were more efficient; a good deal came from thirty million acres of sod formerly used for livestock production that were plowed under in South Dakota and elsewhere on the Great Plains and planted to wheat.

This agrarian prosperity continued after the war ended until European agricultural production was restored, and the normal flow of grain resumed from Canada, Australia, and Argentina to European markets. Wheat prices began to decline in 1920, and South Dakota farmers soon found themselves in a depression. Small farmers, who had overexpanded their tillage, were hardest hit and found it difficult to adjust. Increasing technology in the form of improved machinery and the widespread introduction of tractors made agriculture more efficient, but it exacerbated the crisis as farmers now faced the cost of accelerating mechanization. New scientific farming methods and the latest findings of the county agents were another challenge. With all this, the average farmer could handle 138 acres in South Dakota, but the continued output of surpluses of corn, wheat, hogs, and milk drove down their market prices drastically.[2] Another factor in the economic

1. Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, eds., *One Third of a Nation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 85.

2. Theodore Salutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), pp. 3–9.

plight of farmers was the high protective tariff implemented during the 1920s.[3]

Presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover had all enjoyed the fiscal advice of Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, banker and multimillionaire head of the Alcoa Company. He recommended keeping taxes low on large incomes and maintaining a high tariff to protect American manufacturers from foreign competition. There were no controls over the easy credit available for speculation on the wild bull market on the New York Stock Exchange. Buyers purchased more and more stocks on less and less margin until 24 October 1929 when the market crashed under this pressure. In the next three years, the value of stocks declined from almost $90 billion to less than $20 billion. This gigantic paper loss did not cause the Great Depression, but it proved to be a trigger, resulting in a catastrophe for the world's leading capitalist system and only a little less so for American farmers. South Dakota, fundamentally an agrarian state, suffered terribly.[4]

While wages rose slightly during the twenties, the fiscal policies implemented during the decade brought stagnating incomes for the middle class. On the other hand, from 1923 to 1929, the top 400,000 people who reported incomes of more than $10,000 increased their income by 76.6 percent; the top 40,000 by 129.5 percent; the top 4,000 by 207.5 percent; and the income of the 400 "real rulers" of America increased by 234.5 percent. An article in *The American Mercury* noted, "The bigger the ownership the better it did."[5]

Even conservative bankers indulged in stock market hysteria, and they suffered accordingly, with five thousand banks failing across the nation during the three-year financial debacle after the 1929 crash. Corporate income fell from $2.5 billion in profits in 1930 to net zero in 1931 and to $3.5 billion in net losses in 1932. Unemployment rocketed to 25 percent, perhaps as high as 33 percent—no one is certain

3. Ibid., pp. 9–12.

4. *See* John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), for this financial crisis.

5. Benjamin Stolberg and Warren Jay Vinton, "The New Deal vs. Recovery," *American Mercury* 33 (Dec. 1934): 386.

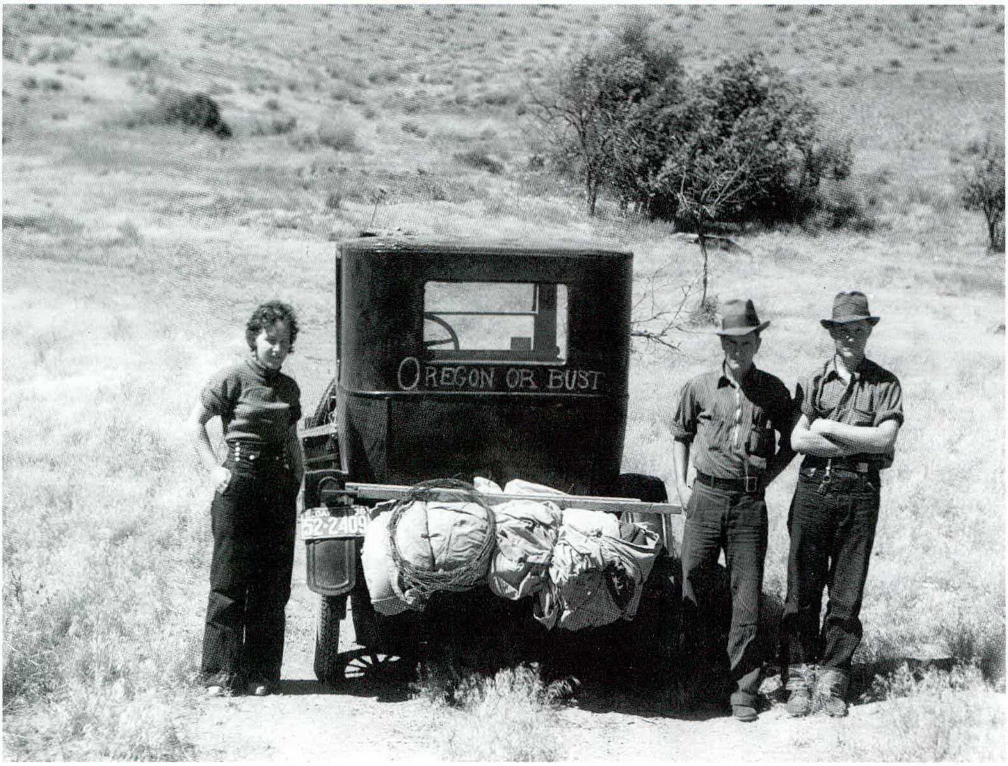
because the government did not keep accurate records at that time. The price of wheat dropped from one dollar to thirty-eight cents, corn to thirty-two cents, and hogs to six cents. Gross farm income, already low, declined another 60 percent during this chaos. After 1920, rural incomes were about 50 percent that of the earnings in manufacturing.[6]

The depression's most devastating effect hit farmers and the small town business owners whose existence depended on them for their commerce—more than half of the American population. This depression was far more devastating than the Panic of 1893 or any other similar episode that Americans had yet witnessed.[7] Following the stock market crash, Mother Nature struck blows in rapid succession. The drought in 1930 was so severe that "it literally tore, cracked, and ruined the earth." Unbearable heat and awesome swarms of grasshoppers destroyed the crops. One South Dakota rancher recalled, "It started to get dry in 1930 . . . and every year it got worse." Between 1927 and 1938 there were two relatively wet years, but the rest were dry with 1934 and 1936 being the driest residents had ever endured. Wells, springs, small streams, and even lakes dried up. Chinook winds followed the cold, snowy winters. They brought such a quick thaw that the moisture ran off without even penetrating the thirsty soil. A few spring showers and a few drops of rain in the hot summer followed, but moisture often arrived when the crops were no longer salvageable. If crops survived in one of these better summers, plagues of grasshoppers that hatched quickly in the dry windy weather devoured everything in sight. Once the crops were gone, they ate up the meager family gardens. Once the land was barren, the dust storms began.[8] Prices dropped for crops, and, as farmers suffered, they bought less while unemployment spread.

6. David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 199.

7. T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. 44; Melvyn Dubofsky, "Not So Turbulent Years: Another Look at the American 1930s," in Melvyn Dubofsky, ed., *The New Deal* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 125; Conrad Black, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), p. 316; Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), pp. 130–31.

8. McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 2–23.



Vernon Evans and his family were among thousands of South Dakotans forced to leave the state due to drought and depression.

South Dakota towns depended on farmers, and when they had no money to make purchases, storekeepers had to cut back inventories.[9]

Homemakers tried to make do with sewing underwear from flour sacks. Farmers fed their livestock with Russian thistles. They found that if they cut them green and stacked them, they made "fair feed." However, the cattle developed sore mouths and diarrhea, forcing one to stay "ten feet behind when bringing home the milk cows." Professionals, even teachers, did not always receive their salary in cash. They lived on chickens and eggs and received their pay in warrants or scrip

9. Paula M. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), pp. 117–23.

that merchants discounted. Selling one's real estate was difficult; in fact, in many cases one could not give it away. One man complained bitterly that "the fellow who never did have anything anyway—can get plenty of help . . . [but] the fellow who has kept out of debt must now get into debt to get any help from the government."[10]

During the 1920s, the national average per capita income for the decade hovered around $750, but for farmers it was $250.[11] While the annual farm income declined, the importance of the income farm wives brought to the family increased. Commonly called "pin money," in fact, the value of what the women who supplemented family income became more significant. Studies by historians Dorothy Schwieder and Barbara Handy-Marchello, among others, have revealed how important women's contributions were to the family farm, sometimes making the difference between starvation and sustenance, foreclosure or survival.[12]

Farmwomen had traditionally planted large gardens and canned large amounts of fruits and vegetables. Letters to the *Dakota Farmer* indicate this aspect of farm life played an increased role during the depression years. Not only did the farmwife increase her production for the family table but in some cases produced extra food for cash sales. Some women reported canning fifty quarts each of several vegetables annually. In Schwieder's study, a Lawrence County farmwife indicated she had canned this quantity and, "put away" fourteen hundred pounds of potatoes, along with a bushel of onions. With five milk cows and some chickens, she estimated her grocery bill at two dollars weekly.[13]

Women also made a significant contribution with poultry and eggs. Many hatched their own chicks, both with setting hens and with incu-

10. Lorena Hickok to Harry L. Hopkins, Aberdeen, 7 Nov. 1933, in Lowitt and Beasley, eds., *One Third of a Nation*, p. 181.

11. Salutos, *American Farmer*, pp. 3–9.

12. Dorothy Schwieder, "South Dakota Farm Women and the Great Depression," *Journal of the West* 24 (Oct. 1985): 6–18; Barbara Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870–1930* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005).

13. The description of the work of farm women here and following comes from Schwieder, "South Dakota Farm Women," pp. 10–17.

bators. Some women produced two or three batches yearly. Throughout the 1930s, "many women raised flocks larger than 399 chickens." Between 1932 and 1941, South Dakota women averaged production of 523 million eggs annually and sold 72 percent of them. Turkey production also thrived on these farms.

Women shared the milking duties and were largely responsible for the separation of cream from the milk. Butter making was a related task. They used the butter at home and sold it to town families and to merchants in a barter system. The farmwife "traded" eggs and butter to the grocer for items that needed to be purchased, such as condiments and clothing. Letters to the *Dakota Farmer* indicated that poultry, eggs, and dairy products were "absolutely essential for feeding and clothing farm families."[14] Farmwives during the depression also stopped purchasing many of their household supplies and either made them at home or found substitutes. They used fine ashes for scouring or cleaning and made their own soap. Many sent in recipes for homemade toothpaste, furniture polish, fly paper, fly spray, hand lotion, and stove cleaner.

In addition, rural women in the early part of the twentieth century faced physically demanding and time-consuming chores to keep the household running. To do the weekly washing, a farmwife pumped water from an outside well, hauled it into the house, and heated it on a wood or coal stove. She ironed and cleaned house with only the simple and traditional tools available without electricity. She baked and cooked for her family and whatever hired hands might be working on the farm; and, in her spare time, she raised a large garden (when rains came) and did an immense amount of canning. These chores were daily, in addition to the farm work she provided when her husband was unusually busy, during the calving season, for example, and through the threshing season.

National home economist Day Monroe reported that South Dakota farmwomen, through cash income, bartering, or trading farm products for family necessities, might realize half the annual farm income of $634. While letter after letter written to the *Dakota Farmer* during the Great Depression reflected the accepted view of farming as "essential-

14. Ibid., p. 13.

ly a male occupation," women's supportive work was essential for the family.[15]

Almost all the South Dakota farmers raised grain and livestock, cultivating approximately two hundred acres. The remaining acreage was devoted to horses and mules, head of cattle, hogs, sheep, and chickens. Raising hogs was their most profitable endeavor. Typical of the area, farm tenancy averaged 41.5 percent. These farmers neglected to keep adequate records but most failed to clear five hundred dollars annually. Tax burdens were excessive as rural South Dakotans sought to improve their roads and schools to satisfy the needs of expanded use of gasoline-powered vehicles. In the late 1920s, about 66 of every 1,000 farms in South Dakota were sold for taxes. These sales increased rapidly from 1928 to 1932, and in 1933, there were 103.1 farms per 1,000 changing ownership, with 25.1 percent of these coming from default on taxes.

15. Ibid., p. 17.

Women were active partners in farm work, as seen in this image of shelterbelt planting in the 1930s.

In 1890, 55 percent of farms in Potter County had no indebtedness; by 1930, this had dropped to 27 percent. Southeastern South Dakota had the lowest tax delinquency in the state while those over 40 percent were in West River counties. A superimposed precipitation map over a tax delinquency map at the time shows counties with the least precipitation had the greatest tax delinquency rate. The farm crisis was not of one variety but "a whole series of integrated problems."[16]

Many farmers had over-expanded, and their expectations had "ballooned," but "both plummeting land values and anemic commodity prices had deprived them" of a standard of living comparable to the urban middle class. As a result, many took out second mortgages and became ever more deeply mired in debt. With their increasing grain surpluses, high farm debts, and declining land values, South Dakota farmers were "ill-prepared to face the Great Depression" when it hit.[17]

In this chaotic situation, farmers were willing to follow leaders who offered ready panaceas or proposed chimerical ideas to solve their situation. The first United States senator from South Dakota, Richard F. Pettigrew, was one such politician. Senator Pettigrew, conservative Republican turned Silver Republican (in favor of moving from a gold standard to a silver), turned Populist cum Democrat, then Socialist, followed a number of popular paths, depending on the current political winds. At the end of his career, ready to incur the wrath of national authority, he eventually supported the Farmer-Labor movement. When that group met in Chicago in July 1923, the former South Dakota senator welcomed them with a speech praising the Soviet system. "All power to the men who do the work and create the wealth," he urged, "don't buy the mines and railroads, take them." He died shortly thereafter.[18]

At about the same time, a powerful political movement with strong Socialist tendencies was sweeping the Dakotas. A. C. Townley, a

16. "Tax Delinquency Status of Farm Land in South Dakota," State Planning Board, Brookings, 1 July 1937, South Dakota State University Archives.

17. Michael Johnson Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 11.

18. R. Alton Lee, *Principle Over Party: The Farmer's Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880–1900* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011), p. 175.

North Dakota farm organizer, made rapid headway with his Nonpartisan League movement, beginning in 1915. Townley viewed railroads, banks, machinery "trusts," and lawyers as the farmers' major enemies and promoted the political concept that their salvation lay in entering the political arena by capturing primary elections for their candidates on a nonpartisan basis. These Socialists pursued a program of government-owned mills and elevators and a rural credits plan to make agrarian loans at low interest rates. Townley discovered farmers liked his ideas but disliked the "red card" membership of the Socialist party. They were willing to support his Socialist plans by voting for nonpartisan candidates who promised to promote the Socialist goals of government-owned resources important to farmers.[19]

These concepts were quickly exported into neighboring South Dakota and Minnesota. In the latter, the movement eventually emerged as the Farmer-Labor party during the depression decade. A friend of two-term South Dakota Governor Peter Norbeck (1917–1921) warned him that the NPL was invading his state like "a swarm of grasshoppers." Norbeck was a liberal Republican and a supporter of Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism policies. Most importantly, he was a relentless promoter of his farmers and wanted desperately to help them out of their economic morass without resorting to socialism.[20]

Norbeck had espoused progressive Republican views in his campaign for the governorship in 1916. He saw no problem with extending the powers of the state government if that authority were used to help his embattled farmers. After winning the election, Norbeck proposed and the legislature approved a rural credits program similar to that in North Dakota in an effort to combat current high interest rates. In contrast to the conservative Republican government in North Dakota (before the election of 1918), his legislature was controlled by progressive Republicans, and they had no hesitation in endorsing Norbeck's constitutional amendments to extend governmental powers into new

19. R. Douglas Hurt, *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 74.

20. Gilbert C. Fite, *Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman* (1948; reprint ed. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2005), is the definitive story of this towering figure in South Dakota history.

areas. These included creating a post for a commissioner to control abuses in marketing; establishing a workmen's compensation law; creating a state highway department; and appointing committees to investigate the possibility of operating a coalmine and a cement plant, and also building mills and grain elevators, similar to those activities taking place in North Dakota. South Dakota eventually owned a cement plant that prospered and a coalmine that suffered from inefficient management. When mining had nearly depleted the coal, the mine was sold at a loss of nearly \$175,000.[21]

21. Gilbert C. Fite, "Peter Norbeck and the Defeat of the Nonpartisan League in South Dakota," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33 (Sept. 1946): 220–22; Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 286.

Peter Norbeck advocated for Black Hills tourism, among other enterprises. He appears here outside the Custer State Park Game Lodge around 1927.

George N. Peek, a farm economist who became president of the Moline Plow Company in Illinois, observed, "You can't sell a plow to a busted farmer," and led the campaign at this time to enact the McNary-Haugen Farm Relief bill. This program sought to remove surpluses from the market to force an increase in domestic prices, and farm leaders in South Dakota desperately pinned their hopes on this assistance. Introduced in 1924, the measure finally passed Congress in 1927 only to have President Calvin Coolidge veto it. Congress passed it again the following year with another Coolidge veto. He explained that the national government could not interfere with economic forces in this way [to help farmers], although it was helping business with high tariffs, low taxes, and other policies.[22]

In South Dakota, the two governors who served during President Hoover's term were from different parties but took very similar approaches to the impending disaster that the depression was fast becoming. The state's first eleven governors were Republicans (Andrew Lee was officially listed as a Populist), and the party had held sway in South Dakota politics for years. In the election of 1926, however, for the first time, voters elected a Democrat. William J. Bulow defeated the incumbent Carl Gunderson, and held the position for two terms, 1927–1931. Bulow proved to be a "conservative old line" Democrat who made few people unhappy. Despite the economic woes that loomed, Bulow viewed his second administration "as a sort of era of good feeling." In 1930, he decided to forego another gubernatorial race and ran instead for the United States Senate seat held by William H. McMaster, a Republican and former governor. He won by the narrow margin of 6,000 votes and went on to serve two terms.

With the governor's seat open, the Democrats nominated D. A. McCullough, while five candidates were involved in the Republican primary. Gladys Pyle received 33,000 votes, Gunderson 31,000, Brooke Howell 22,000, Carl Trygstad 21,000, and Warren E. Green 8,000. Because no candidate won the required 35 percent, the delegates to the state convention held a runoff, during which one of the candidates withdrew in favor of Green who then won on the twelfth ballot. In

22. Gilbert C. Fite's *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), is the classic account of this failed program.

a modest campaign, Green, a former state senator, subsequently defeated McCullough by 15,000 votes in the general election. The conservative self-styled "dirt farmer" of Hamlin County, Governor Green continued Bulow's fiscal policies during the emerging depression.[23]

The Green family had moved from Vermont to Wisconsin to Iowa and, after the Civil War, to South Dakota where Green farmed in Hamlin County. By the time he became governor, he and his wife owned five quarters of land and sixty Hereford cattle. Advocating a conservative course of action for South Dakota, Green was plagued with patronage problems after his party came to power, and he made thousands of enemies by saying "no." His proposed budget cut the one Bulow had proposed by $500,000 and the legislature reduced this by an additional $200,000, compensating with a slash in state employee salaries. When North Dakota's capitol building was destroyed by a fire in December 1930, the South Dakota legislature quickly determined to protect their own state records and authorized an annex costing $270,000. To pay for this, Green attempted to cut state expenditures further by reducing college and university salaries by 10 percent.[24] Problems were multiplying exponentially for the state and the nation.

President Herbert Hoover tried to help farmers by persuading Congress to establish the Federal Farm Board in 1929. The board was to promote the marketing of farm commodities through cooperatives and stabilization corporations. The law provided for a revolving fund of $500 million for loans to these agencies. After spending $180 million of this, and the Grain Stabilization Board accumulating 257,000,000 bushels of wheat without any appreciable effect on prices, this purchasing program was dropped. The solution to the problem of surpluses remained out of reach. The Federal Farm Board had spent $345 million by 1933, and its attempts to "urge" farmers to cut production were a miserable failure. Force was required for the recalcitrant.[25]

23. "William John Bulow" in Lynwood E. Oyos, *Over a Century of Leadership: South Dakota Territorial and State Governors* (Sioux Falls: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1987), p. 117; Alan L. Clem, *Prairie State Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), p. 36.

24. Donald D. Parker, "Warren Everett Green," in Oyos, *Century of Leadership*, p. 122.

25. Fite, "Peter Norbeck," pp. 224–27.

South Dakota's percentage of population engaged in agriculture was the fourth largest in the Union. The paucity of other natural resources, such as timber, petroleum, coal, and waterpower compounded their problem. Due to the lack of natural resources and subsequent lack of industries, when crops failed, there was little to which farmers could turn to for a livelihood. Their suffering also affected the small towns whose merchants were dependent on them as their most numerous and reliable customers. For the first time most of the merchants had to announce a "cash only" policy. "We trust in the Lord," their signs read, "cash only to all others." Bonds for city improvements languished as town taxpayers were unwilling to commit themselves in the depressed economic conditions. The economic downturn forced banks to merge or close, taking depositors' savings down with them. It drove county and other local units of government to curtail services. School officials "struggled to hold costs down," cut salaries, and often resorted to paying teachers in scrip (redeemable with local merchants); merchants became increasingly skeptical of accepting it as the scrip was not an acceptable currency to pay for replenishing their inventory. In farm country, when farmers hurt, everyone hurts.[26]

With real estate values in a sharp decline and the farmers' outgo, in terms of fixed charges, including taxes and debts, remaining stationary, the result was a sharp rise in tax delinquency. Farm foreclosures, which reached a high in 1924–1925, were again on the increase in 1932. Some 34,419 farm foreclosures occurred from 1921 to 1932, with one-third of them in the last two years. Farm tenancy rose from 34.9 percent in 1920 to 44.6 percent by 1930 and provided many reasons for a farm revolt.[27]

Farmers who were strapped for cash sought loans to keep their operations going. To receive loans for reseeding, farmers had to describe the land to be seeded and how the loan was to be repaid. The county auditor received this information, and each county had a loan committee to oversee the process. To receive any kind of assistance, South

26. Nelson, *Prairie Winnows*, pp. 9–12; W. F. Kumlein, "A Graphic Summary of the Relief Situation in South Dakota (1930–1935)," *Research Bulletins of the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station* 310 (May 1937): 7; C. Hartley Grattan, "Who is on Relief?" *Scribner's Magazine* 97 (June 1935): 25.

27. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 283.

Dakotans had to demonstrate that family resources were exhausted or real property was mortgaged before receiving relief. When the Hoover administration acknowledged the responsibility of the national government in this economic crisis, it marked a turning point in the role the federal government was to play.

Late in President Hoover's term, Congress authorized his Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to loan $300 million to states for relief work. Most authorities assumed, correctly, that the loans would never be repaid. The needy also began receiving surplus commodities from the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC). Among other programs, the RFC set up a feed and grain loan program that helped farmers remain on their land. This approach would work in a short-term crisis, but the Great Depression was not temporary. As it continued, farmers incurred further debts, which Mother Nature prevented them from repaying by destroying their crops.[28]

The RFC was revolutionary for South Dakota. To take advantage of RFC loans, Governor Green established a required State Relief Committee. Members included Attorney General Merrell Q. Sharpe, Henry McGrath of Aberdeen, W. C. Lusk of Yankton, B. C. Yates of Lead, and R. F. Looby of Artesian. In mid-November 1932, Roy L. Emry, state relief director, telegraphed county commissioners in fifty-seven counties who had relief projects currently functioning that they must halve their programs until a new plan of relief was constructed. Emry, at the time, was in Washington, D.C., to learn about the new federal plan to help relief with RFC funding. At this point South Dakota had received $368,000 in RFC loans, in addition to $50,000 for the Mount Rushmore project, and these funds were being used primarily for road building and water improvements.[29]

One week later, Roland Hayes of the RFC held a conference in Pierre to instruct the governor and other state officials on the new program. Green was able to telegraph county officials that they should resume

28. R. Alton Lee, "Drought and Depression on the Great Plains," *Heritage of the Great Plains* 39 (Spring/Summer 2006): 6; A. R. Mangus, *Changing Aspects of Rural Relief*, WPA Division of Social Research Monograph 14 (1938; reprint ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), p. xvii.

29. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 14 Nov. 1932; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 8 Aug. 1932.

work relief with loans ranging from $1,000 to $5,000. Work relief supervisors and county commissioners were warned not to exceed their allotments and to give the work "only to the destitute needy families." Hayes then returned to Washington with South Dakota's request for an additional loan of $436,000 from the RFC and information to substantiate the need for increased funding.

The new plan called for shifting administration of the funds from the county commissioners to "individual administrators" in Beadle, Davison, Codington, "and possibly other counties." Workers would be compensated with food, clothing, and fuel, but not in cash, and the funds would be used "entirely for destitution relief and not for unemployment relief." RFC loans for South Dakota were cut from Hayes's recommendation of $436,000 to $290,000. Emry lamented the fact that the amount was "not as large as we had hoped to get" but the state could now "meet relief needs up to the first of the year."[30]

As conditions worsened, the rumblings of a farm revolt could be heard across the Midwest. The agrarian movements took various forms and had a variety of leaders. Milo Reno, president of the Iowa Farmers' Union from 1921 through 1930, became the leader of a populist organization known as the Farmers' Holiday Association (FHA), established in 1932. In addition to currency inflation and agricultural production and price controls, Reno and his supporters were promoting farm strikes in the Midwest to call attention to the plight of Great Plains farmers.[31]

Beginning with a "cow war" in Iowa, Reno goaded farmers into taking direct action through his FHA. Dairy farmers began blockading the highways into Sioux City, Iowa, by leaving boards with protruding nails in them and dumping the milk of those who tried to run the gauntlet. In the autumn of 1932, and again in 1933, they blockaded highways into market cities such as Sioux City, Madison, Yankton, and Sioux Falls, demanding the withholding of crops until the cost of production issue was settled. In Moville, Iowa, and Jefferson, South Dakota, angry farmers halted freight trains hauling farm produce into Sioux City. Fifty

30. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 21, 22, 26 Nov. 1932.

31. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), pp. 238–41.

farmers at Jefferson were placing torpedoes on railroad tracks, waving red lanterns to halt trains. This, of course, was a direct interdiction to the flow of interstate commerce that quickly caught the attention of federal officials who brought this activity to an immediate halt. These agrarians also insisted the Frazier-Lemke Farm Mortgage Moratorium Act, languishing in Congress, be enacted to refinance farm mortgages. Further, they revived the old Populist demand to expand the amount of currency in circulation.[32] Farmers in the wheat, corn, and hog belts of eastern South Dakota were particularly active in the boycott movement. In a brief holding action in Watertown, events got out of control, resulting in the shooting death of one person.

Emil Loriks, a wealthy farmer from Oldham, South Dakota, and a leader of the state's FHA from 1927 to 1932, had "logged thousands of miles" in organizing support. He urged moderation at all times and found his cooperative approach to be particularly appealing to South Dakota business leaders. Two hundred of the 1,200 people that launched the Holiday movement in Minnehaha County were business owners. Historian John E. Miller discovered that they and lawyers often played key leadership roles in farm organizations and as organizers. Loriks found that "the residents of towns and cities are backing the movement better than the farmers in many instances." He noted that merchants and business owners in Howard and De Smet had joined the Holiday movement 100 percent but more important, all had paid their fifty-cent dues.[33]

While Governor Green was sympathetic to Farm Holiday goals, he sought peaceful means to achieve them. He addressed a Holiday meeting in Huron in August 1932 and "indicated his approval of a holding action," but insisted on using his gubernatorial authority to keep high-

32. John L. Shover, ed., "Depression Letters from American Farmers," *Agricultural History* 36 (July 1962): 163–64; *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 22 July 1932.

33. John E. Miller, "Restrained, Respectable Radicals: The South Dakota Farm Holiday," *Agricultural History* 59 (July 1985): 429–47. Miller's thorough analysis and description of the activities of the Farm Holiday in the state during the years between 1932 and 1934 is an excellent resource on this topic. Included here is a brief review of the significant events leading up to the implementation of the New Deal. For an excellent study of the FHA in a broader region, *see* John L. Shover, *Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

ways open. He received approval from the FHA board to hold a meeting in Sioux City on 9 September of governors and farm leaders from fifteen states to formulate "an orderly, practical, legal, and nonviolent plan" to increase farm prices. There were many South Dakotans among the five thousand in attendance who listened to Farm Holiday spokesmen threatening a farm revolution if their demands were not met.[34]

The governors rejected the cost-of-production concept, the Frazier-Lemke farm bill, and the strategy of withholding produce from markets. Attorney General Sharpe opined there was no legal basis for states to embargo goods crossing their borders; in fact, he advised governors that this would contravene the power of the national government to control interstate commerce. Instead, the governors submitted "a tepid set of resolutions" for President Hoover's consideration. The Holiday leaders then proceeded with plans for a voluntary withholding of livestock and grain, and the governor gave this action "his full support." As a result, grain receipts fell at Rapid City and Huron for a couple of days, and hog sales at Sioux Falls, the state's primary hog market, were cut in half, but generally the state remained calm. Most farmers were resolved to wait and evaluate the Roosevelt farm plan.[35]

Communists and other radicals, however, were not idle during this crisis. The Communist front for farmers, the United Farmers League (UFL), was very active in North Dakota, as well as in Roberts and Brown Counties in northeastern South Dakota where the cities of Frederick and Sisseton are located. This area had formed the basis for support of liberal politics since Populist days, through Socialist organizing, to the NPL failure to conquer South Dakota politics. John Miller notes that, "these locations were also the home to the most prosperous farmers working in the highest valued land in the state and, in general, they suffered less from drought and depression than did farmers further west."[36]

Clarence Sharp, who sold the Socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason* on the streets of Bristol, South Dakota, in the first decade of the twen-

34. Miller, "Restrained, Respectable Radicals," pp. 433–434.
35. Ibid., p. 437.
36. Ibid., p. 430.

tieth century and was currently an implement dealer, supported the NPL and joined the Communist Party "in 1930 or 1931," according to historian William Pratt. He became South Dakota chair of the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA) in 1932 and was soon busy organizing branches and recruiting members. He found most success in the northeast corner of the state, and brought Knute Walstad and his son Julius, farmers in Roberts County, into the fold, who proceeded to support CPUSA member William Z. Foster for president in the 1932 campaign. Pratt notes that the area "was ripe for Communist organizing" and there may have been one hundred members there by 1933. Sharp also recruited successfully in West River country among former Socialists and members of the NPL.

In 1931, another Communist Party leader, Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor, and her North Dakota recruits organized a "drought relief caravan" to exchange coal mined in North Dakota for wheat grown in northeast South Dakota. Trucks drove through North Dakota to Frederick, South Dakota, in August 1931 then hauled grain back for sale in North Dakota.[37]

In Wilmot in Roberts County, former members of the Ku Klux Klan joined the CPUSA and were in the forefront of radical agitation. In Milbank, a forced sale of a farmer's chattels attracted "a large number" of United Farmers League (UFL) members who attempted to prevent a deputy sheriff from holding an auction. He pointed his gun at someone and it discharged. The crowd disarmed the deputies and conducted a "Sears-Roebuck" sale, also known as a "penny auction," where the neighbors bought equipment and livestock for a penny or a nickel and returned them to the owner. The state brought an injunction against the UFL and "some ninety individuals," prosecuting fifteen of them for this violence. After a dramatic trial in Sisseton, a local jury acquitted them.[38] In another example of violence, in February 1933, Keats Markell and his two sons tried to run a highway blockade near Sioux City

37. William C. Pratt, "Rural Radicalism on the Northern Great Plains, 1912–1950," *Montana: The Magazine of History* 42 (Winter 1992): 48; Allan Matthews, "Agrarian Radicals: The United Farmer's League of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 3 (Fall 1973): 412.

38. For this episode, *see* Matthews, "Agrarian Radicals," pp. 408–21.

and all three received buckshot wounds. Conditions were deteriorating rapidly, requiring cohesive legislative action that the divisive legislature was unable to provide.[39] Pratt estimates that there were 300 to 500 members of CPUSA in South Dakota, but their numbers declined after 1934 when the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) program was proving successful.[40] These assaults by conservatives and reactionaries stoked the early flames of anti-Communism that Karl Mundt was able to exploit in his election of 1938 and thereafter.[41]

In an address at the annual state attorneys' meeting in 1932, Attorney General M. Q. Sharpe described what this topsy-turvy world order was doing to South Dakotans. He deplored the "vote-buying statesmanship of the 20th century" that he said was weakening public morale. He lamented that "shyster politicians, lavish use of public funds for pensions, bonuses and public works had encouraged a tendency to lean on and live off the government." He deplored the effect of the "beneficiaries of mothers' pensions and poor relief funds cavorting around in automobiles, attending movie picture shows and enjoying a better state of affluence than the average citizen enjoys." Sharpe and other conservatives found this new attitude of indolence and dependence on the state for support to be degrading and a regrettable development for American society.[42]

The help from Mothers' Pensions to which Sharpe referred was the major contemporary support for needy children in these trying times. This program dated from the Progressive period when reformers were attacking child labor abuses. They discovered that available sources through charity were insufficient to sustain children who had no father to support the family. A coalition, headed by federated women's associations, managed to overcome intense opposition to providing for these pension funds. Between 1911 and 1913, twenty states established such a program. By 1935, only Georgia and South Carolina had failed

39. Ibid., 420. For a survey of these sales, *see* John Shover, "The Penny-Auction Rebellion: Midwestern Farmers Fight Foreclosure," *American West* 2 (Fall 1965), 64–72.

40. Pratt, "Rural Radicalism," pp. 49–50.

41. Ibid., 51. *See also* William C. Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Summer 1988): 134.

42. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 16 Nov. 1932.

to do so. The South Dakota legislature was on the cutting edge of this movement, enacting a fund in 1911.[43]

The South Dakota program made a cash allowance for children of poor women who had been widowed, divorced, or abandoned. Judges of county courts determined the amounts that usually averaged the costs of "institutionalizing" the children in orphanages or poor houses as a basis for payments. In South Dakota in 1931, the average grant per month per family was $21.78, about in the middle of a list of forty-three states. After a judge awarded the status of "worthy poor," and decided upon the stipend, based on need, the father's status, and the suitability of the home, an official periodically visited the family to determine if the conditions of the award were being maintained. The sums were generally inadequate, forcing the mothers to supplement this income by taking in laundry or engaging in some other kind of domestic work.

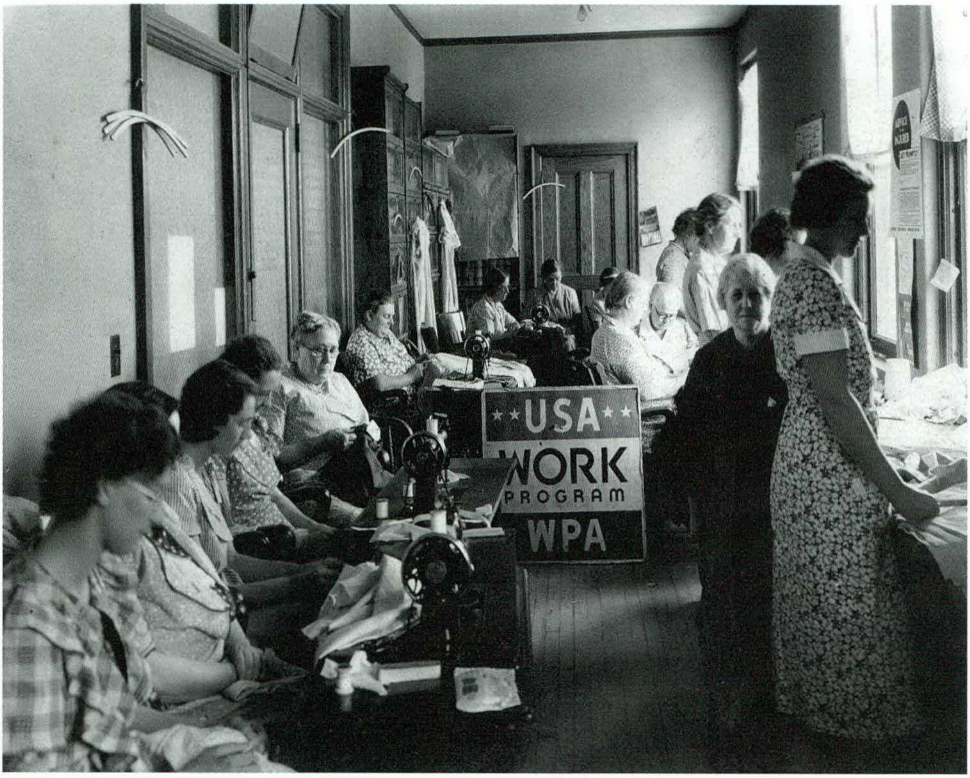
American relief laws had been based on English poor laws that assumed the poor were responsible for their condition and "they had to be forced to overcome their laziness and go to work." If relief became necessary, it was the responsibility of local government or private charity. As historian William Bremer asserted, often the destitute were subject to means tests and "direct relief was given in kind, so that others prescribed what the unemployed should eat or wear."[44] County commissioners appointed a "Poor Agent" in charge of overseeing the county dole, grocery list, trade in kind, or whatever system they used to feed the hungry. Mothers' Pensions were later supplanted by Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs for women, which helped relieve the financial pressure on county budgets, followed by Social Security's Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). The Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor sought to monitor the earlier program, but later the State Bureau of Social Services took responsibility for it.[45]

The Great Depression challenged these concepts and showed Americans that poverty "could be caused by brutal economic circumstances,

43. Christopher Howard, "Sowing the Seeds of 'Welfare': The Transformation of Mothers' Pensions, 1900–1940," *Journal of Policy History* 4 (Apr. 1992): 193.

44. William W. Bremer, "Along the American Way: The New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed," *Journal of American History* 62 (Dec. 1975): 639.

45. Howard, "Sowing the Seeds," p. 193; table on p. 202.



Sewing rooms such as this one in Milbank provided work for women through the Works Progress Administration.

not just weak character." The widespread economic crisis demonstrated that local government and private charity were inadequate, and the situation required national action. Such federal assistance would not "sully" the character of the poor.[46]

The Great Depression also revealed the truth that all the Great Plains states whose economies were primarily agricultural and whose populations were largely rural were not created equal. Neighboring states—Kansas, Nebraska, and even North Dakota—were more advanced industrially than South Dakota. Their economies were rooted in the production of grain and livestock, but, in addition, Kansas held extensive oil and gas deposits, Nebraska had its meatpacking industry,

46. Cohen, *Nothing to Fear*, pp. 248–49.

and North Dakota possessed processing plants for its agricultural production. In contrast, South Dakota's economy was fully dependent on agriculture with only a smattering of extractive work and a tourism industry in its infancy.

At the same time, South Dakota faced devastating droughts and grasshopper plagues, even more severe than their neighbors. These conditions dealt significant blows to an already aggrieved economy, which, in combination with the economic conditions, placed almost 40 percent of the state's population in a crisis condition.[47]

In late 1931, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur M. Hyde wrote in a letter to President Herbert Hoover, "Tens of thousands of farm families have had their savings swept away and even their subsistence threatened." The following year, Edward A. O'Neal, president of the conservative Farm Bureau Federation, warned Congress, "Unless something is done for the American farmer we will have revolution in the countryside in less than twelve months."[48]

President Herbert Hoover strove diligently, but fruitlessly, to stem these economic tides. When he ran for reelection in 1932, the economic life of the country was already draining away, and continuing the policies of his Republican predecessors did not stanch the flow. American voters were looking for change in 1932 and found it in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) campaign promises of a New Deal.

The depression was nearing its nadir by the election of 1932. With unemployment and destitution rampant, the voters turned to Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose presidential campaign appealed to the "forgotten man on the bottom of the economic pyramid." One-fourth of farmers had lost their farms before Hoover left office, and most of those who maintained possession of their land were having a difficult time surviving. South Dakotans blamed the president and his lack of interest in agrarian concerns.[49]

47. For a firsthand account of the drought in Laura Ingalls Wilder's county, *see* Lyle R. Johnson, "Decade of Drought: A Year-by-Year Account of Weather-related Changes in 1930s Kingsbury County," *South Dakota History* 43 (Fall 2013): 218–244.

48. Quotes in Egan, *Worst Hard Time*, pp. 103–4.

49. Frank Freidel, "Election of 1932," in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Fred L. Israel, eds., *History of American Presidential Elections* (New York: Chelsea House, 1978): 2311–12,

An unsuccessful Democratic candidate for the vice presidency in 1920, Roosevelt developed poliomyelitis the next year that left him permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Nevertheless, he kept his name and political future alive, placing Alfred ("Al") E. Smith's name in nomination for the presidency in 1924 at the Democratic convention to run against President Calvin Coolidge. Four years later, Smith lost to Herbert Hoover, while FDR became the governor of New York. When the Great Depression struck, Governor Roosevelt instituted a feasible state program to combat adverse economic conditions and won a second term two years later by a wide margin. By 1932, he was ready to run for the presidency, challenging Smith who continued to seek his turn in the White House.[50]

Roosevelt's promise of a "New Deal" resonated with farmers. During a coast-to-coast campaign tour, the New Yorker appealed to farmers in a major speech in Topeka, Kansas, in which he promoted a domestic allotment plan. The brainchild of a Montana economist, M. L. Wilson, the domestic allotment plan operated on the idea that agriculture had to adjust production to demand or, according to the current philosophy, follow a program of "planned scarcity." In contrast, Hoover spoke to farmers about keeping the tariff high to protect their products. If the Democrats were to enact their promise of a low tariff, Hoover asserted, "grass would grow in the streets of a hundred cities, a thousand towns, the weeds will overrun a million farms." Roosevelt's ready response was that was exactly what was happening with the current Republican tariff, the highest in American history.

In 1932, all eyes were on the presidential race between Franklin D. Roosevelt and the incumbent Herbert C. Hoover. In South Dakota, which was traditionally a bulwark for Republicans, historian Herbert S. Schell noted, "the smaller margin of victory for Republican state candidates in 1930 and an increase in the number of Democratic legislators clearly portended unrest among the voters." The unrest was apparent among the Republicans where fissures again broke open. Green's

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2318. The "deflation" quote is from Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (1975; reprint ed., Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1992), p. 146.

50. James McGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), pp. 105–22.

supporters denounced the use of taxes to promote Black Hills tourist attractions during difficult economic times and were convinced the Mount Rushmore carving was never-ending, frivolous, and needlessly costly. Norbeck defended the development of the Black Hills as vital to the state's future and won his primary.[51]

On the Democratic side, Emil Loriks declined the urgings that he run for governor. Fearing that an election run would only prove to be an opportunity to mortgage his farm in a losing effort, he misjudged the mood of the country and his state. The futile efforts of President Hoover to combat the depressed conditions heralded 1932 as a Democratic year. The ongoing economic crises of adverse weather and continued depression are revealed in the real estate statistics of the time.

By 1932, the average value of South Dakota farmland had dropped from $71.39 in 1921, to $35.24 in 1930. It would continue to decline to $18.65 in 1935. Wheat brought 50 cents, corn 30 cents, and hogs $2.68 per hundredweight. These factors increased the farmers' debt burden and in 1931–1932 some 7 million acres, or 19.6 percent of the farmland in the state suffered foreclosure. This produced "public outcry for relief" on property taxes.[52]

The Democrats drew up a platform calling for reduction in state expenditures and a revision of the tax code to place it on "the ability to pay." The major farm organizations, the Farmers Union, the Farm Bureau, and the Grange agreed on a plan of action for farm programs on the state and national levels, a graduated income tax, and a severance tax on gold. They chose Tom Berry, a cattleman from Belvedere, as their candidate for governor.

Berry had been born in Paddock, Nebraska, married a schoolteacher named Lorena McLain, and homesteaded in Mellette County, South Dakota. Over the years they built up a prosperous ranch of 30,000 acres, raising Hereford cattle and superior saddle horses under the XX brand. The father of four children, he served three terms in the South

51. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 281; Suzanne Barta Julin, *A Marvelous Hundred Square Miles: Black Hills Tourism, 1880–1941* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009), p. 109.

52. Matthew Cecil, "Democratic Party Politics and the South Dakota Income Tax, 1933–1942," *South Dakota History* 26 (Summer/Fall 1986): 140.

Dakota House of Representatives and on the Custer State Park Board until Governor William Green replaced him with a Republican. The two men now faced off for the governor's chair.

South Dakota Superintendent of Banks Fred R. Smith became an issue in the 1932 campaign. Attorney General Sharpe investigated the state's financial institutions and disclosed Smith's misappropriation of funds. When he was arrested, he admitted to the embezzlement of $1.2 million from closed banks whose assets had been "placed in a state bank operated by members of his family." He pled guilty and received a seven-year prison term in 1931. Governor Green had previously praised Smith publicly, then Smith confessed, making himself *persona non grata* politically, and the Republicans tried to turn the issue back on the Democrats. They argued that the Democrats had reappointed him to office, blaming Berry with "guilt by association." Excitement over this disclosure had not dissipated when the state was struck with grasshopper invasions, drought, and crop failures. A decade of economic disasters left the state ill-prepared for these additional distresses.[53]

Berry was a "ruggedly handsome" fellow with a droll sense of humor. With a paucity of funds, Berry used his western wit to good effect in the campaign.[54] For example, in one of his speeches, he insisted there was "so much nepotism in Pierre that they could have a father and son banquet every night." Berry made up for a lack of campaign funds by energetically campaigning, often delivering twenty talks a day. His wit, down-to-earth explanation of problems, and proposed solutions proved most effective in wooing South Dakota voters."[55] Senator Bulow "enthusiastically joined the campaign," traveling with Berry and appearing at a large rally with him in the Sioux Falls Coliseum. Former governor Carl Gunderson also endorsed Berry as he "vehemently disagreed" with a number of Governor Green's policies and wanted a change in leadership in Pierre.

As early as mid-July the *Argus-Leader* reported the campaign of 1932 as heating up. Both parties were ignoring the political issue of prohi-

53. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 29 Oct. 1932.

54. Joseph V. Ryan, "Tom Berry, 1933–1937," in Oyos, *Century of Leadership*, pp. 127–28.

55. Ibid., p. 128.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Governor Tom Berry, and Senator William Bulow appeared together at Mount Rushmore in 1938.

bition and stressing the sick economy. Democrats described Hoover's plan of recovery as "hesitant and blundering, and in the interests of the rich and powerful." In turn, Republicans pictured Roosevelt as "weak, vague and given to radical predictions." Governor Green offered this Hooveresque statement on the campaign trail: "People will soon lose their fear of the future when they see a fine improvement made possible by a fine crop."[56] Both candidates insisted they would cut state expenses more deeply than the other, symbolized by Berry with the axe he carried on the campaign trail. He promised to revise taxes, saying he preferred an income tax "similar to those in more than 30 other states in the Union." As of 30 October the GOP had spent $1,454,179, compared to the Democrats' miserly $5,000.

56. Ibid., pp. 139–40.

Roosevelt swamped Hoover in the November election, winning 42 states, or 472 to 59 votes in the Electoral College, easily carrying the anti-Hoover farm vote. In South Dakota, Roosevelt won over the traditionally Republican agrarian vote, gaining 185,000 votes to Hoover's 100,000. His lopsided victory changed the political landscape of South Dakota as well, bringing Democrats to power in the executive and legislative branches of state government. Despite this great difference in campaign spending, Democrats won the governorship and both seats in the United States House of Representatives, electing Tom Berry, Fred H. Hildebrandt, and Theodore B. Werner, respectively. Berry received 63.6 percent of the vote on the platform, "Use the Axe." Only Republican Senator Norbeck was able to retain his seat in the Democratic sweep, to continue his work next to Senator William Bulow, a Democrat and former South Dakota governor who had won his seat in 1930.[57] As Norbeck expressed it, "The President is so immensely popular over the country that the Republicans here are on their knees and the Democrats have their hats off."[58]

57. Paul H. Carlson and Steve Porter, "South Dakota Congressmen and the Hundred Days of the New Deal," *South Dakota History* 8 (Fall 1978): 328–32.

58. Ibid., pp. 327–38.; Norbeck quote from Lewis L. Gould, *The Most Exclusive Club* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 113.

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