

Hope in Hard Times

NEW DEAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF MONTANA, 1936-1942



MARY MURPHY





PART I

Hard

Times



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Marion Post Wolcott • Indians going to Crow Fair, Vicinity of Crow Agency, September 1941. In 1941 Wolcott accompanied a group of dudes from the Quarter Circle U Ranch to Crow Fair and en route met this family, including the two dogs, one under the seat and one under the wagon. Notice the tepee poles lashed inside the wagon. (*overleaf*) John Vachon • Sheep ranch of Charles McKenzie, Garfield County, March 1942.

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Human history is work history.

—MERIDEL LESUEUR

ON MAY 31, 1937, James Womble, a farmer from Jordan, Montana, sat down and wrote a letter to Senator James E. Murray. After describing the desolate state of Garfield County, he concluded with an account of his own situation: “I have only 6 work horses left, have 1280 acres of land but there is not enough grass on it for the 6 horses. I have nothing to live on, have not made a good crop since 1928. I believe it would be best for the Government to buy our land and help me get started someplace where I could make a living or at least make a garden when I planted it. All of Garfield County people need help. This never was a farming country.”¹

In a few short lines James Womble laid bare the attitude of many rural Montanans in the late 1930s. They had taken up land offered by the various federal land acts believing it to be fertile—why else would the government have encouraged people to file on it? They had labored hard, often for decades, fueled by the dream of self-sufficiency and agricultural success, only to learn that “this never was a farming country.” Indeed,

many had stuck it out even longer than the government seemed to expect. In 1934 Dr. Elwood Mead, commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, toured the “stricken lands” of the West. The *Circle (Mont.) Banner* reported his recommendation that tens of thousands of people should be moved off the plains and the land reseeded with native bunch or buffalo grass. “I never believed we would have any thing in this country like the catastrophe I witnessed. . . . There is nothing left, no green thing. It is gone. . . . The land never should have been cultivated.”² James Womble concurred, and, as far as he was concerned, the powers that had invited him in, now needed to help him leave.

There is no one story of rural Montana in the Great Depression, but there is a main story line, one that begins with optimism and rain, proceeds through drought and dust, declension and crisis. For some the tale ends with exile, for others with rescue, and for still others, with their ability to benefit from neighbors’ hard times.

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THE VAST MAJORITY of people who took up homesteads in eastern Montana in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had no idea what they were getting into. Danish immigrants Peter and Bertha Josephson Anderson homesteaded near Sidney in 1899. Like many other newcomers, the Andersons were ill-prepared for the high plains. Reflecting on their first winter, Bertha ruefully described how they neglected to lay in a sufficient supply of food because they had anticipated a much milder climate. Back in Denmark the Andersons had located Montana on a map, checked its latitude, and figured that the winter temperatures would be something like those in France. Luckily, a neighbor was able to provision them until spring.³

The Great Plains have always been a hard place for people to live. For thousands of years Native Americans used the resources of this “stingy land,” as Elliott West aptly called it, making forays onto the grasslands for hunting but retreating to better watered and sheltered riverine environments for much of the year. However, in the nineteenth century, demographic pressures and the desire for economic expansion pushed and pulled Native and Euro-Americans onto the plains as permanent residents.⁴ As Native Americans lost their struggle for sovereignty and freedom, they



Arthur Rothstein • Sheepshearers at dinner, Rosebud County, June 1939. After washing up and combing their hair, sheepshearers sat down for a dinner of meat, potatoes, coffee, and pie. Like harvest and roundup, shearing was a labor-intensive period for male hands and the women who cooked for them.

also lost control over the land, and homesteaders and ranchers flooded the plains and prairies. By the twentieth century, when most Montana homesteading occurred, severely shrunken reservations contained the native people of Montana. Still, evidence of the nomadic horse cultures of the plains was all around the latest settlers. While Kermit Baecker worked on constructing the earth-filled Fort Peck Dam in 1934, he spent his days off hunting in the fill piles for bison skulls. He knew that the last bison in the area had been shot around 1890: “That was only forty-four years and it really makes you think how new the country was.”⁵

It was a new country for the thousands of emigrants who loaded their goods into boxcars and took the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, or the Milwaukee railroad into Montana and disembarked to face ramshackle towns and bewilderingly vast expanses of land. Many used locators, men who made a living helping prospective settlers find a piece

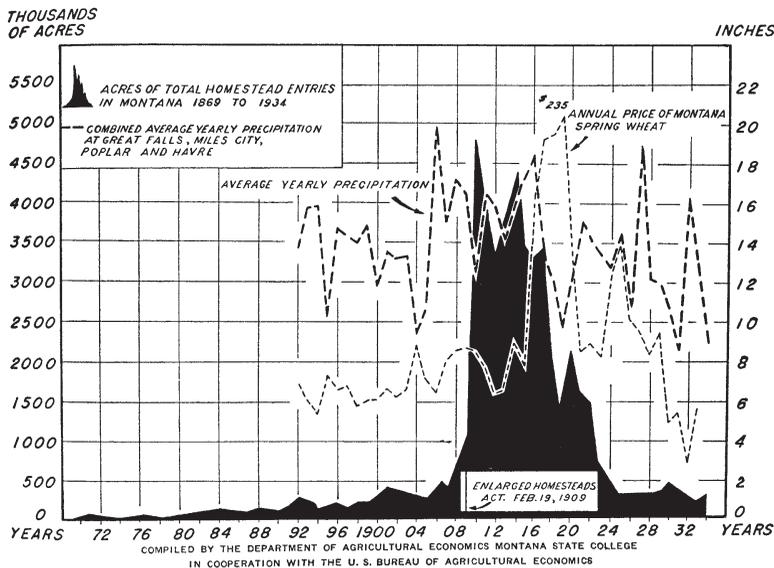
of land and file on it. Emil Ferdinand Madsen stepped off a Great Northern train in Culbertson in October 1906 with five companions and hired a locator. By the end of the following day, they had constructed six new homestead shacks on the rolling prairie, the kernel of a Danish immigrant colony. After christening the site Dagmar, in honor of a thirteenth-century Danish queen, Madsen began writing articles for Danish newspapers, inviting settlers to move to Montana. The Danes of Dagmar benefited from good initial choices and their communal efforts to gain a foothold on the prairie.⁶ Other individuals and families, responding to the flood of advertising issued by the railroads and the State of Montana, did not choose so well. Donald Morrow remembered that his father, a plumber in Minneapolis, saw an ad about “making a fortune on 160 acres of land, free land.” His parents moved to Montana in 1908 and homesteaded in the Mildred area, northeast of Miles City, on land he described as “a bunch of gumbo gullies.” Only because his father continued working as a plumber—spending months away from home as far afield as Florida—were they able to keep the homestead as long as they did.⁷

Thousands of men and women like the Morrrows inundated the Montana plains in the early twentieth century. Until 1901 fewer than one thousand people per year completed patents on homestead land in Montana.⁸ But, at about the same time that all the watered land had been claimed, scientists and pseudoscientists began touting dryland farming as a viable agriculture for the high plains. Dryland farming is simply “agriculture without irrigation in regions of scanty precipitation.”⁹ Newcomers would soon learn just how scanty precipitation could be. Changes in federal land laws that allowed homesteaders to claim 320 acres, to prove up in less than five years, and to spend time away from their claims earning cash also made farming the arid West more attractive. Between 1909 and 1920, 156,988 new claims were made on Montana lands.¹⁰ Another 28,000 entries were filed between 1920 and 1930.¹¹

Wheat drew the hopeful to eastern Montana. Farmers planted other crops—oats, flax, barley—but it was the price of wheat that appeared on the front page of Montana newspapers and the tips of farmers’ tongues. When soil and rain successfully conspired, high plains sod produced fifty bushels per acre in the mid-1910s. Europe’s tragedy promoted sodbusters’ fortunes. During World War I the federal government set the price of

wheat at roughly \$2.20 per bushel.¹² Farmers scrambled to plow up more land. Many men and women who had never held a hoe took up homesteads, hoping to prosper in the boom. M. L. Wilson's 1922 study of dryland farming in north-central Montana revealed that only 50.5 percent of 550 homesteaders in the area had previous farming experience. Among the inexperienced were two circus musicians, a paper hanger, two wrestlers, six "old maids" and three "old ladies," five lumberjacks, two preachers, a dressmaker, and a deep sea diver.¹³ In 1910 wheat covered 435,000 acres of Montana. By 1929, despite some years of contraction, farmers cultivated 4,419,000 acres of the golden grain.¹⁴

Cashing in on Montana's bonanza required hard labor. Mary Kindzerski characterized her parents' time on their High Line farm: "All their life, they just keep working."¹⁵ Breaking sod, building a house, picking rocks, hauling water, feeding animals, caring for children, plowing, planting, weeding, harvesting, fencing, butchering, milking, cooking, canning, cleaning, laundering, mending—and the list went on. Homesteading was hard work, and no one was excused. Children had their chores, starting as soon as they were big enough to work, and work



This graph, from the Great Plains Committee's *The Future of the Great Plains* (Washington, D.C., 1936), 41, illustrates precipitation and acreage claimed under homestead laws in Montana. Note the rise in claims after passage of the Enlarged Homestead Act in 1909 and the sharp decline during the post-World War I depression.

often took precedence over school. Edith McKamey remembered that neither she nor most girls she knew had much education. They came from big families, and they stayed home to help their mothers. When Edith was fourteen, she was “just barely starting the fifth grade.”¹⁶ Kaia Cosgriff’s father did not believe that she needed an education as much as he needed her on the farm. When she insisted that she wanted to go to high school, he said: “You can’t start school until after Thanksgiving.’ After Thanksgiving I started school. Then the next year he said, ‘You can’t start school until after Thanksgiving.’” But at Thanksgiving he told her she would have to wait until after Christmas. She thought, “I’ll have to get away from here or I’ll never get to finish the grades.” Without telling her parents, she answered a notice for a girl to do housework and left home at fifteen to trade her labor for room and board while she finished school.¹⁷ Other children quit school to help maintain the farm. Rose Maltese had completed eighth grade by the time rheumatism so incapacitated her father that he could not keep up his work. She decided to get a job in order to save the cattle they had mortgaged the previous spring. Not quite sixteen, she moved to town where she “worked like a fool” as a waitress and pastry cook at the Glendive Candy Kitchen. Rose saved the cattle but “couldn’t afford to get home. Had to keep on working, you know.”¹⁸

Childhood chores prepared both men and women to run their own homesteads. When Edith McKamey married, her husband Leslie was working as a cowboy for a nearby rancher. They filed on a homestead, and Leslie’s boss gave him a week off “so that he could fix that homestead shack so that the rattlesnakes didn’t come right in the door.” Edith navigated around more snakes each time she went to the coulee for water: “When I think of the way we had it down there I know that it must have been true love.”¹⁹ Ethel George came to Montana in 1920 to visit relatives and stayed to work on a ranch for twenty dollars a month. She met her husband at a dance and married in 1922; they had nine children. Mr. George

Arthur Rothstein • Young sugar beet worker with his dog, Treasure County, June 1939. Recruited by the Great Western and Holly Sugar companies, entire families, mostly Mexican or Mexican American, worked in the sugar beet fields of the lower Yellowstone Valley. Children labored alongside their parents hoeing, thinning, weeding, pulling, and topping the beets.

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ran a thresher, and wherever they lived, including an old house that had been used as a lambing shed, Ethel kept house, tended her children, and helped run the engine for the thresher: "I made a hand. . . . I had to 'cause my husband could not afford to hire help."²⁰

While everyone pitched in as needed, a rough gender division of labor still held true in farm life. Men cared for the fields; women cared for the house. In her 1930 study of forty-seven rural homemakers in seven Montana counties, Blanche Kuschke found that they worked an average sixty-five hours per week; 84 percent of that was spent in homemaking, 16 percent on farm work. Preparing and serving food was the most time-consuming task. Kuschke examined several factors to assess their impact on work time, including the family's annual income and whether women lived on dry or irrigated farms. The only factors that appeared to have significance were the age of children, the presence of electricity, and sinks with drains. Not surprisingly, children under six increased the amount of housework. Electricity and drains decreased work, but both were scarce in her sample.²¹ By 1940 only 28 percent of the state's farms were electrified.²²

Montana farms acquired labor-saving technology in fits and starts. Animal power and muscle power fueled the farms and ranches of the state well into the twentieth century. Even mechanized farm equipment was spottily distributed. Erick Olson, who went to work on the Fort Peck Dam in the mid-1930s, recalled that he "never knew what a tractor was till I got to Fort Peck." A superintendent came up to his crew one day and asked: "Is there any man here that can drive a pick-up?" And there never was a hand that had lifted and he went on to the next crew and do you know there was not a man that could drive a pick-up." Olson learned to drive on the Fort Peck job.²³ In 1930 only 36 percent of Montana farms used tractors and 29 percent had a truck. By 1940 tractor use had risen to encompass 47.6 percent of the state's farms, and 43.8 percent had acquired a truck. The most dramatic increase in mechanization was in the wheat-growing counties.²⁴

Arthur Rothstein • Farm girl pumping water, Fairfield, May 1939. Hauling water was an onerous and time-consuming chore for farm women. A good pump was a vast improvement over carrying buckets on long walks to and from creeks.



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John Vachon • Boomtown of the Fort Peck construction era, Wheeler, March 1942. Vachon came to the nearly deserted town of Wheeler two years after completion of the Fort Peck Dam and the departure of thousands of workers. He wrote to his wife, Penny: “It’s very strange looking, wide street with scattered cheap buildings and hotels, and lots of holes where buildings were. Other towns marked on the map aren’t even faintly visible any more.”

The agricultural history of early-twentieth-century Montana is an often told tale. Relatively plentiful rain in the early 1910s, high prices for grain after 1914, and easy credit encouraged farmers to buy land and tractors and plow up more and more acreage. Then drought crept into northeastern Montana in 1917 and spread steadily south and west through 1921. World War I ended, and European agriculture rebounded. Montana farmers were in debt, their lands dry and withered, and the price of wheat depressed. Tens of thousands packed up and left, and the

face of the countryside appeared bereft. Birdie Streets, whose own family left its homestead in the 1920s, recalled that “a lot of them homesteaders just walked off. Left their place. Turned their horses out, loose ’cause it was open range. . . . Just left their furniture in their house—what little furniture they had.”²⁵ When John C. Harrison moved to Harlowton in 1928, “the homesteaders were pretty well gone . . . no matter which way you went out of Harlowton, the homesteaders’ homes were collapsing, nobody lived there anymore.”²⁶ Some who stayed would rather have gone. Lillian Stephenson remembered that during the drought in the late 1910s, she “couldn’t even rake up enough money to buy a postage stamp.” She would have left except that she had no money for a train ticket and nowhere to go. For her, Montana homestead life was “just desolation.”²⁷

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Arthur Rothstein • Farmer with John Deere tractor, Fairfield, May 1939. Farm mechanization increased during the Depression with the help of FSA loans. A Fairfield farmer shows off his new John Deere tractor and cultivator for Rothstein’s camera.

Just how many people came to Montana to seek their fortune on the land in the homestead boom between 1909 and 1917 will remain a mystery, for uncounted numbers left before they could be recorded in the 1920 census. The 1920s witnessed a continued exodus. Even with an influx of determined or misguided adventurers in the 1920s, by 1930 there were 24,000 fewer people living on Montana farms than there had been at the beginning of the decade.²⁸ If the 1910s and 1920s were tough, the 1930s dealt the killing blow for some. When asked about his memories of that decade, Wallace Lockie replied: “The thirties I don’t want to remember at all. That was bad all the way through. . . . Nobody had any money. . . . You could buy a set of overalls for 25 cents [but] nobody had 25 cents.”²⁹

What is often overlooked in the discussion of Montana’s homestead bust is that when people left, land changed hands. In the 1920s while the farm population declined, cultivated acreage continued to increase, and the size of farms ballooned. In 1870 Montana’s average farm comprised 164 acres; by 1930 it was 940 acres, and by 1940 it was 1,111.³⁰ The crisis of the 1920s and the Great Depression highlighted the economic truths of high plains farming. Those with more land stood a better chance of surviving. In 1930 the average acreage of Prairie County farms was 1,291.9 acres; those families receiving relief in 1934 lived on farms with an average size of 486 acres.³¹

People did not seek to prey on their neighbors’ ill fortune, but land was cheap in the 1930s, and if an outfit had savings or good credit, buying more land was a bargain. If feed was available, inexpensive livestock could be had as well. Kaia Cosgriff and her family were living on an irrigated farm north of Big Timber in the 1930s. Their land, milk cows, and machinery were all paid for. They had a big garden, lambs, chickens, hogs, and cattle. A mill ground their wheat into flour and cream of wheat. Cosgriff made most of the children’s clothes. All they bought was coffee and sugar, shoes, overalls, and underwear. “So we were sitting pretty.” When a neighboring farmer “lost everything and the bank was selling him out,” Cosgriff bought some of his stock. “I paid \$26.00 for one cow and a calf and \$31.00 for another cow and a calf and we walked them home and we had a lot of hay and we fed the calves and got them nice and fat and we got more for the calves than we paid for the cow and the calf.”³² Wallace Lockie’s grandfather brought his wife from Scotland



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Arthur Rothstein • Pure-bred Hereford bull, Willow Creek Ranch, Summer 1939. At one point Stryker told Rothstein to get “more portraits—straight-on pictures—cows, steers, horses, calves, bulls, sheep.”

to a homestead in Montana and died when his youngest son was three months old. Wallace’s grandmother raised six sons on her own. In the 1930s he remembered her saying: “Boys, we’re going to buy land. All we can. We’re going to take all the money we can get together and start buying land.’ Course you could buy it at that time for taxes, fifty cents an acre. They started buying up land. This was in the early ’30s when nobody else had any money but they took what little they had and Bill and Dave went out and worked in the ’30s, sent their money home. They used it and bought land. They wound up owning a heck of a lot of land, I’ll tell ya. It started in Miles City and stopped this side of Forsyth.”³³ August Sobotka’s desires were more modest. He wanted enough land to run a hundred cows. But he, too, was able to acquire it in 1940 when it sold for tax title. Auctions were held on the courthouse steps, but if no one bid on the land, “you could buy it for private treaty for 10 percent less. I paid forty-five cents an acre for some of it.” The county was so anxious

Arthur Rothstein •
Grain elevators on
Sheffels's wheat farm,
Cascade County,
May 1939.

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to get rid of the land that for a few months, until they realized what they were doing, they included the mineral rights in the forty-five-cent price. "About 1940 was the last, the last big deal of getting land cheap, 'cause then it rained. . . . You couldn't get land cheap like that anymore."³⁴

Because this was "a new country," there were relatively few settlers around who recognized the regularity of drought on the plains. Between 1889 and 1936 the Great Plains suffered eleven severe drought years, but only three of them occurred between 1900 and 1917, lulling farmers into a false expectation of regular precipitation.³⁵ Yet even had farmers recognized the deep aridity of the high plains, some still would have stayed. Each time a rain fell, many were convinced that "we have definitely passed through this drought cycle and will have normal conditions again."³⁶ And many grew to love the land. Mary Frances Alexander McDorney's father came to Culbertson to be the superintendent of schools, "but he fell in for all of the propaganda about homesteading." McDorney recalled that "even my mother said that it probably would be a good thing to go out on this homestead and stay there for—what—three years, I think, in order to prove up on the homestead. Then the land could be sold, and probably they would come out of it with a couple of thousand dollars." But her father never wanted to leave, and he spent forty years on their dryland farm.³⁷

By the time the Great Depression rolled around, Montana had a decade's prelude of hard times, and more drought followed. Dry years came close on each other's heels during the 1930s: 1930, 1931, 1933, 1934, 1936.³⁸ The two areas of the Great Plains most severely affected by the droughts of this decade were the southern plains that launched the Okie migration to California and the Dakotas and some contiguous areas, including eastern Montana.³⁹ A weather observer in the Circle area reported that 1931 was the driest in thirty years with total rainfall of 5.67 inches, and a farmer in Daniels County lamented in his diary, "the world is a dreary spot for Montana grain growers."⁴⁰ Sheridan County, in the far northeastern corner of the state, snug up against North Dakota, was particularly hard hit. Of the 1,402 farmers in the county in 1931, 987 applied for feed loans, the largest percentage in any county in the state.⁴¹

Banks, which had marketed easy credit in the great plow-up of World War I, were reluctant to loan money to farmers whose ability to repay



Arthur Rothstein • Branding, Quarter Circle U Ranch, June 1939. Broad-brimmed hats, sweat-stained shirts, cigarettes, and the round tags of Bull Durham tobacco bags dangling from shirt pockets were ubiquitous among the cowboys Rothstein photographed at work and at rest.



those loans seemed chancy at best. Between 1930 and 1932 Montana farmers' annual income plummeted by nearly 53 percent.⁴² A worker on the Federal Writers' Project collected a story in Sanders County that captured the strained relationship between farmers and bankers: "A farmer went to his banker to borrow \$300 for feed for his stock and his family for the winter. Times were hard and the banker was loath to let the money go. However, the old farmer was insistent and finally in order to get rid of him the banker, who had a glass eye, a perfect match for the good one, said: 'I'll tell you what I'll do. If you can tell me which is my glass eye I'll let you have the money.' 'It's the right eye,' said the farmer. 'You're right,' said the banker, 'but how did you know?' 'Well,' said the farmer, 'it looked a damned sight more sympathetic than the other one.'"⁴³

Prior to the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the inauguration of the New Deal, in particular of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, struggling farmers had recourse to private charity in the form of local institutions and the Red Cross, as well as government seed and feed loans, but those resources were limited and quickly exhausted. The FSA photographers were not around to document the deepest days of Montana's Depression. Charles Vindex remembered winter 1931–32 as "our nadir." It was exemplified by his effort to earn a little cash. In February 1931 after a spell of forty-below-zero weather, Vindex helped a neighbor cut and store ice. He got up at 4:30 A.M., walked three miles before breakfast, and ate by the light of a kerosene lamp. Then he sawed blocks of ice all day, leaving "every muscle trembling." After supper he helped pack the ice blocks into the icehouse, then walked home, and collapsed until it was time to start over. "I would have said this was the hardest a man could work for \$1.25," he wrote. But the following winter, after the birth of a child, another summer of drought, and an invasion of army worms, he took on the same job for \$.75 a day.⁴⁴

In 1931 Herbert Hoover resided in the White House and John E. Erickson in Montana's governor's mansion. Hoover's commitment to limited government intervention in the economy and his faith in private charities would prove woefully inadequate to cope with the massive economic dislocation of the Great Depression. State, local, and federal officials sympathized with people's straits and offered what help they

Arthur Rothstein •
Cowhand, Quarter
Circle U Ranch,
June 1939.

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could, but it was not until Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Brain Trust came to office that imagination and authority combined to launch new, massive work and relief programs. In the meantime people in Montana did the best they could for themselves, their families, and their neighbors. They turned to the government, sometimes in personal requests to the governor, only as a last resort, and many refused to ask for help for themselves. J. Calvin Funk, a schoolteacher from Santa Maria, California, was moved to write to Governor Erickson, asking if any assistance was available for a family he met while visiting friends near Lustre, north of Wolf Point. They “told me that they had a well-sized garden as usual. This the sandstorm killed. Then they replanted it. The second garden the hailstorm destroyed. With what little they had left they started a small third garden which will probably not mature due to early frosts.” They were in danger of losing their cows and chickens to creditors, but even if they managed to keep their stock, “the pastures were very dry and bare. The short and very thin grain is mostly thick full of tall thistles. . . . It seems to be too embarrassing for those brave people to ask for aid.”⁴⁵

Other equally brave people, longtime residents who had worked steadily, paid their taxes, supported themselves, but were now at wit's end, did ask. Mrs. H. Frederickson and her husband came to Montana in 1913, and she wrote Governor Erickson in 1930 that they and their six children had “worked very hard to try to make a home but it seems as if we can not raise means enough to do so any more.” Four years earlier an accident had disabled her husband, so she and the children were doing the heavy farm work. Like many other supplicants, her chief concern was for her children. She feared she could not send them to school after the eighth grade, for they had not been able to raise a crop for three years, and they lost their savings when the bank failed: “So no money to pay taxes and intrests and we have never waisted a cent for shows and dances and so on. . . . I can not get a job and work for there is no work to be gotten here and I don't like to seperate my family. Can you advice me what to do we have always payed our honest debts when we could rase the money to do so, it was never spent for finery I am not to nice to wear cast off shirt and overalls of my husbands and work in the field. If only we could raise a crop again we could live.”⁴⁶ Petitioners, such as Steven and Louise Watts, also wanted the governor to know they were not making



Russell Lee • Mother and child, Sheridan County, November 1937. Lee's poignant portrait of mother and child in the kitchen of their farmhouse is full of symbolism, from the clock ticking away on top of the cupboard to the dirty, armless doll perched above the head of the little girl in her worn shoes and stockings.

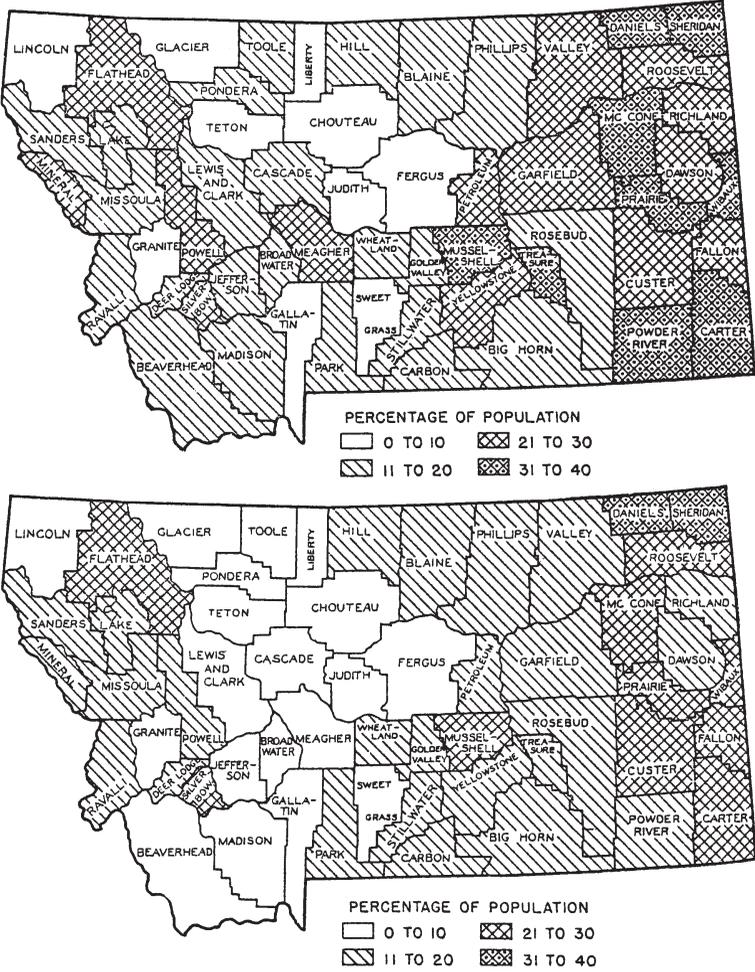
frivolous requests. The Watts arrived in the state in 1910 with a goodly amount of money, acquired 960 acres of land in Daniels County, and began raising wheat. In 1916 they built a modern house with a good barn and had forty head of cattle, twelve horses, and twelve cows. Louise made and sold butter and vegetables as well as helped in the fields. The couple estimated they had paid over fourteen thousand dollars in taxes since their arrival but now had “no machinery, horses, cattle . . . and only two cows.” Their earnings from crops for the last four years had not brought enough to pay their taxes. They were seventy-six and sixty-seven years

old, and they wanted to know what Erickson was going to do so that they could keep the home “we have been a lifetime making.”⁴⁷

Neither the Watts’s nor Mrs. Frederickson’s stories were unusual. Investigators in the 1930s found that most people seeking relief in the drought area were longtime settlers. In a study of several Montana counties, 46.6 percent of drought-relief recipients had been in their current residence for twenty or more years, 26.1 percent for more than ten years; only 10.8 percent had been on their farms for five or fewer years.⁴⁸ Their stories also highlight a complicating factor in administering relief during the Great Depression. Close scrutiny of some Montana counties revealed the fact that not all people who benefited from New Deal programs were victims of only the Great Depression. New social service programs assisted the chronically poor and disabled as well as those struck by recent drought and unemployment. For example, in a 1937 study of 217 families on relief in Prairie County, Ruth McIntosh determined that most of the families had moved to the county between 1910 and 1920 and that the heads of families were aging and suffering from perennial lack of medical care.⁴⁹ By 1930 the percentage of people sixty-five and older on all Montana farms had nearly doubled from 1920.⁵⁰ Of those adults on relief in Prairie County, one in ten, presumably people like Mr. Frederickson, suffered from disabilities that made them unemployable regardless of the state of the economy.⁵¹ By the time the New Deal arrived, deep-rooted poverty had weakened the overall health of the population. Prairie County employed a public health nurse from 1928 through early 1930. On her home visits she diagnosed problems far in excess of what she could remedy or what the county would pay to treat. Many relief clients preferred not to be told the nature of their children’s ailments, since they could do nothing about them. McIntosh concluded that over 20 percent of the county’s families on New Deal relief would likely need long-term assistance.⁵² In his statewide study, also conducted in 1937, Carl Kraenzel discovered that one in five heads of 1,104 relief households had been unemployable prior to going on relief. They needed help regardless of the crisis of the Depression.⁵³

Whenever and for whatever reason their hard times began, Montana’s working poor stretched their resources as far as they could. Mrs. Charles Vindex remade her worn-out dresses into clothing for their children, and

when her husband's clothes could sustain no more patches, she tore them into strips and knitted them into rugs with a pair of needles he made out of a springy wire barrel hoop. Mr. Vindex recalled, "We became shy of other people during those patched and shabby years."⁵⁴ In 1931 Jim Kelsey of Kirby, Montana, wrote to the governor, asking to mortgage his 1927 Model T Ford coupe, "in pretty good shape," for the seventy-five dollars he estimated he needed to keep his family through the winter. He had found work in only five months of the previous year; at a dollar a day, his total income was a hundred and fifty dollars.⁵⁵



These maps indicate the percentage of Montanans on relief in February 1935 (top) and June 1935 (bottom), two years after the institution of the New Deal. From Carl F. Kraenzel, with Ruth B. McIntosh, *The Relief Problem in Montana: A Study of the Change in the Character of the Relief Population*, bulletin no. 343, (Bozeman, Mont., 1937), 10.



Other Montanans wrote to the governor offering schemes to propagate relief. In August 1931 Mrs. L. R. Lang, manager of the Women's Exchange in Wolf Point, suggested asking merchants in every Montana town to put 5 percent of their daily receipts into a "helping" fund, from which farmers could borrow.⁵⁶ A. W. Ricker, editor of the *Farmers Union Herald* in St. Paul, Minnesota, informed Erickson that the Farmers Union, which had twelve thousand members in Montana, was "conducting a census of our individual membership for the purpose of separating those who have some resources with which to help themselves and those who are completely impoverished." The union planned "to assign the counties of Montana to counties here in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and have one county here take care of our membership in one county in Montana. When I say take care, I mean provide food for the family and clothing. We must rely on the various governmental agencies to take care of the livestock, we cannot undertake that job."⁵⁷ A report from the Circle Red Cross committee in 1931 stated that the group was trying to feed the hungry but had no funds for clothing. The secretary urged people to "write friends and relatives back home and ask them to send what they can spare." The Red Cross had already shipped more than two hundred freight-car loads of donated food and clothing to the Montana–North Dakota drought area in the month of October.⁵⁸ One of the most imaginative ploys for generating relief monies came from Wencil Vanek, living in the hamlet of Brooks in Fergus County. In both 1931 and 1932 Yellowstone National Park offered Montana "surplus" bison from the park herd. The size of the herd was fixed at one thousand head, based on the amount of hay available for winter feeding. Some of the excess animals were sent to zoos, but the remaining surplus could be slaughtered for meat for the unemployed. The Park tendered Montana fifty bison. Vanek inquired as to the disposition of the bison heads. As a taxidermist, he proposed to mount the heads for nominal cost and sell them to "monied men from the east," turning over the proceeds to the Red Cross.⁵⁹

Russell Lee • Kitchen stove, Sheridan County, November 1937. Another of Lee's revealing interior photographs, this one highlights a family's kitchen stove, the sack full of cow dung used as fuel, battered pots, and a washboard—a collection of objects that speaks eloquently of poverty and hard work.



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Arthur Rothstein • Tromping a bag of wool in a sheep-shearing pen, Rosebud County, June 1939. A wool tromper sews up the top of a jute sack full of three to four hundred pounds of fleece that he has “tromped” with his feet into the bag. The Milwaukee and Northern Pacific railroads shipped millions of pounds of wool out of Rosebud County.

Despite people’s determination, hard work, and creativity, by 1932 local resources had been consumed. In August 1932 a citizens’ emergency relief committee in Cascade County was caring for over a thousand families. In that same month other communities began petitioning Governor Erickson to facilitate federal relief, as both the coffers of the Red Cross and local charities were depleted.⁶⁰ Also that month M. L. Wilson, after a long conversation with the state Red Cross director of relief, reported to the governor that he doubted the national organization would return to the state to render assistance. He believed that if the Red Cross did resume operations, it would expect that the contribution with which it would work would have to come from Montana.⁶¹ But Montanans had nothing left to give.

It was only in these dire straits that people turned to the government, and they did not ask for charity, but for work. “I am taking the liberty of writing you to see if there is anything you can possibly do for the unemployed people of Sanders County,” penned John Hauge, a grocer who had already extended more than three thousand dollars of credit to his community and could no longer pay his own bills. “Work is what they want not dole. The world owes no man a living, but it certainly owes all of its people a chance to make a living.” Hauge called upon the governor to exercise state power, the kind of power wielded in wartime, “for it certainly ought to be more important to raise money to save life than destroy it.”⁶²

On November 11, 1932, wheat farmer James Bennett recorded in his diary, “Democratic landslide in Valley Co. as well as in the nation.”⁶³ Montanans had helped propel Franklin D. Roosevelt into the presidency. They also sent a full complement of Democrats to the United States

House and Senate. Republicans retained a majority in the Montana senate and held onto the office of state superintendent of public instruction; otherwise every elected statewide office became Democratic. In 1934 Democrats would take the Montana senate as well as the house.⁶⁴

Even people who did not like FDR felt an upsurge of optimism with his election. John Harrison recalled that his father disliked Roosevelt



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Arthur Rothstein • Shearing sheep, Rosebud County, June 1939. Crews of sheep-shearers traveled throughout the West, wielding their shears in the sheds of the region's woolgrowers. These sheepshearers are using electric cutters that had become common by the early 1910s. One worker uses a belt to brace himself during the grueling day bent over grasping sheep and shears.

John Vachon • *The New Deal Cash Grocery*, *Judith Gap*, March 1942. Montanans demonstrated their support for the New Deal and Democratic politicians by naming businesses and even towns in their honor. Butte had the New Deal Bar, and some Fort Peck Dam workers lived in the hamlets of New Deal and Wheeler, the latter named for Montana's influential senator, Burton K. Wheeler.

“with a passion,” but he acknowledged that “when you listened to Franklin D., you were listening to *hope*.”⁶⁵ Roosevelt's political skill led people to identify him as the personal architect of the New Deal edifice. His stamp of approval was enough to give people confidence. When nineteen-year-old Herbert Jacobson heard Roosevelt describe the Civilian Conservation Corps in a fireside chat, he went to the courthouse in Sidney and signed up; later he went to work on the Fort Peck Dam because it paid more. He recalled, “Fort Peck and the CCC camp was a life saver for an awful lot of young boys like me.” Doris Gribble's husband considered FDR “great because he had provided work. . . . He was the one that started that Work Project Administration.” The Morrow family, several of whom worked on the Fort Peck Dam, “thought that Roosevelt was a regular god because he really saved the day for all of us.”⁶⁶ Walter Ait-

ken wrote to the president from Bozeman, “the ‘forgotten man’ feels that you remember him.”⁶⁷ In turn, people did what they could for the president. Beginning in 1934 communities across the country held fund-raising birthday balls in honor of Roosevelt. The money was for the treatment of crippled children, a portion sent to the Warm Springs Foundation in Georgia, the rest for local use. By 1937 over fifty Montana communities joined in Roosevelt's birthday celebration.⁶⁸ Citizens also repaid Roosevelt's efforts with political allegiance. David Gregg, a laborer





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reflecting on the impact of the Fort Peck Dam, summed up, “I think it made a lot of Democrats out of a lot of Republicans.”⁶⁹

Federal work programs came to Montana “in the nick of time” in October 1933.⁷⁰ Uncle Sam dipped his toe in the waters of work relief with the Civil Works Administration (CWA); hastily organized, it put twenty thousand Montanans to work within three months. But review disclosed that not all workers were actually in need, and many in need did not obtain the work intended for them.⁷¹ The Federal Emergency Relief

Administration (FERA) supplanted the CWA. It initially supplied direct relief, later supplemented with work. At one point during the FERA's tenure, nearly one-fourth of all Montanans received some kind of assistance. By far the largest work relief program and the one that in many people's minds came to stand for the New Deal was the Works Progress Administration (WPA), launched in July 1935 to create jobs for the unemployed on useful public projects. On July 1, 1939, the agency became part of the newly created Federal Works Agency and was renamed the Work Projects Administration.⁷² Designed to give work to "breadwinners," the WPA employed nearly twenty-one thousand Montana men and women by September 1936, the peak of New Deal employment in the state.⁷³

For each WPA project the federal government provided money for labor and required a local sponsor to match that contribution in funds or equipment; those were often in short supply, especially in the early days of the program. Consequently, as one report noted, "many projects were carried out which were of necessity of temporary value" because there was no money for supplies or equipment.⁷⁴ The chorus of criticism that followed the WPA, castigating "leaf-rakers" and men who propped up shovels and hoes, was perhaps sparked by these initial projects. As more sponsors lined up, the quality of projects improved. Eva MacLean, who entered the relief office for the first time "outwardly defiant but with inward self-loathing," was very suspicious of the efficacy of work programs. However, when she became the cook at a dormitory built and run by the WPA so that rural children could attend school in town, she changed her mind. The project allowed children to stay in school, eased the financial burdens of their families, and gave MacLean pride in her own labor. At the end of the school year, she untied her apron "with a sense of achievement."⁷⁵ Joe Medicine Crow also remembered that Roosevelt "kind of artificially created jobs here and there." But there were benefits for the Crow people. "Up to that time there were no jobs for Indians here . . . the Crows found work, employment from the government, maybe only \$30 a month. Dollar a day. But they are making money. Something new." Even more valuable were the skills Indians acquired "doing this and that government program. . . . They learned to become professionals in carpentry and heavy equipment operating."⁷⁶

The WPA eventually built or renovated many long-lasting structures

on the Montana landscape, including schools, roads, bridges, dams, stadiums, parks, swimming pools, tennis courts, fairgrounds, golf courses, water and sewage systems, airports, fish hatcheries, fences, sidewalks, and curbs. While the overwhelming majority of WPA construction was on public facilities, perhaps the most appreciated edifices were the eight thousand privies built on farms and ranches across the state as part of the WPA sanitation project.⁷⁷ Montana roads were in grave need of the services of



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Marion Post Wolcott • Cheyenne Indian's home, Vicinity of Lame Deer, August 1941. A woman in a cotton print dress and moccasins stands outside her government-built cabin on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. A variety of tack and clothing hang off the log structure. Wolcott took a few pictures in Lame Deer, likely on her way to photograph the Ashland rodeo.

WPA crews, and more work hours were spent on road building than on any other WPA project.⁷⁸ Joseph Conway, a seasoned world traveler, claimed the roads he traversed in Montana were worse than anything he experienced in Egypt, Portugal, or India. Complaining that he and his traveling companions had been confined to bed to recover from injuries sustained driving through the state, Conway informed the governor:



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Arthur Rothstein • Board sidewalk on Main Street, Butte, June 1939. The man with his cane making his way up the worn plank sidewalk next to the refuse-filled gutter of North Main Street highlighted the need for improved infrastructure in Butte, much of which was accomplished by the WPA. As one resident recalled, the WPA “finally got Butte out of the mud and gave us decent streets.”

“This is my first visit to Montana—needless to say, it will be my last. I hope for the sake of those who must live here, that things will be better.”⁷⁹ Thanks to the WPA, 7,239 miles of roads were built or improved by 1940.⁸⁰

The WPA engaged in more than construction. “Professional” projects hired men and women to catalog library books, inventory government records, conduct archaeological excavations, kill predators, do clerical work, provide dental and medical exams, and administer vaccinations. Under the Federal Writers’ Project, writers penned thousands of pages, and the artists employed by the Federal Art Project created 267 pictures, posters, and miscellaneous pieces of art. Women in WPA sewing rooms manufactured over eight hundred thousand garments, rugs, and household articles for relief clients. Lunch programs served nearly one hundred thousand meals to school children. Government-sponsored gardens produced tons of food, much of which workers preserved in WPA-run canneries. Workers cut firewood, mended shoes, and refurbished toys. Thousands enrolled in WPA education programs or played in WPA recreation centers.⁸¹

While the WPA was the best-known work project, another ten thousand people toiled under the auspices of a plethora of new and old federal agencies: the Public Works Administration (PWA), Resettlement Administration (RA), Farm Security Administration (FSA), National Youth Administration (NYA), United States Forest Service (USFS), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Soil Conservation Service (SCS), National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Public Roads, Biological Survey, Department of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, and the War Department. Between 1933 and 1939 Montana received more than \$530 million in federal grants and loans, or \$986 for each resident, ranking second only to Nevada in per capita expenditures nationwide.⁸²

Depression relief began under state regulations. In 1933 a special legislative session organized the Montana State Relief Commission, which was revamped into the Montana State Board of Public Welfare in 1935. Regardless of the nature of the New Deal program, local boards of county welfare determined individuals’ eligibility for relief. In many counties the welfare boards were the county commissioners. This system certainly guaranteed local control over the distribution of resources, but it could also lead to favoritism, nepotism, cronyism, and outright abuse.⁸³ As one

woman from eastern Montana recalled, “Jobs distributed according to need rather than according to pull was an ideal scarcely understandable to the average local ring which was invariably put in charge.”⁸⁴ Another man complained to Governor Erickson that the chairman of relief work in his county gave jobs only to people who owed him money.⁸⁵

It was no secret that the WPA was an enormous patronage program. According to historian David Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt shamelessly used the program to secure political alliances, not always with Democrats.⁸⁶ In Montana the first director of the WPA was Ray Hart, a Republican and friend of Senator Burton K. Wheeler. According to



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John Vachon • Saturday afternoon in Kalispell, March 1942. Vachon spent a Saturday afternoon walking up and down Kalispell’s Main Street “looking for pictures.” A young man with “glasses, new green suit and hat, awfully clean shirt and appropriate tie whizzed by me on a brand new bicycle . . . he is a sign of the times.”



Arthur Rothstein • Blacksmith shop now used as an auto repair shop, Glendive, June 1939. The photographers were always on the lookout for engaging and quirky signs that reflected American culture. The horseshoe door and windows and row of cast concrete rooftop anvils on this wonderfully whimsical blacksmith shop, which had made the transition to automobile care, would have been irresistible.

Senator James E. Murray, Hart thought the best way to implement the “non-partisan” character of the program was to appoint only Republicans to the top positions, arguing that there were no Democrats with proper qualifications. Murray intervened and had a Democrat, Joseph Parker, replace Hart, but the administration insisted that Parker not fire any administrative officials already in office.⁸⁷ Watching the results of years of this political laddering, L. W. Fenske, a resident of Savage, south of Sidney, wrote irately to Murray that “surely our Montana grants are being completely dominated by powerful, subversive Republicans. . . . These same Republicans while milking the top Democratic jobs bone dry, stand along the Main Street curbs and loudly denounce the terribly wasteful



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Arthur Rothstein • Cowboy eating in camp at the Three Circle Ranch roundup, Custer National Forest, Powder River County, June 1939. Men worked hard on a roundup, and food was important, including the ritual of eating prairie oysters, or calf fries. An old cowhand told a WPA worker collecting Montana stories that “it may have been my youth or the long hours we worked, from sunup to sunset, which caused me to be continuously hungry, but in between meals, man oh man, were those calf fries good.”

Democratic spending.”⁸⁸ Murray was well aware of the situation. Writing to Colonel F. C. Harrington, a WPA administrator in Washington, D.C., Murray noted, “Some of these counties in Montana are strongly Republican and the Republicans being in the majority get the majority of the jobs and, of course, when the Republicans are at the head of the set up

they probably only give consideration to Republicans.”⁸⁹ Murray was a great supporter of the WPA, but he was also concerned about the “terrible jealousy and bitterness” that the program sparked: “Every Democrat who has an inferior job is green-eyed with jealousy and bitterness toward the Republicans he sees occupying the soft jobs, the same situation occurs, of course, when the reverse is true. I hear some of the Senators around here claiming that the WPA is a liability instead of an asset to the Party and I am inclined to feel that this is true.”⁹⁰

Journalist Edna Mae St. Claire obtained a WPA job writing publicity for the New Deal; partisan politics directly affected her work. She submitted her stories to the *Lewistown (Mont.) Democrat*, which published them with little editing. “I always used ‘WPA’ as many times as I possibly could. Everything was WPA. . . . The civic center had been built with WPA money. The post office had been built with WPA money. The fish hatchery had been built with WPA money. . . . They had a woman that was going around teaching crippled children. Her salary was paid with WPA.” Then St. Claire got a promotion and transferred to Billings, but the *Billings Tribune* was a Republican paper, “so they didn’t like all the WPAs. I would write the article about a project, an archeological project that was going on . . . and they would write it up as I turned it in, but they would leave out that it was a WPA project.”⁹¹

Patronage and politics aside, the welter of regulations and the inexperience of people assigned as caseworkers occasionally led to confusion and the misdirection of goods and services. While most counties had some kind of preexisting welfare committee or poor relief system, none of them were prepared to take on the volume of paperwork and cash and commodity distribution that the New Deal programs spawned. Elmer Linebarger, a WPA commodity clerk in Garfield County, dealt with a farrago of demands and complaints as well as new rules for administering relief. At one point a caseworker instructed him to remove a woman from the list of commodity recipients, as she “has cattle, is getting transportation from the school district, and . . . recently invested in a new car.”⁹² Sometimes shortages of professional workers held up the allocation process. According to regulations, only people certified eligible by a Department of Public Welfare caseworker could receive commodities and only the amount and kind designated by the caseworker. In some

counties caseworkers managed anywhere from three hundred to a thousand cases per month.⁹³ Garfield County had no caseworkers, and the job of determining eligibility devolved to the commodities clerks, who ended up giving everyone the same amount of goods no matter their eligibility.⁹⁴ In other counties caseworkers were WPA workers subject to

periodic layoffs. When they were dismissed, no one could certify other workers in need of jobs. For example, in Judith Basin County the caseworker was laid off and the county had no certification forms, so the entire process ground to a halt while men came to the office each day looking for work, and a soil conservation project waited for sixty laborers.⁹⁵ In November 1935 Butte had men and projects, but no winter clothing, and relief administrators felt it was “inhuman” to ask the men to work outside so ill-clothed.⁹⁶

Notwithstanding the politics, confusion, and complaints, most Montanans who participated in New Deal programs were pleased to have the work and felt they accomplished something worthwhile. For many the most difficult part of the process was acknowledging that they needed help and then dealing with the stigma of going on relief. Donald Morrow went to the courthouse to apply for the WPA, but the applications clerk was a girl with whom he had gone to school, and he was too embarrassed to approach her. His wife finally talked him into going back. Jean Stanley’s father worked on a WPA dam and her mother in a WPA sewing room, but they would not accept commodities: “We just took money for the work we put out and that was it.”⁹⁷

Applying for relief was not necessarily the end of embarrassment. Julia Trees, for example, recalled the mortification her mother and other



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Arthur Rothstein • Finnish steam bath, Butte, June 1939. Many Finnish miners lived on Butte’s East Side and patronized commercial steam baths, such as this one located in the back of the Broadway Bar (later the Helsinki Bar), which used its smokestack as a billboard.



Russell Lee • Columbia Gardens, Butte, August 1942. The Columbia Gardens amusement park was long a favorite pleasure spot for Butte residents. Lee noted that when he visited Butte in 1942 city buses provided free transportation to children every Thursday during the summer, just as streetcars had done decades earlier.

women experienced while employed on a WPA sewing project because they were required to wear uniforms. Her mother had taught school, worked as school clerk, and later—during and after World War II—ran the county newspaper. She was, as her daughter recounted, “a very, very capable person.” Yet the “awful shapeless dresses, all alike, . . . proclaiming to the whole town each day that they were on the welfare projects” undermined her self-esteem and her public image of capability. “They

were good sewers and made nice clothing and flannel sleep wear for distribution to needy people,” Trees continued. “They didn’t mind the eight hour days bent over a machine but never should they have been singled out in this way with uniforms.”⁹⁸

Despite her qualms about WPA women’s uniforms, Julia Trees believed strongly in the New Deal. A National Youth Administration (NYA) clerical job helped her finish high school, and when she began teaching, she wore WPA dresses and slept under WPA wool and cotton quilts. To her the WPA was a “needed,” “wonderful” program. Trees knew several widows who were able to support their children through WPA work, and in retrospect she thought that “my dad should have gone to work for the WPA and it would have been easier for us to have . . . eyeglasses and things like that.”⁹⁹ Workers for whom life close to the bone was a normal condition saw people on relief receive goods usually considered luxuries. Claribel Bonine, teaching in a country school, recalled the children of two families on relief bringing oranges in their lunch. “People had oranges only at Christmas time,” she remembered, “and they would give them new Mackinaw coats, mittens, caps and overshoes . . . the government did that.”¹⁰⁰ Eyeglasses, oranges, new mittens—hardly extravagances, yet beyond the reach of so many. New Deal programs introduced standards of everyday life that were revelatory to many Americans. Jane Phelps also had an NYA job and graduated from high school in 1937, but it was not only Jane who benefited from the program. The previous Christmas Jane had given her younger sister Elizabeth a pair of snow pants to wear on her long walk to school; she paid for them with five dollars she had saved from working for the NYA. Elizabeth remembered Jane’s gift as “really a wonderful thing.”¹⁰¹

In addition to providing much-needed income, work relief programs could sometimes change workers’ lives, occasionally in unexpectedly complex ways. Eva MacLean once penned a poem titled “Ranch House Blues”:

*One day ends the same as another
And begins again in the same old way
Ambitions and aims are but born to smother
And I just mark time for another day.*

*Oh Life! Is this all you have to offer
In pay for the best that I have to give?
Do you hold naught for me in your coffer
But to just mark time when I want to live?*¹⁰²

For a time the New Deal lifted MacLean's blues. Cooking for the WPA dormitory in Glendive gave her satisfaction, then a supervisory position in the WPA Recreation Division proffered "a chance to build a career and launch a new social service, a challenge to ambition, capability, aggression, vision—oh everything." She relished the opportunity to help her family, "to release my husband from common labor, to educate my boys, . . . to dress them and us all well." What she did not foresee was her husband's increasing resentment of her professional success, a situation that eventually led her to conclude, "I must either give up my 'career' or my family . . . no earthly power could reconcile the two." Eva MacLean resigned her job and moved with her husband to Washington where she had time "to approach the artistry of homemaking." When the county planning board in her new community sought her advice about hiring a home demonstration agent, she was reluctant to attend the meeting. "I am a bit afraid to even skirt the public life, like any burned child."¹⁰³

The New Deal smorgasbord of programs tried to meet the needs of millions of Americans in wildly different settings, some more readily accommodated than others. For instance, it was much easier to design work programs in Montana cities than in rural counties where projects were less viable, equipment scarcer, and extravagant distances made it difficult to gather work crews.¹⁰⁴ Yet farmers were desperate for work. In 1937 the Northern Valley County Drouth Committee meeting in Opheim sent a petition to President Roosevelt, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, WPA director Harry Hopkins, and the Montana congressional delegation asking for work. Over four hundred farmers attended the meeting and approved the petition, which declared that "the majority of those living in the drouth area have been here over twenty years, they do not want to leave their established homes, many could not do so if they wanted to, they have no place to go, many of the drouth victims are men over fifty-five years of age and physically disabled." The committee requested that the WPA or some other agency set up a works program

Arthur Rothstein • Copper miner's home, Butte, June 1939. The headframe of the Neversweat Mine looms above workers' houses in Finntown. Rothstein suggests the inseparability of work and home life in this photo.

for sparsely populated areas, perhaps building small reservoirs in order to irrigate garden tracts so families could raise vegetables for themselves and feed for their stock.¹⁰⁵ Farmers in Phillips and Richland counties echoed the committee's request. Noting that "this calamity of drought may be nobodys fault, but it is our misfortune," they solicited "a work relief program where they can feel that they have earned their bread by honest labor," since they had "lost all but our selfrespect."¹⁰⁶ In Dagmar three hundred farmers met to "insist that the Government take immediate steps to provide work for the farmers."¹⁰⁷ Heeding their calls and overcoming the difficulties inherent in running rural projects, the WPA hired more than twelve thousand farmers in 1936.¹⁰⁸

Other farmers came to the painful decision that no amount of assistance would allow them to make a living on the lands they presently occupied, and they petitioned the government to initiate a resettlement project. Resettlement projects, one of the New Deal's more radical ideas, combined two goals: to give farmers a leg up by moving them to more productive lands and to conserve land by converting acreage used inappropriately for farming to timber or grazing reserves. First implemented by the Resettlement Administration and then by the Farm Security Administration, the program relocated over ten thousand families nationwide before it was dissolved in 1945.¹⁰⁹

In Montana many farmers welcomed the resettlement project with open arms, glad of the chance to leave their dried-out farms and begin





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anew somewhere else, somewhere with more water. In August 1936 Warner Just sent a petition signed by 817 people, 90 percent of the resident landowners of Garfield County, to Senator James Murray. The petition asked the federal government to initiate a submarginal land buying program in the county, so they could sell out. Just stated that they “all realize that there is no future in this County, that [it] is a submarginal land area, never intended for farming. We have been able to produce only one



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Arthur Rothstein • Model farm unit, Fairfield Bench Farms, May 1939. Chickens forage in the yard of a model FSA farm at Fairfield. Rothstein's photograph shows the new farmhouse, barn, and combined garage and tool house that the project provided to each new settler. The power pole carefully framing the right side of the picture indicates that the farm houses were electrified, and the antenna on the roof reveals the family had a radio.

crop in the last eight years. The last four years, due to drought and grasshoppers, have forced nearly every farmer and rancher out of business. There is very little live stock left in Garfield County. Many people will even be forced to sell their work horses, milk cows, and chickens, as we have no feed or grass, and the cost of feed is prohibitive. The ranchers who were fortunate enough to have a little money left, after selling their live stock, have moved out. They plan on letting their land go for taxes. The County has already taken title to over one quarter million acres." Garfield County had no railroad, and with no rain for gardens everything had to be purchased and trucked in at great expense. Asking the government

to buy them out was not a decision these farmers made lightly: “Many of us have put in the best years of our life out here; we know what hardship, privation and hard work means. We realize that we must start over some where else, as we have lost faith and confidence in this part of the country. It isn’t easy for us to give up our homes and admit defeat but we must admit that we are done. . . . There is no future on the relief rolls. . . . Giving us the chance to move out, and the opportunity to become self-supporting citizens is the real solution to the drought problem in Garfield County.”¹¹⁰ In other places ranchers saw in the resettlement program the prospect of reclaiming grazing land from farmers. In Custer County thirty-two ranchers petitioned the government to facilitate resettlement of nearby farmers, turn their lands into a grazing district, and “enable stockmen to mature plans for the rehabilitation of the livestock business.”¹¹¹

Fairfield Bench Farms was a resettlement project created when the federal government purchased approximately thirteen thousand acres of irrigated land in Teton and Choteau counties on which to relocate dryland farmers whose “submarginal” lands had been purchased by the government in order to take them out of agricultural production. Administrative work on the Fairfield Bench project began in 1934, and construction was completed in 1938. The FSA divided the land into 129 farms, averaging 98 acres. Each had a house, either new or refurbished, and a variety of outbuildings, including barns, poultry sheds, privies, and combined garage-tool sheds. All the houses had central heating, a kitchen sink, and electricity. A new community center housed a school, a library, meeting rooms, and administrative offices. The Cooperative Health Association hired a doctor and a dentist. The Greenfields Cooperative Sire and Marketing Association fostered livestock production. There was also a co-op milk testing association and a co-op oil station. The settlers were drawn from a pool of dryland farmers in Prairie, Musselshell, and Petroleum counties and included a large number of Germans from Russia and their descendants.¹¹² Initially settlers rented their farms from the government. The modern facilities and cooperative associations were designed to improve their chances of financial success so that they would eventually be able to purchase their farms.

The town of Fairfield, twenty-seven miles northwest of Great Falls, was platted in 1916, a community built on the promise of agricultural



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Arthur Rothstein • Farm wife feeding her chickens, Fairfield Bench Farms, May 1939. A few months before Rothstein's visit to Fairfield Bench Farms, the local newspaper reported that the resettlement project had built close to 150 chicken brooder houses and ordered "an astounding number of baby chicks." Egg and butter money, generated by women's labor, often provided the only steady source of cash on many American farms.



Arthur Rothstein • Farm family at dinner, Fairfield Bench Farms, May 1939. One of the chickens fed in the previous photo may well be the centerpiece of this dinner. The FSA encouraged subsistence agriculture, and the products of this family's labor are evident on the supper table, adorned with a vase of irises and laden with fried chicken, vegetables, and canned fruit.

plenty watered by the Sun River Irrigation Project and shipped on the Milwaukee railroad. By the mid-1930s, when the resettlement project began, the area was well acquainted with government-sponsored agriculture projects. As the *Choteau (Mont.) Acantha* boasted in 1916: "Uncle Sam has almost outdone mother nature in preparing a rosy future for Fairfield. He has sent his reclamation men to put water on the fertile acres that Nature placed on the Greenfield's bench."¹³ Fairfield welcomed the resettlement project; everyone from the Teton and Cascade county commissioners to the local school superintendents endorsed it. The local newspaper reported each stage of the project's development, even including the social activities of resettlement officials in a regular "Resettlement

Notes” column. The project generated business for the town, which grew significantly with the influx of settlers.¹¹⁴

However, the relocatees’ experience was mixed. A survey of several resettlement projects conducted in 1941 pointed to problems in economy of scale and in management at Fairfield. The project had been planned for horse-drawn equipment, which proved impracticable, but the farms were too small for cost-efficient use of tractors. Heavy-handed paternalism on the part of supervisors was another problem. The attitude was patently obvious in a promotional pamphlet the managers issued, in which they proclaimed: “The dry land farmer is a gambler. The irrigation farmer is a builder of a home and a farm. This being generally true, it has been the task of project officials to make builders out of dry landers by



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Arthur Rothstein • A farm couple and their International Harvester tractor, Fairfield Bench Farms, May 1939. Agriculture on the irrigated farms at Fairfield was more labor intensive than on the dryland farms of eastern Montana, and women found themselves more actively involved in fieldwork.

education and example.”¹¹⁵ Outright hostility came to characterize the relationship between managers and farmers, who organized the Resettlers Adjustment Association to negotiate with the FSA. When that proved unsatisfactory they took their grievances to the Montana Farmers Union and Senator Burton K. Wheeler, both of whom intervened with FSA officials.¹¹⁶

Perhaps most difficult was the transition from dryland to irrigated farming. Very few of the relocatees who came to Fairfield Bench had any experience with irrigation. Upon his first view of a moveable canvas dam, one newcomer to Fairfield mistook it for a grasshopper trap. Farmers had to raise unfamiliar crops with unfamiliar methods, in a vastly more labor-intensive environment that led one woman to describe herself as “an irrigation slave.”¹¹⁷ The difficulties relocatees faced at Fairfield moved many families to leave. However, 48.4 percent of the original settlers did successfully purchase their farms.¹¹⁸

The New Deal dispersed less equivocal opportunities for others, especially men working on the Fort Peck Dam. Fifty thousand people constructed the dam between 1933 and 1940; it was the single largest public works project in Montana and attracted people from all over the country.¹¹⁹ Melvin Hanson, only seventeen and away from home for the first time, grew up “pretty fast” working on the dam. He credited the experience with giving him the work habits he embraced over a lifetime. William Fly was also “green as grass” when he arrived at Fort Peck in 1934. In his years on the dam he steadily climbed the civil service ladder and came to feel that he was not on a project that was “just putting people to work, but you were accomplishing something big.” Working on the dam “made a rolling stone” out of Owen Williams, who grew up in Custer, Montana. After Fort Peck he decided he wanted to see more of the world, and went to work on several other dams, traveling widely. James Wiseman, raised on a cattle ranch in Garfield County, never went back to ranching. He learned to be an electrician on the dam: “It changed me from a small farmer/rancher to a worker.” The project also altered people’s attitudes toward the federal government. Bill Whisenhand, who ran a pool hall in the construction boomtown of New Deal, witnessed the optimism the dam generated. Fort Peck “was one of the things that really gave the people more, should I say, courage to go on and insight

in our government to feel as though maybe they're doing something for us, maybe everything's going to work out."¹²⁰

Workers' attitudes toward government work and relief were muddled. The initial mixture of embarrassment and gratitude frequently gave way to an appropriation and tailoring of the program—a process in which workers applied their local knowledge to government designs in order to make them work and to make them their own. Sometimes this meant contravening the program guidelines in order to better serve the community. Red Killen worked on an AAA project to slaughter nonmarketable sheep. He agreed with the blueprint of the program: to get “old ewes” off the market and off the range. Workers were supposed to turn in the pelts and destroy the meat. Yet when Red and his fellow workers had “some dry ewes that would be in pretty good shape,” they ignored the rules, risked being fined, butchered carefully, and gave the meat to local people.¹²¹ Wallace Lockie had a similar experience. Supervising federal seed loans, he visited a family near Ingomar. The husband was running a grain drill in one of his fields but asked Lockie to go back over the hill until he was finished, saying, “I don't want you to look at this.” Lockie complied, realizing that what “he was doing was just making tracks in the ground. He had ate the wheat 'cause the wheat ain't going to grow anyway. I put it in that he had planted the wheat, you know, because there was a lot of people did that. There was something to eat, and that's what they lived on.”¹²²

Juggling federal rules and on-the-spot judgments is a pattern that runs through the memories of many people who lived with the New Deal. On the Fort Peck Dam workers learned all kinds of new skills, but they also brought with them accomplished craftsmanship that allowed them to refine tools, tailor work processes, make improvements, and claim ownership in that gigantic endeavor. Relief workers also reasserted their autonomy and reclaimed their dignity by pointing out the absurdity of some government projects. Nicknames for the WPA, such as “we poke along” or “we piddle around,” illustrated laborers' recognition of the make-work nature of some of the projects without denigrating the skills they might have employed on them. David Rivenes worked as a draftsman for a rural WPA recreation center in Prairie County. It had tennis courts, a softball diamond, dance hall, stage, kitchen, and showers, everything a community could enjoy. The only problem was that all the



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Russell Lee • Playing cards in the Miners' Union Hall, Butte, October 1942. Lee took an extensive set of photographs of activities at the Miners' Union Hall, which included socializing as well as official business, such as meetings and getting out the union newspaper.

nearby residents had been moved by the Resettlement Administration to more productive lands, so that by the time the center was completed, scarcely anyone was there to use it.¹²³

While New Deal projects brought cash and jobs into the state, no bureaucracy could change the climate, and drought continued during the Roosevelt years. The dessication that led to hunger and hard times was marked in people's memories by the two most unforgettable environmental events of the 1930s, dust storms and insect invasions. Dust storms earned the decade the moniker "the dirty thirties," and they were most common in the southern plains. But the most famous "black blizzard" originated in Montana and Wyoming. On May 9, 1934, a windstorm

blew tons of topsoil from Montana and Wyoming to the east, picking up more dust in the Dakotas until the air was saturated with 350 tons of dirt. That evening Chicagoans experienced dust falling like snow, and two days later dust rained down on Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. Montana dirt coated the decks of ships three hundred miles off the Atlantic coast a couple of days later.¹²⁴ In 1937 a storm blasted the state with winds measuring seventy-six miles per hour in Billings, covered the Great Falls area with an inch of dust, and buried railroad tracks under a foot of displaced soil. One newspaper noted, “we have still to find an old-timer who has ever seen its equal.”¹²⁵ When Rose Maltese visited her father after one such dust storm, he dragged her out to the east fence to show her the structure of six-foot poles and four strands of barbed wire submerged in dust.¹²⁶ Yet while dust storms remain vivid in people’s memories, it is grasshoppers and Mormon crickets that evoke their most visceral descriptions.

Grasshoppers had periodically invaded the plains for decades, but no one could remember swarms like the ones that descended on eastern Montana in the 1930s. When journalist Ernie Pyle traveled through Montana in 1936, he found that “the grasshopper opened and closed every conversation.”¹²⁷ Grasshoppers attacked in two stages. First sweeping the fields for food, they left devastation and then eggs in their wake. A mature, healthy female—well fed on wheat—could lay four to six pods of twenty-eight eggs each. The eggs, deposited about an inch below the surface in loosely cultivated fields, remained dormant until they hatched in the spring at about the same time wheat began to sprout. The fledglings grazed on the new vegetation for the six to eight weeks it took to grow wings, then a new generation began another reproductive cycle.¹²⁸

Another pest that wrought devastation in eastern Montana was the Mormon cricket, which infested Montana and surrounding states between 1936 and 1941. Mormon crickets look like large wingless grasshoppers, and they invade on foot. The insects earned the nickname “Mormon crickets” after a famous incident in 1848 when seagulls swooped into the Great Salt Lake Basin to devour the crickets eating Mormon settlers’ crops. Searching for forage in the 1930s, the crickets moved in enormous bands. Entomologist Ely Swisher described armies of crickets that carpeted the ground with “as many as 100 crickets per square yard.”



Arthur Rothstein • Cleaning a cricket trap, Big Horn County, June 1939. Hordes of Mormon crickets infested eastern Montana between 1936 and 1941. Farmers defended their crops from the invaders by building metal barriers around grain fields to stop their march and then dusting the insects with poison to kill them.

He recalled posting signs to warn motorists of slippery conditions on Highway 87 south of Billings, where crickets marched across the road for nearly two weeks, fodder for unprecedented road kill.¹²⁹

While each year farmers hoped that spring would bring the return of “good years,” the 1930s seemed to deny them at every turn. As the *Circle*

Banner lamented on June 5, 1936: “Here we are with almost a week of June gone and no rain. Many early crops are ruined already for lack of moisture and grass on the range is suffering.” The last part of May had been extremely hot with high winds, and then the weather turned cold.

“To top it all off comes reports for several communities that grasshoppers are hatching out in the millions.”¹³⁰ Prophetically, many of the stories of grasshopper invasions begin with the insects turning day into night. Russell Evans had heard people “talk before about grasshoppers flying so thick they would cover the sun,” but the first time he saw the phenomenon was when he got off his horse to open a gate and heard a strange humming. He looked up and saw a swarm “shut off the sun.” Ethel George recalled that clouds of grasshoppers made noon seem like twilight. And when the grasshoppers left, they “took the fields” with them.¹³¹ So little was known about how far or in what pattern grasshoppers could fly that in 1938 entomologists painted 3,500 grasshoppers captured northwest of Sidney with gold paint on the same day that colleagues in North Dakota painted a like number silver. They asked that anyone catching a gilded grasshopper send it the State College in Bozeman, so scientists there could begin to chart their travels.¹³²

For settlers familiar with the Old Testament, the plagues of grasshoppers that visited them must have recalled Biblical stories and warnings. Yahweh frequently invoked the curse of locusts on the agricultural people of

Israel and Egypt who had ignored his word or become prideful or faithless. “You will cast seed in plenty on the fields but harvest little, for the locust will devour it”; “All your trees and all the produce of your soil will become the prey of insects.”¹³³ When settlers described the sky darkened



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Arthur Rothstein • Farmer loading a spreading device with grasshopper poison, Forsyth, June 1939. Farmers spread a mixture of water, sawdust, arsenic, and amyl acetate, which smelled like bananas and attracted the grasshoppers, over their fields. The bait killed grasshoppers, but the smell was nauseating, and workers had to be careful not to get the mixture on their own bodies.

by grasshoppers, wings whirring in the air, their imagery might have been shaped by their reading of Revelation, of the locusts that dropped from a darkened sky “like horses armoured for battle,” as “the noise of their wings sounded like a great charge of horses and chariots.”¹³⁴

Entomologists working with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) devised a variety of defenses against the onslaught of grasshoppers and crickets; the ground troops were New Deal employees. To deal with crickets the USDA in conjunction with county extension agents devised a three-pronged attack: “oiling irrigation ditches, building metal barriers with traps, and dusting the insects with a 33 per cent sodium arsenite dust.”¹³⁵ Workers deployed the oil barriers almost exclusively on irrigated lands south of the Yellowstone River. Crude oil was dribbled onto the water in irrigation ditches and suffocated millions of crickets as they tried to cross. The insects and the oil then had to be skimmed off the ditch before the water could be used. At one point a mound of dead crickets, one hundred feet long and three to five feet deep, accumulated south of Billings, emitting a foul and lingering stench, as the crickets, soaked in oil, resisted decomposition.¹³⁶ Agents and farmers also built nearly one hundred miles of small metal fence around crops to divert the crickets, who could not fly over nor crawl up the smooth surface. But crickets could defeat even these traps. “One night,” remembered Joe Medicine Crow, “we could hear them coming, crickets off the hill there about a mile away. You could hear ‘zzzzzz’ as they walked, you know. . . . They tried to stop them by digging trenches clear across the country about that deep and lined with sheet metal so once they get in there, they can’t climb out.” The trenches trapped thousands of crickets, but when they were filled, the remaining insects simply trod over their brethren. The next morning when people went out to check their gardens they found “their corn, squash, watermelon, the whole bit, just chewed off to the ground. . . . The only thing that was standing is a couple rows of onions.”¹³⁷ The most widespread weapon was poison. A mixing plant in Billings produced hundreds of tons of sodium arsenite dust that workers spread over infested fields in Montana and Wyoming. Swisher recalled that plant workers were reluctant to wear face masks made of sanitary napkins that the scientists bought at Woolworth’s, but working in the dust soon made them overcome any embarrassment.¹³⁸

In 1938 it looked as if the Circle area was finally going to have a good year. Plentiful rain fell in July, and the paper predicted a bumper crop throughout the county, “the first real crop in many years.” But a week later devastation hit. On Friday people began noticing grasshoppers appearing in the air, by Sunday and Monday the county was under siege by millions of the insects swarming onto fields and gardens. After stripping the crops, they defoliated the trees. To rescue something from the situation, farmers in advance of the swarm cut their grain fields for feed. People must have wondered what they had done to deserve such a fate, when on that same Monday a hailstorm hit, destroying what crops the grasshoppers had skipped in the Sand Creek, Vida, and Nickwall area. A week later the grasshoppers had moved on, leaving a “pitiful” countryside behind.¹³⁹

Were plains dwellers being punished, like the Egyptians and the Israelites of old? Rebuked for plowing up land that had sustained grazing and hunting cultures for millennia but not large-scale agriculture? Chastised for their arrogance in thinking they could create a new society on the northern grasslands? Perhaps some people thought in retributive terms. Others shared James Womble’s sentiment, blaming the federal government for their plight, and, like Anna Schultz, remembering advice they had received many years ago. “I feel, had the Government not put its stamp of approval on these parts as agricultural lands thru the survey and plotting of ‘Homestead’ land these people, myself included, would never have dreamed of farming here. It is pathetic to recall our experimental ‘dry farming.’ It is pathetic now to recall the arguments between the Homesteaders and the Ranchers thirty years ago. The Homesteader argued stoutly feeling he was standing securely on the experiments and wisdom of the government. These drouth years have proven the words of the Rancher.”¹⁴⁰

Anna Schultz may have come to the conclusion that eastern Montana was better suited for ranching than farming, but drought had dried up the range as well as crops. When customs collector William Bartley traveled through northern Montana in 1937, he passed through Scobey, where people were staging a mock celebration on the anniversary of their last rain. What else could they do? “Winter wheat had not come up and spring wheat could not be planted. Cattle and horses were chasing themselves to death looking for a little grass and some sheep men were



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Marion Post Wolcott • Sweat lodge on Cheyenne Reservation, Near Lame Deer, August 1941. Wolcott's photograph of the frame of a sweat lodge juxtaposes old and new on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. While the sweat lodge and bison skull predominate, in the background are a tepee and tent, log cabins, and an automobile.

killing lambs at birth in an effort to save the primary stock.”¹⁴¹ Drought compounded overgrazing and erosion, and by the end of 1933 the AAA estimated there were from 8 to 10 million cattle alone that the public lands could no longer support.¹⁴² John Vukonich's family, ranching near Joliet, had a neighbor with a hundred head of cattle he could no longer feed once the bank stopped extending credit: “Every one of those cows died.” The calamity seared teenage Vukonich's memory: “For years there was those cockeyed piles of bones in all those different coulees and I can always remember those cows bellowing because they was starving to death. That still stayed with me.” Wallace Lockie, rounding up horses for shipping to a slaughterhouse, remembered the orphan colts he came

across: “I have seen fifteen, twenty colts in the bunch where the mares had already died and they’d come running up to you as you were riding. It was pitiful. It was pitiful.” The cowboys shot the colts before they starved to death.¹⁴³



Arthur Rothstein • Branding a calf during the roundup, Quarter Circle U Ranch, June 1939. Stryker sent Rothstein a detailed shooting script for the cattle industry, instructing him to get photographs of, among other things, branding and vaccination and the working clothes of cowboys, all of which came together in this picture.

In 1934 Congress passed the Jones-Connally Farm Relief Act, which provided funds to purchase starving animals. By September 1934 the government had bought two hundred and sixty thousand drought cattle in seventeen eastern Montana counties. Ranchers sold just under half the stock in McCone County. In some cases, those who had no feed left sold their entire herd. By December 1934 more than half a million sheep had also been purchased and skinned by FERA workers, their pelts stored in Miles City until relief tanneries could process them. More relief workers turned the wool into winter garments for Montanans receiving assistance.¹⁴⁴

The government’s action resurrected the cattle industry, and by January 1935 cattle prices were on the rise.¹⁴⁵ But the experience of culling the herds had been traumatic. Charlotte Edwards worked as a secretary in the AAA office in Broadus during the cattle-buying program. It was a growing-up experience for her to watch ranchers selling off the stock that had been the source of their livelihood and life in the region: “I’m sure I didn’t realize the enormous tragedy that this was for the individual ranchers because they were losing everything. . . . I had never seen grown men cry and many of them did when they came in to sign their forms. . . . I realized that life was not a carefree fun time. . . .

Many people left Powder River County during that period and sought jobs or lost their places and never came back.” She also witnessed the sorrow of the men who had to do the killing: “It

was hard on them. They didn't like to do it. It was a rough job. It was rough on everyone."¹⁴⁶

The vivid memories of starving livestock, infested fields, and mushrooming dust clouds represent only a part of Montanans' experiences of the Great Depression. Unemployed men loitered on the streets of Montana's cities (unemployed women were less visible); the state's western valleys hosted exiles fleeing the dried-out fields of the Dakotas and eastern Montana. Carl Kraenzel found almost one in every four households in Montana receiving assistance in February 1935. Across the board, young people, with little time to build up resources, were on relief disproportionate to their numbers in the state.¹⁴⁷ In Missoula four lumber mills laid off from 33 to 89 percent of their workers between 1929 and 1932.¹⁴⁸ The price of copper plummeted from eighteen cents per pound in 1929 to five cents in 1933, and massive unemployment dogged Butte,

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Arthur Rothstein • Men in front of the Stockman Bar on Main Street, Miles City, June 1939. One of the main topics of the FSA photographers in Montana was the cattle business. In this picture Arthur Rothstein extends the range of his assignment to include one of the many “Stockman” bars in Montana and the male visiting that took place in and outside of them.

Anaconda, and Great Falls. There, too, New Deal programs provided men and women with work and commodities, and the same psychological challenges that rural people faced accepting relief.¹⁴⁹

Still, not everyone was hurting in the 1930s. In the majority of Montana counties—in at least forty-seven of the fifty-six—cattle numbers rose between 1930 and 1935.¹⁵⁰ Men and women on irrigated farms fared better than their dryland counterparts. Sugar beet growers prospered. In 1925 sugar beet farmers harvested 333,110 tons of beets worth nearly \$2.6



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Arthur Rothstein • Houses for sugar beet workers, Hysham, June 1939. In an effort to encourage Mexican families to become year-round residents in order to build up a readily available labor force, the Holly Sugar Co. built adobe colonies to provide housing. Still, in 1940 two-thirds of the people working in Montana's beet fields were migrant workers.



Russell Lee • Dinner at ranch, Big Hole Valley, August 1942. Ranchers and cattle buyers from the Midwest talk over dinner. As one ranch cook recalled, no matter who was working or visiting, “However much was put on the table, it disappeared like a snowball in August.”

million. Ten years later, in the midst of the Depression, when wheat production had dropped by 50 percent, the sugar beet crop had more than doubled in tonnage and garnered \$3.8 million.¹⁵¹ The Amalgamated Sugar Company factory in Missoula County increased employment 33 percent between 1929 and 1932.¹⁵² Mary Frances Alexander McDorney, teaching school in Thompson Falls in the early 1930s, watched freight trains full of men heading west to look for work, but times were not quite as bad in town. The Montana Power Company dam gave some economic security to the community, which meant that she always got paid, unlike many other Montana teachers who received warrants—promises of future

pay—from school districts that had no money. McDorney even went to Chicago to the 1933 World’s Fair: “And that tells you that I was one of the rich people!”¹⁵³

Economic diversity cushioned some communities from the full effects of the Depression. As the state capital and county seat, Helena, for example, provided layers of government employment that remained fairly stable during the 1930s. Helena also served as the market town for the Prickly Pear Valley, but agriculture there was quite different from the dryland, grain-growing areas of eastern Montana. At least ten thousand acres of the valley’s farms were irrigated, and farms were diversified, producing vegetables, poultry, and dairy products for a local market. Still, cash was often in short supply, and, as in many places in the country,



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Marion Post Wolcott • Freight trains, Havre, August 1941. Havre was a division point for the Great Northern Railway. Wolcott took this photograph looking west into the freight yard and showing tank cars used for shipping petroleum products, as well as a variety of boxcars and flatcars for carrying miscellaneous freight. The passenger station is in the upper left.



Russell Lee • Anaconda Smelter, Anaconda, September 1942. In this scene at the Anaconda smelter, molten copper being poured from the converter into the ladle splashed violently to make a dramatic photograph.

people turned to barter to meet their needs. One elderly couple provided two dozen eggs each week for over six months in exchange for a used gasoline engine. But compared to other parts of the state, Helena, as Edward Bell found, “came through the Depression with only a moderate amount of inconvenience and suffering.”¹⁵⁴

The 1930s were tumultuous years. Despite the New Deal’s myriad programs, neither the country nor Montana marched up a steady ramp of recovery. Rain would fall, but drought returned; industry rallied, but slumped again. In 1937 22 percent of the Montana work force was out of work, the highest unemployment rate of any state in the Union. Montana was not immune to the farm and labor unrest that rattled



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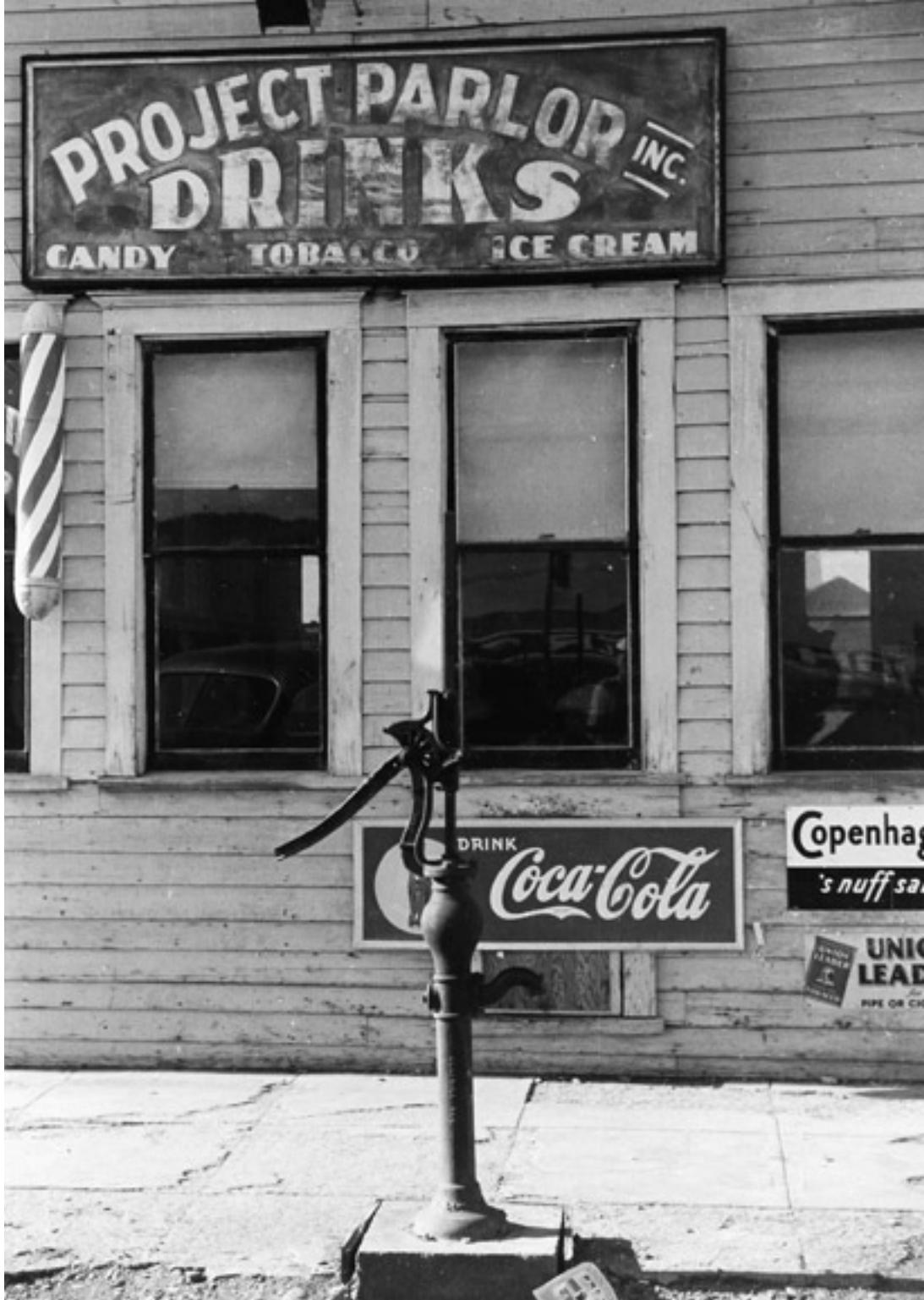
Russell Lee • Miners' union meeting, Butte, October 1942. With the support of the National Industrial Recovery Act, copper miners reorganized the Butte Miners' Union, Local No. 1 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelterworkers. Here they meet under the benevolent gaze of FDR.

the rest of the country.¹⁵⁵ In 1931 Leverne Hamilton wrote to Governor Erickson, urging the government to take action against the Depression, reminding him that “the people of Montana are desirous of observing the social regulations and laws of the state, but we must remember that ‘Hunger knows no law.’”¹⁵⁶ The following year, the Roosevelt and McCone County Farmers Holiday Association refused to take their grain to market; they protested declining prices with a grain strike.¹⁵⁷ In 1934, heartened by passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which gave workers the right “to organize and bargain collectively,” miners in Butte reorganized the Butte Miners' Union No. 1 after working in an open shop for twenty years. Strikes in Great Falls and Anaconda resulted in

new contracts also honoring union shops.¹⁵⁸ Even workers on relief got caught up in the struggle for workers' rights. In 1937 the Workers Alliance staged a sitdown strike at the Great Falls WPA office seeking a raise in the WPA quota for the county.¹⁵⁹

As remote as Montana might have seemed in the 1930s, the nature of its extractive export economy linked it to a much broader world, and Montanans were well aware of the unnerving events swirling around them. On January 1, 1939, wheat farmer James Bennett commented on the past twelve months: "A queer year has just ended. Undeclared wars have been waged. Dictators have bluffed the rest of the world. Raped smaller and weaker countries and got away with it. Jews have been ostracized, mistreated and it looks as tho Hitler would take their belongings in its entirety. Chamberlain proved to be the most liberal man of all times with other peoples territory and countries. Most of tradition has been upset and it looks like Europe is in for another 'dark age' and may eventually drag us into it. The New Deal thinks only in Billions and where they end, is anyone's guess. . . . Roosevelt says we can spend our way to prosperity. Wallace says the answer is produce less, in the meantime we are hanging on the ropes and betting that 39 cant be any more cockeyed than 38 no matter what the hell happens."¹⁶⁰

In this tangle of stories from the Great Depression—stories about the reluctance of people to accept welfare, gratitude for that help, the ineptitude of government programs and the ability of common people to make those programs work, faith in FDR, and wonder at this "cockeyed" world—is a turning point in westerners' attitudes toward the federal government. The government had been a shaping hand in the West since it bought the Louisiana Territory and paid Lewis and Clark to go up the Missouri River. The government mapped, surveyed, and distributed land, removed Indians, and subsidized railroads—all in order to facilitate white settlement. But all that action seemed only to set the stage for individual and familial accomplishments. During the 1930s the hand of the government was made glaringly obvious in government paychecks and government projects in every nook of the country. Between 1933 and 1939 the West led all other sections of the country in per capita payments for loans and work and direct relief; Montana was one of the most generously endowed western states. The New Deal planted physical reminders of



LC-USZ53-003106-M4

Arthur Rothstein • Pool parlor, Fairfield, May 1939. Seeking to document the traditional as well as the modern aspects of small American towns like Fairfield, the photographer framed the water pump in front of the “Drink Coca-Cola” sign on the local pool parlor and barbershop.

people's newly configured relationship with the government all over the landscape: roads, bridges, sewers, culverts, schools, stadiums, outhouses, windbreaks, and dams bore the builders' plates of half a dozen New Deal agencies and the craftsmanship of millions of American workers. During the 1930s government infused the daily lives of citizens in unprecedented ways. As a result people had to revise their ideas about that once seemingly distant institution, to accept the level of social security it could provide and yet convince themselves that government support did not constitute a lessening of individual competence. In these stories we see the seeds of consciousness that came both to accept and defy government planning, regulation, and assistance—an uneasy truce that continues in the West to this day.