

"A GREAT DEAL LIKE SMALLPOX": "DESTITUTION BUSINESS" AND STATE DROUGHT RELIEF IN NEBRASKA 1890-1895

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The settlement of the Great Plains ebbed and flowed over the latter half of the nineteenth century. Contrary to assertions of the U.S. Census Office and Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier did not close in 1890. The year that Turner delivered his famous frontier thesis at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Great Plains settlers were heading back east "to the wife's folks." The exodus of homesteaders from the Great Plains, and relief efforts to those who stayed are overlooked facets of regional history that demand attention. In studying these events, one gains insights into the Plains agricultural frontier in the 1890s, and changing notions of societal and government responsibilities to the less fortunate.

Meager rainfall was by far the most serious factor in inhibiting settlement of the Plains. After a series of wet years in the early 1880s, drought returned to the Plains in 1885 and lasted until 1895, with the exception of 1891.¹ The dry years brought crop failures to farmers in the western part of Nebraska who had just settled on their claims and lacked the resources that would be needed in case of disaster.

After a real estate boom that began in 1885, declining land values after 1887 burdened settlers with mortgages that were necessary to survive each successive season.² Crop failures led to nonpayment of mortgages, and haphazardly-financed mortgage companies found themselves sitting on land in a bear market, leading to their demise as well.³ By 1890 real estate agents were making no loans at all, unloading land for the price of the deed (thereby saving the cost of a foreclosure), and getting out of the business.⁴

By 1888 some settlers were already noting destitution among their western brethren. One letter from a committee in Cheyenne County noted a dozen families in distress, "without means to get flour or seed corn or any thing they need to plant. They neither have corn for their teams." The letter begged for help for these homesteaders, all "hard-working" men and women, in procuring seed and feed.⁵

In March 1890 Reverend Rufus Cooley of Potter, in Cheyenne County, petitioned Governor John M. Thayer for aid.⁶ Although scoffed at by some who believed there was no problem, Cooley formed the Potter Relief Commission. Its

chairman, attorney Charles Anderson, wrote Thayer in April that the pressing demand for "seed! Seed!! Seed!!!" took precedence over other relief supplies.⁷

In late March Governor Thayer undertook a personal inspection tour of the Panhandle to determine the veracity of the reports. Thayer heard no complaints of destitution in the town of Kimball, and when he reached Potter he met with a group of men who told the same story—that settlers were hard up but not starving. However, a group of women who met with Thayer later in the evening produced a different story, haranguing the governor for over an hour with tales of hardship. Thayer's attempt to escape by catching a freight train was foiled when it did not stop. After another hour, he managed to step aboard a passenger train, muttering only "Thank God!"⁸ By the end of May 1890 the Potter Relief Commission had met the needs of over three hundred people, issuing seed grain, bushels of wheat, corn, potatoes, millet, oats and barley sent to its residents from such other communities as Lincoln, Hebron, Grand Island, Kearney and Cozad.⁹

Others remained unconvinced, claiming that the situation in Potter was being caused by "a few dead beats, who are too lazy to earn an honest living."¹⁰ This no doubt reflected the general view in American society and law—state-sponsored welfare measures were frowned upon, because they encouraged sloth on the part of the poor. Gilded Age sentiment favored private relief, but was willing in some cases to provide state aid, if the recipients were seen as "worthy." Farmers were one such favored class, and had received state money for seed grain and supplies since the grasshopper plagues of the 1870s.¹¹

The summer of 1890 provided the final push for the problem to be recognized and state relief to begin flowing. July 1890 was "on the whole the hottest on record," with a maximum temperature of 112° recorded at Thedford; in the southwestern part of the state only a fraction of an inch of rain fell.¹² August 1890 dashed the hopes of western farmers who waited for a good rain to save their corn crop.¹³ The devastation of the drought was first recognized in the southwest. One farmer in Red Willow County wrote that nine-tenths of the corn crop was "a total failure," with some farmers raising not one ear on a hundred acres. Wheat, normally more tolerant of hot, dry weather than corn, was not even worth threshing in some places.¹⁴

As in the grasshopper plagues of the mid-1870s, the town boosters denied anything was wrong, for fear of discouraging settlement and driving down land values. The Dawes County Fair in September 1890 boasted "splendid specimens of Dawes County produce," making a "respectable showing" to those anxious to view the rumored disaster.¹⁵ Newspapers, themselves quite often tools for promoting settlement, either downplayed the extent of the damage, or failed to mention it entirely.

For example, not a word about the suffering appeared in the *Chadron Advocate* until January 1891, when there was an article noting the receipt of relief supplies, including flour, salt and hardtack, in two shipments on January 10 and 17. An editorial in the same edition told of "the old discovery being made again that the country west of the 100th Meridian never was intended for a farming region and that nothing but starvation and misery will follow the agriculturalist there."¹⁶ Farmers in Dawes County submitted over 800 applications for relief by mid-February. The *Advocate* began decrying the fact that some were not truly in need, and would receive aid despite affidavit requirements.¹⁷

The *Sidney Telegraph*, commenting on the efforts of Reverend Cooley, proclaimed them a fraudulent response to "exaggerated" reports of privation.¹⁸ When Cooley went east to secure aid, the editor mixed mock hurt with indignation. Sidney, he noted, had never failed to respond generously in the past to charitable causes. That Cooley had to travel so far east was evidence enough that the condition was "caused more by a dislike for hard work than by circumstances over which [they] had no control."¹⁹ While denying anything was wrong, the *Telegraph* later pleaded with farmers planning to flee to the east to "think twice...the drought is general this year, you won't find a garden of Eden anywhere."²⁰ Later, after the severity of the problem was apparent to all, the *Telegraph* claimed that it had since taken the lead in calling for aid to the now "plucky, hard-working and honest" farmers.²¹ In fact, only two articles even indirectly concerned with the problem appeared in the paper. Thereafter, with the exception of a report on the fourth page of its January 10, 1891 issue, nothing further appeared.

In the capital western destitution escaped notice until after the November elections which saw the Populists capture control of the Legislature and help elect the first Democratic governor, James E. Boyd. Populist strength centered in a diagonal slash running from Knox and Holt counties in the northeast to Perkins County in the southwest. It extended as far east as Saunders County in the east, with pockets of support in Sioux and Sheridan counties in the Panhandle. This area was also the hardest hit by the drought, and the Populist strength there was no accident.²²

The earliest mention of the effects of drought appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal* on November 9, 1890. On November 14 Governor Thayer, the mayor of Lincoln, and the President of the Lincoln Board of Trade called a meeting in Lincoln to organize "charitable forces of the city" to aid western farmers. Speaking to Lincoln citizens in the First Congregational Church, Thayer said he first received word of the disaster in September from farmers in Hitchcock, Deuel, and Perkins counties. He apparently had forgotten about his experience in Potter. Thayer named Reverend George W. Martin of the Kearney Industrial School to investigate conditions. Martin estimated that nearly 5,000

people were lacking food and clothing. Thayer also met with Union Pacific officials in Omaha to arrange transportation for coal to farmers along their route.²³ Martin was chosen to head the Nebraska State Relief Commission, and Reverend Luther P. Ludden of the Grace Evangelical Church in Lincoln acted as manager.

By the end of January 1891, the privately run relief commission had distributed 120 cars of coal, 336,976 pounds of flour, 158,276 of corn meal, 26,222 of meat, 11,700 of hard bread, 29,754 of beans, and 13,074 of rice.²⁴ The sheer scope of the task overwhelmed the capabilities of private charity. In introducing a resolution to the U.S. Congress in the Nebraska Legislature, a state senator from Lincoln estimated 160,000 people in 28 counties were in need of some form of aid. His resolution called upon Congress to appropriate a million dollars for the purchase of seed grain.²⁵

On February 6, 1891 the Legislature approved H.R. 79, making the Nebraska State Relief Commission a formal state agency. It also earmarked over \$100,000 from the public treasury to the Commission for immediate relief of drought-stricken counties. The Commission was to distribute supplies through county clerks and county commissioners, to keep an accurate record of the distribution, and to make an accounting to the Legislature.²⁶ A month later, on March 6, the Legislature authorized the issuance of \$100,000 in state bonds, payable in five years at 4% annually, for the purchase of relief supplies.²⁷

Finally, the Legislature on March 24 authorized counties to draw upon their surplus general funds to purchase feed, seed, food or fuel for destitute farmers,²⁸ and to issue their own bonds (not exceeding \$20,000) for the purchase of relief supplies.²⁹ However, the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that H.R. 284, which authorized the county bonds, was unconstitutional because the provisions for calling elections were contrary to law.³⁰

On February 9 the newly approved Nebraska State Relief Commission met in Lincoln and organized itself into an executive committee to coordinate the effort, and committees for the purchase, transportation and distribution of relief supplies.³¹ The members of the voluntary society automatically became members of the State Relief Commission, "heterogeneous [in] composition, being made up of republicans, democrats and independents in politics, and a diversity of business interests."³²

The following evening, the commission voted salaries, approved the drawing of its first warrant of \$25,000 from the state treasury, and moved its headquarters to offices in the Capitol that were donated by the State Board of Agriculture. The purchasing committee was instructed to survey the needs of each county in the eastern part of the drought area, in order to ascertain which counties were capable of taking care of their own people by issuing bonds.³³ One member of the commission was outwardly wary of appearing to be too free with

state aid. "We realize that this destitution business is a great deal like smallpox. It is catching. One community hears that another has obtained state supplies and immediately concludes that it would like a slice as well. This investigation will be made at once and upon a most economical basis of operation. There will be no junketing."³⁴

By the end of February, though, Relief Commission Secretary Ludden predicted the commission would run out of money in three weeks. In a discussion with the editor of the *Chadron Advocate*, Ludden expressed doubt that the Legislature would appropriate another \$100,000 for relief. "There has been a complete change in the legislature in this matter," he said. Attempts to influence newly-inaugurated Governor James E. Boyd, who already questioned the legality of such appropriations, were to no avail. Boyd seemed not to recognize the political liability of having one-quarter of the state depopulated under its first Democratic governor.³⁵ Ludden urged local relief committees to spend money on seed grain rather than food, pinning their hopes on a bountiful harvest in 1891.

H.R. 461, providing an additional \$100,000 for seed indeed went down to defeat on March 28, 1891.³⁶ Reverend Martin wrote the *Advocate* that their own senator stood against the appropriation, and would be "answerable to your county if there is disappointment and loss." The committee, he added, was financially unable to do anything more for settlers.³⁷ The last relief shipment to Cheyenne County, on April 7, drew a huge crowd, but resulted in a "fair and equitable allotment" for all.³⁸ The rejection of relief by the Populist legislature was indicative of their penurious tendencies, even with fellow agriculturists, and it would not be the last time Populists left Nebraska farmers wanting.³⁹

The rains temporarily returned in the spring of 1891, enabling farmers to raise plentiful crops. The million dollars' worth of seed grain provided by the state produced seven million dollars in crops; the corn crop alone accounted for five million dollars.⁴⁰ Moreover, crop failures in Europe and Russia caused a 300 million bushel shortfall there and opened a ready market for American farmers, who exported two-thirds of the difference to foreign markets.

Reports of famine in Russia led to the formation of the Russian Famine Relief Committee. Great Plains farmers, who had only last year faced ruin themselves, were most generous in donating grain to the Russians.⁴¹ Reverend Ludden chaired the committee's Nebraska chapter, forwarding nearly a million pounds of corn and over \$5000 in donations in 1892.⁴² With the Russian crisis abated, the Nebraska State Relief Commission closed down on December 5, 1892. The final orders of business were the packing of records and awarding Ludden \$200 for his services.⁴³

Although good growing conditions prevailed in 1891, the next three years, aggravated by a depression that began in 1893, were successively less so. In 1894 early rains led to flooding on the Platte River, and raised hopes for yet another

big crop. Up until late July a big harvest of corn and wheat still seemed possible despite increasing dryness. On July 26, 1894, hot southerly winds blistered the state, wilting crops before the farmers' eyes. Temperatures hit a high of 114° at Creighton and the Santee Agency, 112° at David City and Blair. At Grand Island, twenty to fifty prairie schooners a day could be seen heading east, "the settlers expressing themselves in haste to get to some land where it occasionally rains."⁴⁴

The corn crop for 1894 was a mere 47 million bushels, with yields averaging 7 bushels per acre; the year before, Nebraska farmers had harvested 169 million bushels with yields of 26 bushels per acre.⁴⁵ The winds had scarcely stopped blowing when calls for aid began. Republican Governor Lorenzo P. Crouse, a former Congressman who was elected governor in 1892, denied calls for a special legislative session to vote relief to farmers, saying that it would be "exceptional among the states similarly afflicted, and would give Nebraska an advertisement which should be avoided if possible." Crouse added that the state had exceeded its debt limit of \$100,000 providing aid for drought victims in 1891, and there was no money left in the general fund. The destitute would have to depend on private charity until the next regular session in January 1895.⁴⁶

Crouse advised counties to take action on their own to relieve the destitute. A convention of western counties held in North Platte on September 21 produced frightening figures—5,000 in need in Lincoln County, 1,000 each in Logan and Frontier counties, 90% of the farmers in Perkins County, and half the farmers in McPherson County were in need of help. Some of these counties faced the same problem as the state, and could not approve relief bonds due to debt left over from 1891.⁴⁷

The *Nebraska State Journal*, a solidly Republican newspaper, took Crouse's lead, viewing as "the greatest folly" any attempt to "demoralize the people with gifts of money or food except in cases where there are no able-bodied males to work for the support of a family." The *Journal* did endorse the idea of a public works program, claiming it would relieve the embarrassment of asking for charity, putting an end to the "plans of the 'beats' to get a living without work this winter," and returning the full value in tax revenues to the citizens of the county.⁴⁸

The *Journal* hailed the State Fair in September, claiming that viewing the abundant crops on display "is enough to make one believe that the stories of drouth and ruined crops were for the most part myths."⁴⁹ Nothing more was said until after Christmas, when the *Journal* explained its refusal to "slop over" on destitution by noting the apparent inconsistency in many reports of suffering. The *Journal* asserted that once the true extent of the situation was known, Nebraskans would not hesitate to aid the western settlers.⁵⁰

The *Journal* was not alone in its attitude. The *Sidney Telegraph*, located in one of the hardest-hit areas, again overlooked the subject, running only one

article in 1894, detailing the number of families in need. While giving the numbers for surrounding counties, Cheyenne County (of which Sidney was the county seat) was conspicuously excluded.⁵¹

Meanwhile, the reports of disaster and suffering continued to roll in. On September 25, Governor Crouse called upon Luther Ludden to handle incoming correspondence about the drought and to formulate a response.⁵² On October 28, the Nebraska State Relief Commission was revived, with Luther Ludden appointed chairman. The commission was given the task of surveying the extent of suffering and distributing private donations which were already beginning to accumulate.⁵³

The elections of 1894 returned Republicans to power, due in large part to the Panic of 1893 and perceived Populist mismanagement of the legislature. In his inaugural address in January 1895, newly-elected Governor Silas Holcomb urged swift action to aid the "hardy set of farmers who have been struggling against adversities over which they had no control."⁵⁴ The Legislature responded rapidly. H.R. 1, authorizing the issue of county bonds for buying seed and feed, was approved on February 1.⁵⁵ H.R. 113, appropriating \$50,000 for immediate relief, passed on January 29.⁵⁶ H.R. 525, earmarking \$200,000 for the purchase of seed and feed, passed on March 22.⁵⁷ Another bill giving merchants a lien on crops for the value of seed handed out to farmers, failed on January 30.⁵⁸

In the interim, the Relief Commission collected cash donations of \$28,999.38 and spent \$24,335 on relief supplies.⁵⁹ Donations of food and clothing arrived from all over the country—21 railroad cars bearing corn, flour, meat, sugar and coal from Georgia, done up in bunting and banners arrived in Lincoln in January 1895.⁶⁰

As in 1891 there were complaints of incompetence and slowness against the Relief Commission, which only distributed supplies in the "destitute district," comprising most of the western half of the state save for a few Panhandle counties. The problem may have been the sheer size of the task; there were fewer than a dozen people each day assigned to handle the shipment of entire carloads of goods.⁶¹ Ludden also complained that the inconsistency of stories created headaches for the commission. One day the commission would be assured that all was well, and the next day a "famine cry" would go up, loudly demanding immediate aid.⁶²

Organizations other than the state were offering relief. In 1891 churches had largely shunned their "traditional palliative role," because they were more concerned with indebtedness and cutbacks in missionary services. However, by 1894-1895 they were more willing to concern themselves with the physical well-being of parishioners.⁶³ The Methodist Church in Nebraska collected over \$6,000 and 18 carloads of relief supplies.⁶⁴ The Congregational Church sent supplies into Perkins and Boyd counties.⁶⁵ In contrast to its actions in the Capitol, the

Nebraska Farmer's Alliance (the formal name adopted by the Populists) spent much time and effort aiding its members.

The temporary aid and seed grain again gave Nebraska farmers the time they needed to raise bumper crops—120 million bushels of corn and 24 million bushels of wheat in 1895.⁶⁶ After hitting the bottom in early 1895 wheat prices rose throughout 1896-1897, largely due to massive crop failures in Europe, Argentina and Australia.

The drought and destitution of the 1890s were crucial events in the history of the Plains, yet have been almost entirely neglected by historians. The outmigration from the Plains in the 1890s dispels the notion that settlement on the frontier was an unwavering, steady advance that closed the frontier in 1890. The relief efforts help dispel the view of homesteaders as hardy, uncomplaining, self-reliant pioneers. The calamities of the 1890s and government reaction to them were a transition from the reluctance of the Gilded Age to dole out charity to the activist federal programs of the Great Plains Dust Bowl forty years later. They deserve to be studied for their role in altering attitudes towards government relief.

NOTES

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25. *Ibid.*, January 13, 1891, p. 6; Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmer's Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), 65-70.
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33. *Minutes*, February 10, 1891, 14.
34. *Nebraska State Journal*, February 11, 1891, p. 5.
35. *Chadron Advocate*, February 27, 1891, p. 2.
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