expands and squirts out the drip hole fifteen feet in the air, but the firestick

induced extension service personnel tick. Instead, most of them use the ghting fires. This device is comprised stem extending from the top. A coil ing into the canister, while a wick at

mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel. ne torches, were first introduced in

the Flint Hills during the 1970s, but the 1980s and even beyond. The m to have been made of kerosene-

th a corncob or rags stuffed in one e other end. Today all Flint Hills he potential market is too small to

in many different sizes and lengths, if their makers—a ring welded onto eker, a shovel-like handle built into on rod built around the drip end to ps, an upper end of plastic pipe and ght.

t of a Flint Hills rancher’s job, but

led with permission of The Kansa
chairman, attorney Charles Anderson, wrote Thayer in April that the pressing
demand for "seed! Seed!! Seed!!!" took precedence over other relief supplies.

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!" 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. 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." 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.

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. August 1890 dashed the hopes of western farmers who waited for a good rain to
save their corn crop. 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.

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. Newspapers, themselves quite often tools for
promoting settlement, either downplayed the extent of the damage, or failed to
mention it entirely.
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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

to 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

agriculturaJist there."14 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.14

When Cooley went east to secure aid, the editor mixed mock hun 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

anyv.'here."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.·

In fact, only two

article~
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 Populis~
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 nonheast to

Perkins County in the southwest. It

enended as far east as Saunders County in

the east, with pockets of suppon 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.21

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 Chutch, 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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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, and to issue their own bonds (not exceeding $20,000) for the purchase of relief supplies. 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.

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. 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."

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. One member of the commission was outwardly wary of appearing to be too free with
Hayter also met with Union Pacific for coal to farmers along their Kansas State Relief Commission, and Evangelical Church in Lincoln acted privately run relief commission had 159,276 of flour, 34 of beans, and 13,074 of rice. The capabilities of private charity. In the Nebraska Legislature, a state public committee to coordinate the operation and distribution of relief became members of its composition, being made up in various political and business interests. One of the state treasurers, approved the state treasury, and moved its funds donated by the State Board of Agriculture to survey the needs of the area, in order to ascertain which people by issuing bonds. The legislature voted salaries, approved the 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."

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. 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. 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. The last relief shipment to Cheyenne County, on April 7, drew a huge crowd, but resulted in a "fair and equitable allotment" for all. 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.

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. 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. Reverend Ludden chaired the committee's Nebraska chapter, forwarding nearly a million pounds of corn and over $5000 in donations in 1892. During the Russian crisis, 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. 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."

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. 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. 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 1891.7

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.8

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 drought and ruined crops were for the most part myths."9 Nothing more was said until after Christmas, when the Journal explained its refusal to "stop 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.9

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
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at Sidney City and Blair. At Grand Island, 6\, one Shade heading east, "the 7\, the land where it occasionally rains. 8\,
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unify." The Journal did endorse the 22\, could relieve the embarrassment of 23\, over which they had the "hardy set of farmers who have been struggling 24\, against adversities over which they had no control." 25\, The Legislature responded 26\, rapidly. H.R. 1, authorizing the issue of county bonds for buying seed and feed, 27\, was approved on February 1. 28\, H.R. 113, appropriating $50,000 for immediate 29\, relief, passed on January 29. 30\, H.R. 525, earmarking $200,000 for the purchase 31\, of seed and feed, passed on March 22. 32\, Another bill giving merchants a lien on 33\, crops for the value of seed handed out to farmers, failed on January 30. 34\, In the interim, the Relief Commission collected cash donations of 35\, $28,999.38 and spent $24,335 on relief supplies. 36\, Donations of food and clothing 37\, arrived from all over the country—21 railroad cars bearing corn, flour, meat, 38\, sugar and coal from Georgia, done up in bunting and banners arrived in Lincoln 39\, in January 1895. 40\, As in 1891 there were complaints of incompetence and slowness against 41\, the Relief Commission, which only distributed supplies in the "destitute district," 42\, 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 43\, fewer than a dozen people each day assigned to handle the shipment of entire 44\, carloads of goods. 45\, Ludden also complained that the inconsistency of stories 46\, created headaches for the commission. One day the commission would be 47\, assured that all was well, and the next day a "famine cry" would go up, loudly 48\, demanding immediate aid. 49\, Organizations other than the state were offering relief. In 1891 churches 50\, had largely shunned their "traditional palliative role," because they were more 51\, concerned with indebtedness and cutbacks in missionary services. However, by 52\, 1894-1895 they were more willing to concern themselves with the physical well-
being of parishioners. 53\, The Methodist Church in Nebraska collected over $6,000 54\, and 18 carloads of relief supplies. 55\, The Congregational Church sent supplies into 56\, Perkins and Boyd counties. 56\, In contrast to its actions in the Capitol, the
article in 1894, detailing the number of families in need. While giving the 57\, numbers for surrounding counties, Cheyenne County (of which Sidney was the 58\, county seat) was conspicuously excluded. 59\, Meanwhile, the reports of disaster and suffering continued to roll in. On 60\, September 25, Governor Crounse called upon Luther Ludden to handle 61\, incoming correspondence about the drought and to formulate a response. 62\, On October 28, the Nebraska State Relief Commission was revived, with Luther 63\, Ludden appointed chairman. The commission was given the task of surveying the 64\, extent of suffering and distributing private donations which were already 65\, beginning to accumulate.

The elections of 1894 returned Republicans to power, due in large part to 66\, the Panic of 1893 and perceived Populist mismanagement of the legislature. In 67\, his inaugural address in January 1895, newly-elected Governor Silas Holcomb 68\, urged swift action to aid the "hardy set of farmers who have been struggling 69\, against adversities over which they had no control." 70\, The Legislature responded 71\, rapidly. H.R. 1, authorizing the issue of county bonds for buying seed and feed, 72\, was approved on February 1. 73\, H.R. 113, appropriating $50,000 for immediate 74\, relief, passed on January 29. 75\, H.R. 525, earmarking $200,000 for the purchase 76\, of seed and feed, passed on March 22. 77\, Another bill giving merchants a lien on 78\, crops for the value of seed handed out to farmers, failed on January 30. 78\, In the interim, the Relief Commission collected cash donations of 79\, $28,999.38 and spent $24,335 on relief supplies. 80\, Donations of food and clothing 81\, arrived from all over the country—21 railroad cars bearing corn, flour, meat, 82\, sugar and coal from Georgia, done up in bunting and banners arrived in Lincoln 83\, in January 1895. 84\, As in 1891 there were complaints of incompetence and slowness against 85\, the Relief Commission, which only distributed supplies in the "destitute district," 86\, 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 87\, fewer than a dozen people each day assigned to handle the shipment of entire 88\, carloads of goods. 89\, Ludden also complained that the inconsistency of stories 90\, created headaches for the commission. One day the commission would be 91\, assured that all was well, and the next day a "famine cry" would go up, loudly 92\, demanding immediate aid. 93\, Organizations other than the state were offering relief. In 1891 churches 94\, had largely shunned their "traditional palliative role," because they were more 95\, concerned with indebtedness and cutbacks in missionary services. However, by 96\, 1894-1895 they were more willing to concern themselves with the physical well-
being of parishioners. 97\, The Methodist Church in Nebraska collected over $6,000 98\, and 18 carloads of relief supplies. 99\, The Congregational Church sent supplies into 100\, Perkins and Boyd counties. 101\, 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.\(^\text{1}\) 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 unswerving, 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

5. Letter dated March 22, 1888, John M. Thayer papers, hereinafter cited as JMT, Coll. RG1 SG14, Box 2, folder 21, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives (NSHS).
7. Letter dated April 14, 1890, JMT, Box 6, folder 55, NSHS.
9. Newspaper clipping, undated, JMT, Box 6, folder 59, NSHS.
10. Lincoln County *Tribune*, April 30, 1890, p. 2.
12. Nebraska Weather Service Bulletin, July 1890, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, MS 791, Box 3, folder 2, NSHS.
13. *Ibid.,* August 1890. The statement on the bulletin that "the rainfall although less than normal for southeastern Nebraska has on the whole been sufficient to improve greatly the condition of crops," along with rosy predictions of large corn yields, must be taken with some caution. The NWS was headquartered in Crete, in the southeast, and received reports largely from east of the 100th Meridian.
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er, hereinafter cited as IMT, Coll. RG1
Society Archives (NSHS).


17. Ibid., February 13, 1891, p. 2.
19. Ibid., April 19, 1890, p. 2.
20. Ibid., August 16, 1890, p. 1.
21. Ibid., December 13, 1890, p. 2.
23. Nebraska State Journal, November 9, 1890, p. 6; Ibid., November 15, 1890, p. 2.
26. Laws of Nebraska 1891, 297-301.
27. Ibid., 302-307.
28. Ibid., 308-309.
29. Ibid., 310-313.
31. Minutes of the Nebraska State Relief Commission, Coll. RG33, Series 2, box 3, vol. 1, 11, NSHS.
33. Minutes, February 10, 1891, 14.
34. Nebraska State Journal, February 11, 1891, p. 5.
35. Chadron Advocate, February 27, 1891, p. 2.
36. Nebraska House Journal 1891, 852.
38. Ibid., April 10, 1891, p. 1.
40. Minutes, September 25, 1891; Luther P. Ludken, comp., Report of the Nebraska State Relief Commission to the Governor of Nebraska (Lincoln: State Journal Co., 1892), 38.
42. James E. Boyd papers, Coll. RG1 SG15, Box 1, folder 10, NSHS.
43. Minutes, December 5, 1892.
44. Nebraska State Journal, July 17, 1894, p. 3.
46. Ibid., September 2, 1894, p. 8.
47. Lexington Clipper-Citizen, October 12, 1894, p. 8.
48. Ibid., September 1, 1894, p. 4.
49. Ibid., September 12, 1894, p. 4.
51. Sidney Telegraph, December 29, 1894, p. 2.
52. Nebraska State Journal, September 26, 1894, p. 6.
53. Ibid., October 30, 1894, p. 8.
54. *Nebraska House Journal* 1895, 125.
55. Ibid., 445-446.
56. Ibid., 357, 359.
57. Ibid., 994-995.
58. Ibid., 404.
59. Luther P. Ludden, *Report of the Nebraska State Relief Commission to the Governor of the State of Nebraska, 1895*, Coll. RG33, Series 1, Box 2, vol. 1, NSHS, 75, 90.
61. Ibid., January 15, 1895, p. 8.
64. *Record of Supply Distribution in Nebraska by the Methodist Church, 1894-1895*, Coll. RG33, series three, box 5, vol. 16, NSHS.