

Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief the Dole, and Rehabilitation

J. Christopher Schnell
Southeast Missouri State University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2008 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Schnell, J. C. "Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief the Dole, and Rehabilitation." *The Annals of Iowa* 67 (2008), 241-243.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1240>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

a place for leisure and relaxation. The Wisconsin state government and business interests encouraged this trend by creating, maintaining, and promoting state parks and other recreation areas to which people could travel and experience nature. This was, however, a particular kind of nature: one that had been reshaped and made accessible (and more comfortable) as a result of the same transformation that had reshaped everyday life in all parts of Wisconsin.

These linked worlds of production and consumption first came into overt conflict right after World War II, when aroused citizens in the Fox River Valley pushed for more rigorous enforcement of water pollution laws along the Fox River, site of one of the most intense concentrations of pulp and paper mills in the world. Ironically, those paper mills, first drawn to the valley by its natural resources, had played a large role in creating the material prosperity that lay behind the heightened concern for protecting the environment. At first, the economic importance of the paper industry allowed it to avoid stringent regulation of its discharges. That was only the initial clash, however, in a series of battles over Fox River water quality that would become more intense in later decades.

Consuming Nature addresses a topic of relevance for students of Iowa history as well as other parts of the United States. The particular timing of the developments described here will, of course, vary by state, depending on such factors as industrial development and traditions of active government. *Consuming Nature* is well written, and the analysis is based on a close review of local newspapers, state government documents, and other primary sources. The implication of modern environmentalism's failure to adequately recognize the ways modern life is inextricably linked to productive use of the environment is not well developed, but other scholars interested in this issue can build on Summers's fine monograph.

Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation, by Peter Fearon. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. xv, 316 pp. Map, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.95 cloth.

Reviewer J. Christopher Schnell is professor of history at Southeast Missouri State University. He has written extensively about the Great Depression and the New Deal, including "Franklin D. Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the Missouri Clergy," in *Gateway Heritage* (1997-98).

When the Great Depression struck in 1929, midwestern farm states such as Iowa and Kansas presented very similar pictures to federal officials attempting to relieve the widespread misery. Such rural states

relied on the agricultural productivity that bolstered the economies of the small towns that dotted the countryside. Neither state contained a dominating metropolis.

Peter Fearon has closed another gap in depression and New Deal history. This highly readable work successfully analyzes how Kansas suffered from, coped with, and eventually recovered from the Great Depression. *Kansas in the Great Depression* begins with President Herbert Hoover's admirable but insufficient response based on private charity and trickle-down economics. Hoover's failure, as much political as economic, gave way to the massive federal bureaucracy created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Fearon's work, based on research at the local level, is a case study of how macroeconomic decisions worked out in places such as Beloit and Smith Center, Kansas, where people disliked the dole but saw the need for the federal work relief promised by Iowan and New Deal architect Harry L. Hopkins. The state enjoyed one major advantage over many others: both presidential administrations understood that, despite its devastating droughts, massive dust storms, failing farms, and widespread unemployment, Kansas ran an extremely efficient relief operation even though Kansans generally feared a loss of independence and pride that came with accepting handouts.

The "politics of relief" was a problem in Kansas as it was in practically every other state. Although President Roosevelt ordered Hopkins to "keep politics out of relief," it was an impossible task. Generally, Hopkins succeeded in working with Kansas Republicans such as Governor Alfred Landon and John Stutz, the administrator of the Kansas Emergency Relief Administration. When Democrats complained, Hopkins appointed Kansas Democrat Evan Griffith as Works Progress Administrator but retained Stutz to handle relief. However, as Hopkins himself became more politicized, accusing Governor Landon of balancing the budget by "taking it out of the hides of the people," the Kansas Republican leadership fought back and forced him to back down.

The story of how Kansas coped with the Great Depression should interest Iowa readers. In particular, state and local historians may join New Deal scholars in applying Fearon's county-by-county methodology to Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Missouri, and Oklahoma. This is a study of how two huge bureaucracies—one national and one local—worked out a successful strategy to cope with the greatest economic crisis of the twentieth century.

Like other midwestern states, Kansas suffered from several devastating droughts, complicated by massive dust storms produced by the

plowing up of valuable prairie farm land during the 1920s. Surprisingly, however, the number of Kansas farms actually increased from 1930 to 1935 as people desperately fled the cities in search of subsistence in the countryside. Although there were demonstrations—even riots—by farmers in Crawford and Wyandotte counties as well as in cities such as Topeka and Wichita, Kansas resisted the militant strategies advocated by groups such as Milo Reno's Farmers' Holiday Association.

Although Kansas had experienced previous radical movements in the 1890s under populists such as "Sockless" Jerry Simpson, Annie Diggs, and Mary Ellen Lease, this time there was no revolt. One reason was that President Roosevelt satisfied the public demand for aid, relief, crop subsidies, insurance, and employment. The 1933 Farm Bill, creating the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act, combined with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration, kept the opposition to a controllable minimum.

Kansas in the Great Depression is a penetrating analysis of the Wheat State's greatest crisis since the Civil War. Its focus on local issues fills a significant gap in New Deal literature. The work ethic, not the dole, was a primary Kansas philosophy supported by most of its citizens. Prior to the New Deal, the federal government had never spent a dime for unemployed persons. But Roosevelt found an answer. Peter Fearon's unbiased account of how federal and state officials responded to local needs in a time of crisis represents a methodology that should be applied to other midwestern states. His approach clearly indicates how social, political, and economic factors inherent in the Great Depression affected not only the people but all levels of government.

Iowa City Municipal Airport: Opening the West to Aviation, 1918–2007, by Jan Olive Nash. Iowa City: Iowa City Municipal Airport Commission and U.S. Federal Aviation, 2007. 44 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography.

Reviewer Janet R. Daly Bednarek is professor of history at the University of Dayton. She is the author of *Dreams of Flight: A History of General Aviation* (2003) and *America's Airports: A History of Municipal Airports in the United States, 1918–1947* (2001).

Today, the airports most people are familiar with are the giant facilities associated with the nation's largest cities. In fact, a sizable majority of the nation's commercial air traffic goes through only about 25 to 30 major hub airports. In the early days of aviation, however, smaller airports in smaller cities, especially in the Midwest, played critical