

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

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aspirations of the town's residents in ways that words alone cannot, and Chase's pairing of photographs with quotations from former residents' oral histories serves to further elucidate the images' meanings.

Chase provides a balanced assessment of Buxton as "utopia" versus a "dangerous" coal town. She acknowledges that Buxton experienced its share of gambling, drinking, and violent crime but points out that its legacy was shaped in large part by the politics of racial identity. Both black and white residents of the town described Buxton as a good place to live and work, but for African Americans its demise represented a much greater blow, the loss of one place where they could work, live, shop, and learn free from extreme racism and oppression. *Lost Buxton* provides a window onto the promise of racial harmony that Buxton represented, albeit fleetingly, and asks its readers to contemplate the lessons that it might continue to offer today.

A New Deal for South Dakota: Drought, Depression, and Relief, 1920–1941, by R. Alton Lee. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2016. xii, 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Catherine McNicol Stock is professor of history and director of the American Studies program at Connecticut College. She is the author of *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996) and *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (1992).

Nearly two decades have passed since a full-length treatment of the experience of the people of South Dakota in the "Dirty Thirties" has been published; the library shelf of recent monographs considering the Great Depression years in nearby midwestern states is similarly strikingly bare. But that is only one reason to welcome University of South Dakota professor emeritus of history R. Alton Lee's book, *A New Deal for South Dakota*. Lee does not just put a new gloss on familiar—if still heart-wrenching—stories of grasshopper plagues, dust storms, starving cattle, itinerant men and women riding the rails, abandoned farms, "penny auctions," and utterly overwhelmed local charity organizations. Lee dives deeper and explains how local people responded to the crisis politically. Given the recent "discovery" of white conservatism in rural America by journalists and pundits, it is high time for a scholar based in a rural state to put this political heritage in full historical context.

Although it might have been better placed in the introduction, Lee waits until the conclusion to ask the big question about South Dakota politics during the Great Depression: How could the people of South Dakota have accepted relief from the New Deal and then "[bit] the hand that fed them" by voting against state Democrats in 1936 and 1938 and

even against Roosevelt himself in 1940 (216)? After all, the situation in South Dakota was so desperate that in 1932 Lorena Hickok told Eleanor Roosevelt that the state was the “Siberia of the United States. . . . A more hopeless place I never saw” (26). In a different letter to Roosevelt, she said of the state: “What a country – to keep out of” (3). The New Deal did in many respects come to the rescue of farmers, ranchers, and townspeople on the northern plains. Between 1932 and 1938, South Dakota received funds from the federal government far in excess of the proportion of their population. At the height of the Depression, 39 percent of South Dakota’s population was on relief, compared to an average of 13 percent in the United States as a whole (x). Why then weren’t South Dakotans more grateful to the government? Why didn’t they, like poor whites in Appalachia or the cotton South, help to form the backbone of the Democratic Party for a generation to come?

Lee answers these questions, demonstrating that, however much the people of South Dakota needed federal relief, they nevertheless neither liked New Deal programs nor the eastern bureaucrats who designed them. They didn’t just resent the programs. They were not just ashamed of their need. They believed the programs were poorly organized, poorly conceived, and poorly administered. Lee provides example after example: South Dakotans argued that FERA stock-buying programs instituted limits so low that they made it impossible for beneficiaries to continue ranching; FERA and WPA salaries for men on relief were too low while for men selected to be in charge of the programs, they were too high; CCC men’s families could not live on 20 dollars per month, and as a result they sometimes became wards of the state; Social Security payments for the elderly sometimes did not go to people who were old. In other words, while people in South Dakota may have needed temporary relief (mostly, they also believed, due to circumstances beyond their control), they never thought the federal government did a competent job of providing it. Like Kim Phillips-Fein’s *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade against the New Deal* (2009), Lee’s study suggests that the beginning of the antigovernment movement on the right and the belief that government was “part of the problem” go back many decades before the so-called Reagan Revolution.

Lee also compiles information on relief programs for local indigenous people, a topic that has also seen little ink in recent years. For the many bands of Sioux in South Dakota, deciding whether or not to comply with the “Indian New Deal” was politically complicated. Why should Indians trust the government this time, when in the past federal authorities had proven themselves to be untrustworthy time and again? Unfortunately, Lee does not discuss the ways the splits that developed

in several bands over the Indian New Deal controversy continued through the late twentieth century, contributing to the rise of the American Indian movement, the occupation of Wounded Knee, and the violence on the Pine Ridge reservation that followed. Furthermore, Lee should have let this important chapter stand on its own, rather than combining it with material about programs for youth.

Overall, this important book reminds us of the long-lasting nature of the reforms brought during the New Deal years — as well as the long-lasting nature of American resistance to them.

American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture, by Wendy Griswold. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xiv, 361 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, appendixes, notes, references, indexes. \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Michael Edmonds is director of programs and outreach at the Wisconsin Historical Society. He is the author of "The Federal Writers' Project in Wisconsin, 1935–1942" (*Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 2011).

The Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s and 1940s has always been infused with a romantic glow. Poet W. H. Auden called it "one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted" because it tried to use unemployed lay people to research, write, and edit books. It also nurtured young authors, including Saul Bellow, Zora Neale Hurston, John Cheever, and Richard Wright, whose later work would shape how Americans saw themselves during the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1935 and 1943, the project's 6,500 staff produced more than 600 books about local American life and culture, the most famous of which are the American Guides discussed in this book. It was a utopian dream conceived behind rose-colored glasses, led by visionary idealists, and carried out during a political maelstrom. The sheer optimism of it has spawned a small industry of memoirs, histories, and literary criticism.

Sociologist Wendy Griswold takes a different and much more pragmatic approach. She simply asks, what did the Writers' Project try to do, was it successful, and how did it affect American culture? To find answers she not only exploited all of the relevant documentary sources but collated and analyzed reams of raw data. Her previous work includes books on Renaissance London and post-colonial Nigeria, with a focus on how material objects of culture influence the transmission of ideas and values. Applying that perspective here, she has given us by far the best book on the Federal Writers' Project and why it mattered.

In 1935, two years into Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, nearly ten million Americans were out of work, so Congress funded the Works