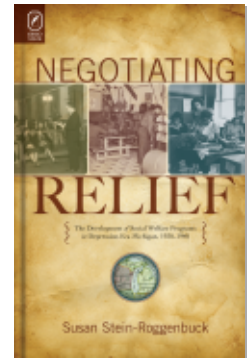




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4. "We Need Help at Once for These Poor People": The New Deal and Michigan Families



Published by

Stein-Roggenbuck, Susan.

Negotiating Relief: The Development of Social Welfare Programs in Depression-Era Michigan, 1930-1940.

The Ohio State University Press, 2008.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27858>.

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CHAPTER FOUR

“We Need Help at Once for These Poor People”

THE NEW DEAL AND MICHIGAN FAMILIES

“**WHAT WE NEED** in Hillsdale is a federal officer to investigate the condition of the unemployed,” wrote Pearl Gibbon to Franklin Roosevelt in July 1933. “We have families who are starving. The fathers are willing to work, but they have no work and no help from the welfare. When they ask for help, the county officers reply, ‘there are no funds, the county is broke.’ Can you help us out? We need help at once for these poor people.”¹ Jack Tatro of Marine City also wrote Roosevelt about the poor-relief situation in his city at about the same time. Tatro noted that relief orders were inadequate to feed the families, clothing was impossible to procure, and “consequently children are practically naked as are their parents in some cases.” Efforts to gain clothing or shoes meant being “sent from Supervisor to Supt of Poor and each refers them to one another, without results from either.” As in Gibbon’s case, county officials told Tatro that there was no money for help.² Tatro wrote that he was not complaining, but simply stating the facts: “The people of this county are true

1. Letter from Pearl Gibbon of Hillsdale, dated July 29, 1933, to FDR, FERA State Series, Michigan Complaints, RG 69, Box 141, Folder G–H. Hillsdale is a small town located in Hillsdale County in the southern agricultural section of Michigan.

2. Letter from Jack Tatro of Marine City to Franklin Roosevelt, dated July 31, 1933, FERA State Series, Michigan Complaints, RG 69, Box 141, Folder T–Z. Marine City, located in St. Clair County, is on the eastern shore of Michigan north of Detroit.

Americans and are not wont to complain.”³ Both letters show a very different perspective from that of local officials. The Federal Emergency Relief Act had become law less than two months earlier and was in the formative administration stages in most Michigan counties. FERA, in conjunction with other programs such as the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the National Youth Administration, brought significant help to Michigan residents.

Both direct- and work-relief programs injected millions of dollars into Michigan’s economy, providing invaluable aid to residents in desperate need. During the six years of emergency relief, nearly \$242 million was spent on all relief programs, with the state contributing more than \$84 million (34.7 percent) and local governments nearly \$47 million (19.4 percent).⁴ Michigan and the federal government endeavored to provide work, rather than simply direct relief, for as many of the unemployed as possible. Work relief, as well as programs such as the CCC and NYA, provided wages for the unemployed. First, through the Civil Works Administration, the programs channeled millions of dollars in wages to families and thus to their communities. The key problem with the work programs was that they discriminated by race, citizenship, gender, and age, providing employment largely for white men. Many groups had limited work options under those programs, and family remained at the center of administration. Policies were predicated on the idea of a family as a unit for relief, and virtually all programs viewed recipients through that lens.

DIRECT RELIEF

Direct relief served more residents than work relief in the Depression years, and Michigan’s economic problems led to high demand for relief. The percentage of Michigan families receiving relief during the first year of FERA ranged from a high of 16.8 percent to a low of 9.6 percent. By 1933 the worst of the relief problem was concentrated in the Upper Peninsula, including Marquette County, rather than in the industrial cities, which faced their most difficult times in the first years of the Depression (see table 4.1). The continued decline of the lumbering and mining industries, which in turn affected the railroad and retail industries, was the biggest factor in high relief rates in the Lower Peninsula. Poor-quality farmland, in addition to a pool of inexperienced farmers, also contributed to the problem. Saginaw and Van Buren counties were

3. Letter from Tatro to Roosevelt, July 31, 1933.

4. Granger and Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan, 1933–1939*, 50–51.

TABLE 4.1
PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS ON RELIEF

| County | % Relief Recipients in Highest Month, 1934 | % Relief Recipients in Highest Month, 1935 | Monthly Average, 1934 | Monthly Average, 1935 |
|-------------------|--|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Marquette | 57.4 (July) | 32.9 (Dec.) | 34.1 | 29.3 |
| Saginaw | 11.9 (Dec.) | 12.6 (Feb.) | 8.4 | 10.3 |
| Van Buren | 13.2 (Dec.) | 17.7 (Feb.) | 7.1 | 13.3 |
| Wayne | 16.0 (Dec.) | 15.3 (Dec.) | 10.9 | 11.1 |
| State of Michigan | 16.8 (Nov.) | 17.8 (Dec.) | 12.9 | 14.6 |

Source: Years in the table refer to the first two fiscal years of FERA. Thus 1934 refers to July 1933 to June 1934, and 1935 refers to July 1934 to June 1935. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, Appendix, table 7; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief and Economic Security*, 304–5.

among those with the lightest relief load; both were in areas—the “thumb area,” on the east side of the state, near Saginaw Bay and the southern agricultural counties—that tended to be the lowest in relief numbers. Agricultural counties in southern Michigan generally had lower relief rates than other areas, as residents could rely on subsistence farming even if they could not produce a cash crop. The state’s industrial counties often had lower percentages of relief rates but, given their higher populations, had the greater number of people receiving relief.⁵

Relief generally was extended to families, rather than individuals, although the types of families varied. The average monthly caseload of families receiving relief during FERA’s first year included about 13 percent of Michigan’s population, and that number rose to 14.6 percent during the second year.⁶ The largest age group receiving relief was made up of children under sixteen. In the first year of FERA, 41 percent of all relief recipients were children, or about one-sixth of the state’s population in that age group. About 15 percent of recipients were ages sixteen to twenty-four, and about a quarter were ages twenty-five to forty-four. Cases that involved single persons comprised

5. William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan* (Lansing: Franklin DeKleine Company, 1935), figure 3, 9, 11–12; Appendix, table 7; Michigan reports by Howard Hunter, August 13, 1934, 3; FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports, Michigan, Box 58, Harry Hopkins Papers, FDR Library.

6. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 65; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 19.

just 12.6 percent of all cases the first year, and increased to 14.6 the second year.⁷

Case-file analysis confirms that most recipients were in families, although that is less true for OAA recipients. Eighteen percent of Marquette County's OAA recipients, about 20 percent of Saginaw County's OAA recipients, and 23 percent of those in Wayne County had no children. Many did not live with their children, even if they had them. The absence of children eliminated a major source of support for older people, and the numbers of recipients with no children on the relief rolls is not surprising. Needless to say, all ADC recipients had children, although about 12 percent of Saginaw's recipients and 5 percent of Wayne County's recipients received aid for relatives, including nieces, nephews, siblings, and grandchildren. Just 15 percent of Van Buren County's emergency-relief recipients had no children.

Race also affected who received relief, although opinions on why varied.⁸ In general, the percentage of African-Americans receiving relief was larger than their share of the population in Michigan. Most African-Americans who received relief were in urban areas with populations of more than 2,500. Blacks accounted for 8 percent of all relief recipients, but about 29 percent of all blacks in the state received relief. Whites comprised 91.4 percent of relief recipients, which was about 12 percent of the total white population in 1930; other nonwhite people, including Mexicans, accounted for the remaining 0.6 percent. Overall, about 15 percent of the state's 1930 nonwhite population received relief.⁹ Both Marquette and Van Buren counties were almost entirely white; Van Buren County's 1930 census, for instance, listed just 1.4 percent of the population as black, and Marquette had no nonwhite relief recipients among the case files analyzed. Just one of Van Buren County's cases before 1940 involved an African-American family. In Saginaw County, blacks accounted for 70 percent of the minorities in the sample, while Mexicans or Mexican-Americans comprised 23 percent. The remainder were Native Americans.¹⁰

7. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 66; Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 77.

8. Harvard Sitkoff argues that decentralized administration of many of the New Deal programs translated into severe discriminatory practices, particularly in the South. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 46–52; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 217, 223–24.

9. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 77–80.

10. In Saginaw County, people of color were 10 percent of the case files analyzed for both ADC and OAA ($N = 593$). They comprised a larger share of the ADC files (13.5 percent) as compared to the OAA files (3.5 percent). In Wayne County, people of color comprised 185 of the cases sampled ($N = 605$). They also comprised a larger share of the ADC files (29 percent)

TABLE 4.2
PERCENTAGE OF NONWHITE RELIEF RECIPIENTS

| County | % Nonwhite, 1930 Census | % Nonwhite Case-File Samples |
|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Marquette | 0.4 | 0.0 |
| Saginaw | 5.8 | 10 |
| Van Buren | 1.4 | 0.0 |
| Wayne | 7.37 | 21 |
| State of Michigan | 3.8 | NA |

Wayne County’s nonwhite recipients were almost entirely black; just one of the cases involved a Mexican family. Nonwhites were not represented in two of the counties (Marquette and Van Buren), but likely had greater need than demonstrated by those numbers (see table 4.2). People of color had fewer job opportunities in the labor market and thus were concentrated in low-wage, unskilled occupations. They were among the first laid off or fired during economic downturns and were therefore among the first to suffer unemployment when the Depression began. Caseworkers themselves commented on the limited employment opportunities available both to people of color and to noncitizens.¹¹

Foreign-born residents, both citizens and noncitizens, also tended to receive relief in greater numbers than their share of the population. A SERA study of Detroit relief rolls found that foreign-born whites comprised 43 percent of the heads of families receiving relief, although the 1930 census reported 39 percent of family heads as foreign-born. Native-born whites, by way of comparison, represented 31 percent of all heads of families receiving relief, but were 53 percent of family heads in the 1930 census.¹² Although statewide figures are not available, similar trends can be seen in Marquette, Saginaw, Van Buren, and Wayne counties (see table 4.3). Figures for the foreign-born among the case-file recipients demonstrate that non-native-born residents sought relief in larger numbers than their population.¹³ Foreign-born residents may have faced more discrimination in hiring, particularly if they were not citizens, as

as compared to the OAA files (12.3 percent).

11. SERA reports acknowledged that unequal job opportunities were a large reason for the racial differences among relief numbers in Michigan. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 77–80.

12. *Ibid.*, 80–81. The Detroit study, based on one month of relief in 1934, is the only statistic available on citizenship and nativity on Michigan relief rolls.

13. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. III* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 1138–40.

TABLE 4.3
PERCENTAGE OF FOREIGN-BORN RECIPIENTS

| County | % Foreign-Born, 1930 Census | % Foreign-Born, 1940 Census | % Foreign-Born, Case File Sample | % Foreign-Born Who Were U.S. Citizens |
|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Marquette | 22.8 | 15.8 | 59 | 81 |
| Saginaw | 9.1 | 9.7 | 27 | 68.5 |
| Van Buren | 10 | 9.1 | 13 | 68 |
| Wayne | 25.3 | 18.6 | 35 | 62.7 |

Source: *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. III* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 1138–40; *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Vol. II, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), 787–88.

described in chapter 2. They also may have had fewer family members to turn to in need, and thus may have sought relief more often.

WORK RELIEF

Work relief proved a more politically popular solution to the Depression's unemployment problems, and the numbers show the critical importance of these programs in the state's economy and in the larger relief effort. By June 31, 1934, nearly \$19 million had been spent on work relief in the state. About 30 percent of families on relief were on work relief, and nearly 40 percent of all relief expenditures went to work relief.¹⁴ In the second year, the state spent almost \$34 million on work-relief projects, of which more than \$27 million was for wages. Those numbers accounted for 44 percent of all expenditures for work and general relief, and 34 percent of all relief costs, including administration, in the state.¹⁵ Through the six years of emergency relief, work relief accounted for 16.5 percent of all cases in an average month in 1933–34, 50.1 percent in 1936–37, and 43.8 percent in 1937–38.¹⁶ In total, the WPA expended more than \$441 million until its demise in 1943.¹⁷ The goal, following Michigan's responsible-relative laws, was to provide aid for families

14. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 92–93.

15. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 238.

16. Granger and Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan, 1933–1939*, 41.

17. *Final Report on the WPA Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 120.

through employable household members. Male heads of household were the first choice.

Early works programs originated through the Public Works Administration and FERA, and then through the Civil Works Administration. The early FERA projects were largely continuations of locally funded projects, but with federal money.¹⁸ The need for a more expansive works program prompted the creation of the Civil Works Administration in November 1933. A part of the National Recovery Act, the CWA had a crucial difference from FERA work projects, and later from the Works Progress Administration: proving need was not a requirement for employment. Any unemployed worker was eligible (see figure 4.1). Applicants did not have to undergo the intrusive investigation that relief recipients experienced; unemployment demonstrated need. While some CWA workers were approved relief cases, not all were, nor did they need to be. They also were under different wage rates than FERA workers and thus earned higher wages and were not limited in the hours they worked. CWA did not carry the stigma or the intrusion that FERA and, later, the WPA did, but it also operated for less than six months.¹⁹ Certification for virtually all works programs, except the CWA, was through the county welfare-relief commission.

The Works Progress Administration (later the Works Projects Administration) was intended to provide work relief for employable residents, and thus remove those individuals from direct relief. It was a reaction against "the dole," and its inauguration coincided with the demise of FERA and the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. The WPA would provide employment for those able to work, and the SSA would provide help for the unemployable. Direct relief would no longer be the center of the federal relief program. The National Youth Administration, a part of the WPA, provided jobs for young people to enable them to continue their educations.²⁰

Work-relief projects improved roads and bridges, and also built or repaired buildings and schools. The majority of projects focused on repairs and construction, including sewers, airports, and bridges. In FERA's first year, 26 percent of projects highlighted building and school repairs and new constructions, and another 13.7 percent went to street and road repairs (figure 4.2).²¹ Thousands of miles of roads were built or improved, and crews constructed

18. Rose, *Put to Work*, 38.

19. Rose, *Put to Work*, 45–47; Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward*, 45–46.

20. Rose, *Put to Work*, 94–95; Granger and Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan, 1933–1939*, 5–6.

21. *50,000 Men: Report of the Work Division of the Michigan Emergency Welfare Relief Commission* (Lansing: 1935), 30.



Figure 4.1 Participants in an aviation ground-school program offered through FERA and held at the REO Car Company Club house in Lansing. Photo courtesy Archives of Michigan.

thirty-seven new schools and repaired more than eighteen hundred others. They erected fifty-five municipal garages and twenty-three county and city halls, and built or repaired eighty-two bridges. Other projects spotlighted conservation programs and improvements to recreational facilities. Projects also employed white-collar workers in its educational and recreational programs. Workers also produced goods, from canned food to mattresses and clothing, which were distributed to relief families.²² Work relief not only brought wages to families and injected money into local economies, but also resulted in visible improvements to local communities.

While racial discrimination did exist on job assignments, despite federal regulations to the contrary, historian Harvard Sitkoff argues that federal programs, in spite of their shortcomings, made a real difference in the lives of blacks, especially by 1936. Regulations against discrimination became more stringent, although never totally effective, but the numbers of blacks employed

22. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 229–238; *WPA Projects* (Works Progress Administration, 1937), 55; and *Employment on Projects in March 1936*, *WPA Including NYA* (Works Progress Administration, 1936), 59.



Figure 4.2 Workers on a Manistee County skidway project. Photo from Louise Armstrong Collection, courtesy of Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Box 1, Photographs Folder.

by New Deal work-relief agencies increased significantly by President Roosevelt's second term. African-Americans were able to secure jobs through the CWA, CCC, WPA, and NYA, and some were reluctant to accept employment in private industry because of the lack of discrimination on work projects.²³ A 1937 report on the projects of Michigan's National Youth Administration lauded the number (ninety-three total) of projects that included black youth. The projects, the report continued, included a variety of training opportunities, especially in Detroit, although whites benefited from training programs more than blacks. In August 1939, the majority of projects for blacks were in

23. Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 51, 69–72, 74–75.

recreation, library, gardening, clerical, health and hospitals, and construction and wood shops. They existed in nineteen counties, including Genesee, Kent, Saginaw, and Wayne, and employed 648 blacks among 5,093 total young people.²⁴ But the larger problem, according to the report, was that “after receiving this wonderful training, there are very few outlets for this training.” Few places would hire blacks, despite their skills, leaving the youth no better off in terms of employment.²⁵

Nonwhites did obtain work relief in Michigan. In Wayne County’s sample, 18 percent of all nonwhite ADC recipients had at least one family member assigned to a WPA job, compared to 15 percent among whites. In Saginaw County more than 20 percent of all nonwhite ADC recipients had a family assignment to WPA, compared to nearly 14 percent for whites. Rates for the National Youth Administration were highest for nonwhites in Wayne County, where nearly 10 percent of all ADC cases had a student assigned to NYA, compared to 3 percent for whites. Saginaw’s rate for whites and nonwhites was 3 and 2 percent, respectively.²⁶

The Civilian Conservation Corps provided employment for young men, most between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three. The program’s goal was to provide training and education for young men who could help support their families through CCC work. Although segregated, the CCC did offer some opportunities for nonwhites. Men worked in camps on a variety of conservation projects in forests, parks, and other public areas.²⁷ Michigan had more than 102,000 men in fifty-seven camps. The programs also reduced relief expenses for states and local governments. Enrollees sent more than twenty million dollars in wages to families, thus reducing their need for relief.²⁸ The assignments were predicated on aid for the family; the WPA, CCC and NYA wages were intended to help support the individual’s family, whether the individual was the parent, sibling, or child.

Michigan’s CCC program’s first priority was to combat the threat of forest fires. In the first two years, crews constructed 3,050 miles of truck trails

24. “Work Report by Districts and Counties,” August 16, 1939, NYA, from John B. Kirby, ed., *The New Deal and Black America* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984, microfilm), reel 6. This collection (hereafter cited as NDBA) contains twenty-five reels of microfilmed documents related to African-Americans and the New Deal agencies.

25. Letter dated August 27, 1937, from C. R. Bradshaw, acting director of the NYA in Michigan, to Richard Brown, deputy executive director of the NYA, NYA (Record Group 119), NDBA, reel 4, 1–2.

26. Virtually no OAA cases in any county had work-relief assignments, due to the unemployability of the recipients. Few also had family to support them.

27. John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), 30.

28. Roger Rosentreter, “Roosevelt’s Tree Army: Michigan’s Civilian Conservation Corps,” *Michigan History* 70.3 (May/June 1986): 22–23.

and 600 miles of firebreaks, as well as new fire towers. Men also worked on fish hatcheries and dams, and conducted lake surveys.²⁹ Bridges spanning the Muskegon and Manistique rivers (103 and 170 feet long, respectively) were completed, and crews improved miles of streams and planted more than seventy-five million fish into the state's waterways. They also established the Seney National Wildlife Refuge and Isle Royale National Park in the Upper Peninsula. In addition, the CCC was also a key part of firefighting efforts in the state, including stopping a fire on Isle Royale that burned 35,000 of the island's 132,000 acres.³⁰ The CCC left a significant legacy in the state's recreational and conservation systems.

Although many of the camps were segregated, they did provide black youth with employment (see figure 4.3). By 1940 the South contained ninety-three segregated camps and another sixty-eight were found throughout the country. Three camps were in Michigan, one of which was in the Manistee National Forest.³¹ The state also included a camp for Native Americans in the eastern Upper Peninsula.³² Blacks comprised about 3.5 percent of the state's population, but by 1941 held about 7.2 percent of the placements. Clearly black young men sought these positions, and at one point the Detroit Department of Public Welfare found itself with an inadequate number of places for blacks. Openings did exist for whites, but segregation prevented assigning blacks to those slots. Efforts to secure another Michigan camp for blacks failed, as federal officials believed that other states were in greater need of additional camps for blacks.³³ Assignment rates for the Civilian Conservation Corps were comparable for both whites and nonwhites in the Wayne County case sample: about 3 percent. But nonwhites in Saginaw County had more than 9 percent in the CCC, while whites had about 4 percent. As with other programs, the goal was to provide aid for the family. Enrollees were paid thirty dollars, twenty-two to twenty-five of which had to be sent home to dependents.³⁴ About ninety-two million dollars was spent on the CCC in the state during the program's history, and more

29. G. A. Young, "Michigan State Civilian Conservation Corps, July 1, 1933, to July 1, 1939," CCC Records, Department of Conservation, Box 1, 5, 7-10, State Archives of Michigan.

30. Rosentreter, "Roosevelt's Tree Army," 17-18.

31. Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 51, 74-75; Rosentreter, "Roosevelt's Tree Army," 21; "The CCC and Colored Youth," CCC (Record Group 35), Division of Planning and Public Relations, reel 8, 2; and "Negro CCC Camps," April 1940, NDBA, reel 8.

32. Rosentreter, "Roosevelt's Tree Army," 21.

33. Letter from Charles Taylor, Asst. Director, CCC, to G. R. Harris, Director of Detroit CPW, April 21, 1941, NDBA, reel 9. Harris argued that one reason for the decrease in white applicants was the renewal of industrial employment, which was open to whites but not blacks. See letter from Harris to H. J. Rigerink, CCC Selection, State Welfare Commission, March 9, 1941, NDBA, reel 9.

34. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps*, 30.

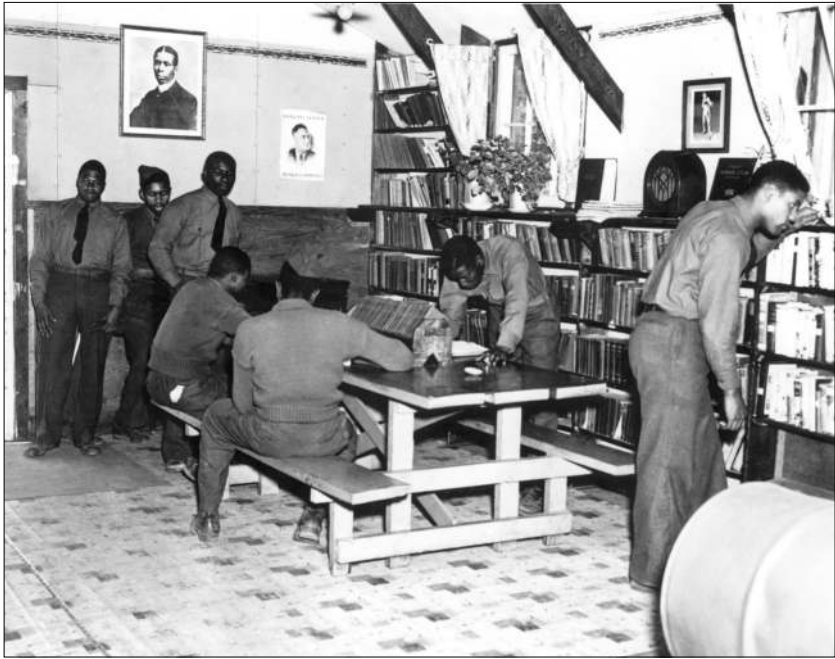


Figure 4.3 Enrollees in the CCC camp library in Bitely. Photo courtesy Archives of Michigan.

than twenty-one million of that was sent home to a camp enrollee's family.³⁵ While the benefits of the program were many, not all young men wanted to work in remote areas supporting their families, a trend explored more fully in chapter 6.

While the benefits of the projects were visible and many, the WPA and other work-relief programs were not without conflict. Local officials criticized the programs, but work-relief recipients also had complaints. Michigan was the site of significant organizing of the unemployed, including WPA workers, during the 1930s. Such activism was found throughout the state, including the Upper Peninsula. In the WPA, workers formed the WPA Project Workers' Union. Allied initially with the American Federation of Labor, the WPA union suffered from accusations of Communism, but even though such red-baiting hurt the alliance with the AFL, the union still expanded.³⁶ The state saw

35. *Second Biennial Report, Michigan Social Welfare Commission, July 1940–June 1942* (Lansing: December 1942), 20.

36. James J. Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed: Community and Union Activists in the Industrial Heartland* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 108–9. Lorence provides the most in-depth analysis of the organizing efforts of the unemployed throughout the 1930s.

thirty-four strikes between 1935 and 1937, and issues ranged from wages and basic working conditions to union recognition, hours, and the quality of the projects created under the WPA. WPA administrators, including State Director A. D. Hall, largely dismissed workers’ complaints, blaming the discontent on a handful of agitators. Historian James Lorence argues that the workers did have legitimate issues that warranted attention. Despite the lackluster administrative reaction, at both the state and local levels, the unions achieved some success, including increased wages in 1936. Such successes only fueled workers to join the union. The union also sought expanded projects and employment in 1938.³⁷

Most work projects, including those in the pre–New Deal years as well as the CCC, the WPA, the CWA, and most FERA projects, were directed at male heads of household or older sons. In fact, the CWA included primarily construction work, which eliminated employment for women. In response to demands for employment for women, Harry Hopkins, whose lack of concern for women’s employment has been documented, created the Civil Works Service.³⁸ The CWS included some white-collar work projects and also production-for-use programs, which employed women in canning, sewing, and other projects (see figure 4.4). But the CWS fell under FERA, and thus included both the means test and lower-wage rates and hours in contrast to the CWA program.³⁹ Work programs for women also employed only a fraction—perhaps 10 percent—of the total numbers of relief workers in Michigan. The number of women employed on the CWA, CWS, and education programs seldom surpassed 5,000 in the state in early 1934, and decreased further when the CWA ended.⁴⁰ In contrast, monthly numbers of workers peaked at more than 60,000 in November 1933, and again surpassed that figure in June 1934. A total of 475,669 relief workers were tallied from July 1933 to June 1934; women comprised only a small fraction of that total.⁴¹ Expenditures for women’s work projects totaled \$1.8 million—just a small part of the \$27 million spent in the second year of the work programs.⁴²

The trend continued under the WPA, with its emphasis on construction and public works improvement projects. Employment was not restricted to men only, but the goal was to employ male heads of household, if possible, to protect their authority in the family. This included putting “some brake upon

37. Ibid., 109–12, 117–20, 180.

38. Rose, *Put to Work*, 94–98; and Rose, *Workfare or Fair Work*, 39–41.

39. Rose, *Put to Work*, 47–48; Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward*, 44–45.

40. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment and Relief in Michigan*, 119.

41. Ibid., 97.

42. Haber and Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security*, 244; *50,000 Men*, 42.



Figure 4.4 Women working on a WPA sewing project in Manistee County. Photo courtesy Archives of Michigan.

women's eagerness to be the family breadwinner, wage recipient, and controller of the family pocketbook."⁴³ Married women were given WPA assignments, as in the case of Mabel Stevenson, who previously had worked as a domestic worker and as a packer at a celery plant. She and her husband, Henry, were both employable, but she was assigned to a Van Buren County recreation project in June of 1938. Henry, a day laborer, was having difficulty finding work, and apparently no appropriate assignment was available for him, and caseworkers accepted Mabel's request for employment. That ended eighteen months later, when Mabel was to be recertified. She was rejected "on the basis that the logical head of the family is not being certified."⁴⁴ The caseworker had bent the rules apparently, but the WPA supervisor rejected the certification.

Women with small children were also not perceived as "eligible" for WPA employment, although regulations did not directly exclude them. SERA's policy relating to women who received mothers' pensions and also supplemental relief from the WRC permitted certifying a son or daughter, if old enough, for WPA, in order to support the family. The policy specifically advised not certifying the mother for WPA unless there was another older person able to care for the children: "We do not want to defeat the purpose of the pension

43. Quoted in Rose, *Workfare or Fair Work*, 40.

44. Letter dated January 25, 1940, from Earl Scott, chief, intake and certification, Case #18155, VB ERA Records, Box 3, Folder 4.

law by stimulating those mothers to work outside the home."⁴⁵ WPA redefined "eligible worker" in its manual and included all women who were able to work, and did not specifically exclude mothers with home responsibilities. In the bulletin alerting county administrators to this change, SERA administrator Haber cautioned about applying the new rule to mothers: "It is not the intent to stimulate employment outside the home of women who have not previously sought such employment."⁴⁶ Some confusion seemingly followed, as Haber clarified the ruling a few weeks later, firmly stating that the new ruling did not mean that all women, "particularly those with small children," were required to be certified for WPA, unless they requested it and were willing to accept full-time work.⁴⁷

In practice, caseworkers went further than simply not encouraging women with children to seek employment; eligibility for ADC could exclude women from certification for a WPA project, or eventually cause them to be removed from their assignment. Mary Linderson, a divorced mother of two children, ages fourteen and sixteen, was a supervisor for a WPA sewing project in Saginaw. She began receiving ADC in mid-1937, and supplemented her grant with income from boarders. In 1938 she asked to be recertified for WPA, but caseworkers told her that they could not because she was eligible for ADC.⁴⁸

Women who were eligible for ADC but employed on WPA projects lost their assignments as the decade waned. Although some wanted to work rather than receive ADC, they had no choice. Hannah Justin lived with her two sons, ages eight and fifteen, in Saginaw. She also was employed on WPA but was removed in January 1939 because she was eligible for ADC. She applied for ADC that month. Justin faced difficulty finding private employment because she was separated from her husband but not divorced. She told her caseworker that she had been supporting and caring for her family on WPA before this, but had been given no choice in the change: "She feels that it is up to us to take care of her," wrote her caseworker, "and in a way that is true."⁴⁹ Even the caseworker acknowledged the agency's responsibility in this woman's unemployment problem. Justin eventually borrowed the money for a divorce and secured a factory job in December 1940. Gertrude Schneider faced a similar situation; a WPA employee from 1936 to 1939, she lost her assignment because

45. SERA Letter #445, August 30, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder July–September 1935.

46. SERA Letter #472, October 11, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder October–December 1935.

47. SERA Letter #485, November 1, 1935, SEWRC Records, Box 1, Folder October–December 1935.

48. Case C7300203, reel 4534, Saginaw ADC, case history, October 27, 1938.

49. Case C7300100, reel 4532, Saginaw ADC records, case history, April 19, 1939.

of her eligibility for ADC. She had seven children, four of whom still lived at home, ranging in age from six to fifteen. Divorced in 1938, Schneider faced the foreclosure of her home because she could not keep up the house payments and taxes. She supplemented her grant with income from doing laundry and watching her older daughter's children, but did not leave the relief roll until her son secured a full-time job in 1942.⁵⁰ Thus women who had supported families with WPA income were removed from their jobs to receive ADC. The grants, which barely covered their children's needs, required supplementation through odd jobs, including doing laundry, taking in boarders, or providing child care. ADC recipients were not eligible for WPA jobs until 1942.⁵¹

The WPA union provided support when a group of Detroit mothers employed on WPA projects successfully protested such efforts, staging a sit-in strike to protest announced layoffs of all workers eligible for ADC. They did not want to exchange their monthly wages of eighty-six dollars (or more) for ADC grants that would provide just eighteen dollars per month for the first child and twelve dollars for each additional child: "For this group of women the Social Security Act became a threat to their minimum standard of living."⁵² Two days of occupation, with the support and aid of the Wayne County Federation of Labor, the United Auto Workers, and the WPA union, yielded an exemption for the projects from Harry Hopkins in Washington DC, allowing the mothers to keep their jobs.⁵³

Not all women, however, were unhappy to leave WPA jobs to remain home full-time to care for their children. Rachel Raney, an African-American mother of three children whose father had deserted the family in 1932, supported her family with day work and later a WPA sewing job, in 1938. She was laid off WPA in early 1939, but welcomed the chance to stay home. She believed her fifteen-year-old daughter needed her. She supplemented her grant with day work, and was admired by her caseworker, who believed she had done a good job keeping her family together despite the absence of her husband.⁵⁴

Another criticism of the women's work projects was their emphasis on unskilled work, particularly in the case of sewing and domestic work, the

50. Case C7300239, reel 4535, Saginaw ADC records.

51. Case C7300215, reel 4534, Saginaw ADC records.

52. Arthur L. Stone and Martin Kahn, "Detroit Sits Down to Work," *Social Work Today* 4.8 (May 1937): 14.

53. *Ibid.*, 15.

54. Case C7300279, reel 4536, Saginaw ADC records; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 224–25. Jones argues that for some black women, particularly in the urban North, "New Deal welfare programs afforded an opportunity to place family considerations over the demands of white employers."

"dumping ground" for women relief workers.⁵⁵ Few work-relief projects, in fact, except those targeting white-collar workers, translated into skills that would be marketable in private employment at reasonable wages. White-collar workers had the skills before the Depression, and such projects offered no training. Unskilled work for women did not command the wages for unskilled work for men, of course, and thus few women who needed long-term work advanced their position in the labor market. An undated press release, "The Negro and the WPA," boasted that those black women who participated in the household training programs not only secured jobs after completing the programs, but also received higher wages than they would have earned otherwise.⁵⁶ Such training programs hoped to raise the status of domestic work by "professionalizing" it through training and standards, but they proved ineffective.⁵⁷ In many cases, such programs trained women to take low-wage, low-skill jobs in their local communities, particularly in areas with a high demand for domestic or agricultural labor. Women of color were aided the least by the work-relief projects, and were even referred to as the "problem children" in the program. Speaking in part of their disadvantaged opportunities and training, the term also connotes paternalism, and is suggestive of blame on the part of black women. The women—in this formulation—were the problem, not the labor market or the work projects.⁵⁸

Noncitizens suffered from the drive to provide employment only to citizens, whether in the private sector or in work-relief programs.⁵⁹ The WPA and private employers often refused jobs to noncitizens, fueling the belief that if they would leave, there would be enough jobs for Americans. Twenty-year-old Maria Gortez supported her entire family—her widowed mother and four siblings—with a WPA job in Saginaw, although her mother also received a small ADC grant to supplement Maria's earnings. Caseworkers noted that supporting the entire family "was too much to be expected of her." But she later lost her WPA job because she was not a citizen, and also could not obtain factory employment without having her first papers, which could take up to a year to

55. Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 72; Blanche Weisen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933–1938, Volume II* (New York: Viking, 1999), 87–88.

56. "The Negro and the WPA," WPA (Record Group 69), NDBA, reel 21, 6.

57. Alfred Edgar Smith, "Negro Project Workers: 1937 Annual Report," WPA, NDBA, reel 21, 2; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 205–6, 218; and Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933–1938*, 261–62.

58. "Narrative Report," Division of Women's and Professional Projects, January 1937, Press release, NDBA, reel 21.

59. Cases appear in Saginaw and Wayne regarding noncitizens denied employment either by private businesses or WPA. See also Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore*, 75–76; and Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929–1939* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1984), 128–29.

obtain.⁶⁰ Caseworkers had no choice but to increase the ADC grant to make up for Maria's lost wages.

Social workers also criticized the overall limited effects of WPA, in particular with respect to its gender and age discrimination, but paid little attention to the discrimination against people of color and the foreign-born. County WRC administrator Louise Armstrong lamented the lack of employment for women in general in Manistee County, and recognized that the work-relief programs did little to add to those opportunities.⁶¹ Gertrude Springer, author of the Miss Bailey series in the *Survey*, agreed, noting that projects rarely taught actual skills, nor, for those women who had never worked outside the home, did the projects instruct workers in how to function in a wage environment. Springer used Miss Bailey in the articles to illustrate issues prevalent in the administration of relief. In one article, Miss Bailey believes that the programs can do much more: "It seems to me we are missing a chance in not using projects to give these women something that industry or business is likely to want and that might rescue them from being last hired and first fired."⁶² The tendency toward public works projects excluded not only women but also older men. Many could no longer do the heavy work such projects required, but were able to work in a different capacity.⁶³ WPA was simply not enough; it was only for the best of the unemployed. And the WPA could not even serve all those eligible for work. The numbers of WPA jobs in no way kept pace with the number of employable people on the relief rolls. In July 1938, employable cases accounted for 40 percent of the direct relief caseload, but only if the WPA employment slots had been increased from 40,000 to 175,000 could that number have been reduced to 25 percent. The WPA was simply not large enough to address the employment needs of all those able to work.⁶⁴

Both direct and work relief provided significant aid to Michigan's unemployed. Millions of dollars came to the state and helped to alleviate the considerable hardship of the Depression. Families were the target, usually through the men in the household. But such aid was not without conflict, even within families. Caseworkers—those who sought to "professionalize" public welfare—were at the center of the administration of relief. The development of social work in public welfare, and the conflicts that occurred during that process, add another layer in the relief negotiations of the 1930s.

60. Case C7300120, Saginaw ADC Records, reel 4533, case history from August 4, 1937, and September 20, 1937.

61. Armstrong, *We Too Are the People*, 304. See chapter 10, "Women and Creeds and Christmas Toys."

62. Gertrude Springer, "Border Lines and Gaps," *Survey* 71 (November 1935): 333.

63. *Ibid.*, 332.

64. Granger and Klein, *Emergency Relief in Michigan*, 88–89.