GEORGE S. McGUIill of Wichita is one of the less well-known persons who have represented Kansas in the Senate of the United States. Yet he was diligent in working for the interests of his constituents. He was also the first Democrat in Kansas history to be twice elected to high statewide office. Indeed he defeated two better-known men, Republicans Henry J. Allen and Ben S. Paulen, the first in 1930 considerably because of Allen’s personal unpopularity then, the second largely because of the availability of the coattails of a popular Democratic presidential nominee and the emergence of a significant third-party vote. McGill’s only previous election campaigns had been victorious. Those had been in running twice for Sedgwick County prosecutor, in which office he served from 1911 to 1915. He had also been active in Democratic politics over the years and he had won credit for being an industrious campaigner in 1930 and 1932.

The big challenge for McGill in 1937 and 1938 was how to remain in the Senate, for despite his qualities of diligence and concern, there were few other factors working in his favor. He was a bald, somewhat paunchy man of no flamboyance and little imagination. He was not a war veteran. Nor was he a graduate of one of the large Kansas colleges, having received his degrees from Central Normal College at Great Bend and the law school of the University of Iowa in his native state. In running for reelection in 1938, the 59-year-old McGill would not likely have the luck of drawing another unpopular Republican opponent, and Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s popularity had declined in Kansas after his reelection in 1936.

Nevertheless, McGill was not without resources. He had become the second Kansan in history to hold a seat on the Senate judiciary committee; he was, which perhaps made up for his lack of war service, chairman of the pensions committee; and he was the fourth of 14 Democrats in seniority on the agriculture and forestry committee. He influenced federal patronage in Kansas, and he had a skeletal personal political organization. McGill had been an active supporter of the New Deal and chairman of the Kansas delegation to the 1936 Democratic national convention, which added to his influence in trying to keep his often rambunctious fellow partisans together. Moreover, this moderate senator had done nothing to outrage the sentiments of most of the state’s Democrats and Republicans.

Crucial to McGill’s reelection campaign was his sponsorship of what became the second Agricultural Adjustment act, which he saw as his main chance to remain a senator. This was all the clearer to him after many Kansas farmers had serious problems when the Roosevelt administration curtailed relief after the 1936 election and when the railways ended emergency drought shipping rates. McGill was aware that his state’s farmers were far from happy with the original Agricultural Adjustment act and its stopgap successor, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment act, which seemed to favor large farmers and involved too much governmental intervention. The administration had, however, an obligation to devise permanent legislation to deal with the needs of larger farmers.

There was no guarantee that the Senate would mandate the new act. But McGill’s membership on the Senate Agriculture Committee meant that the majority of his colleagues would have a chance to take a vote in favor of the new act, with no guarantee that it would pass. The Administration would have to find a way to secure its passage in the House of Representatives. McGill would have to figure out a way to make the new act acceptable to his colleagues on the Senate Agriculture Committee, and to other senators who might oppose the measure.

George McGill (1879–1963) was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1930 to fill the unexpired term of Charles Curtis. He was reelected for the first full term of six years in 1932, becoming the first Democrat in Kansas history to be twice elected to high statewide office. This partisan cartoon by Ralph Faulkner sketches McGill’s career through the 1932 election. In the Senate, McGill was chairman of the pensions committee and a ranking member of the agricultural committee. Crucial to his reelection campaign in 1938 was his sponsorship of what became the second Agricultural Adjustment act.


Senator George S. McGill, Election of 1938

Born in Lucas Co., Iowa—Emigrated to Kansas, aged five—George's brothers and sisters—count by.
Elected to the U.S. Senate, 1929, to fill the unexpired term caused by Chas. Curtis' resignation (when Charlie retired to the Vice-President).

A real son of the soil—born and raised on a farm—attended the Kansas Rural Schools.

Graduated at Great Bend, Kansas—from.
Studied in a law office.

Admitted to the bar in 1903—began his single in Wichita—1904—

George McGill, Attorney at Law (30 years in Wichita).

1900 to 1916—served his county as Assistant and as Prosecuting Attorney.


One of Kansas' famous public speakers (introduced 4 speeches' talks in his last campaigns).

A counselor in the court of democracy for justice and a square deal for farmers and workingmen.

U.S. Senator George McGill of Kansas.
Attorney, prosecutor and statesman. Who believes in action rather than words; a dynamic of political precedent. He has won his way by sincerity, shrewdness and actual accomplishments.
with the vexing agricultural problems of overproduction and low prices. If a formula were found which was acceptable to most farmers and if McGill were associated with it, his path to reelection would be eased.

It has been suggested that, in farm states, the second Agricultural Adjustment act was the overwhelming cause of the defeat of many Democratic candidates in 1938. A close look at George McGill's senatorial and political work in 1937 and 1938 will be a test of this idea. It is the thesis of this study that the legislation did play an important role, but that there were other factors which contributed to his defeat at the polls. One already suggested is McGill himself, but there are other factors which will be discussed.

ONE POSSIBILITY concerns controversies over judicial matters, which McGill was especially caught up in as a member of the senate judiciary committee. The first controversy was personal, and it came as a result of the death early in January, 1937, of George T. McDermott, the Kansan who served on the federal Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. By January 22 it was public knowledge that McGill was being considered for appointment to the court. He was at first silent on the matter. He must have found the appointment tempting, at least in terms of removing himself from the patronage pressures he disliked as a senator. Indeed it would have relieved him from involvement in replacing Judge McDermott and federal district court Judge John C. Pollock, who died on January 23.

McGill told his associates by January 26 that "I'm taking no action" because it was "inappropriate" for anyone to be "an applicant" for a judgeship. This did not mean he was uninterested, for a power among Kansas Democrats, federal Commissioner of Internal Revenue Guy T. Helvering, was working on the senator's behalf and with his knowledge. On January 28 another Kansas Democrat, Cong. John M. Houston, wrote that McGill's court appointment had been approved up the line; it was now "strictly up to the President." Moreover, Assist. Atty. Gen. Joseph B. Keenan had interviewed the senator on the matter for the government, although McGill did not commit himself to take the judgeship. McGill was possibly suspicions of whatever had led him to be considered for the position. Congressman Houston commented that Helvering was rumored to want appointment to the senate, which he could get if McGill became a judge. Houston believed that if people were trying to ease McGill out of the senate, "he might . . . tell them all to go to hell." 6

The senator withdrew from consideration for nomination to the court of appeals early in February. Whether the reason was, as he told the press and his associates, that he felt obligated to fill out his term in the senate is unclear in view of his longstanding rivalry with Commissioner Helvering and former Democratic Gov. Harry H. Woodring. In any event, McGill must have felt confident that he could be re-elected. And there was no doubt expressed in the press or by McGill that he could have had the judgeship if he had wanted it. His associates were elated by his decision, although one of them told the senator "that you have put sentiment above your better judgment." Moreover, former Democratic Cong. Randolph Carpenter agreed with John Houston that some of their party's Kansas leaders had been trying to get McGill out of the senate. He believed that McGill, by his decision, had prevented a split in party ranks and had strengthened himself as a candidate for 1938.

McGill's problems on judicial matters were just beginning, however. This was partly because he received some pressure to get two Kansans on the federal bench to replace Judges McDermott and Pollock; it was partly because on February 5 Roosevelt proposed his controversial judicial reform plan, which would have allowed supreme court justices over age 70 to retire with pay or have offset up to six of them.

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with the president's own nominees. When McGill had withdrawn from consideration for the appellate judgeship, he had urged that a Kansan be nominated for the position. He soon presented the name of Judge L. E. Goodrich of Parsons. The senator's activity was, however, neither successful nor well publicized, so the pressure on him to get a Kansan or two on the federal bench persisted.

The situation became so bad that by February, 1938, Congressman Houston reported that McGill was very upset and embarrassed by various independent moves to get another judgeship for Kansas. Moreover, he would not say, or did not know, whom he would recommend for the bench. "He is in a tight spot," Houston asserted, "and knows it." It was rumored in Washington that McGill would have the appropriate legislation "killed in the Senate." Whether or not McGill was responsible for it, Sen. Carl Hatch of New Mexico blocked the bill. When another bill authorizing a federal judgeship for Kansas was introduced, McGill hastened to say that it "was not introduced by me and I have had nothing to do with it." He did join with his colleague in the house, Republican Clifford R. Hope, to get legislation passed to provide for a federal district court session at Hutchinson. This did not involve the appointment of another judge, however. Why McGill was reluctant to crusade for additional Kansas judges is unclear, although he was known to have been alarmed by the federal judiciary taking over state obligations. Possibly, he also feared splitting his party by backing the wrong nomination.

He acted more astutely on Roosevelt's judicial proposals. Two of the senator's political allies reported within a month after the issue was broached that Kansans were not alarmed by it. He was sensitive, however, to the controversy of the measure nationally. He did not intend to be a rubber stamp any more than he intended to appear an enemy of the President. As McGill wrote to U.S. Atty. S. S. Alexander on March 5, 1937, "I have carefully avoided taking a definite stand on the legislation as a whole and do not expect to do so until the matter has been thoroughly studied and considered by the [judiciary] Committee. However, in a general way I am favorable towards many of the proposals." He told Alexander that his mail had been violently opposed at first to altering the composition of the supreme court, but that now it was more evenly divided.

By the middle of April, McGill was urging speed in the hearings of the judiciary committee, for they had been "unduly prolonged." He separately declared that he would not join those who would strike down the Roosevelt "administration and its usefulness to the country." He did, however, favor some amendments to the legislation. Yet, on April 24 the Associated Press ranked him among the four senators who were not on record on the court bill. McGill was not only being cautious, but he was also biding his time. On April 28 he introduced an amendment to the judiciary bill which would have allowed the President to name only two additional justices to offset those more than 75 years old who had not retired from the supreme court. The senator was plainly splitting the difference between President Roosevelt and his opponents. The issue was not settled until July 22 when the senate recommitted the judiciary bill, which signified that Roosevelt's plan to reorganize the supreme court had been defeated.

One can only surmise the extent to which judicial issues affected McGill's campaign for reelection. Although attorneys, politicians, and the press in Kansas commented publicly on such questions, they seldom did so stridently or for long. It is impossible, therefore, to judge how important judicial concerns were to voters in 1938. McGill may have avoided splitting the Democrats of Kansas by remaining in the senate and by his compromise position on the President's court bill; yet it is probable that some voters were influenced against McGill.

Connections with FDR no asset in 1938

In this photograph taken September 15, 1932, in the offices of Gov. Harry Woodring, George McGill is standing left with Franklin D. Roosevelt and John N. Garner, Democratic candidates for President and Vice-President, seated, and Dudley Doolittle, Democratic national committeeman from Kansas, standing right. McGill defeated his better-known opponent, Ben S. Paulen, in 1932 largely because of the availability of Roosevelt’s coattails. In 1938 McGill’s reputation as a staunch supporter of the President and the New Deal was no advantage in Kansas.

because he had not opposed Roosevelt on the nationally controversial supreme court issue; but it is unlikely that the matter of judgeships for Kansas, specialized question that it was, swayed many votes in the 1938 senatorial race.12

McGill’s chief concern was agriculture, partly because it was the state’s biggest interest and partly because the Roosevelt administration had yet to develop a farm policy to replace the judicially invalidated Agricultural Adjustment act of 1933. After President Roosevelt’s reinauguration in 1937, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace moved quickly to formulate a farm policy. He called 50 agricultural leaders to the capital to work on establishing an “ever-normal granary” proposal, which would have crop surpluses carried over to lean years and thus avoid superfluous production being dumped on the market. This supposedly would allow, over the years, for fairly constant supply and prices for farmers and consumers. And it would be made feasible by granting farmers loans to carry over their surpluses from flush production years and permitting them to repay the loans when prices were high in short years. The farm leaders endorsed the outlines of Wallace’s plan and established a committee of 18 to draft the legislation. By April the committee had turned out a draft bill, which was largely the handiwork of the American Farm Bureau Federation. The measure was based on the ever-normal granary idea and proposed parity payments, marketing quotas, production controls, and perpetuation of the government’s soil conservation program; by May the appropriate committees of congress were considering the bill. Of importance to George McGill and other Midwesterners was that for the first time the concept of marketing

quotas was to be extended to wheat and corn, which was intended to put a floor under the income of their producers.\textsuperscript{13}

Senator McGill had made clear in January, 1937, that he considered farm legislation among the highest priorities of the 75th congress. He particularly sought to establish himself as a champion of crop insurance and better soil conservation provisions. As discussion mounted of the ever-normal granary proposal, U. S. Attorney Alexander advised McGill that Kansas' farmers were strong in principle for such legislation. The senator also heard from farm interests directly and often about the need for legislative action, which seemed to confirm Alexander's assessment.\textsuperscript{14}

The chief problem was that while most agriculturalists wanted something done, they disagreed on particulars. Many farm organizations contended that the Farm Bureau had dominated Secretary Wallace's conference of 50 leaders and the resulting committee of 18. Not only did the radical Farm Holiday Association and the Grange stand in opposition, but the National Cooperative Council wanted more time to consider the legislation and the Farmers' Union affiliates were scattered in their early reactions. Not surprisingly, politicians also split on the issue. Many Republicans on capitol hill opposed the measure for partisan reasons; other congressmen criticized it as an additional step toward regimentation; some, basically representing nonfarm interests, believed the bill could not benefit their constituents; still others objected to its cost, and there were those who thought that the bill did not go far enough.

McGill was edging meanwhile toward taking his stand. On June 17 he spoke over the radio network of the Columbia Broadcasting System on "The Administration of Agricultural Policies," in which he emphasized the need for congressional action. This was a prelude to the senator's decision to take a leading role in breaking the stalemate on the farm bill, H. R. 7577. This he did on July 5 by sponsoring—— with Sen. James P. Pope of Idaho—a senate version of it, S. 2787, in order to counteract a less compulsory and inclusive new house version, H. R. 8505. McGill did this at the request of Secretary Wallace, undoubtedly to have some influence on vital legislation and to help his campaign for reelection the following year.\textsuperscript{15}

The Kansas senator received immediate reaction. O. O. Wolf of the Kansas Farm Bureau was highly pleased with the Pope-McGill bill. Some leaders of the Farmers' Union in Kansas charged, however, that the bill gave "arbitrary powers" to the secretary of agriculture and did not follow the principles "agreed upon by real farm leaders." Thus McGill learned quickly that if he had been subjected to great pressure to do something for farmers, he would hastily be condemned when he did so. His tactic, besides patiently explaining what S. 2787 contained, was to emphasize that he welcomed suggestions on the bill from farmers. Consonant with this, he took to the National Broadcasting Company's radio network in late July to discuss the Pope-McGill bill.\textsuperscript{16} The stakes were high, probably higher than McGill had expected, and he set himself to turning the legislation to what he thought was his and the farmer's best advantage.

S. 2787, despite changes by Senators McGill and Pope, still closely resembled the earlier bill favored by the Farm Bureau. Of course, Secretary Wallace's ever-normal granary concept was central to the Pope-McGill bill as was continuation of the soil conservation program. Yet it provided for commodity loans and controls, parity payments, marketing quotas in years of overproduction, and some compulsion even if it required referenda among affected producers. H. R. 8505, the farm bill introduced by Cong. Marvin Jones of Texas, was closer to the thinking of the National Cooperative Council, the Grange, and even Wallace. It did not call for parity payments or mandatory controls on production. Plainly, the administration was gambling that the differences in the two measures would soon be worked out. It was


\textsuperscript{15} Congressional Record, 75th Cong., 1st Sess., v. 81, pt. 10, Appendix (1937), pp. 1531-1532; Wichita Morning Eagle, July 6, 1937; McGill to John Vesely, July 8, 13, 1937; John E. Bregan to McGill, June 29, 1937, "McGill Collection."

Miscalculations, over optimism, and a slow start for the campaign . . .

Harry H. Woodring (1887-1967), elected Democratic governor of Kansas in 1930, lost his reelection campaign in 1932. An early backer of Roosevelt, he served as FDR’s secretary of war and wielded considerable influence in Kansas Democratic politics. McGill was never close to the Woodring wing of the party and his contention that he was an independent-minded senator was hurt when Woodring characterized him as a loyal Roosevelt supporter. The Woodring statement was just one of several miscalculations by the senator’s backers during the 1938 campaign.

Richard M. Long (1898-1971), a member of the Wichita Eagle news staff, specialized in business and political reporting before going to Washington in 1934 as McGill’s executive secretary. Long’s newsletter which was syndicated to some Kansas newspapers helped keep constituents informed of McGill’s activities, but the senator’s supporters in the state were scattered and unorganized. Not only were his aides overly optimistic, McGill was slow in getting his 1938 campaign started. He even had Long restrain those who were eager to start the reelection effort.

Omar B. Ketchum (1898-1963), mayor of Topeka from 1931 to 1935, was an unsuccessful Democratic nominee for governor in 1934 and for senator in 1936. Some speculation notwithstanding, he did not oppose McGill in the Democratic primary in 1938. Assessing the election situation in October, 1938, he thought McGill would win easily, “unless the farm revolt should be much stronger than anticipated.” After the election, Ketchum blamed “petty differences” among Democrats and ingratitude on the part of agriculture, labor, and veterans.
wrong, for congress and agricultural interests were badly split on what the nation's farm policy should be largely because most farmers were more prosperous in 1937 than they had been since 1929. Therefore, many of them were tempted to believe that they could make do with a voluntary program of production controls. Yet farm production boomed again and fear arose as to what it would bring. It is not surprising that one result was a multitude of conflicting proposals as to how to deal with overproduction.

The first session of the 75th Congress came and went without the house and senate acting on the farm bills. By October 12 the situation was, however, bad enough that Roosevelt called congress into special session on November 15 to enact farm legislation. The senate agriculture committee was active, too. Reflecting their nervousness about the farm situation, the committee's members had arranged for regional hearings on S. 2787. Three subcommittees were engaged during October in this business. McGill joined Senators Pope and Lynn Frazier of North Dakota to hold 20 days of sessions in nine Western cities. McGill and Pope issued a statement saying that 85 percent of the witnesses favored the ever-normal granary program as represented by S. 2787. The two senators vowed to work to have the agriculture committee report their bill out for senate action the day after the special session began.

Opinion was remarkably diverse. Of course, the Farm Bureau staunchly supported the Pope-McGill bill. Pres. Homer B. Grommon of the Farmers National Grain Dealers Association opposed S. 2787 declaring that not only was the issue individual freedom, but it was obvious farmers could handle their surplus production better than would the Department of Agriculture. One Texas farmer demanded only outright federal subsidization of farmers and a New York state agriculturist opposed federal intervention because farmers "do not care to be serfs." Clarence Poe, the editor of the Progressive Farmer and Southern Ruralist, was among those speaking for restraint through increasing the price of gold in addition to enacting S. 2787. Robin Hood tried to come to the rescue. This secretary-treasurer of the National Cooperative Council pointed out that his organization's executive council had rejected "compulsory production control" and "pegging loans above market prices" in favor of voluntary ways of adjusting acreage and handling surpluses.

McGill was optimistic for his bill's chances of approval. The debate in the senate began late in November. It became ferocious and protracted, however, for amendment after amendment to S. 2787 was offered in parliamentary maneuvering. McGill was very much caught up in all this, though mainly behind the scenes as befitted a floor manager. He also kept up a steady flow of replies to the bill's critics, explaining patiently S. 2787's provisions and the latest amendments to it. And many of his correspondents needed this, for it was plain that they had misinterpreted its complicated provisions.

On December 17, after four weeks of wrangling on the floor and in cloakrooms and offices, the senate passed S. 2787 by a vote of 59 to 29. McGill had the pleasure of seeing his fellow senator from Kansas, the veteran tribune of farmers, Arthur Capper, among the three Republicans who supported the bill. The house, in agonized but less lengthy debate, had approved the amended Jones bill, the lower chamber's equivalent of the Pope-McGill bill, on December 10. Now it was up to a conference committee to reconcile the differences between the two measures. Among the committee's members were McGill and two of his Kansas colleagues, Representatives Senator Capper and Rep. Clifford R. Hope.

George McGill was highly active in fighting for his bill in the conference committee and in public. As usual his was a gentlemanly approach, though he took on all comers. He told the press that President Roosevelt’s budget estimate of $440 million for soil conservation payments was “entirely inadequate.” What McGill and his cosponsor, Senator Pope, demanded was $500 million. The Kansas went to the public in other ways. For example, on January 15, 1938, he spoke for 15 minutes on the National Broadcasting Company’s radio program sponsored by the Farm Bureau. The producers of one commodity and in one region must, he declared, understand the situations of all and their intricate relationship to each other. “Balance among all the farm commodities which American agriculture produces and balance with the production of industrial goods will be possible only when farmers have available the means to plan and work together and are not competing individually or in regional or commodity groups.” His talk was not spritely, but its message was clear. McGill’s legislation would allow farmers to come together to achieve balanced, efficient production of all commodities. The alternative was disastrous competition.

The in-fighting on the farm bills was fierce in the conference committee. It was a long, slow process, and the legislation became all the more complicated as a result. It was also a polishing process, for as Sen. Ellison D. Smith had said early in the committee’s deliberations, “everything is in a mess. The public might as well know that these bills were ill-digested, that they were not thought out in all particulars.” Smith was right that they were a mess, though it was largely because too many people had failed to compromise before that point. Whatever the problem, the committee did make progress in shaping up the legislation. Finally, on February 3, the conference agreed on a report for action by the house and senate.

The conference committee’s report was complicated. The measure it recommended provided for marketing quotas on corn, cotton, rice, tobacco, and wheat, subject to the approval in referendum of two thirds of the growers of each commodity concerned. If the quotas were adopted in any given year, the Commodity Credit Corporation would lend money to farmers for the amount of production above that permissibly marketed on the condition that it would be stored for sale in slack years. The bill also contained provisions for, among other things, parity subsidies to farmers; continuation, as Senator McGill insisted, of the soil conservation program; extension of the administration’s commodity surplus removal operations; the creation of four regional laboratories to find new uses for crops; and a federal crop insurance program on wheat, another of McGill’s great interests, one of which large numbers of farmers would take advantage.

There was spirited debate in congress on the conference committee’s report. Nevertheless, the house agreed to it, 264 to 135, on February 9, and the senate did so five days later, 56 to 31, except that congress failed until summer to appropriate funds for parity payments. Roosevelt approved the act on February 16. The new law was a patchwork of legislative clauses and compromises which satisfied no one fully. In for a penny, in for a pound, was George McGill. He decided to make the most of the Agricultural Adjustment act of 1938. It seemed that, despite all the disagreements and misunderstandings, most farmers would accept the measure; certainly, a large majority of them were to take advantage of its provisions. Senator McGill’s chief newspaper supporter, the Wichita Eagle, got into the spirit of things, proclaiming on February 16 that the new law was “the best farm bill ever enacted.” In a lengthy review in March of McGill’s career in the senate, the newspaper was ecstatic about his work on the legislation, especially as a champion of crop insurance for wheat producers. McGill tried to help the good work along in March with a speech over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network on the farm act. Moreover, partial payment was made on political debts as Pres. O. O. Wolf of the Kansas Farm Bureau and Gen. Mgr. M. W.


More of a target than a beneficiary of agrarian feelings

Ortho O. Wolf (1874-1944), president of the Kansas Farm Bureau, was one of McGill's constituents who was pleased with the Pope-McGill bill, a senate version of the legislation which was to become the Agricultural Adjustment act of 1938. But the AAA was to become one of the decisive issues in the campaign, repeatedly forcing McGill to take the defensive, explaining its advantages and benefits. Even Wolf, who supported him, conceded that the regulations promulgated by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration were hastily drafted and therefore were faulty and vexatious.

Dan D. Casement (1868-1953), Manhattan cattlemian and writer, was president of the Farmers' Independence Council, organized in 1935 to discredit the New Deal and fight the AAA and government control of agriculture. The organization's agitation against compliance with the farm law was based on the premise that the regulations would regiment farmers and be destructive of individual liberty. Casement's group as a propaganda organ had some success, as did the regulations themselves, in stimulating a negative political attitude toward anyone connected with the legislation, including McGill.
Thatcher of the Farmers' Union Terminal Association praised McGill for his role in connection with the new law.26

Acceptance seemed in the works. In April one of McGill’s campaign organizers observed that at a meeting of some 200 farmers at least 90 percent of them were fairly satisfied with the farm act. The office of the Department of Agriculture’s statistician in Topeka also reported news that predicted acceptance of the legislation. The stocks of wheat on farms and in storage places in Kansas on April 1 was almost 200 percent higher than a year earlier; in fact, it was the largest on hand since 1934. The statistician later forecast the production of “the second largest winter wheat crop ever grown in the State.” This was seen as good news for the farm law’s supporters. It explained U. S. Attorney Alexander’s report to McGill in May that, despite some quibbles, wheat growers overwhelmingly “feel that it is necessary for them to comply with the Agricultural Adjustment act of 1938.”27 It seemed that the assumed blessings of the law would lead farmers to show their gratitude to its authors in the 1938 elections. This was an illusion, however, for McGill’s close connection with the farm act would make him more of a target than a beneficiary of agrarian feelings.

Yet the Kansas senator had other problems, which can be categorized under the labels of political misfortune, especially, and ineptitude. These included his lackluster personality; his putty-fingered rhetoric; his being considerably a lone ranger in the state’s politics, through necessity and probably inclination; his slowness in organizing his campaign forces; and his doggedness in doing his job in Washington. He also had the reputation of being a staunch supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal, which would be no advantage in Kansas in 1938.

McGill had done yeoman service in getting patronage, although his success was limited, given the superior positions of War Sec. (and former Gov.) Harry H. Woodring and Internal Revenue Commissioner Guy Helvering and their inclination to favor their own brand of Kansas Democrats. As chairman of the Senate pensions committee, McGill was in a better position to be of service, especially with respect to espousing the expansion of veterans’ pension benefits. The senator also was active in trying to solve his constituents’ problems with the government, though cutbacks in federal resources in 1937 and 1938 hindered him here. Moreover, he believed that Roosevelt’s and Gov. Walter A. Huxman’s election victories in 1936 meant that Kansas “is becoming more and more our way all the time.” This feeling must have contributed to McGill’s decision to remain in the Senate rather than take a judgeship.28

After McGill withdrew from candidacy for the bench in February, 1937, one of his organizers declared that the 1938 “campaign is now started.” The senator did not see it that way, however, discouraging the organization of McGill clubs “at this time if at all.” He also, thanks to the press of business in Washington, seldom returned to Kansas until after the 75th Congress adjourned during the summer of 1938. Of course, he often sent messages of greeting and congratulations to his constituents as well as autographs, a few small donations, and letters of encouragement to prospective first voters. There was also the newsletter by his aide, Richard M. Long, which was syndicated to some newspapers. The Democrats in Kansas, however, who were oriented toward McGill were scattered and long left unorganized, which impaired preparations for the senator’s reelection campaign.29

Then there were rather fruitless excursions and memorials in 1937. McGill’s associates viewed his 1930 opponent, Henry J. Allen, as a large problem. The former Republican senator was writing editorials and making speeches, though for what specific purpose the Democratic leaders did not know. Allen infuriated the state’s Democrats in May. They had arranged for Democratic National Committee Chairman James A. Farley to speak in Wichita. Allen got Farley, however, to agree to be editor for a day of the Wichita Beacon. As publisher


29. P. C. Baird to McGill, February 5, 1937; McGill to Baird, February 27, 1937; McGill to S. S. Alexander, March 11, 1938; McGill to David T. Bridgforth, April 14, 1938, "McGill Collection."
Democratic debacle at
the polls . . .

Walter A. Huxman (1887-1972), Hutchinson
attorney, was elected governor on the Demo-
cratic ticket in 1936. McGill, who was close to
him in outlook and who would be running with
him for re-election, went to some lengths in
1938 to work out good relations with the gov-
ernor and Huxman reciprocated. But both
men were defeated and the Democrats suf-
fered losses in other election categories with
the big swing back to Republicans in Kansas
in 1938.

Marcellus Murdock of the rival newspaper, the
Democratic Eagle, fulminated, Farley was
"being used as a newspaper whore" during his
visit to the city. Another furor erupted in No-
vember when the Eagle itself failed to mention
McGill in preliminary publicity connected
with a trip to Wichita by Agriculture Sec.
Henry Wallace which was meant to boost the
senator.30

Problems of patronage were ever present.
McGill and Long often complained to Wal-
lace's office that the senator was not being
sufficiently consulted on patronage and that
available jobs in Kansas frequently went to
Republicans. This led to cool relations be-
tween the secretary and the senator, and Wal-
lace advised McGill to calm down and wait for
the new jobs which would result from enact-
ment of the new agricultural adjustment mea-
sure. Nevertheless, during 1938, 115 appoint-
ments in the Department of Agriculture were
made on McGill's recommendation. It is not
surprising that the senator did not respond
favorably when Pres. Harry B. Mitchell of the
United States Civil Service Commission urged
him to insert a requirement for the "merit sys-
tem in open competition" for employment
under the Pope-McGill bill. After all, the Kan-
sas senator was bedeviled by patronage ques-
tions, and he needed all the resources he could
find. 31

McGill's aides worried about who might run
against him in the 1938 primary election. The
name that arose most often was that of Omar B.
Ketchum, who had been the unsuccessful
Democratic nominee for governor in 1934 and
for senator in 1936. This speculation resulted
from Ketchum's actions, which seemed like
those of a man who wanted another chance,
and there were friends of McGill who saw
Henry Allen behind them. There was also the
possibility that Woodring and Helvering might
back a candidate against McGill for the nomi-

McGill, May 28, July 14, 24, 1937. R. M. Long to Castor, November
M. Long, January 26, 1938. John E. Brogan to McGill, June 29,
1937. McGill to Julien N. Friant, February 16, 1938. McGill to
17, 1938. Harry B. Mitchell to McGill, August 12, 1937, ibid.;
Friant to McGill, December 15, 1938, "Long Collection."
nation. There was even some mention of Woodring himself running for the Senate in 1938, but that was not taken seriously and, like Ketchum’s supposed candidacy, it came to naught anyway.32

Harry Castor, McGill’s former law partner, told him in January, 1938, that things looked promising over the state, although McGill was not as well known in the western sections as were Senator Capper and Congressman Hope. And there were problems about the Democratic senator’s prominence. He relied chiefly on publicity coming into Kansas, for example, his exposure on national radio hookups. Even in the pages of the Wichita Eagle, McGill got far less publicity than Governor Huxman, Senator Capper, and former Gov. Alfred Landon. And that was not for lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Eagle’s editors, who gave the Democratic senator front-page headlines when he was even mentioned in a wire-service story. It was just that McGill did not generate as much news as the others, or did not know how to.33

The senator was diligent in answering letters from his constituents, but rather unimaginatively so. He would usually pass them on to the appropriate federal agencies. Then McGill would send the answers, which were rarely encouraging, back to his constituents with a cover letter saying that the reply was “self-explanatory.” This tactic did not make him seem vitally interested in his constituents’ problems. Moreover, McGill was not a person who seemed very interesting. He had no hobbies except for a little fishing. The most he could say of himself which made him seem human was that he had had “a dog of which I was very fond.”34 McGill’s diligence as a senator never came across to the public very well, for he did not work hard enough, except during campaign times, at politicking and publicity.

There were sensitive issues, too, he had to deal with. On foreign policy, McGill had trod the safe path of the time, declaring that he was for “broad, strict Neutrality legislation.” Yet, in 1938 he stumbled on that path by signing a letter of greeting from members of congress to the deputies of the Spanish Cortes. Many Catholics interpreted this as a gesture of support for the Loyalist government, which they saw encouraging communism and atheism. McGill denied that this was his intention, and he later spoke in the senate supporting the embargo against arms to Spain, under the title “Communism versus Catholicism.” As he had failed to get a federal judge for Kansas, he also was unable to obtain for the state a federal crop insurance office and one of the four regional agricultural laboratories.35 This must have seemed to some a sign of weakness in the senator who had been a sponsor of the legislation which authorized those two programs.

Then there were difficulties within the Democratic party. McGill had never been close to the powerful Woodring-Helvering wing of the party, and he had not established close relations with Governor Huxman, who was nearer to him in outlook and with whom he would have to run for reelection. From all reports, Huxman was making a good impression as governor. McGill went to some lengths in 1938 to work out good relations with the governor, who reciprocated. The senator’s chief workers among labor were unhappy with Huxman, but McGill ordered them to support and to cooperate with the entire state ticket.36

McGill’s biggest political problem was his slowness in organizing his campaign for reelection. When one enthusiast wrote early in 1938 offering to help, the senator replied that it was too soon. Of course, he did not complain when in March the Wichita Eagle ran a laudatory review of his work as “A Kansas Senator for Kansas,” but such publicity was scattered. There is no question, though, that he was so engrossed in his business in Washington, he did not early enough pay attention to his reelection campaign. As McGill wrote to state Rep. F. B. Shacklett early in June, “I have not

had much opportunity to keep up with the activity of the candidates in the republican primary." He hoped that following the adjournment of the senate later that month, he would be able to "give more attention to matters of this kind.” Perhaps McGill believed his aides, who were overly optimistic, and thought himself more popular than he was; perhaps he was counting on being renominated without opposition; perhaps he thought the Republicans would discredit themselves in the struggle for their senatorial nomination among the controversial former governor, Clyde M. Reed, the noisy anti-everything, super-American evangelist, Gerald B. Winrod, a prominent former state senator, Dallas Knapp, and an also-ran candidate. Whatever it was, McGill failed to take precautions in case he was wrong in his assessment of the state's political scene.

Certainly, optimism, or the display of it, too long reigned among the Kansas senator’s supporters and aides. Henry Castor wrote Richard Long in April that things looked good for crops, campaign organizations, and Democrats. In May Long wrote Castor that there seemed to be harmony among the forces of McGill, Huxman, and the state Democratic committee. Yet it was not until May 27 that Long told Castor to find space for the senator's campaign headquarters in Wichita. By June 3 Castor had found quarters, and he agreed that the state organization looked good. He added, however, that he was "a little jittery that the Senator isn't further along with his set-up."

There was also a problem with one of McGill's most effective workers, United States Marshal Lon Warner, whose basis of organizational strength, the railway brotherhoods, had told him to stay out of politics. This perturbed McGill, who urged him to get around the problem, which it took Warner some time to do. Nevertheless, even if some of the senator's aides were becoming edgy, American Federation of Labor President William Green's endorsement on June 10 of McGill for his "perfect record in support of labor legislation" must have buoyed their spirits."

The 75th congress adjourned on June 16. Lon Warner soon wrote McGill that "Everything looks fine," although the "sooner we start [the campaign], the better off we will be." He implied that this was true since McGill did have an opponent in the primary election. Yet the task of tying up loose ends in Washington, particularly working for liberal administration of the commodity loan program for farmers, kept McGill from returning to Kansas until early July. By the end of the first week of July, the senator still had not appointed his campaign committee; he even had Richard Long restrain those who were eager to start the campaign. It was not until September Long indicated that although his chief did not like the idea of McGill clubs, he might approve of them in Wyandotte county, the state's largest.

The new farm program was considered McGill's most pressing problem. He was caught between demands by farmers for assistance under the Agricultural Adjustment act of 1938 and the low commodity loans contemplated under it by the Department of Agriculture as well as the bureaucracy's slowness to grant the loans. Consequently, the senator often had to defend the new program while he was pressing the department to take the steps necessary to make it work. The situation was complicated by the fact that many Kansans did not think the regulations promulgated by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration were suitable to the state. The activities of Dan Casement's Farmers' Independence Council in agitating against compliance with the farm law was based on the premise that the regulations were destructive of individual liberty. Case-ment's group had some success, as did the regulations themselves, in stimulating a negative political attitude toward anyone connected with the legislation. Even Pres. O. O. Wolf of the Kansas Farm Bureau conceded that the


Republicans capitalized on low farm prices...

Clyde M. Reed (1871-1949), publisher of the Parsons Sun and governor, 1929-1931, was the Republican winner in the 1938 senatorial race with George McGill. The controversial former governor surprised McGill supporters by his disciplined, moderate campaign. Pressing the issue of low farm prices, he exploited agricultural discontent in Kansas and the senator’s close connections with the farm act and New Deal. McGill was defeated, 419,532 votes to 326,774.

The farm issue haunted McGill throughout the campaign and repeatedly he had to deal with it. In June he felt it necessary to make a major radio address on agriculture over the Columbia Broadcasting System. Democratic National Committeeman Lynn Brodick took charge of alerting county farm agents, postmasters, county Democratic chairmen, and county conservation committees to when the senator would speak. McGill went on the air the evening of June 21. He called the Agricultural Adjustment act of 1938 “a fine piece of basic farm legislation,” one which was based on the recommendations of farmers. He pointed out its many features, all in aid of providing short-term and long-range assistance and stability to America’s farmers. “Agriculture may look forward to the future with confidence,” he declared. “The whole country may be confident. The nation is going ahead.”

It was not until July 6 that George McGill arrived back in Kansas. Then, informally opened his campaign for reelection in Kansas City. He hailed the New Deal’s record and, by implication, his role in supporting and contributing to it. Not surprisingly, he termed the farm law “one of the great pieces of legislation in the recent Congress....” The senator and his aides also sustained pressure on the Department of Agriculture to make wheat loans at higher than the minimum rate allowable under law. McGill warned Secretary Wallace that “unless new loan program goes into effect at once [wheat] markets will be flooded.” He implied that Democratic nominees for election could, as a result of further delay, be defeated. Disappointingly to McGill and to wheat growers, the agriculture department on


July 14 pegged wheat loans at the legal minimum of 59 to 60 cents a bushel in order to encourage the greatest use of the bumper crop of 1938 and to discourage overproduction in 1939.42

As bad as the low pegging of wheat loans, their payment was thoughtlessly slow. Application blanks for the loans had not arrived in county offices by early August. McGill was irate and exerted further pressure on the Department of Agriculture to act. Farmers were expressing great dissatisfaction concerning the handling of the loan program as many of them were forced to take short-term private loans at high interest rates. Moreover, the government refused to make loans on wheat it deemed to be of marginal quality. The loan checks began to arrive in September, but, as Cong. Clifford Hope observed, “It certainly has been terrible the way they have delayed making these loans” when the agriculture department knew in June they would have to be made.43

McGill had to conduct both primary and general election campaigns. His primary foe, Joe Dohner, a Peabody farmer, ran little more than a nominal campaign, and the senator easily defeated him in August. More important was that the four candidates for the Republican senatorial nomination received some 248,000 votes while the two Democrats attracted only about 137,000. Yet McGill’s forces were looking beyond the primary to the general election. The Democratic newspaper advertisements began before the primary election and were run often until the November election. In his campaign McGill emphasized his efforts to achieve economic stability and relief in the farm act. He particularly identified himself with its wheat crop insurance and soil conservation provisions. Moreover, he was careful to make vows and promises to a variety of other groups, including oil producers, veterans, youth, labor, and military preparedness advocates as well as defenders of American neutrality. McGill often took to the radio, and he followed a gruelling schedule of speech-making over the state.44

Early on the senator received much encouragement. The Wichita Morning Eagle contended that Clyde Reed, McGill’s Republican opponent, would have trouble rallying the followers of his erstwhile primary election foes, especially those of the right-wing extremist, Gerald Winrod. McGill also got positive assessments from his own supporters who often wrote him as federal Internal Revenue Collector H. D. Baker did that “your campaign is going good.” Nevertheless, the senator knew that he was in trouble with many farmers and, as the campaign developed, with Reed. McGill worked hard to expedite wheat loans to farmers, and he conceded that however splendid the farm act was, it needed amendments.45

Others recognized McGill’s predicaments, too. Republican Congressman Hope saw in the bitterness of farmers encouragement for his party’s nominees in Kansas. On September 12 he cautiously predicted to a national Republican official that their party would carry both the governorship and the senatorship. Hope was more positive in his assessment of October 17, though he found it “hard to believe that the situation can actually be as good as it looks.” What made McGill’s plight worse was that the Democrats, according to Hope, were emphasizing their gubernatorial campaign. Democratic reports paralleled Hope’s. In response to an inquiry from Agriculture Secretary Wallace’s office, Richard M. Long wrote on September 14 that “things do not look as well as they did... our chief trouble lays with the Farmers [who] apparently are not as well sold on the [farm] program as they should be.” As requested by Democratic National Committee Chairman James A. Farley, Omar B. Ketchum assessed the election situation in Kansas toward the end of October. He predicted that Huxman would win handsomely and that McGill “should win easily unless the farm revolt should be much stronger than anticipated.” Ketchum also thought the senator might have problems because “there is some

44. Wichita Morning Eagle, July 17, 31, August 2, 15, 25, September 2, 3, 20, 25, October 13, 14, 15, 18, 23, 26, November 3, 9, 1938.
dissatisfaction among Democrats, chiefly over patronage matters."  

CLYDE REED definitely posed problems for McGill. The former Republican governor had the reputation of being temperamental. He surprised everyone, however, with his disciplined, moderate campaign. He safely described himself as "standing on the Republican platform and my lifetime record of devotion to the best interests of Agriculture, which is the most important thing to Kansas." He also championed the constitution, and he declared that after six years of the New Deal, the country had not recovered from depression. Real liberalism, he stressed, followed the path between "Big Business" and Roosevelt's "Big Government." Reed's supporters pressed the issue of low farm prices and suggested that the result would be McGill's defeat. Many of them also chided those who "rubber-stamped" the New Deal. Plainly, the Reed campaign, without being nasty, was exploiting McGill's close connections with the 1938 farm act and the New Deal, which were declining in esteem in Kansas, as well as the senator's mild association with the attack on the supreme court in 1937. Reed's campaign was helped by Arthur Capper's criticism of Roosevelt's "yes men" and the senior senator's about face on the farm act, which he condemned for promoting "centralization of authority in Washington."  

McGill counterattacked by saying that Reed was vague on farm issues and had been more hostile than himself toward the supreme court in 1937. The senator accused his opponent of being allied with Eastern and reactionary interests to destroy the agricultural program. He went to great lengths to declare that he was an independent-minded senator. This assertion was demolished, however, as War Secretary Woodring and Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley, trying to be helpful, soon afterward described McGill as a loyal supporter of President Roosevelt! That was not the only late campaign miscalculation made by the senator's backers. For one, there was the large advertisement, entitled "Reed Forgets," which gave the Republican much free exposure and only mentioned McGill's name in small letters at the bottom. For another, the senator's side failed to make arrangements for a special McGill edition of the Labor newspaper until it was too late to be fully effective.  

The campaign on behalf of George McGill continued energetically, however, until election day. His forces imported Democratic Senators Alben Barkley of Kentucky, Allen Ellender of Louisiana, Carl Hatch of New Mexico, and Josh Lee of Oklahoma to help. Moreover, Democratic National Chairman James Farley and Sen. Lewis B. Schwellenbach of Washington sent last minute telegrams of support. This and much else was to no avail, however. Reed defeated McGill, 419,532 votes to 326,774. Even Governor Huxman was beaten, and the Democrats suffered considerable losses in other election categories.  

Congressman Hope was proved right about the big swing back to Republicans in Kansas in 1938.

UNHAPPINESS among farmers was the reason most often cited for the Democratic debacle at the polls. Henry Wallace was "shocked," and he pointed out that the party's losses were largest in farm areas, especially in corn and wheat states. One McGill worker proclaimed that "The farmer is the most ungrateful person in the world," another declared that "Kansas farmers must have been in a stupor." McGill contended that the election results were "due largely to low commodity prices." He believed that the state's farmers "will find they have made a mistake," that it


48. Wichita Morning Eagle, October 15, 23, 25, 27, November 1, 2, 6, 1938; Long to H. O. Bennun, October 25, 1938, "Long Collection."
was “difficult to get them . . . to be willing to understand the farm measure.” Representatives of the Farmers’ Union agreed that agriculturalists were responsible for the Democrats’ losses. As one group of them wrote Secretary Wallace, what else could one expect given the farmer’s financial plight. John Vesecky, the Kansan who had recently been elected president of the National Farmers’ Union, told Senator Capper, “We do not expect to ask for repeal of the present agricultural act, but we do believe it needs a lot of amendments and that farmers should be assured a fair exchange price.”

There was, however, more behind the election results than agricultural discontent. McGill’s associates cited a variety of other problems: some postmasters and other Democratic officials did not cooperate with the campaign; the Republicans worked hard and effectively for their victories; the opposition had taken over the vote of relief workers because they had gotten control of a good deal of patronage; and some voters reacted adversely to Mrs. McGill campaigning with her husband. Omar Ketchum blamed “petty differences” among Democrats and ingratitude on the part of agriculture, labor, and veterans. McGill conceded that “there was a landslide against us and I do not believe anyone could have overcome it.”

Certain factors were, however, overlooked in the postmortems and the lamentations over voter ingratitude. The slowness of the Department of Agriculture in making loan payments and the low per bushel price of the loans must have made many farmers even more unhappy than they already were. Moreover, judicial issues probably contributed to the growing adverse reaction to the Roosevelt administration and those, like McGill, who were associated with it. Yet it is clear that there was an at least equally important reason for McGill’s defeat. He just did not organize early enough or handle himself astutely enough to enhance his chances for reelection. One can further suggest that the senator suffered from having too little flair for the theater of politics. Indeed even the Wichita Eagle concentrated more on Republicans in its news columns, and why not? They were more interesting and better at making news than was McGill. All this suggests that scholars must be careful in citing the reasons for election results. Given what happened in Kansas in 1938, agricultural discontent was probably the chief reason for McGill’s loss. It was, however, only one of several reasons, all of which tended to reinforce one another.

What of McGill after the 1938 election? He resumed the practice of law in Wichita, but he did not forsake politics. He ran again, unsuccessfully, as his party’s nominee for the senate in 1942, 1948, and 1954. He was also a delegate to the 1944 Democratic National Convention, and he often worked in Democratic campaigns and spoke out on the issues until his death in 1963. Nor was he exiled permanently from Washington, for he served as a member of the U.S. Tariff Commission from 1944 to 1954. In short, for a generation George McGill was an important part of the democratic dialogue in Kansas.

