UNEMPLOYMENT REMAINS THE MOST HAUNTING legacy of the Great Depression. The best estimates show that the percentage of the civilian labor force in the United States without work rose from a modest 3.2 in 1929 to a colossal 25.2—or 12.3 million people—in 1933. Construction activity virtually ceased. Manufacturing output, especially of durable goods, contracted sharply; industries such as iron and steel, lumber, and cement shed labor to a much greater extent than non-durables, examples of which are textiles, food, and tobacco. The unemployment data, however, masks the extent of the suffering as many classified as at work found their hours of work, and therefore their pay, reduced. Moreover, few occupations escaped substantial reductions in wage rates. Once the families of the unemployed are aggregated it is easy to see that many millions of Americans faced the unenviable reality of hard times.

Unfortunately, generalizations can obscure as well as inform. The aggregate data presented does not tell us, for example, which age, sex, occupational or ethnic groups were most affected by this crisis, nor does it give any indication of the geographic variations in economic disintegration. Indeed, attempts made to ameliorate the impact of the misery can only be comprehended if the actions taken by individual states, and the communities within them, are analyzed. An account of these unprecedented years in Kansas makes a valuable contribution to understanding not only the progressive worsening of the depression at grass roots level, but also the response of people and institutions to it.

Kansas is primarily a farming region; indeed in 1930 only Texas had more acres of farmland than the Sunflower State. Farmers are not normally victims of mass unemployment. When industry is faced with declining demand and squeezed profits, it responds by reducing output and discarding workers. This course of action is not a possibility for the vast bulk of farms where labor is supplied by the farm family. While output in manufacturing and the construction industry falls, farmers will only be prevented from maintaining or even increasing production by adverse weather. Nevertheless, a state whose economy depends heavily on farm income will be seriously affected during any period of agricultural distress.

The 15th Census of the United States (1930) recorded 622,276 gainfully occupied workers in Kansas. Agriculture, with 229,544, was by far the most important employer. Table 1, however, shows that large numbers of Kansans worked at nonfarm pursuits. There are no exact figures which chart the incidence of unemployment amongst these groups, but all were affected. For example, the railroad companies laid off thousands of office workers. This had a devastating effect not only in Topeka but also in smaller towns such as Parsons where such employment was relatively more extensive. When oil companies shut offices, white collar workers were also fired, together with the unskilled. Amongst the professional groups, teachers suffered the most. All these people needed help.

Peter Fearon is a senior lecturer in the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Leicester, Leicester, England.

The author would like to thank Professors J. C. Clark and D. M. Katzman for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper; they are not responsible, of course, for any of its deficiencies. Generous funding from the SSRC, the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation has enabled the author to undertake research on Kansas during the 1930s at the National Archives, Washington, D.C., the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, and the Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas. The author is happy to place on record his appreciation for the assistance given whilst working at these institutions.

1. For an account of the depression see Peter Fearon, War Prosperity and Depression. The U.S. Economy, 1917-1949 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), especially chapter 3.
In 1929, Kansas had 47,367 wage earners in manufacturing and was ranked twenty-third in the nation as to the volume of its manufacturing output. The leading industries, with employment figures in parenthesis, were meat-packing (11,001), railroad repair shops (9,552), printing (3,812), petroleum refining (3,597), and flour milling (3,219). Manufacturing activity was not evenly distributed throughout the state. The most committed counties, with wage earners in parenthesis were: Wyandotte (14,035), Sedgwick (5,925), Shawnee (3,847), and Montgomery (3,322). Some counties had no measurable manufacturing at all. In addition, coal, zinc, and lead were mined in the southeast corner of the state; Kansas was also a major producer of salt, oil, and natural gas.

Yet another sign of diversification in the Kansas economy, and also of its vulnerability to unemployment, was urbanization which had been continuing apace since the turn of the century. By 1930, nearly thirty-nine percent of the population was classified as urban, using the standard census definition of a settlement of more than 2,500 people. The urban population was not evenly distributed; 56 of the 105 counties had no urban dwellers at all in 1930 and only 10 of the remaining 49 had more than one incorporated city over 2,500 people. There was a clear correlation between urbanization and the presence of manufacturing, industry, or mineral extraction. Using 2,500 residents as a yardstick for urbanization is not entirely satisfactory as centers below this figure are often indistinguishable from those above it. There were, however, by 1930 twenty centers in Kansas which had more than 10,000 residents though three of these—Kansas City (121,837 inhabitants), Wichita (111,110 inhabitants) and Topeka (64,120 inhabitants)—far outstripped the fourth largest, Hutchinson (27,085 inhabitants).

The drift of population from the countryside to the town, so noticeable during the 1920s, was restricted as the depression began to bite. A shortage of urban job opportunities kept many rural people on the farm who would, in other circumstances, have moved to the city. In addition, urban misery encouraged a “back-to-the-land” movement, the extent of which is difficult to assess for these years. Nevertheless, it seems clear that more people moved back to farms in Kansas between 1930 and 1933 than moved to towns. Many of these rural dwellers swelled the numbers of the disguised unemployed, a common feature of agricultural economics.

2. Figures are from U.S. Census of Manufactures: 1929.
4. Ibid., 72.

A demonstration intended to rally the unemployed in Columbus, Kansas.

One great advantage of the depression for the historian is that it led to a substantial improvement in the collection of statistics, especially those relating to the labor force. In 1931, the Kansas Department of Labor and Industry began collecting monthly data on employment and payrolls. At this time similar figures were collected for Kansas City by the University of Kansas Bureau of Business Research and by the Chamber of Commerce in Wichita. Some Kansas firms also had been cooperating with the U.S. Department of Labor which was engaged in compiling figures for the whole country. All this information was brought together to construct an index of payrolls and employment. (See Table 2.) The base is April 1930, a sensible choice which coincided with the return for the thirteenth census of the United States. Not all firms provided information; indeed, by 1932 only 1,100 did so in a state which had about 1,900 manufacturing enterprises. Nevertheless the improvement in the quality of information was significant.

The index, which measures changes in eight leading industrial sectors and in the state as a whole, shows that

employment fell by just over thirty percent between 1930 and 1933, while payrolls declined by nearly fifty-two percent. The steeper decline in the payroll index reflects not only shorter hours but also reductions in wage rates. Until the middle of 1931 both indexes moved in unison but from that date the decline in payrolls was much more rapid. Up to the middle of 1932 unemployment in Kansas increased at much the same rate as for the rest of the nation; the fall on the state’s payrolls, however, was relatively more modest. Although job losses had serious implications for many Kansans, unemployment was less severe than it was in the United States as a whole. Estimates prepared for the Social Security Board show that Kansas, with an average of 21 percent of its gainful workers unemployed between 1930 and 1933, was below the national average of 25.8 percent. Kansas was in a low grouping along with several southern states and fared better than its neighbor Missouri where the percentage figure was 24.2%.

Although it is tempting to seize on any published figures and use them with the utmost conviction, we should be aware of their limitations and interpret them with care. Even today there are formidable problems in defining and calculating the extent of unemployment. In the Kansas index, workers with part-time jobs, even if for only a few hours per day, are counted as employed. Consequently, the payroll figure is the more useful guide to economic misery. This index also assumes that during April 1930 employment conditions were identical in each of the separate sectors which it identifies. The series on minerals and mineral products would suggest, therefore, that the industries which comprised this sector—coal, lead, zinc, gas production, salt mining, and oil refining—did relatively well. Such an interpretation would be profoundly mistaken. The coal industry, for example, had already experienced years of contraction. In 1920 the 10,509 men attached to the industry worked, on average, 202 days; by 1929, 5,577 men worked, on average, 108 days. In an already depressed industry the scope for violent contraction is limited.

Although the quality of the information about the extent of unemployment improved between 1929 and 1933, for much of the period there was a great deal of confusion as to the exact numbers involved. An investigation on behalf of the President’s Emergency Committee on Employment (PECE) in November 1931 was told that between twenty and forty thousand Kansans were without work. The decision to apply for federal money in September 1932, however, necessitated a more careful count of the needy. By that point the state was judged to have 150,000 unemployed men and women. Put another way, 46,039 families and 7,719 non-family persons needed relief.

Unfortunately, no detailed analysis was made of the characteristics of the jobless between 1929 and 1933. However, a study of 74,000 applicants at employment or

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### Table 1: Principal Occupations in Kansas (1930)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gainful Workers:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Industries</td>
<td>692,276</td>
<td>374,823</td>
<td>317,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>229,544</td>
<td>222,028</td>
<td>5,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mechanical industries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plus construction</td>
<td>112,999</td>
<td>99,593</td>
<td>13,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>103,846</td>
<td>80,737</td>
<td>23,109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>80,481</td>
<td>75,421</td>
<td>5,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional services</td>
<td>54,516</td>
<td>24,310</td>
<td>29,906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic and personal</td>
<td>54,735</td>
<td>17,346</td>
<td>37,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>service</td>
<td>19,663</td>
<td>19,364</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraction of minerals</td>
<td>16,254</td>
<td>14,671</td>
<td>1,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public service (not elsewhere classified)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Including 38,905 teachers

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### Table 2: Index Numbers of Employment and Payrolls in Kansas (April 1930 = 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>All Industries</th>
<th>Food &amp; Allied Products</th>
<th>Mineral and Metal Products</th>
<th>Metal and Wood Products, construction materials</th>
<th>Flour Milling</th>
<th>Public Utilities &amp; Public Service</th>
<th>Service Industries</th>
<th>Trade &amp; Finance</th>
<th>Miscellaneous Manufacturing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>100.4</td>
<td>98.4</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>97.9</td>
<td>99.1</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>99.1</td>
<td>100.1</td>
<td>100.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>74.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kansas Commission of Labor and Industry, Report of Labor Department. (continn)

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SELF-HELP TO FEDERAL AID
unemployment offices between December 1, 1933, and December 1, 1934, reveals an interesting pattern which cannot be dissimilar to that existing in the earlier period. It showed that more than three-quarters of male applicants had lived in Kansas for over fifteen years; only 7 percent had been resident in the state for less than five years. Nearly 47 percent of women applicants were domestic or personal service workers, while 26 percent were clerical workers. Interestingly, 40 percent of women investigated were single and 37 percent widowed or divorced. The popular prejudice that women did not need jobs was far from the truth. Moreover, in this sample, the female unemployed were relatively better educated than the male. It is difficult to calculate the impact of the depression on ethnic minorities' jobs, but the Kansas City office reported that 26 percent of males registered were black as were 44 percent of women, both relatively high figures.\(^8\) In Topeka and Wichita, as the depression worsened, white women replaced black waiters and black domestics in a competition for scarce jobs that lowered wages for all.\(^9\) As the railway companies discharged labor, many Mexicans were left jobless; the last hired, first fired principle affected minority groups disproportionately.

As indicated earlier, the farm crisis did not usually result in unemployment for operators, but it did lead to a significant fall in income, thus affecting rural communities which offered services to farm families. The reasons for farm distress were a combination of bumper crops at low prices and the devastating effect of drought which was to become much more serious in 1934 and 1936. The value of farm output in Kansas was over $548 million in 1929; $441 million in 1930; $325 million in 1931; and a meager $204 million in 1932.\(^10\)

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Such a sharp reduction in income led to a reduced demand for the services provided by local stores and tradesmen. Initially, merchants gave credit to the unemployed and the farmers. By 1932, however, credit had been exhausted and many merchants faced bankruptcy. Where drought led to a reduced output of food and fodder, millers and meat-packer's could not escape. As prices and land values fell, the credit worthiness of farmers was undermined; inevitably many banks were placed under such severe pressure that they collapsed. Tax delinquency became widespread, especially in the western part of the state, as income contraction and rising real debts rendered payment impossible.  

Agriculture was an important seasonal employer not only for native Kansans but also for migrant workers. Under the circumstances outlined above, farmers cut hired help to a minimum. Many laborers moved to villages and towns so that they would be near relief work, but owners and most tenants stayed put. Some tenants did look for nonfarm work but it was in such short supply that they were forced to remain on the land. Rural poverty was a major problem in the state but such misery is often obscured and fails to attract attention compared with mass urban unemployment. The links between the farm and the nonfarm economy, however, meant that a significant change in the fortunes of one must affect the other. 

By 1932 all Kansas industrial counties were experiencing serious unemployment which was particularly disturbing since many of the jobless had been without work for long periods. In the rural counties, especially in the western third of the state, drought and low farm prices combined to produce misery. Indeed, in December 1933 the State Reemployment Service noted that the largest number of applications for work came from farm workers which, given their absolute numbers, is not surprising; the next group of importance was the construction worker. In many counties where the population was relatively low and the dependence upon agriculture great, the cry for jobs was real. Many of these men and women were far removed from the centers of nonfarm employment, but had they been closer their situation would not have improved. A combination of industrial and agricultural depression reduced job opportunities for all. 

The fact that unemployment in Kansas was relatively light and that agricultural distress was not as serious as it was in the Great Plains states as a whole cannot detract from the fact that the depression presented a pressing social problem. Nor was it any comfort for distressed Kansans to learn that others were worse off; they wanted action. As late as November 6, 1930, Gov. Clyde Reed was able to reassure the PECE that the state could adequately take care of its own problems. On January 10, however, under pressure from PECE, he agreed to form the Governor's Committee for Employment with Harry Darby, Jr., of Kansas City as its chairman and C.J. Beckman, Kansas commissioner of labor, as secretary. Initially the committee had a membership of twelve, but in September it was expanded to include a representative from every community with a population of over 5,000. The first meeting took place on January 20, by which time Reed had been succeeded by Harry H. Woodring. 

The Governor's Committee agreed that there was an emergency and analyzed possible courses of action, which would be presented to the public. Its priority, however, was to increase the quality of information on the impact of the depression so that help could be targeted on the most needy. The committee visualized itself as a conduit directing ideas to local communities which would spearhead the attack on the crisis. This central body and the local committees which it encouraged were not concerned with charitable relief; they existed solely to place those who were willing and able in jobs. Although the employment committees would liaise with the charitable organizations responsible for relief, it was stressed that they offered a new and quite distinct service. Moreover, local involvement was vital not only to avoid the possibility of duplicating the function of charities but also to ensure that those in need could be properly identified and helped. Local committees were better equipped to raise funds, to identify bona fide residents, and to judge what public work should be undertaken.

In the middle of 1931 an agreed structure emerged. It was suggested that under the direction of each mayor, a local committee should be established which would vary in size according to the needs of the community but should utilize the talents of those who had exercised leadership during the war. As many as five subcommittees—for registration, budget, finance, ways and

13. Reed to Woods, November 6, 1930, Box 82, File 620.1, Kansas Misc. Central Files, PECE, Record Group 73, National Archives, Washington, D.C. [hereafter cited as RG73, NA].

14. Lucey to Reed, January 5, 1931, and Lucey to Beckman, January 5, 1931, Box 82, File 620, Kansas State Committee, Central Files, PECE, RG73, NA.

means, and employment—would be required to tackle in a professional manner the task of guaranteeing employment. By October 1931 twenty-three cities had agencies and fourteen communities had committees whose function was to provide jobs for those unemployed who were able to work. Eleven of these structured their relief committees to comply with the suggestions of the Governor's Committee. However, while some cities had separate agencies for employment and welfare, these needs were combined in at least seventeen others, in spite of the insistence of the Governor's Committee. Moreover, many able-bodied unemployed were offered so little work relief that they had to supplement their earnings by recourse to charity.

The ideas discussed at the first meeting of the Governor's Committee embodied the philosophy already evident in PECE, with the addition of the economic xenophobia which is so often the by-product of depression. Thus, the imposition of a shorter working week, the avoidance of overtime, and the encouragement of work-sharing were popular with the committee. Employers were urged to retain their workers and to maintain wage rates and to implement federal and state construction work with great rapidity. Another idea which illustrates a commitment to the long term was the establishment of an economic council for Kansas using as its model the New England Council. In the short term, however, members of the public were exhorted to hire men to do odd jobs. The committee was also keen to discriminate in favor of native Kansans when state contracts were awarded and urged the use of Kansas materials, especially coal, in place of out-of-state fuel. This vision of the state using its political boundaries to act as barriers against the depression, while at the same time freely exporting unemployment, lacked both logic and reality.

At the next meeting of the committee in Topeka on June 11, it was agreed that a survey should be undertaken of Crawford and Cherokee counties where suffering was at its most acute. Indeed, during April a number of petitions from both business and organized labor in this region emphasized the dire circumstances into which so many had fallen. The spread of strip mining and the depressed market for coal had combined to pauperize most deep shaft miners. The committee also reiterated its commitment to the maintenance of the existing wage rate, to the use of local labor on all projects, and the return of transients to their place of residence. President Hoover had argued that unemployment was a local problem and that is how the committee viewed it.

Prior to August 31, Woodring called a meeting of labor representatives from all over the state to discuss their proposals for ameliorating the effects of the crisis. Labor leaders argued that the state, not the local communities, should take the lead in providing work or charitable relief. To overcome the financial problems which their radical view presented they suggested increasing the state tax on gasoline from three to five cents a gallon; issuing three-year bonds by cities and counties for the relief of those unemployed with at least two years residence and, if this were insufficient, the issuance of state scrip. In addition, labor requested that the governor call a conference of themselves and employers and insisted that not only should there be no further reduction in the work force but also that a five day week and six hour day without loss of pay be implemented.

Woodring referred these proposals to the Governor's Committee which duly met on October 7 to discuss them. The reply was drafted on October 20, and, not surprisingly, it dismissed out of hand what it viewed as demands of a semi-doole system. The responsibility for the provision of work for Kansans, the committee intoned, was the responsibility of the people of Kansas, not the state. Public works were desirable but could only be implemented when funds were available. All over the country expenditure was being reduced and Kansas could not depart from fiscal responsibility. An increase in gasoline tax would be a serious imposition upon consumers, leading in the long run to a reduction in funds, especially since federal highway grants matched part of gasoline revenue dollar for dollar. Furthermore, it was impossible to reduce the working week significantly without reducing pay on a pro rata basis. Finally, and somewhat disingenuously, the committee argued that there was no need to issue scrip since the state constitution obliged county commissioners to take care of the destitute.

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17. The New England Council was formed in 1925 to encourage cooperation between six states in a wide range of investigative and promotional activities. Its publications included the semi-monthly New England News Letter that publicized the industrial news of the region.

18. "Emergency Employment Activities," January 10, 1931, Governor's Committee Meetings folder, Box 58, Records of State Labor Department, Archives Department, Kansas State Historical Society (hereafter referred to as Records of State Labor Department).

19. Businessmen of Arma to Woodring, April 16, 1931, and Ina Hall to Woodring, April 29, 1931, Coal Industry folder, Box 59, Records of State Labor Department.

20. "Kansas Committee for Employment," June 11, 1931, Governor's Committee Meetings folder, Box 58, Records of State Labor Department.

21. Statewide Labor Organization to Woodring, August 31, 1931, Committee on Employment folder, Box 58, Records of State Labor Department.

22. Consideration of Proposals by Organized Labor (n.d.), Box 58, Records of State Labor Department.
Two Mexican workers employed at the Topeka shops of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. In 1931, Governor Woodring would ask railroad companies to provide this ethnic group with free passage back to Mexico.
committee, therefore, was firmly wedded to the notion of local rather than state initiatives. It also took note of the growing demands of taxpayers for reduced public expenditure. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that at a meeting on October 7 several members expressed concern about violence by the unemployed and evidence of communist agitation in parts of the state.  

During late 1931 the committee again turned its attention to Crawford and Cherokee counties. The region's problems had been highlighted in April when a group of businessmen from Arma wrote to Woodring claiming that in the southeast region 4,500 men were available for work but only 1,300 had jobs. Many of those employed, however, had worked no more than one hundred days in a year. Their problem was exacerbated both by coal imported into Kansas (5 million of the 8 million tons consumed were "foreign") and by the extensive use of labor-saving strip mining. Strip mining not only destroyed jobs but also land which fell in value and therefore undermined the tax base of the counties. In desperation, residents were leaving the neighborhood, letting their homes and property go for tax payment. As a result, it was difficult to finance even the local schools.  

Organized labor also petitioned the governor; the situation was so desperate that miners were dependent on the Red Cross for food. Even this meagre supply had now been discontinued and starvation was a reality.  

Beckman, to whom Woodring passed these pleas for comment, replied that oil was now so cheap that most consumers favored it. However, it was possible that coal could be used instead of gas in some state institutions and the public, through a publicity campaign, might be persuaded to use Kansas coal. Beckman went on to observe that the extension of oil and gas pipe lines had not only led to a fall in freight earnings and job losses on railroads but it also led to the displacement of coal in the home and in the factory.  

The coal issue was complicated by the existence of a deep shaft mine in the state penitentiary at Lansing. Prison-mined coal was used in the jail and, much to the fury of organized labor, in a whole range of state institutions. The Kansas State Federation of Labor requested that coal production at Lansing be suspended for at least a year. Beckman replied that such a closure was impossible; Lansing coal helped defray the cost of the prison to the benefit of the taxpayers. Moreover, if the penitentiary did not produce coal, its customers would be compelled to accept the next cheapest alternative which would be strip-mined fuel. Although the use of deep mined coal in state institutions would create mining and railroad jobs in Kansas, the closure of the Lansing shaft was too high a price to pay.  

The seriousness of the situation in southeastern Kansas was such that in November 1931, Woodring appointed a committee of five to study the coal industry, and he called a meeting of operators and miners to discuss ways in which the industry could be stabilized. In the same month a Kansas Coal for Kansans Committee was founded with Kenneth A. Spencer of the Pittsburg and Midway Coal Mining Company as chairman and Harry Turner, secretary of the National Retail Coal Dealers Association, as secretary. In a blaze of publicity the committee hired a special train to tour the state promoting Kansas coal at the expense of out-of-state fuels.  

Also in November, members of the Governor's Committee paid a four-day visit to Crawford and Cherokee counties. At the same time a representative of PECE, no doubt alerted by William Allen White, a member of that body, undertook a tour of the region. The Governor's Committee was told of mass unemployment and short-time work, which had reached such serious proportions in Cherokee County that merchants had shut off credit and many of the destitute existed on bread and water. One distressing effect of the depression was that children could not go to school because there was no money to clothe or shoe them. A welfare officer confessed that the 195 families on his list could be given only $1.50 each week. The county commissioners reported that the poor fund was in deficit and an appeal had to be made to the tax commission for the privilege of issuing emergency warrants. Fortunately their case was successful.  

In spite of the obvious poverty and the inability of local funding to cope with the situation, C. J. Beckman, who wrote the report for the Governor's Committee, viewed the situation in Crawford and Cherokee counties as serious but not critical. It was one which could be handled if the county and the city commissioners organized their communities with greater efficiency.
The PECE report is perhaps more interesting because it is the impression of an outsider. In it poverty was confirmed: children used newspapers for clothing during the winter, food was stolen, violence was a reality, and the liquor traffic was essential to ensure survival for many families. There was "ample evidences [sic] of moral and physical decadence," and it seemed clear that the region could not manage on its own. Indeed, William Allen White wired PECE headquarters pleading for advice as the problem in these counties was more than a local one.30

During November 20 and 21, 1931, a PECE field agent visited Emporia, Newton, Wichita, McPherson, Salina, and Kansas City. The general observation made was that when questioning bankers, mayors and the members of committees, or those in secure employment, the response was always optimistic. The unemployed, however, expressed depression and even rebellion. Moreover, it was clear that while cities made some attempt to help their unemployed, much less was done to assist those in rural areas. Even the urban programs were often none too successful. In Emporia, for example, there was no agreement on the numbers actually unemployed, but of the either 310 or 360 jobless only 80 had been given relief work. Out-of-town projects presented special problems. A road construction project in Ellsworth County employed about two hundred, but once the required weekly deductions for board had been made, the laborers had nothing left.31

There was still a strong belief on the part of the Governor’s Committee that Kansas communities could handle their own problems. When, in December, the PECE met with Darby, Beckman and Besore, all three men opposed William Allen White’s view that Crawford and Cherokee counties needed outside help. Their opinion was that both counties had the resources necessary for their needs and that as soon as money was raised it would be used for work relief. Men with families could work for three days a week at $2.50 per day. According to Beckman, $7.50 a week would keep those families in rural districts in "very fine condition," and he was willing to waive the required minimum wage of $4 because they were on relief work.32

Nevertheless, in spite of the outward appearance of confidence, the advent of the third winter of mass unemployment must have had a chilling effect. Several disturbing features of the continuing depression were evident in 1931. Beckman who, as state commissioner for labor, must have been well informed, noted a change in attitude amongst the unemployed. By the fall of 1931 they had become discouraged and were more demanding. Where previously they had accepted their fate now they petitioned, marched, and showed a worrying propensity to follow communist agitators.33

The strategy of attacking unemployment through work relief organized at the local level faced serious problems of funding. As profit margins were reduced so was the ability of business to subscribe to charitable causes. As personal incomes and savings fell, the popular system of persuading those employed to donate a proportion of their income to a fund to help those less fortunate became more difficult to sustain. Hard times and short hours limited the amount of private funds which could be raised. Moreover, as organized labor was quick to point out, drives to raise money often attracted subscriptions from those least able to pay. Such a drive by Topeka’s Citizens Employment Committee resulted in $26,000 being raised, eighty percent of which came from small-salaried people or wage earners. Direct action had to be taken to tap other more affluent sources.34

An alternative was to raise more tax revenue, but at a time of increasing tax delinquency, taxpayers were determined to see their burden reduced, not increased. As a result, public expenditure was cut and additional private donations were needed to make up the loss. Any program which required a rise in the fiscal burden would have been politically unpopular, nor was there any agreement as to what taxes could be raised without a special session of the state legislature.

William Allen White observed that one of the obstacles to fund raising in Kansas was absentee ownership. The headquarters of the major railroad and oil companies which operated in the state lay outside it, consequently, so did their interests. Money, however, was essential for both work and direct relief. As Beckman candidly conceded to White in September 1931, he was convinced that the state would not be able to cope during the ensuing winter unless the federal government could outline a general plan of assistance.35 In order to meet their local needs in 1931, political subdivisions raised all sums that were legally possible

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30. Preliminary Report of Visit by Field Representative (Nov. 1-5 1931, and White to Gifford, November 19, 1931, Box 249, POUR, Office of the Asst. Director, State Files Misc. (Kansas), RG75, NA. The quotation is from p. 8.
31. Special Report on Unemployment Situation in Certain Cities visited November 20 and 21, 1931 (A. E. Howell), Box 245, POUR, RG75, NA.
32. Report of Field Trip, December 11-19, 1931, Box 245, POUR, RG75, NA.
33. Beckman to Woodring, July 29, 1931, Commission of Labor and Industry—June to December, 1931 folder, and "Conference on Unemployment," August 31, 1931, p. 4-6, Labor Conference folder, Box 18, Woodring Papers.
under the poor fund levy. They also over drew other funds in order to fund work relief in the belief that these overdrawn sums could be repaid in 1932. However, during 1932, reductions in valuations and increases in tax delinquencies reduced the poor fund levy and made it impossible for the political subdivisions to finance work relief from other sources. In September 1932, for example, Wyandotte County faced the sort of financial problems which were replicated throughout the state. A vigorous Tax Payers League had effectively campaigned for a reduction in the tax levy. Valuation in the county had fallen to an extent which necessitated a rise in the tax rate to almost confiscatory levels. At the same time, the limit on levying additional taxes, issuing bonds, or borrowing money to assist the needy had been reached. Furthermore, the board of county commissioners and all taxpayers organizations had vetoed the idea of applying to the Kansas State Tax Commission to obtain the authority to issue warrants so that additional funds could be raised.56

If the counties were unable to take care of their own poor by 1932, could the State of Kansas help them? Practically all the state’s tax receipts came from three sources: the property tax, the gasoline tax, and the motor vehicle tax, which taken together accounted for around eighty-five percent of receipts in 1930 and 1931. Local tax revenues were almost wholly dependent upon property taxes. The alarming rise in delinquent taxes on farm real estate led to an acute problem, especially as general property taxes had, in 1929, reached a historically high level which could not be sustained during a deflation. In addition, the railroads were heavy taxpayers but the contraction of the system had led to the withdrawal of railroad property from tax lists, with consequent drop in revenue.

Woodring, of course, was anxious to present himself to the electorate in 1932 as the man who had reduced their taxes. In this he was successful, but a reduced tax revenue placed an additional burden upon fund raisers. Woodring, however, had only limited freedom to maneuver since borrowing by the state for general purposes, which included relief, was legally restricted. Constitutionally the State of Kansas could contract debts only through the action of its legislature, but the provision for miscellaneous borrowing outside general debt limits stipulated that the sum must not exceed $1 million.57 As the legislature did not convene until January 1933 even that $1 million would not be available until after the worst of the winter had passed.

The consent of the people for a greater sum could not be obtained before the general election due in 1934. Similarly, the counties and cities had their power to raise tax funds for poor relief curbed by law. The fiscal structure of Kansas was not designed to cope with a major economic crisis.

There were further meetings of the Governor’s Committee on December 21, 1931, (at Kansas City); February 3, 1932, (Wichita); March 5 (Topeka); and March 9 (Lawrence) for which no minutes have been located. Woodring then called a final meeting of the committee which met on April 1 at Topeka. To the historian of the depression this is a fascinating occasion, not least because the nineteen members were joined by twenty-five others giving a cross-section of Kansas opinion. By a stroke of good fortune the record of the meeting was taken down verbatim by a stenographer. Although occasionally marred by the imprecision of the spoken word, over fifty pages of evidence from prominent citizens, many of whom who had just seen their communities endure three years of depression, gives a remarkable snapshot of Kansas at a crucial moment in its history.

In Kansas City, Kansas, the heads of 8,000 families were out of work, but only a few had been provided with relief work in spite of the existence of a well organized local committee. Moreover, funds were now running short. Topeka’s mayor, Omar B. Ketchum, gave a very detailed account of his Citizens Employment Committee which registered the unemployed and organized relief work. Men with between two and four dependents obtained two days work at a daily rate of $3.20, paid in cash. Ketchum, however, doubted if Topeka residents could raise the money to fund this activity if the depression continued for another winter.58 A report from Parsons indicated that the unemployed there were offered two days work per week; morale, however, was slipping.

Asa Messenger delivered a rambling report on unemployment in Pittsburg. He spent a great deal of time describing the many obstacles which the needy had to overcome before help was given by his committee which deliberately kept a low profile lest outsiders were attracted by their largesse. A questionnaire was drawn up which, according to Messenger,

... covered nearly every question you could think of and it was a pretty good size sheet of paper printed on both sides. ... It revealed how long you had been in Pittsburg, whether you owned your property, how many in the family. It also asked how old you were, whether you had an automobile or a radio, which church you belonged to, and what lodges you belonged to. ...
A questionnaire obviously designed to deter all but the most persistent supplicants. After completion, its accuracy was checked by a specially appointed inspector who then reported to a secret committee which made the decision on entitlement to relief.

Pittsburg did not pay cash to the unemployed; instead provisions were distributed to them. Although Messenger was anxious to ensure that the recipients of relief performed some task, often as basic as chopping wood, even this work was not always available. In such circumstances the destitute had to promise that they would undertake the appropriate hours of labor at some time in the future. Thus, according to Messenger, the receipt of charity was not an issue.

Messenger railed against demonstrators who demanded cash relief and branded them as communist led. He was unsympathetic to any aims to establish a more generous system of relief for “If we started out to establish payrolls or jobs for everybody and just got everybody a job, they wouldn’t look any place else for one.” Messenger gave no indication that the economic crisis had reached disaster proportions in his locality, but the Crawford County Red Cross representative revealed that her bankrupt local organization was dependent upon monthly donations from the national body.39

In a typically elegant speech, William Allen White stressed the obvious: families could not exist on two or three days’ work each week. Dean Frank T. Stockton, the committee’s economics expert, asked the assembled group how it imagined Kansas was going to sell its produce to other states but at the same time refuse to buy from them. The situation he observed was now so bad that it was impossible to distinguish between charity and employment problems as the committee had once hoped. Moreover, reliance upon private charity had at least one undesirable result in that it placed a great strain upon contributors from lower income groups. It was becoming impossible to continue collecting money without reference to an ability to pay.

A note of radicalism was introduced when Samuel Wilson, manager of the State Chamber of Commerce, attacked the national preoccupation with balanced budgets and reminded his audience that not all government expenditure was wasteful. Throughout the meeting fear surfaced: fear of the dole, fear of the winter, and fear of labor unrest. This insecurity increased the already present economic parochialism. W. B. Hayes of Atchison raged that the federal government was building a hospital in Leavenworth but the labor used was recruited by out-of-state union organizers. This was unacceptable and he called for “the elimination of foreign labor and foreign labor means labor outside the state. . . . Are we going to . . . let these foreigners, as we might term them, take this money back to Missouri with them?”40

39. Ibid., 10-12, 15.

Some work projects such as that at the Abilene mattress factory gave women employment.

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The meeting provides interesting information on the extensive activity which took place in Kansas, especially in key urban areas, to finance relief. Concerts were planned and football games organized; lodges, fraternal orders, churches, parent-teacher organizations, and community chests all played a part. There were soup kitchens, the organized distribution of foodstuffs, and the adoption by police and fire departments of unemployed families. There was, however, no statewide organization of charity work or of the distribution of relief. In spite of determined fund raising the unemployed got little work. Moreover, it was clear by the spring of 1932 that another winter would impose an intolerable strain on hard pressed communities.

This crisis, like others, created an opportunity for leaders to show their mettle. How did Woodring cope with the exigencies which he faced during these troubled years? The governor seems to have had few positive thoughts on how to combat the depression. At meetings, his usual gambit was to inform the audience that he had no plan, or preconceived ideas, but had come to listen to the discussion. He was, however, quick to oppose any suggestions that taxes, for example, that on gasoline, should be raised. This was hardly surprising at a time when the public clamor for economy was both loud and clear.

In December 1931, Woodring refused to support a national petition, which had the backing of Governor Pinchot of Pennsylvania, requesting Red Cross aid for soft coal districts. Woodring argued that to do so would greatly exaggerate conditions in southeastern Kansas and would hinder the work of his Governor's Committee, which in any event had given him an assurance that there would be no real suffering in the district. His attitude provides yet another example of official complacency regarding this troubled region. On the other hand, Woodring was sympathetic to letters from black leaders complaining about their problems, which were exacerbated by racial discrimination. In response to a plea from B. L. Marchant he called for a black representative at the labor conference which was held in August 1931. This offer, however, which also was extended to the Order of Railroad Telegraphers, could be seen as the politicians' natural inclination to give way when there were no costs involved. Nevertheless, Woodring also acquiesced to a request for black representation on his Employment Committee and agreed with complainants who protested discrimination against blacks on highway relief projects. These were, of course, painless requests and needed no direct action. For positive help, black Kansans usually had to depend on themselves.

Mexicans were another racial minority hit by hard times. Most of them had come to Kansas to work on the railroad but were now unemployed, victims not only of the contraction in rail services but also of the "Kansas Jobs for Kansans" campaign. In Lawrence and in Salina there was mounting apprehension that these aliens were a charge upon their local communities and should either be deported or given free passage back to Mexico by the railroads which had been responsible for bringing them. Urged on by Beckman, Woodring wrote to the railroad companies and asked them to provide free transport for those who wished to leave or could be compelled to do so.

The alacrity with which Woodring acted was uncalled for. The U.S. Immigration Service, after a visit to Salina, came to the conclusion that the Mexicans they interviewed had lived in the United States for so long they could not be deported. Moreover, none of the fifteen families had been a public charge; they had received some help from the Red Cross which was a private charity. By September the situation in Salina had ameliorated and Lawrence's Mexicans, in spite of the offer of free rail transport, wished to stay. This episode demonstrates how adversity can encourage xenophobia.

Woodring was happy to agree with correspondents who proclaimed that unemployment would be reduced if married women with working husbands quit their jobs. This was a popular cause even amongst women. Woodring received a petition from forty-six married women from Arkansas City who were employed but felt that women who did not need jobs should be fired. However, even if those women who were deemed not in need of jobs could have been identified and removed from the labor force, it would have made very little, if any, difference to the unemployment totals. In addition, we should not forget that a large number of females,

41. Woodring to Gifford Pinchot, December 2, 1931, Labor Conference—Governor's Employment Committee—October to December, 1931 folder, Box 11, Woodring Papers.
42. B. L. Marchant to Woodring, August 27, 1931, and Woodring to Marchant, August 28, 1931, Labor Conference folder, Box 10, Woodring Papers.
44. Charles H. Bren to Woodring, July 31, 1931; Mrs. E. R. Corey (president, Lawrence Social Service League) to Beckman, July 3, 1931, Mexican Situation—Lawrence and Salina folder, Box 59, Records of State Labor Department; Beckman to Woodring, July 3, 1931, Woodring to A. B. Warner, Woodring to N. A. Williams, Woodring to F. A. Lehman, August 6, 1931, Commission of Labor and Industry—June to December, 1931 folder, Box 10, Woodring Papers.
45. F. A. Lehman to Beckman, September 6, 1931; Lehman to Woodring, September 6, 1931, Commission of Labor and Industry—June to December, 1931 folder, Box 10, Woodring Papers.
46. Woodring to Fred Schmidt, July 22, 1931, and Woodring to C. A. Dur [July 1, 1931, Commission of Labor and Industry—June to December, 1931 folder, Box 10, Woodring Papers.
47. "Married women who do not have to work . . . ." W. F. Walker folder, Box 58, Records of State Labor Department.
single, widowed and divorced, and therefore presumably in need of work, were unemployed.

It was the recognition of the desperate situation facing Kansas and the anticipation of help from the federal government that persuaded Woodrige to wire the mayors of eighty-eight Kansas cities, on July 11, requesting firsthand information about their plight. He wanted to know if they could care for their unemployed during the coming winter and asked for details concerning the numbers out of work and the amount of money required to provide work relief for them. Both Kansas and Washington had reached the conclusion that the state could not manage on its own.

Woodrige's request elicited sixty-three responses. A few cities—Anthony, Belleville, Beloit, Kinsley, Marion, and Salina—declined the offer of outside help. The remainder requested aid though their answers to Woodrige's questions were neither uniform nor systematic. Some returned figures for total numbers unemployed, others for dependents or families in need, or provided no information at all. Even though a few respondents requested an "indefinite" sum for aid, when all claims were aggregated the figure was $1,075,200; this was almost identical to the amount spent by all private welfare agencies in the state during 1932.

On July 21, 1932, President Hoover signed the Emergency Relief and Construction Act which made available to the states $300 million for relief, in the form of loans. Two days later Woodrige established the Kansas Federal Relief Committee (KFRC) with a membership of twelve; Dean Ackers, general manager of Kansas Power and Light Company, was appointed chairman. This committee met and deliberated with

49. Labor Conference—Governor's Employment Committee—Federal Unemployment Relief Committee folder, July 12-23, Box 11, Woodrige Papers.
50. Other members were: E. J. Laubengayer (publisher, Salina Journal); Harry Darby, Jr. (president, Darby Corp., Kansas City); H. B. Mize (secretary, Mize and Spillman Hardwood Co., Atchison); Lee Goodrich (labor lawyer, Parsons); G. H. Humphreys (president, Barton Salt Co., Hutchinson); Ralph Snyder (president, Kansas State Farm Bureau, Manhattan); W. P. Innes (president, Chamber of Commerce, Wichita); Homer Bastian (mayor, Atwood); Clarence Neviss (merchant, Dodge City); John G. Snutz (secretary, Kansas League of Municipalities, Lawrence). In a radio speech on July 23, Woodrige announced E. L. Jenkins, secretary of the Topeka Federation of Labor, as a member of the committee but his name does not appear on subsequent lists. Under the Statehouse Dome, 51.
great speed. One cannot fault Woodring for failing to appreciate the significance of this legislation, though it must be said that the vast majority of the country's governors also acted swiftly. The KFRC realized that accurate information would be needed if Kansas was to attract the federal money to which it was entitled. Moreover, the committee was adamant that this injection of money was to supplement that raised by local communities. In this they were in clear agreement with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to whom applications for loans would be made. The result was, of course, that the county continued to be the administrative unit for relief.

The state was divided into eleven districts and in each a KFRC committee exercised responsibility. Each of the 105 counties was required to have a County Federal Relief Committee (CFRC) consisting of no fewer than three members. All told, the CFRCs employed the talents of over six hundred Kansans, the vast majority of whom had been involved already in the relief business for some time. It was their duty to present the case for federal funds. The state committee required the county committees to undertake, on September 1, a survey of their needy and also to estimate the numbers likely to require relief during the coming winter. In addition, the sums required to provide work relief had to be calculated. These claims were then to be examined by the KFRC and, acting on the advice of this body, Woodring would make a submission to Washington.

It was the policy of the KFRC that federal funds should be used for work relief only. Counties, therefore, had to speedily draw up convincing work relief projects, the specifications of which were laid down in detail by the RFC. Federal money, moreover, would only be used to assist persons in proportion to their needs. The relief to which the needy were entitled had, opined the KFRC, to be determined in a uniform manner by meticulous social inquiry. Another KFRC instruction was that the rate of pay for those on work projects should not exceed the prevailing wage for similar work in the private sector. Ideally, work relief remuneration was to be slightly lower than local wage rates so that there would be every incentive for recipients to move to the private sector when jobs became available.

The applications from each county for federal relief funds (Rice County alone failed to make a submission) for the period September 1 to December 31 make interesting reading. Brown County, for example, reported a high level of unemployment in Hiawatha and Horton caused by job losses at the Rock Island Line workshops. Osawatomie in Miami County was similarly affected by layoffs at the Missouri Pacific shops. Decatur County reported crop failure, Douglas County ruinous potato prices, and Greenwood County a combination of low oil prices, bankrupt cattlemen, and bank failures. The catalogue of misfortune was extensive.

Some of the requests for financial assistance were relatively large. Cherokee County bid for $691,233 and Crawford County, whose spokespersons had pushed optimism only recently, asked for $357,000. In aggregate the claims came to $4,267,187, a sum far in excess of the $2.75 million which press reports suggested that Kansas might receive.

The KFRC, however, subjected each submission to careful scrutiny and in most cases sharply pruned the claims. Crawford and Cherokee counties found that their requests were reduced to $43,163 and $70,390, respectively. On the other hand, Shawnee, Wyandotte, and Sedgwick counties were allocated the sums requested, i.e., $99,480 for the first and $100,000 each for the others. Comanche, Ellsworth, Franklin, Graham, Jackson, McPherson, Nemaha, Stafford, Sumner, and Wabaunsee counties were judged to have sufficient resources and received nothing. Lincoln County had its modest bid for $9,600 raised to $6,118. The final submission by Woodring to the RFC, sent on September 24, was for $1,869,752. This sum which, it was stressed, would be used only for relief work and was to sustain ninety-four counties during the months of October, November, and December.

As required by the RFC, the application was accompanied by a very detailed table showing for each county, inter alia, the numbers on relief, the estimated amount available for relief expenditure during 1932, the state of the poor fund, and the sums available for distribution to the needy. Federal money was available only as a supplement to local funding; it was not designed to replace it. According to Woodring, misery could be found throughout the state but was especially pronounced in the southeast and drought affected west. The situation was now so bad that in spite of determined efforts, the state and its political subdivisions could no longer wholly meet relief needs.

Kansas' application was the product of detailed work by the KFRC. On what basis did this committee summarily reduce the claims of so many counties? The KFRC made a distinction between the general relief projects which formed the basis of many hastily concocted claims and work relief projects as defined under the Emergency Relief Act.

53. Woodring to Directors of RFC, September 24, 1932, Box 34, RG254, NA.
did was to cost any work in their locality which could be done by relief labor. They should have realized, however, that federally financed work relief was not available to those who were merely unemployed but to out-of-work people who had no resources of their own. Moreover, such work was to be given only in amounts which would satisfy needs on a deficiency budget system. The KFRS scaled down claims accordingly, though it is possible that much of this difficulty stemmed from unclear instructions to CFRS.

Washington was sufficiently impressed with the claim from Kansas, and the fact that allotment for each family had been kept to a minimum, to award the state $450,000 for the period October 1 until November 15. This sum financed 185,000 days of work relief, with single men obtaining one day's work and those with families two or three. Before this period was over, $13,634 was awarded to Franklin and Nemaha counties.

In November a second tranche of $688,477 became available for the period until December 31. In addition, $17,729 was awarded to Ellsworth, Graham, McPherson, Stafford, and Sumner counties for the relief of 1,025 families plus five single persons. Thus, for the period October to December, Kansas received $1,136,206 from the federal government. Although this was $323,546 less than the state had requested, it was an invaluable aid during the early winter months. A new governor, Alf Landon, promised the RFC that his first message to the legislature would emphasize the need to raise additional revenue for relief purposes.

Although the KFRS was congratulated by the RFC in October 1932 on the manner in which it proposed to distribute federal funds, much still had to be done in order to reform the state's relief system. The Report of the Public Welfare Temporary Commission, published in January 1933, contained a withering indictment of relief in Kansas. According to its findings the relief program in the average Kansas county was unbelievably haphazard. The efforts of county, city, and private agencies to combat the depression were uncoordinated, and as a result the duplication of relief was unavoidable. Trained social workers were so scarce that investigations of the needy were superficial, records were poorly kept, and relief was often inadequate.

In 1933, Kansas' public welfare system underwent a much needed reform, and the responsibility for the administration of poor relief was placed on local boards of county commissioners who were obliged to appoint a "properly qualified" poor commissioner and case supervisor. The need to apply for federal aid necessitated a systematic analysis of the needy and, ultimately, the centralization of all relief giving agencies. Methodical record-keeping, professional investigation, and a uniformity of approach were forced upon the less organized counties by the KFRS, thus forming a firm base for a new system of welfare.

The economic deterioration which confronted Kansans between 1930 and 1932 was experienced by many throughout the nation. This unique depression presented problems which could not be solved by local efforts or by the state alone. The sheer unpredictability of economic fluctuations destroyed even the most precise plans; local tax revenue and charity could not sustain relief for more than three winters. By late 1932, however, Kansas had taken a number of positive steps toward imposing a sense of order on its ramshackle welfare system. In a very short period the mayors and local employment committees had been transformed. Attempts to divorce them from relief issues were overturned, and, by force of circumstance, they were compelled to consider a whole range of problems other than unemployment.

Kansas' application for federal funds was timely. The RFC was a very cautious organization which required each supplicant to demonstrate both need and the ability to administer the distribution of government money. In order to ensure that claims were sound, the Emergency Relief Division of the RFC closely investigated the financial conditions and the relief administration of each state. It is a tribute to the acumen and common sense of the KFRS that although the state was not amongst those most seriously hit by the depression, Kansas received from the RFC sums very close to those requested. Indeed, as has been pointed out, the RFC was pleased with the manner in which the Kansas claim was submitted.


56. Croxton to Directors of RFC, November 11, 1932, RFC Records Relating to Emergency Relief to States, Kansas Correspondence, Loan 5 (Part 1), 4-5.

57. These sums calculated from RFC files are slightly different to those presented in: The Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, Public Welfare Service in Kansas, A Ten Year Report, 1932-1933, Bulletin 127, December 1, 1934, 10, where an aggregate of $1,149,850 is reported. In addition, it is claimed (p. 11) that only 96 counties were receiving aid whereas the RFC reports 101 counties in receipt.

58. Landon to Croxton, December 28, 1932, RFC Records Relating to Emergency Relief to States, Kansas Correspondence, Loan 5 (Part 1).

59. J. H. Jones to Stutz, October 20, 1932, RFC Records Relating to Emergency Relief to States, Kansas Correspondence, Loan 5 (Part 1); KERC, Bulletin 127, 10-12.


61. KERC, Bulletin 127, 10-12.

62. It was reported that Kansas credit was sound and that tax rates were not seriously out of line with those of neighboring states. Financial Condition of Kansas Prepared for Legal Section of Emergency Relief Division Oct. 26, 1932, RFC Records Relating to the Emergency Relief to States, 1932 Reel, Approved Loan Correspondence file.
clear impression is that Kansas obtained as much as was possible from this source.

The same high rating cannot, however, be awarded to Governor Woodring. K. D. McFarland has emphasized the importance which Woodring attached to the reduction of state taxes. Faced with declining revenues and taxpayer resistance, Woodring introduced an effective austerity program which enabled the state tax commission to actually cut the tax levy. Savings in public expenditure were made possible by the elimination of state jobs, the postponement of construction, widespread salary reductions, and sharp cutbacks in funding for state institutions. In his second year of office Woodring had saved $2 million and had balanced the budget. His proud boast, in September 1932, was that for the first time in its history, Kansas had a governor who had spent less than the amount appropriated by the legislature.65 The political advantages of fiscal retrenchment in an age of deflation are easy to see, but the costs, much more difficult to calculate, were formidable. Reductions in jobs and cutbacks in wages helped to reduce expenditure on goods and services even further. Thus, Woodring's policies, for which he expected significant electoral support, helped worsen the depression for Kansans.

It could be argued that Woodring was a victim of circumstances and that a program of sustained spending would have elicited only limited support. A more telling criticism of the governor, therefore, is his failure to more actively involve himself in the key socio-economic problems of the day. It is significant that McFarland's detailed biography contains practically nothing on unemployment or relief. An illustration of Woodring's lack of perception can be seen in his supporting statement attached to the claim for RFC funds. He wrote: 'The mining districts in south east Kansas have been at a standstill industrially for the past three years. This section is inhabited largely by foreigners and it is only through the [sic] heroic efforts that riots and hunger strikes were prevented last year.'64

The census of 1930, however, reveals that Crawford County had 4,923 foreign-born white residents whereas Wyandotte County had 8,476. What characterized Crawford County was not the numbers of its foreign-born but its history of militancy and socialism, its excessive dependence on coal mining, an industry in long-term decline, and the lack of sympathy shown by some of its public officials. Woodring attached far too much importance to the popular myths of the depression: that misery was caused by working women, by the foreign-born, and the workshy. He was unable, at this crucial period, to provide the imaginative leadership required to produce policies which would give hope to those close to despair: the unemployed and the destitute. 65


64. Quoted in memo from Croxton to RFC Directors, November 11, 1932, RFC Records Relating to Emergency Relief to States, Kansas Correspondence, Loan 5 (Part 1).
Those affected by the Great Depression and those who received some form of federal or state aid were recorded by photographers who were themselves hired under federal work programs. Among the faces of the depression in Kansas captured on film are the following:

Top: A farm couple poses with the wife's new pressure cooker "of which she is very proud," Sheridan County, Kansas. (Russell Lee, photographer)

Below: A farm wife waits while her husband attends an auction, Oskaloosa, Kansas. (John Vachon, photographer)
Top: Farmers at an auction, Oskaloosa, Kansas. (John Vachon, photographer)
Below: A tenant farmer, Jefferson County, Kansas. (John Vachon, photographer)
Right: Wife of the tenant farmer, Jefferson County, Kansas. (John Vachon, photographer)
Coal miner, Cherokee County, Kansas. (Arthur Rothstein, photographer)