RIOT
IN
WICHITA
1934

by Peter Fearon
A 1930s labor strike erupts into violence.
On May 9, 1934, Wichita was shaken by a riot of such severity that Mayor Schuyler Crawford and City Manager Bert Wells appealed to Gov. Alfred Landon for the immediate assistance of the Kansas National Guard. This plea was reinforced by local police who informed Adjutant General Milton R. McLean that the situation was so volatile they were unable to handle it. Landon, who was legally required to send troops, did so the following day and order was restored.

The violence brought to a climax a long series of increasingly bitter confrontations. Groups of unemployed relief workers, protesting the imposition of a new relief schedule that they believed inadequate, battled with the police. So seriously did the authorities view this clash that twenty-six people, including two women, were arraigned on the serious charge of criminal syndicalism. Senior Washington officials including Harry L. Hopkins, director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), expressed great concern and demanded a full inquiry. Detailed investigations by both state and federal officials followed. One of those who played a full role in the post mortem was the executive director of the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee (kerC), John G. Stutz. Many years later, Stutz recorded that his role in this Wichita incident “turned out to be one of the most difficult assignments of my 40 years of political service.”

The Wichita riot of 1934 raises a number of interesting questions. Was it a spontaneous outburst of anger provoked by agitators, or was there a steady growth of discontent that, perhaps, could have been predicted, and therefore prevented? Was the local or state relief administration to blame for the unrest? Were officials, for example, inefficient or corrupt? Why were such serious charges brought against the rioters? Why did federal officials involve themselves so closely in the post-riot investigation and with what results? What lessons were learned from this unfortunate incident? And, how was peace finally restored?

In 1934, Wichita was the second largest city in Kansas, with its population of just over 104,000 accounting for about 80 percent of the total residents in Sedgwick County. Until May 1934, the city had no history of violence, nor could it be considered a center of organized labor. The FERA census, taken in October 1933, identified 4,467 relief families comprising 15,550 people in Wichita. Separate figures are not available for the city during 1934, although the KERC reported that Sedgwick County had 24,700 persons on relief in December of that year. A difficult problem therefore faced local relief administrators in this highly urbanized county.

To fully comprehend the background of the events of May 1934, it is necessary to understand the system of relief operating at that time. In November 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civil Works Administration (CWA). His aim was to provide work at regular wages for the unemployed during the traditionally difficult winter months, and at the same time to stimulate a faltering economy. The program was federally administered through state and local bodies. Thus, the KERC became the state CWA, and each of the county relief administrations was designated a county CWA. The county poor commissioner became the county civil works administrator and its disbursing officer.

Along with other cities, Wichita gained from the CWA. Apart from road and park improvements, the courthouse and the city hall were repaired; substantial modifications were also made to other public buildings including the hospital, municipal warehouse, boys' and girls' detention homes, police headquarters, and Wichita airport. In Sedgwick County during the first three months of 1934, a weekly average

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2. John G. Stutz, handwritten note, October 31, 1980, John G. Stutz Papers, box 1, folder 5, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence. (Hereafter cited as Stutz Papers.)

The difficulties and uncertainties of the Depression were reflected in many works of art produced during the 1930s. Artist Selma Freemen captures the growing tension and discontent, likely similar to that within the Wichita labor community, in her 1934-1935 painting Strike Talk.
of 4,237 persons were employed by the CWA. This was, however, a temporary program and its liquidation began in the early spring of 1934. Peak employment had been reached in the week ending January 18 when 63,879 were engaged on various projects throughout the state of Kansas. For the week ending April 12, the figure had fallen to a mere 683, all of whom were auditing, accounting, and certifying officers. Indeed, during the month of March alone, all 36,000 workers who were on state and local CWA payrolls were laid off. The Emergency Work Relief Program replaced the CWA; it bore a close resemblance to the relief policies that were in operation before the CWA had been established in November 1933.

Employment policies under the CWA contrasted sharply with those of its predecessor, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Under FERA rules, work relief was only available for the destitute unemployed. National data shows, however, that by January 1934 nearly half the CWA labor force comprised those who, although unemployed, had not been previously in receipt of relief. The implementation of the CWA substantially reduced relief rolls by providing jobs for both those already relieved and for those who were potential relief cases. The method of payment used by the CWA also contrasted sharply with that of the FERA. CWA wage scales were initially relatively generous, as minimum wages were established for regional zones. For the central zone, which included Kansas, the minimum hourly wage rates for skilled workers was $1.10; the unskilled minimum was $.45. The unfortunate result, however, was a higher level of expenditure than Washington had anticipated, and in January 1934 the maximum permitted weekly hours of work on CWA projects in urban areas was reduced to twenty-four, a move that reduced weekly earnings. A further change took place in March. As it was clear that in some localities CWA minimum wages exceeded local rates, a new scale was to be determined by wage rate committees appointed by the local CWA. Each committee consisted of three members: one representing organized labor, one local business, and one the local civil works committee. Its task was to determine what the prevailing local wages were and to send this information to the KERC. The committee was also empowered to hear all grievances concerning pay scales. By the use of these local rates, wage policies reverted to pre-CWA standards, and the new wage policies continued under the Emergency Work Relief Program.

The changeover from the CWA to the Emergency Work Relief Program was not without its problems. After March 31, 1934, CWA employees were obliged to file applications with their local emergency relief administrations, and only those found eligible on the basis of need were considered for work relief employment. All decisions on eligibility for relief were taken by the local relief administration which was obliged to thoroughly investigate each applicant and make periodic re-investigations of need. Decisions concerning an applicant's eligibility for relief and how many hours each person could work were made at the local level. Under the CWA, all employees had been permitted to work the same number of hours in any given week. With the introduction of the Emergency Work Relief Program, however, wages were determined by budgetary deficiency, and the hours of work relief were limited to the number required to earn individual budget allowances. Even so, being eligible for work relief did not guarantee relief employment. Enough projects were never available to satisfy all applicants, the majority of whom had to rely upon direct assistance.

In an April 4 letter to Harry Hopkins, KERC director John Stutz deftly put his finger on a key issue. He noted that the transition from the CWA to work relief caused difficulties because relief clients were better off under the CWA. Stutz recorded that the unemployed in Kansas were "anxious and expectant. [But] there have been no demonstrations of violence and no violence is anticipated." If the unexpected

8. Stutz to Harry L. Hopkins, April 4, 1934, Stutz Papers, box 1, folder 4.
did occur, Wichita seemed an unlikely venue as Stutz was confident that the relief administration in Sedgwick County was sound. In November 1933, Stutz’s deputy, F. H. Marvin, the state superintendent of relief, had opined, “the set up in Sedgwick county is the best that we have in the State of Kansas.” B. E. George, the poor commissioner, was described as “a capable, conscientious, and socially minded person.” This came in Marvin’s reply to criticisms about Sedgwick County’s relief organization, the details of which seem not to have survived. Nevertheless, the three investigations that had been undertaken had failed to find fault. Marvin believed that agitation and politically motivated scandalmongering were responsible for the complaints. Both Stutz and Marvin were to be proved dramatically wrong in their judgments as discontent soon erupted. By late April, groups of unemployed workers had raided relief offices in Wichita, Pittsburg, and Coffeyville; Topeka also reported disturbances. A crisis point was reached in Wichita on April 20 when angry relief workers met officials at the Forum, Wichita’s large civic auditorium. Later that day at a mass meeting of over two thousand, James “Whitney” McLean was elected president of a “temporary organization” of relief workers. The demands at the mass meeting were for twenty-four hours of relief work per week at the rate of $40 per hour; that grocery orders be given in cash not in script and that Poor Commissioner George, together with County Physician Cyril Black and Dr. P. M. Bell, be forced to resign. In addition, the relief workers insisted that officials recognize a committee of the unemployed to hear grievances.

Early on the following morning, Saturday, April 21, demonstrations took place outside relief headquarters (located in the old post office building at Market and William Streets) and some demonstrators, having entered the building, intimidated the staff. Although the crowd of several hundred was orderly, anxious police and county officials contemplated calling in the National Guard. Relief workers then began a march on North Broadway calling upon those engaged in relief projects to lay down “their picks and shovels and join them.” In some cases, according to the Wichita Beacon, “tools were taken from some who hesitated” or were reluctant to heed the call.

At 7:00 A.M. the same day, a conference of the county commissioners, county clerk, and poor commissioner was held and steps were taken to immediately make available the $100,000 bond issue that had recently been sold. Temporary relief measures were introduced to provide food and relief employment for every registered person. When this announcement was made at a pub-

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On Monday, April 23, the Central Application Bureau, comprising representatives of private charities and local business organizations, which had been established in 1933 as a center to investigate relief applicants, was ordered closed until at least April 26. Its reopening would depend upon the outcome of a meeting of the unemployed which would take place at the Forum on that day. Until then, 4,200 work orders had been issued to the jobless and, in addition, grocery orders to those who had regularly received them in the past. Responding to the increasing emergency, Governor Landon called an early morning conference with relief officials. Poor Commissioner George was determined not to resign, but George Rogers, a Sedgwick County commissioner, stated that he supported a shake-up in the relief administration.

The Wichita demonstrations were complicated by a struggle between Commissioner Rogers and Thurman Hill, both of whom

9. F. H. Marvin to T. J. Edmonds, November 9, 1933, Records of the Works Progress Administration, FERA State Files, May/December 1933, Kansas, RG69, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
11. Wichita Beacon, April 21, 22, 1934.
12. Ibid., April 23, 1934.
KERC Executive Director John G. Stutz was praised highly for his role with the Wichita riot and its aftermath. He later described the incident as "one of the most difficult assignments of my 40 years of political service."

News of the faltering economy caused much concern not only in Wichita but across the state and nation. Blue-collar workers keep up on the latest developments in Joseph Hirsch's painting Editorial.
were candidates for the Democratic nomination for governor. Rogers telegraphed Landon claiming that Hill's meetings with the unemployed were responsible for their occupation of the relief offices. In short, Hill was "playing politics...with human misery" by taking advantage of the evident dissatisfaction that existed among the jobless. Hill invited an inquiry into the charge and also demanded that Stutz, who was periodically a target for Kansas Democrats, be fired.

A formidable and capable figure in the Kansas relief organization, Stutz had been named executive director of the Kansas League of Municipalities in September 1920. Although a Republican, Stutz had been invited to join the KERC by Democrat Gov. Harry Woodring, to which Landon could with justification point out that Stutz was not a Republican appointment. Stutz held no political party office while he was executive director of the KERC. But a far more powerful reason for rejecting the call for his dismissal was that Stutz was recognized, even by New Deal administrators, as a superb administrator of high integrity.

The demonstrations and the occupation of Wichita's relief offices posed particular difficulty for the board of county commissioners who opted for compromise rather than firmness—a decision with unfortunate results. A meeting was held on the morning of Tuesday, April 24, among County Commissioners John Millhaubt, Herman Hill and George Rogers, County Attorney John W. Wood, and a committee of the unemployed in Wichita. The unemployed were represented by Whitey McLean, J. S. Osborne, R. F. Hyde, B. Sullivan, C. C. Cole and R. H. Beebe, all of whom gave Wichita addresses.

The minutes of the meeting present a picture of a rambling and poorly structured discourse. The stenographer, unfortunately, did not always identify which unemployed representative was speaking, and no attempt was made to convert the script into correct English. It is clear, however, that the county commissioners were worried, indeed frightened, about violence and stressed that they would not recognize any group that advocated it.

The unemployed had a number of grievances. They particularly resented social workers' investigations to determine whether or not unemployed persons were entitled to relief; they complained that relief was not distributed fairly and that favoritism occurred; and they were dissatisfied with the standard of medical care available for those on relief. Poor Commissioner George was castigated as indifferent to the plight of the needy, and they resented that federal funds had been cut off. In addition, the committee claimed that the workers' occupation of the relief offices had been peaceful and that no theft had occurred, even though relief officers on the scene had certainly felt intimidated. An unidentified representative of the unemployed expressed the bitterness over the shortage of relief jobs: "There is a bunch of people that haven't got any work and they are demanding it...If part of them can be put to work, they reason that the rest can be put to work..."

The county commission acted in a conciliatory fashion, pointing out the simple truth that while strikes and disturbances continued on relief projects, federal funding would be withheld. They wanted the committee to continue articulating the complaints of the unemployed, for example, concerning medical provision or the conduct of the poor commissioner. This task was made more difficult as the jobless also had chosen one other group to represent them. The commission's greatest gesture was to increase the number of relief jobs and to introduce a new high wage scale similar to that which had prevailed under the CWA. This was a gamble and the

15. Stutz to Edmonds, August 21, 1934, Stutz Papers, box 1, folder 4.
16. Minutes of Meeting between Board of Sedgwick County Commissioners, County Attorney John W. Wood and a committee of the unemployed in Wichita, April 24, 1934, Stutz Papers, box 2, folder 29. Although none of those attending the April 24 meeting seems to have been involved in any incorporated organizations for the unemployed, several such groups had registered in Kansas between 1931-1933 and had located in Wichita. They included the Unemployed Citizens' Organization, Laborers' Appeal Association, Liberty Service Corporation, Workmen's Relief Association, Citizens' Relief Association, Khaki Shirts of America, and Unemployed Trading Post. Ernest F. McNutt, comp., "Kansas Unemployed Organizations, Their Programs and Activities" (WPA Writers Project [1940], Typescript, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society).
17. Minutes of Meeting between Board of Sedgwick County Commissioners,
extent of it was recognized by the commissioners who pointed out that they had sufficient funds to finance this operation for two weeks only. Once that period had elapsed, and if additional funding could not be raised from state or federal sources, the county officials were genuinely at a loss as to what would be done.

Why was this course of action taken? Why did Sedgwick County officials pledge their relief resources in this way? John Stutz’s explanation was simple: the commissioners were frightened, as one was running for governor and another for reelection.19 Lest we consider Stutz’s view prejudiced, it is worth noting the opinion of federal official T. J. Edmonds. He wrote that the county commissioners had allocated local money, which should have been spent throughout the year, to placate angry relief workers who wanted work relief on the same scale as that given by the CWA. Unfortunately, after two weeks the money ran out and relief had to be cut.20 The only explanation for this action, therefore, was a mixture of fear and political opportunism on the part of the commissioners. Reaching agreement with the protesters, however, was crucial if federal relief was to be restored, which it was on April 28. On Monday, April 30, approximately 4,500 jobless returned to work, 1,000 of whom were employed on federally funded projects.21

Wichita had bought peace, but only temporarily. Eventually the commissioners met with the Central Application Bureau and concluded that the relief introduced in response to the disturbances on April 20 and 21 could no longer be financed. For the five-week period, May 1 to June 7, Sedgwick County would receive $51,000 from the federal government which would be supplemented by $18,000 of local money for work relief. Bids to secure additional funding from the KERC and from Washington had not been successful. In an attempt to placate an angry population of unemployed, the commissioners promised to pursue the possibility of additional funding.

On May 5, a walkout of Wichita’s 4,200 relief workers was threatened unless the county commissioners raised the rate of pay on relief projects. C. M. Fitzwilliam of Wichita, who was the Democratic county chairman, telephoned Washington on May 7 with a warning that because of the meager relief, riots were possible after a mass meeting of the unemployed which was to take place the following day. He had, however, no complaints about the local or state relief organizations which he believed were well run.22 On May 8, C. W. Gardner, also of Wichita, sent a telegram to the President on behalf of the Wage Earners Roosevelt Club appealing for some gesture to defuse the tension at the mass meeting.23 These warnings were picked up by Washington officials who began to take an interest in Wichita. In response to their queries, Stutz claimed that the problem was due to relief workers simply wanting the same income that they had received under the CWA. He had every confidence in the local relief organization, and Poor Commissioner George had advised him that the situation was improving.24 T. J. Edmonds believed that Stutz would cut off federal relief funds if further trouble occurred and would restore them only when conditions returned to normal. This strategy had been effective before and would be again.25

22. Corrington Gill to Hopkins, May 7, 1934 [sic 1934], Wichita Strike file.
25. Fellows, telephone conversation with Edmonds, May 9, 1934, Wichita Strike file.
As with any riot the sequence of events and individuals' roles are difficult to verify. Indeed, inconsistencies appear in several accounts of the incident. Contemporary newspapers' reports are a valuable source for factual information, but their analyses are weak, and they are disappointingly deficient in other respects. For example, no participant seems to have been interviewed by reporters, and the opportunity to provide personal insight into these events was lost. The most useful account of the violence and the results of it were provided not by local journalists but by two federal officials, T. J. Edmonds and William Nunn. They questioned people after the event while the memory of it was still clear but when passions had moderated. Their reports were especially valuable because they were based upon the interrogation of a wide cross section of the community. Both sides were allowed to present their views to inquisitors who were outsiders and therefore not directly involved in the events that had led to pitched battle.

On Tuesday, May 8, some three thousand unemployed met in Payne's pasture, an athletic field on Wichita's west side, having been denied admission to the Forum. A quiet and orderly crowd, implementing a decision made at a meeting at Riverside Park on April 29, called for a strike of relief workers. Whitey McLean advised the crowd not to return to work until local officials took positive action to redress their grievances. On the afternoon of May 9, about fifteen hundred demonstrators returned to Payne's pasture where they were addressed by their leaders. Taking care not to advocate violence directly, McLean was reported as saying that if his followers wished to tear down the old post office building stone by stone he would happily accompany them. A mass of discontented people then moved towards the city with the intention if not of demolition then, at least of persuading those still working on relief jobs to join the strike.

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About half the relief work force had responded to an FERA inducement that those at their jobs would receive regular pay. For its part, the city had promised to protect any of the unemployed who wished to work, and various projects were placed under police guard. The police, who had been forbidden to use firearms, equipped themselves with nightsticks, many of which had been fashioned from pool cues.

At the first relief project the marchers managed to overpower the guards, but about a thousand protesters were constrained; the remaining five hundred made rapidly for downtown Wichita. The marchers were confronted by police at the Douglas Avenue and Central Avenue bridges. A standoff was transformed into mayhem at the Central Avenue bridge when a woman marcher, defying orders not to advance, did so and was struck by a nightstick. During the melee that followed, demonstrators slashed four hundred feet of fire-hose as water power was used in an unsuccessful attempt to deter them. More seriously, police lieutenant C. D. Murrell was hospitalized after being stabbed in the back. Apart from this incident, however, the fighting was limited to fire-hose, fist, stick and stone, and no other serious injury was reported. The crowd dispersed and no further meetings or demonstrations occurred during the evening or night.

Early the following morning, groups of unemployed returned to Payne's pasture. However, four units of National Guard under Col. Harrie S. Mueller assisted by police, sheriff's, and marshal's forces used tear gas to disperse them. On this occasion, no casualties were reported. The authorities acted swiftly, and approximately eighty people were taken into custody. Eight ringleaders were charged with criminal syndicalism and sent to the State Reformatory in Hutchinson; eighteen (including two women) faced similar charges.

Criminal syndicalism was a serious misdemeanor and those convicted could face prison sentences of from five to ten years. Sixteen more people faced the less serious charge of disturbing the peace; the remainder were released after questioning.

The criminal syndicalism charges were soon dropped against all but eight of those who had been arrested. Of the score appearing before Judge O. W. Helsel on Friday, May 11, all but four pled guilty to disturbance charges and were given six
months parole on the understanding that they would attend no more meetings. The eight facing the more severe charge were Whitey McLean, Ed Warren, Ralph Mundis, Claude Rogers, John Hardin, Fred Taylor, Dora Bayouth, and Rose Hardy. Although the authorities searched for paid agitators, the marchers seem to have been entirely local and a high proportion of them were the heads of families. Ironically, the Wichita jail to which several of the rioters were sent had been built with CWA labor and funds.

Once disturbances began on May 9, senior FERA officials quickly became involved. On the instructions of FERA director Harry Hopkins, Jacob Baker telephoned Stutz for a firsthand account of the situation. He emphasized to Stutz the need for rapid action and suggested a cessation of work relief and a possible switch of federal funds to direct relief. Stutz promised to learn all he could and call Baker as soon as possible. When Stutz replied on May 11 that the city was quiet and that work relief was continuing, Baker's instructions were firm: under no circumstances was work relief to continue under the protection of the National Guard. Stutz was to travel to Wichita immediately with Edmonds to assess the situation. Baker also expressed the view that no indictments for criminal syndicalism should be issued for conduct that he believed was simply disorderly.28

Hopkins reinforced Baker's message when he telephoned Stutz on the same day. Hopkins was insistent that if the National Guard was necessary to ensure that public works could continue, they should be shut down immediately. Stutz's protests that the community might be able to control the situation, that he would be accused of starving people into submission, and that the county could not finance the heavy burden of direct relief which would fall on it if federal funding ceased, fell on deaf ears. Hopkins firmly held to the belief that if men really needed work relief they would not go on strike. He was particularly worried about the adverse publicity that could result from this conflict, saying, "It makes us look ridiculous to have strikes on relief jobs."29 Stutz agreed to personally investigate the situation and to shut down work relief if the presence of the National Guard was required to keep it functioning.

Stutz, Edmonds, and Nunn left immediately for Wichita, where, at 8:30 A.M. on Saturday, May 12, they began a long series of meetings with inter alia, public officials, the commander of the National Guard, the chief of police, and delegations of the unemployed. The personnel at the meetings changed as various sub-conferences were held, but the city manager, the chief of police, and the county attorney remained throughout. It was a long day and Nunn finally retired for the night at 1:30 A.M. on Sunday.30

Both Edmonds and Nunn wrote fairly detailed reports on their stay in Wichita. They found those relief workers who were willing to work doing their jobs; the National Guard was confined to the armory and not patrolling the streets. Meanwhile, prisoners were being grilled by police and detectives anxious either to press criminal syndicalism charges or to persuade those being interrogated to plead guilty to lesser charges. Defendants were unrepresented by counsel both during their questioning and at their trials. According to Nunn, local officials viewed the riot as a serious event that could happen again. They believed that the intervention of the National Guard had been vital for the restoration of law and order and that they were anxious to secure speedy convictions in order to teach the rioters a lesson. Indeed, the desire to make an example was so strong that criminal syndicalism charges were seen as essential.

Both Nunn and Edmonds had a more detached view. They saw the nature of work relief as leading inevitably to an employer-employee relationship and the possible conflicts that would result from it. Miserly relief payments, together with Wichita's lack of organized recreation, made the strikes and demonstrations even more understandable. The attempt to impose stiff jail

As government programs failed to offer adequate assistance, many Wichitans found themselves out of work and seeking relief. Jobless men are the subject of Harry Gottlieb's 1930-1940 painting *Their Only Road* (top); Louis Ribak captures the despair of unemployed families in his 1935-1936 painting *Home Relief Station* (bottom).
sentences aroused the ire of both men. The Criminal Syndicalism Act, passed in 1920, had been placed on the statute books to combat Industrial Workers of the World activity in the coalfields; to use it in this situation seemed hysterical in the extreme. As Nunn remarked, "the Federal Emergency Relief Administration cannot continue to support with Federal Funds and relief projects controlled in such a way as to destroy the very principles of our political democracy." Thus, the charges of criminal syndicalism were very strongly denounced by the two federal officials and they were determined to see them dropped.

During a series of meetings on May 12, City Manager Bert Wells, Chief of Police O. W. Wilson, and County Attorney John Wood were under tremendous pressure to persuade local officials to abandon the criminal syndicalism charges. It was Edmonds' view that in any case these charges were not sustainable. Having them substituted by misdemeanor, he believed, at least would lead to a conviction, whereas if tried with the more serious offense all the accused workers would be freed. Wichita officials finally conceded; they abandoned the criminal syndicalism and substituted misdemeanor charges; the male defendants pled guilty to these reduced charges and received thirty days in prison. The women were paroled and released immediately. In addition, Wichita officials agreed to dismiss the National Guard on May 13.

For their part the FERA and the state relief administration resolved to supply funds to Sedgwick County for as long as they were available and if conditions merited such action. It was also decided to introduce, as soon as possible, an educational and recreational program for the unemployed in Wichita which would diffuse future unrest. The investigating officials received a battery of complaints from the unemployed and, as a result, Stutz promised to keep a representative in the city for several days so that current grievances could be investigated. In addition, particular hours of the week were assigned for people to come to relief headquarters for the purpose of making complaints. Moreover, complainants were assured that matters would be dealt with expeditiously, that no effort would be made to protect persons connected with the relief administration, and that the instigator of the complaint would be notified of the action taken.

After a day of intense meetings, Nunn reflected upon some of the individuals he had confronted. Chief of Police Wilson had made a favorable impression. A young graduate of a police academy in California, he had remained calm during the riot using only nightsticks and water to combat the rioters, not fire power which would have made the situation much worse. Edmonds, on the other hand, harbored suspicions. He was puzzled why the police chief had insisted for so long on prosecutions for criminal syndicalism, a charge that Edmonds was convinced would not stick. Both men made caustic comments about County Attorney Wood who had said that he would secure convictions for criminal syndicalism by ensuring that any jury would be hand-picked. When challenged on this matter by Nunn and Edmonds, he retracted, conceding that juries in Kansas were not chosen on a selective basis. The poor commissioners also came in for criticism for using the unemployed for political purposes. Stutz, however, was praised highly by Nunn as a man of considerable ability who had persuaded city and county officials to make concessions. The day of conferences had begun with two groups very far apart in their thinking. Fortunately the meetings had been conducted in an atmosphere of goodwill and, as a result, the essential compromise had been reached.

Although Nunn was confident that the five hundred or so still on strike would soon return to work, he also recognized the possibility of renewed rioting. If disturbances reoccurred, city officials could use this resurgence as vindication of their previous actions. His advice in such an eventuality was clear: "Federal Funds be withdrawn without a moment's notice, without any discussion, without any more conferences, that we simply close down the work." He was also conscious that federal officials

32. Edmonds to Hopkins, June 21, 1934, Wichita Strike file.

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could be accused of interfering with the Kansas justice system by threatening to withdraw funds if criminal syndicalism charges were not dropped. He urged consultation with himself and Edmonds if any Kansas politician decided to jump onto that particular bandwagon.

Peace returned to Wichita although Nunn remained in the city for several days to pursue an extraordinary line of enquiry. It was suggested that certain representatives of the unemployed had been regularly in receipt of money from county and city but not FERA sources. The payments were ostensibly for work relief, but it seems that no work was done. Moreover, the sums were in excess of what would have been received on the basis of budgetary requirements. Edmonds speculated that they were stool pigeons of the authorities, but there is no evidence that Nunn was able to substantiate this charge.²⁴

More important, J. M. Besore, of Stutz’s Topeka office, was instructed to remain in Wichita not only to receive and to investigate complaints, but also to ensure that where grievances were legitimate, action would be taken. Before the riots, Stutz and his deputy F. H. Marvin were confident that relief operations in Wichita were efficiently run. Besore’s investigations were soon to demonstrate that their faith in B. E. George and his subordinates was badly misplaced.

On June 13 and 14, a series of probing interviews gave some employees of the Wichita poor relief organization the opportunity to air their grievances. Besore and Marvin conducted the interviews and were assisted by several individuals affiliated with the Central Application Bureau. The charges levied against Poor Commissioner George and particularly some of his staff were both serious and disturbing. They ranged from unprofessional conduct, incompetence, and dishonesty to drunkenness on the job, sexual harassment, and sexual impropriety: persons not entitled to government commodities were given them; women workers not considered “good sports” were at a particular disadva-

Charges against Commissioner
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Wichita Sunday Beacon which was able to headline its front-page story, “Graft, Booze, Attacks on Women Charged in 25 Wichita Affidavits.”²⁵ In just a few words the newspaper epitomized an outrageous misuse of power by men who had betrayed the trust placed in them.

This investigation was not, of course, a full legal inquiry; those who were most heavily criticized were not represented. Nevertheless, the evidence as far as Stutz was concerned was so overwhelming that draconian action was justified. In a wire to Hopkins he stated, “there must be a cellar to garret house cleansing local relief administration, including removal of County Poor Commissioner and all department heads.”²⁶ The county commissioners and a committee of private agencies immediately began a restructuring of the relief organization. If a satisfactory solution was not proposed within a few days, Stutz promised to personally impose the correct standards. In the meantime, B. E. George was disqualified by the KERC as a poor commissioner and was summarily dismissed from office. An acting poor commissioner, Raub Snyder, was appointed until a suitably qualified person could be employed by the board of county commissioners.

Stutz was able to assure Nunn that the unemployed’s complaints about the quality of medical services for those on relief had been accepted. There was to be a complete reorganization of the medical setup. In addition, the excessively high case load borne by social workers would be reduced with the employment of two assistants to

34. Edmonds to Hopkins, May 17, 1934; Edmonds to Hopkins, June 21, 1934, Wichita Strike file.
35. Notes on interviews with Mrs. Bowers, Mrs. Collins, Mrs. Holloway, Mrs. Kennedy, Mr. Rasure, and Miss Campbell, June 14, 1934, Stutz Papers, box 2, folder 29. See also notes on an interview with Eual Snodgrass, June 13, 1934, who was in charge of commodities and clothing at the Central Application Bureau, Stutz Papers, box 2, folder 30.
36. Interview with Mr. Rasure, June 14, 1934.
37. Wichita Sunday Beacon, June 17, 1934.
38. Stutz to Hopkins, June 21, 1934, Wichita Strike file.
Although less frequent in Kansas than in other parts of the nation, violence of the 1930s found its way into labor centers such as Wichita. Illustrating the actions of certain dissatisfied workers is George Picket's 1934-1935 painting Strike.
the case supervisor and twelve additional case workers. A few months later, Edmonds was able to note that not only was Wichita peaceful, but also that he was much impressed with the efficiency of the new Sedgwick County relief administration.

The disclosure of incompetence and corruption in Wichita naturally caused a great deal of embarrassment in political circles. Before these revelations, Stutz had assured Governor Landon that George was blameless, and the governor publicly defended the poor commissioner—a position that became untenable once the details of wrongdoing became public knowledge. Local Democrats were displeased but not surprised that George was eventually replaced by another Republican, E. M. Leach. Even though George left his Wichita post in disgrace, within a few months he was appointed superintendent of the Eskridge Transient Camp. The wisdom of this appointment was questioned by Elizabeth Wickenden of the Transient Bureau, but Stutz's view was that George was not dishonest, he merely found that the job of poor commissioner was beyond him. He was, however, capable of running a transient camp. This distinguished response from Stutz probably owed a great deal to the attachment that both he and George had to the Republican cause. An attempt to discredit Landon and Stutz for their roles in the Wichita affair surfaced again in the 1936 election campaign, but to no effect.

The Wichita riot was not a unique disturbance; unrest also occurred elsewhere in Kansas. It was, however, an unusual event in a city with no previous history of mass disturbances and, unlike Crawford County, no tradition of labor organization. At the core of explanation for this event must be the level of incompetence in the relief administration. The complaints that the unemployed had articulated against a corrupt, graft-ridden administration were justified and so were their protestations about the level of available medical care. Relief payments were not generous and it is little wonder that the unemployed felt frustrated, especially after the termination of the CWA. Handling a potentially explosive situation required a high degree of professional skill on the part of officials because it was vital that the jobless believed in the integrity of those administering relief. In Wichita, however, relief was administered by individuals who could never inspire confidence and whose corruption contributed to the resentment justly felt by those who sought assistance. The county commission-

39. Nunn to Stutz, June 8, 1934; Stutz to Nunn, June 30, 1934, Wichita Strike file.
41. Edmonds to Hopkins and Aubrey Williams, June 27, 1934, FERA State Files, Kansas, June-September 1934, RG69.
42. Elizabeth Wickenden to Gerard E. Price, July 31, 1934; Nunn to Wickenden, September 14, 1934, FERA State Files, Kansas, June-September 1934, RG69.

Riot in Wichita