

**SASKATOON, THE GREAT DEPRESSION,
AND THE CIVIC RELIEF BOARD**

**JEFF O'BRIEN
CITY ARCHIVES**

JANUARY, 2006

INTRODUCTION:¹

The Great Depression of the 1930s hit the prairies particularly hard. In Central Canada, the effects of the Depression were buffered somewhat by a diversified (and often tariff-protected) manufacturing-based economy. It was different here. Times were hard in Ontario during the 1930s, but in Saskatchewan – smashed by depression and hammered by drought – times were desperate.²

In 1929, Saskatchewan was essentially a one-crop economy. 1928 was a record crop year, and from 1925-1928, Saskatchewan residents could boast one of the highest net cash incomes in the world.³ But in a depression it is the primary producers and those dependent on export markets that are hit the first, the hardest and the longest. Here in “One-Crop Country”, when the bottom fell out of the wheat market, the bottom fell out of everything. Unemployment rates skyrocketed. Provincial and municipal governments teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and the fabric of society was strained to the breaking point.

Under normal circumstances, the care of indigents was considered to be strictly a local obligation. During periods of acute distress it was expected that the local governments could turn to the province for emergency assistance. But no one was prepared for the depth and duration of the Great Depression, particularly on the prairies. Nevertheless, senior governments continued to view unemployment relief as a problem to be administered primarily at the local level. Thus, most of the burden of providing relief fell to the limited and severely over-stretched means of the local authority.

SASKATOON ON THE EVE OF THE DEPRESSION:

The most pervasive images of the Depression in Saskatchewan are rural. There is a tendency to associate images of urban poverty - bread lines and soup kitchens - with places like Toronto and New York. In Saskatchewan it is the effects of drought and erosion that we remember: “black blizzards” of wind-blown dust, long drifts of bone dry topsoil piled high against a fence line, and the boarded up windows of abandoned farmhouses. But farmers with no money to spend meant that the cities – which for the most part existed to serve their rural hinterlands – lost their most important source of income. The effects of the Depression hit the cities like an economic tidal wave.

¹ An expanded version of this paper was published in the 2006 edition of the *Saskatoon History Review*.

² It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the causes of the Great Depression in any detail. Speaking very generally, it was the result of an unstable global economic system (a lingering effect of the First World War) exacerbated by an oversupply of export goods crucial to Canada’s economic health, and protectionist trade policies adopted worldwide in an (ultimately misguided) attempt to protect domestic producers from outside imports. See Michiel Horn, *The Great Depression of the 1930s in Canada* (Ottawa, Canadian Historical Association, 1984), pp. 3-5.

³ George Hoffman, “The Arid Years”. [Http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/canadianreflections/97-03.asp](http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/canadianreflections/97-03.asp)

On the eve of the Great Depression, Saskatoon was in very good shape economically. Although the 1920s had started out poorly, by mid-decade Saskatoon's economic and political climate had stabilized and prosperity was the order of the day. The city's population increased from 31,000 to 43,000 between the 1926 and 1931 censuses.⁴ The value of building permits issued by the City of Saskatoon increased steadily during the latter 1920s, from \$1.1 million in 1925 to a high of nearly \$6 million in 1929. Spending on public works in the city also rose precipitously, reaching a high of \$885,000 in 1929.⁵ These were the days of Saskatoon's "second boom", hearkening back to the great real estate bonanza that had preceded – and been ended by – the First World War. Like that earlier boom it couldn't last. But where that one had ended with the boom of guns in the trenches of Flanders, this one ended with a crash.

EFFECTS OF THE DIRTY THIRTIES IN SASKATOON:

The price of wheat had begun to decline even before the Stock Market Crash of October, 1929. Then a drought began that swept the prairies from Texas to Lloydminster. The price of wheat dropped like a stone. By 1932 it had hit 35 cents a bushel, and throughout the 1930's it averaged only 60 cents a bushel. Total provincial income had dropped by 90 per cent by 1931; in 1932 two-thirds of rural residents were on relief.⁶ Although 1935 was not a bad crop year (comparatively speaking) there was a general crop failure in 1936, and in 1937 wheat production in the province averaged only 2.5 bushels an acre. In some places gardens failed utterly and the south – which was hardest hit – was "a prairie desert." As one observer recounted: "The land was lifeless as ashes, and for miles there is scarcely a growing thing to be seen.... There did not appear to be one single field that will produce a bushel of grain or a load of fodder."⁷

At first, however, things seemed manageable. In the summer of 1930, for example, Mayor John W. Hair, at a conference on unemployment in Winnipeg, declared that the situation in Saskatoon was under control.⁸ He was so wrong. That year the price of wheat dropped to below the cost of production. In 1928 there were 27 families on relief; by the end of 1929 it had risen to fifty. By the fall of 1932, more than 1200 families in Saskatoon were on relief. A year later it was 1600. At the height of the Depression, 1 in 5 Saskatonians was drawing relief. Even civic staff were not exempt. There were massive layoffs and, starting in 1933, across the board wage reductions at City Hall that by 1936 totalled 25 per cent.⁹ Capital works projects undertaken by the City

⁴ Federal census figures. *Municipal Manual*. (Saskatoon: City of Saskatoon, 2003), p. 83.

⁵ Weir Historical Treatise, COS Archives 1055-1, pp. 42-47.

⁶ James Struthers. "The Great Depression". *Canadian Encyclopaedia*. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com>.

⁷ <http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/canadianreflections/97-03.asp>

⁸ Jeff O'Brien, Ruth W. Millar and William P. Delainey. *Saskatoon: A History in Photographs*. (Regina: Coteau Books, 2006), p. 57.

⁹ Weir Historical Treatise, COS Archives 1055-1, p. 52. Civic wages did not return to their 1931 levels until 1942.

dropped to virtually nil from 1931-1938.¹⁰ Only four “modern” homes (i.e., with indoor plumbing) were built in the city between 1932-1937.

Although unemployment during this period was a national problem, there was no national system of relief. The federal governments of R.B. “Iron Heels” Bennett (1930-1935) and even the marginally-more-enlightened W.L. Mackenzie King refused to take responsibility for relief, and for the most part it was left up to local governments to care for their own. The result was fiscal collapse in the western provinces and a hodgepodge of poorly-thought out, arbitrary and often completely bungled relief programmes implemented and run by rural and municipal governments without the financial resources, experience, or desire, to manage a calamity of the size that they were faced with. The exception were single men, whom the municipalities flat out refused to support. Bennett’s solution was to force them into concentration camps with results that proved that the Dominion government was just as far out of its depth when it came to dealing with the crisis as the municipalities.

During this time direct relief - charity - was seen as a last resort. Employment of any sort was much preferred, both by the administration and presumably, by the unemployed. The City of Saskatoon was successful during 1931-1932 in getting federal and provincial money for two large capital works projects – the 19th Street subway¹¹ and the Broadway Bridge as well as for storm sewer construction. The Broadway Bridge in particular was very much a “made in Saskatoon” project as it was designed by faculty at the University and built by gangs of married, unemployed men. A working day consisted of three 7-hour shifts. The men worked in one month rotations, and as much as was possible only hand tools were used in the construction to provide as much work for as many men as possible.

In June of 1932 the City had abolished the open voucher system and opened its own “Relief Store”. Under the old system relief recipients were paid with vouchers which could be redeemed at any retail outlet. Under the new system those on relief had to come into the Relief Store each week to pick up their allotment. The reason for this was to save money and make the system more fraud-proof. While it may have been successful in this regard it was not well-liked by those on relief, many of whom were forced to travel much farther to pick up their supplies. The City also distributed Cooking oil and coal (later wood) for heating. Relief recipients were also eligible for money for rent (\$7/month) and for lighting and other incidentals (\$5/month), first under the “Created Work Plan” which provided them with casual employment and later as a direct payment.

THE CIVIC RELIEF BOARD – 1932-1934:

In the fall of 1932, with requests for relief growing at an alarming rate and in an attempt to save money and reduce the burden that it was placing on the City administration (and Council itself) City Council passed Bylaw 2277 establishing the Civic Relief Board.

¹⁰ Ibid. No capital works projects were undertaken in 1933-1934.

¹¹ Demolished in 2006-2007.

The Relief Board operated until June of 1934, and in retrospect was a dismal failure. Its members were later described by the Relief Officer, Frank Rowland as being “the toughest men in the City” and “unhuman beasts”. Its actions sparked outrage and controversy in Saskatoon. its secretiveness and its autocratic, uncompromising attitude, its meanness of spirit and unwillingness to admit error exacerbated the hardship experienced by Saskatoon’s unemployed.

The Civic Relief Board consisted of six “members of the taxpaying public” and the mayor who sat as an ex-officio member. Under the provisions of the bylaw the Board acquired complete control over the administration of relief in Saskatoon, including staffing and operation of the City’s relief department. Originally serving “at the pleasure of Council”, the bylaw was amended almost immediately to set a two year term with new appointments thereafter. This was so as to “keep the actions of the board entirely out of the pale of civic politics”.¹² Council retained the power to approve the Board’s budget and – in theory at least – to be consulted regarding changes in policy. Other than that the Board operated without oversight of any kind and its decisions were final with no right of appeal.

The decision to give the Board free rein was not made without some disagreement both in Council and on the part of the public. Alderman A. M. Eddy, in particular, expressed concern that the City was shirking its responsibilities with respect to the jobless and Alderman W.B. O’Regan was adamant that “We were elected to represent the people and in the final analysis the responsibility rests upon us!” Public opinion was split as to whether the move would result in the more responsible use of limited financial resources or was merely an example of Council “passing the buck”.

It is interesting to note that when the Women’s Labour League requested that it be allowed to appoint members to the Civic Relief Board it was turned down by the Board on the grounds that – as the Board was appointed by Council – it had no authority to appoint new members. A few days later, however, City Council responded to a similar request by the Saskatoon Local Unemployed Association by saying that it had no authority because “all relief matter had been turned over to the Board”.¹³ Thus both sides were able to disavow any responsibility for anything.

Things got off to a bad start right from the very beginning when the Board announced that henceforward all those registering for relief would be required to sign an undertaking stipulating that they would repay it once they were once more gainfully employed. This was not actually unusual – applicants for relief had been promising to pay it back since 1921 and just such a relief agreement had been instituted in Regina. The difference was that previously no effort had ever been made to actually enforce repayment. The City Commissioner, in fact, could recall no instance of relief money being repaid. The Board made it very clear from the outset that it was quite serious about getting its money back, to the extent of requiring property owners to put up security. Payments were to be retroactive: anyone who had ever received relief from the City would be forced to pay it back. Finally, any who refused to sign the agreement would be cut off.

¹² Saskatoon Star, 12 Oct. 1932.

¹³ Ibid, 21 Oct., 1932

The Relief Agreement was detested for other reasons. It gave Board members and their agents the right to enter the homes of relief recipients at any time for any reason. Those failing to cooperate with the Board by granting access to their homes, answering questions or displaying reluctance of any sort could be taken off relief. Immigrants who had been in Canada for less than five years were forced to sign deportation orders before being granted relief and became deportable the minute they accepted it. Many recent immigrants endured unbelievable hardship rather than accept relief for this reason.

Many families continued to refuse to sign the relief agreement and the Relief Board refused budge. The argument went back and forth until finally on November 19, 1932, a group of some 30 women and children staged a sit-in at City Council chambers in protest. They stayed all day and through the night. Food was sent to them by local restaurants. Still the Board refused to comment or to meet with them or any other labour representatives. This went on all night. The women were told that if they signed the agreement they would immediately be put back on relief; the Relief Store staff would be recalled and their orders filled before they went home. The Mayor stated that he would not forcibly evict women and children from Council Chambers. However, late in the evening police guards were posted. Anyone who left was kept from coming back. Worst of all, deliveries of mattresses and blankets for the protesters were turned back. If they were planning to stay the night, they would have to sleep in chairs or on the floor.

This led to a march on City Hall by 150 angry protesters. It was met by a cordon of police, and a few tense moments followed before they learned that a committee of the Trades and Labour Council had finally been granted an audience by the Relief Board.

Commenting on the actions of the women, the Saskatoon Star printed the text of the agreement in a long editorial condemning its terms as being overly severe and an invasion of privacy. While there was a need to ensure that there was no misuse of funds, the newspaper suggested, “surely a less offensive method” could be devised. The editorial also questioned the legality of the agreement as being essentially a promise given under duress and questioned right of board to refuse relief to any needy family.¹⁴

This didn’t help get blankets to the women spending the night in Council Chambers. However, the next night City Council promised that while the repayment agreement would remain unchanged, the City would provide a four month grace period and would not require more than 10 per cent of earnings per month to go to repayment. This resolution would be printed on the application form and thus become part of the agreement. The sit-in ended and the women and children lost no time in returning to their homes. “*Council will not push collection*” declared the Saskatoon Star, and that was that.¹⁵ While opposition continued to the agreement, it became a great deal less urgent. And in any event, no repayment was ever demanded or received by the City of Saskatoon.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19 November 1932. The article also suggested that “if it [the offensive provisions of the relief agreement] is a matter of preventing the obtaining of relief by false pretences, as Mayor Underwood told the council, does not the Criminal Code provide all the authority necessary?” (Ibid.)

¹⁵ Ibid., 21 November 1932.

The relief agreement wasn't the only cause for unrest among the ranks of the unemployed. The fall of 1932 was a very busy time for unrest. The Relief Board had declared from the first that it would only receive complaints filed in writing with the City Clerk, and those only from individuals speaking in respect of their own personal cases. No delegations or submissions were to be accepted from any groups or organizations. The Board's decisions were final (including the repayment assessments); there was no mechanism for appeal. Moreover, there was no published schedule of meetings. Essentially, in turning the administration of relief over to the Board, Council had shut off any means for those most affected by it – the unemployed themselves – to have any say in how they were to be treated. It is difficult to imagine a more anti-democratic system.

People knew it, too. "JUST AN OLD FOGY", writing in the Saskatoon Star, said:

What this city needs is a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Those on Relief.

When one thinks of all the petty and unnecessary things that first your council and later your Relief Board have thought up to aggravate the already grave enough portion of the unemployed in this city it is indeed amazing that there are no more riots and disturbances than there are. There is always a last straw and it would appear that your Relief Board and Council are looking for it.¹⁶

Several unemployed rallies were held in Saskatoon in October and November, and a frightened City Council turned to the police to protect it from the mob. The Relief Board made it clear from the first that single unemployed were not eligible for municipal relief and were completely the responsibility of the provincial and federal governments. Matters came to a head on Oct. 22 when a group of 150-200 single men besieged the Relief Offices, demanding that they be fed. Some of them threatened that they would take to eating in restaurants and refusing to pay, on the grounds that at least in jail they had to feed you. The Relief Board refused to back down. "We are not in the least bit frightened of your mobs" sniffed one board member. However, a deal was soon put in place where the province and the federal governments agreed to pay for meals and lodgings until something permanent could be put in place.

That "something permanent" turned out to be the "relief camps" which are such a big part of the folklore of the Depression. On November 1, 1932, the provincial and federal governments announced that a "concentration camp under strict military discipline" would soon be opening at the exhibition grounds for single unemployed men. These camps – called "Bennett's Prison Camps" by some, were conceived of as temporary holding areas where men could be kept until they could be sent out work camps (like the one in Prince Albert National Park) or to do farm work. They were universally detested and were hotbeds of political unrest.

That afternoon a group of men marched on City Hall under a red flag, singing the "Internationale", the Communist marching song. Mayor Underwood was furious and immediately banned all parades by the unemployed. A group of special constables was hired –

¹⁶ Ibid., 26 November 1932.

ironically, from among the ranks of unemployed ex-servicemen, and the City prepared to defend itself from the monster within.

On the 7th of November, the day that the new camp was to open, a group of single unemployed men converged on the relief offices at the same time as a large group of curious on-lookers, drawn by a rumour that an attempt was to be made on the life of Frank Rowland, the Relief Officer. In all the crowd numbered more than 200 men. Perhaps not coincidentally, the police also showed up, as well as the newly-minted special constables and a force of RCMP. Words were exchanged, followed by bricks, and the police moved in. According to the evening paper:

Wielding blood-soaked batons and sticks, police and the unemployed clashed in a fierce pitched battle at 2 o'clock this afternoon. Charging a yelling mob of workless, nearly 90 officers accounted for a dozen or more casualties and a half dozen arrests.¹⁷

The mood in Saskatoon that month was not a happy one. One writer, signing himself "Almost A Communist" in the letters section of the local newspaper, summed it up:

Do not kid yourselves that this is only for a few weeks. The end of this oppression (pardon me, depression) coincides approximately with the return of Halley's Comet unless the workers stand firm together.¹⁸

D.S.L. Patterson, Manager of Imperial Oil in Saskatoon and the chairman of the Relief Board had a different take on the disruptions of the fall of 1932. According to him, the whole thing was orchestrated by local merchants for the express purpose of seeing the Relief Store closed:

A small section of the food industry, determined to extract its pound of flesh, is responsible for most of the criticism which has been levelled against the city relief board and its policies during the past few weeks.¹⁹

Most of the excesses of the relief administration of the day were based on the fear that the system would be abused. "Foreigners" were particularly suspect. Speaking to a reporter the Relief Officer said: "A large number of the applicants had absolutely no respect for the law...Many of the foreigners, especially, would swear to anything". He then went on to tell a story about the five fellows who tried to register for relief, each producing the same woman and claiming her to be his wife!²⁰

One of the responsibilities of the relief administration was therefore to investigate fraudulent claimants. In fact this was one of the complaints about the old City Relief Department – that it was not rigorous enough in its investigations. The new Board had determined to make no such error. It goes without saying that the less people you have collecting welfare, the less that welfare costs. Some of the stories that came out of this were, quite frankly, appalling. Frank

¹⁷ Stan Hanson and Don Kerr, "Saskatoon: the First Half Century", (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), p. 300.

¹⁸ Saskatoon Star, 5 November 1932.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23 November 1932.

²⁰ Ibid.

Rowland after his very public resignation from the Relief Department in May of 1933, accused the Board of paying its investigators a bounty of \$2.00 for every family they could get cut off relief. This included reporting men for buying alcohol or for not reporting earnings as low as 25 cents. One man was reported for accepting a pair of socks and pants as payment for painting a fence. Another man was accused of working to pay off a doctor's bill.

Other wacky rules were used by the Relief Board to deny payment. Previously, a couple had to have been married for a certain period of time to qualify. In 1933 the regulations were changed to require that only people married *before* a certain date qualified. This was supposed to keep single people from marrying in order to get on relief. As one speaker at a public meeting asked "Surely City Council cannot say to the single people of Saskatoon that they cannot get married until after the Depression?"²¹

Rules like this caused incredible hardship for people who could not have been said to welfare cheats by anyone's definition.

The Civic Relief Board's mandate ran out in June of 1934, and was not renewed. In July of that year, Bylaw 2277 was repealed and on July 3rd authority for the routine administration of relief was once more in the hands of the City's Relief Officer, reporting directly to City Council. Under Bylaw 2396, a Relief Appeal Board was created to adjudicate appeals arising from decisions of the Relief Officer. The Relief Store closed October, 1934, and the city went to a biweekly direct cash relief system which provided recipients with a small amount of money plus milk and bread tickets under what was known as the "Diet System".

Not all of the voices complaining about the Depression were particularly compassionate. In a letter received by the City's Relief Office in 1936, the writer complained loudly about the carryings-on at a house next to a rental property he owned on Weldon Avenue:

I have had trouble continually for the past two years with the adjoining tenants, who are half-breeds. My tenant complains to me that these breeds are continually swearing and using abusive language [and] that the garden has been raided several times during the past few weeks.

Sir, it hardly seems right that my tenant cannot bring her children up without the continual swearing of these Indians and I hereby request you to use your good offices in either having these people moved or bringing these people into line, whereby their neighbours may live in peace and quietness which is the true right of every British Subject.²²

CONCLUSION:

During the Depression of the 1930s the people of Saskatoon mostly stuck together, helped each other, and did the best they could. Even the men of the Civic Relief Board were not evil or even

²¹ Ibid, 14 July 1933

²² E. Erickson, 7 September 1936. COS Archives, 1069-1177, Vol 50.

cruel, just inflexible and dogmatic. In 1934, two journalists from back east toured the drought area. The reports they wrote back were of a land devastated. But they also said this: "The people living here, who ought to know, say that the land is still all right. It will grow crops if nature will only provide rain. They still believe a 'comeback' can be made if it will only rain next year."

In 1939 war came to the world, and while the Second World War was a human tragedy of overwhelming proportions, it did cure our economic ills. And the rain did come, and the crops with them. After the war ended came growth and prosperity the like of which this city and this province had not experienced since the great settlement boom in the years before 1914. Saskatoon's long winter was finally over. The good times had come again and proved the faith of all of those who had held on and hoped for the future.