



## ***The Thirties: Drought and Depression***

AFTER THE STOCK-MARKET CRASH of 1929, the economic system of the United States and much of the world began to break down as economic activity declined and mass unemployment appeared. During this crisis, threatening the very fabric of society, the administration of President Herbert Hoover and then that of President Franklin D. Roosevelt took the responsibility for the economy of the nation. Both the Great Depression of the 1930's and the principle of government responsibility for the economy were of momentous consequence for the United States and the world. They were no less so for North Dakota.

The state underwent a traumatic experience in the 1930's. Because drought added to the difficulties caused by the depression, North Dakota suffered more than much of the rest of the nation. Moreover, in North Dakota drought and depression accentuated long-standing difficulties created by its status as a producer of raw materials which had little or no control over the markets in which it bought and sold. Thousands lost their farms; more than one-third of the population lived on relief; many people left the state.

During the crisis, the principle of government responsibility for the economy placed the strength of the United States government, and to some degree the resources of the nation, behind efforts to improve the economic well-being of the people of North Dakota. Massive federal expenditures for relief and farm programs saved North Dakota. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Great Plains Committee pointed out the

adjustments needed for a better life in that vast semiarid region, and his administration began to work toward such adjustments. Moreover, the Roosevelt Administration was committed to the liberal and progressive outlook which had long found a congenial climate in liberal, progressive North Dakota.

Yet there was conflict. Farmers, even in North Dakota, where farm cooperatives had long flourished, were individualists, each running his own enterprise. Aid and direction from the federal government inevitably meant some loss of freedom. Then, too, aid and direction from the federal government accentuated North Dakota's dependent status, an unhappy outcome for many touchy North Dakotans. So, while federal relief and farm programs devised by a Democratic administration in Washington were vital to their very survival, North Dakotans remained staunchly Republican. Scarcely a single popular leader in the state, Democratic or Republican, was a consistent supporter of the New Deal. More significant, in spite of or possibly because of their suffering, North Dakotans were reluctant to change their ways. Progress toward adjustment to the semiarid country was painfully slow in the 1930's.

The crisis did produce a bold leader in North Dakota—William Langer. Using his authority as governor to stop foreclosures on farms and to raise the price of wheat, he gave a distressed people not only some economic aid but also some measure of emotional security. His daring, aggressive course brought him the hatred of both the conservatives and some segments of the Nonpartisan League. The political history of the decade revolved, to a remarkable degree, about Langer; it ended with his triumphant election to the United States Senate.

## **THE GREAT DROUGHT**

Drought struck down North Dakota in the 1930's. Nine of the eleven years from 1929 through 1939 had less than average rainfall. June, 1929, was one of the driest Junes on record; in 1930 hot winds cut down the crops; spring rains were light in 1931, and in July searing heat withered the vegetation. By fall more than half the farmers in the hardest-hit northwestern counties needed relief. The next year, 1932, had normal moisture, but 1933, with only 13.5 inches, was the fourth-driest year yet recorded. The state was drying up. In the spring of 1934, dust storms occasionally made travel by plane and auto hazardous; here and there drifting soil covered fences, ditches, and farm machinery. With only 9.5 inches of rainfall, 1934 was the driest year yet on record. On the western ranges, new grass made no growth that spring, and hungry cattle lost weight. The federal government began buying stock, paying four dollars a head for calves and twenty dollars for cows. Ranchers culled their breeding herds and in some counties sold half or more of their cattle. Many cattle died from lack of feed and from dust in their lungs and stomachs.

In the late winter and spring of 1935, dust storms brought anxious

foreboding, but good rains gave the growing season above-average moisture, though still producing a small wheat crop. The year 1936 was the coldest (-60°F. at Parshall on February 15), the hottest (121°F. at Steele on July 6), and the driest (8.8 inches) ever reported. Summer was a disaster. By the end of a hot June, stock feed was short; from July 5 to 18, temperatures reached 100°F. nearly every day; no prairie grass grew outside the Reel River Valley. Again the federal government bought cattle. Ranchers, unable to raise any winter feed, sold a large part of their herds, keeping only their best breeding stock and feeding them on cottonseed cake, brush, old straw, and whatever roughage was available.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 1930's, grasshoppers, menacing the whole Northern Plains, added their ravages to the damage of drought. In the spring of 1931 they began to destroy crops in Pembina and Adams counties, cutting binder twine on sheafs of grain, chewing up clothing, and even roughening shovel and pitchfork handles with their powerful mandibles. They soon spread over large parts of the state. Led by county agents, farmers spread poison bait (molasses, bran, arsenic, and water) and plowed under unhatched eggs. The state government had no funds for the work. The counties spent \$25,000 in 1931, \$110,000 in 1932, \$90,000 in 1933, \$764,000 in 1934, and \$24,000 in 1935. From 1936 to 1947 the North Dakota State Grasshopper Control Committee spent \$3,600,000, the largest sum expended by any state. In 1936, Works Progress Administration crews were mixing poison bait, sometimes working day and night to keep up with the demand.

County control was ineffective: farmers in counties which checked the hoppers saw their fields reinfested from counties without money for poison bait. The problem was really a national and international one. The Greater North Dakota Association called a regional grasshopper conference in Fargo, November 21-22, 1933, with delegates from seven states and three Canadian provinces. The conference finally secured funds from Congress for the control program.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

The battle against the hoppers was won. Although precipitation remained below normal in 1937, 1938, and 1939, the disastrous droughts of 1934 and 1936 were not repeated. But the drought years were also depression years, and depression prices for meager crops brought double hardship. At the bottom in 1932, North Dakota farmers sold wheat for 36¢ a bushel, oats for 9¢, barley for 14¢, potatoes for 23¢, flaxseed for 87¢, and beef cattle for \$3.30 per hundredweight. Prices recovered somewhat,

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<sup>1</sup> Frank J. Bavendick, *Climate and Weather in North Dakota* (2nd ed.; Bismarck: North Dakota State Water Conservation Commission, 1952), pp. 13-17, 53.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Munro, "Grasshopper Outbreaks in North Dakota, 1808-1948," *North Dakota History*, XVI (July 1949), 150-157.

but were never good in the 1930's: wheat sold for only 53¢ a bushel in 1938.

Yields were scanty and income small. From 1929 to 1941, North Dakota farmers produced only two wheat crops of more than 100,000,000 bushels—a minimum for a satisfactory yield. In 1936 the crop was a pitiful 19,000,000 bushels. Even in the depressed 1920's, annual cash farm income had always exceeded \$200,000,000, but in the 1930's it was quite often less than \$100,000,000, and a sizable portion (24 percent in 1934) came from government payments. The low was \$61,000,000 in 1932, or about \$760 per farm. Basing the calculation upon the average cash farm income in North Dakota from 1924 to 1928 (not very good years in the state), drought and depression deprived the state's farmers of the staggering sum of \$1,340,000,000 from 1929 to 1933.<sup>3</sup>

In 1933, the low year, the per capita personal income in the United States was \$375, but in North Dakota it was only \$145. By 1933 the figures were \$527 in the United States and \$278 in North Dakota. From 1932 through 1937 the per capita personal income in North Dakota was only 47 percent of the national average. Plainly, the 1930's brought much greater hardship to North Dakota than they did to the nation as a whole.

Low income caused a multitude of misfortunes: a decline in land values, delinquent loans and foreclosures on mortgages, unpaid taxes, increasing tenancy, growing public ownership of land, large numbers of people on relief, and a great movement of people out of the state. The average value of farm land per acre fell from \$22 in 1930 to \$12 in 1940, the average farm from \$12,200 to \$6,600. Most of the farm mortgage loans became delinquent (78 percent of the Federal Land Bank loans in 1933), and the number of forced sales increased. From 1921 to 1934 there were 43,000 forced sales of farm land in the state. From 1930 to 1944 probably one-third of North Dakota's families lost their farms by foreclosure. The number of forced sales was larger, but not all were for entire farms, and some debtors later recovered their land.<sup>4</sup>

Many people were unable to pay their taxes. By the end of 1936 about three-fourths of the taxes in the southwestern counties were delinquent. In 1933 the total tax burden of the state, over \$31,000,000, was one-third of the farm income. From 1932 to 1937 the unpaid general property taxes amounted to more than \$34,000,000.

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<sup>3</sup>North Dakota Public Welfare Board, "[Special Report to Honorable John Moses on Relief and Economic Situation in North Dakota, April 22, 1939](#),"

prepared by L. A. Baker (Mimeographed; [Bismarck], n.d.), p. 18 (cited hereafter as "Special Report to Moses").

<sup>4</sup>Rainer Schickele and Reuben Engelking, [Land Values and the Land Market in North Dakota, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin](#) 353 (Fargo, 1949), pp. 13-16; William E. Koenker, "[The Rural Land Tax Problem in North Dakota with an Appraisal of the Income Value of Land as a Measure of Taxation](#)" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1938), pp. 15-16.

Farm tenancy increased from 35 percent in 1929 to 45 percent in 1939. Because farmers could not pay their debts, a considerable amount of farm land passed from individual to corporate and public ownership. The Bank of North Dakota, the Federal Land Bank of St. Paul, the state land department, county governments, and the United States Soil Conservation Service acquired title to about six million acres.<sup>5</sup> After 1934 from one-third to nearly one-half of the people were on relief; 75 percent of the people in Billings County were receiving government assistance in February, 1939.

Thousands fled the stricken state. By 1940 the population was down to less than 642,000, a loss of 5.7 percent, or nearly 39,000 persons, in a decade. The loss was really much greater. The excess of births over deaths in the 1930's was more than 82,000. That is, if no one had left the state, its population would have increased by 82,000 from 1930 to 1940. North Dakota lost not only that number, however, but also 39,000 more, a loss by out-migration of over 121,000, or about double the loss of the 1920's.

The loss was spread fairly evenly through the decade. For the years from 1935 to 1940, a special census on internal migration showed that 86,699 persons left North Dakota, moving principally to Minnesota, Washington, and California. During the same years, 20,218 persons moved into the state. The loss was chiefly from the farms, although the small towns also lost many people. The urban population (persons living in towns of 2,500 and more) increased by 16 percent, or approximately the rate of natural increase; the small towns increased by only 7 percent; the farm population declined by 17 percent. Forty-three of the fifty-three counties lost population; the western ones lost most heavily—Slope County 29 percent.

Many defeated people drifted from the farms into the towns. Professor John M. Gillette, a stocky, white-haired rural sociologist at the University of North Dakota, described their condition after he had made a six-thousand-mile tour of the state in 1939:

Stoves are giving out; bedding is wearing out; curtains, carpets, and furniture becoming unusable; clothes have become shabby and indecent... Along with these changes has come a decided loss of morale. Ambition... has been killed; and there is little hope of ever being anything but a WPAer. The children born into and being reared in this situation are decidedly underprivileged. They are cut off from association with middle class children, feel themselves to be outcasts and inferiors, have little or no recreational privileges, and come to absorb an atmosphere of defeatism and parasitism.... It is a most serious situation for the young men and women on farms who are

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<sup>5</sup>Lyman W. Wallin and Reuben Engelking, *Land Ownership Trends in North Dakota, Selected Years, 1929-1944*, *North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin* 337 (Fargo, 1945), pp. 3-8; Morris H. Taylor and Raymond J. Penn, *Management of Public Land in North Dakota*, *North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin* 312 (Fargo, 1942), pp. 7-11.

just coming to maturity. Farming no longer has power to absorb them; and after remaining idle parasites on the farmstead for a time they float into towns and villages, marry, and join the WPA forces. For them and the stranded agricultural laborers and farmers there is no longer a retreat in great cities to join the armies of manual and white-collar workers, for those are filled with unemployed millions and new recruits generally soon apply for relief and are then sent back to the North Dakota counties from which they derived aid where their legal residence is.<sup>6</sup>

## LEMKE AND THE ELECTION OF ROOSEVELT

As a farm state, North Dakota thought of relief chiefly in terms of scaling down farm debts, increasing the supply of money, and guaranteeing the farmers prices which covered the cost of production. In 1929, William Lemke began to work out a program. He devised a bankruptcy law to scale down farm debts in proportion to the decline of land values, a refinance law to pay off farm debts with three billion dollars' worth of newly printed money, and a government-owned United States Bank to take over the issue of paper money from the privately owned Federal Reserve banks. Under the refinance plan, the farmers would repay the government credit agency at a rate of 3 percent annually (half as interest and half on the principal). Lemke also adopted a cost-of-production plan by which the government would guarantee farmers prices which covered the cost of production without any restriction on the size of the crops grown.

Lemke was a fighter who believed there was a devil behind every difficulty. He was a man of extravagant dreams; he simplified reality for the farmers and gave them hope. He promoted his simple cures with energy and determination. In 1931 the North Dakota Legislature endorsed Lemke's proposals, and he sent out copies of the resolution to every state legislator in the nation. Under Farmers' Union auspices, he spoke for them in many middle western states.

Senator Lynn J. Frazier introduced the bankruptcy and refinance bills in Congress. When the Hoover Administration refused to support them, Lemke began to believe that Democratic Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York would be the best candidate for President. Late in 1931 or in January, 1932, Lemke went to see the Governor at Albany. Roosevelt received him graciously, listened carefully, and assured Lemke of his support in general terms: "Yes, yes, I am for all that." Lemke was pleased with his reception and went home to work for Roosevelt in the Farmers' Union and the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota and neighboring states. As a result, Roosevelt made the first formal announcement of his candidacy for the North Dakota presidential primary to be held on March 15.

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<sup>6</sup>John M. Gillette, "Social-Economic Submergence in a Plains State," *Rural Sociology*, V (March 1940), 64-63.

Lemke worked effectively for Roosevelt among League county leaders, and thousands of Republicans voted in the Democratic primary and gave Roosevelt an easy victory over William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, whose inflationary ideas and picturesque personality had a strong appeal in North Dakota. Lemke always believed that the early victory in North Dakota helped Roosevelt in the other farm states of the Northwest and that he himself played an important part in starting Roosevelt on the way to the White House.

## **THE LANGER REVOLUTION**

Just as the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1932 brought a new era to the nation, so, too, did the election of William Langer as governor in the same year bring a new era to North Dakota. Before the June primary the Nonpartisan League had endorsed Langer for governor, Gerald P. Nye for the Senate, and William Lemke and James H. Sinclair for the House of Representatives (after the 1930 census, North Dakota’s representation in the House was cut from three to two). From 1928 to 1932, Langer had spent twenty-one thousand dollars of his own money to finance the resurrection of the League. He was endorsed for governor over opposition from the Lemke-Nye faction.

The 1932 primary campaign was a runaway for the League candidates. Langer, a rough and boisterous campaigner, was a great vote getter. He was especially appealing to the German Russians, many of whom could not read English and distrusted well-groomed candidates. They became Langer’s loyal supporters.<sup>7</sup> He emphasized the need to reduce taxes and to end nepotism—telling issues in the depression. Senator Nye’s national prominence, a result of his investigation of the corrupt election to the Senate of Ruth Hanna McCormick from Illinois, helped the entire League ticket. His opponent, Governor George F. Shafer, lost votes by defending President Hoover and opposing government action against the depression. Lemke promised that his debt-reduction and refinance proposals had Roosevelt’s support.

Every League candidate won Republican nomination. Lemke and Sinclair defeated Independent incumbents Olger B. Burtness and Thomas Hall and also Usher L. Burdick, who ran without endorsement. In the fall campaign the Republican nominees opposed Hoover’s re-election. Nye and Sinclair criticized Hoover bitterly, and although Langer spoke only of state issues, Lemke campaigned openly for Roosevelt, making ninety-nine speeches in October alone. The outcome was a rout for Roosevelt, who received 69 percent of the votes. Although League candidates all received fewer votes, the League won a complete victory: the House seats, all state offices, and control of the legislature. For the first time since

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<sup>7</sup>Joseph B. Voeller, “[The Origin of the German-Russian People and Their Role in North Dakota](#)” (Unpublished M.S. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1940), pp. 99-105.

1919, it controlled the state government.

Before Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in Washington, Governor Langer and the League began a bold operation to meet the crisis in North Dakota. Angry crowds were surging into Bismarck; a spirit of desperation was seizing many; the state treasury was empty; state bonds were far below par. Langer believed that it was imperative to raise farm prices, to save farm property from foreclosure, and to reduce public expenditures. Although seriously ill at the beginning of his term, he acted with daring and imagination. Under his urging and aided by his many vetoes, the legislature cut the biennial appropriations from ten million dollars to five million. Salaries were reduced, and funds for the state's multitudinous departments, its penal and charitable institutions, and the colleges and the university were cut drastically.

The reduction in appropriations did not mean a similar reduction in expenditures, for the legislature controlled only a fraction of the moneys paid out by the state treasurer. Although the legislature appropriated only five million dollars for the 1933-1935 biennium, the state treasurer actually paid out forty-nine million. There were many special funds, such as the six million dollars for highways, that were beyond the authority of the legislature or the governor.

Langer improved the state's credit by transferring money from other funds, such as the gasoline tax, to the bond-retirement fund. He persuaded the legislature to pass a 2 percent sales tax; it was, however, referred to and disapproved by the voters on September 22, 1933, by a large majority. The Public Service Commission secured reductions in electric rates.

In the fall of 1933, Langer made a dramatic move to raise the price of wheat. Using the authority granted by a new law, he placed an embargo on all wheat shipments from the state. The price of wheat rose five cents in Minneapolis on the first day of the embargo and twenty-three cents before he withdrew it on December 5. Late in December the federal district court issued an injunction against the embargo, but Langer had already accomplished his purpose. All farm prices, however, were moving upward in the last half of 1933.

An even more significant action was Langer's moratorium on foreclosures. The voters had twice defeated initiated measures for a moratorium on farm-mortgage debts in 1932. On March 4, 1933, however, Langer proclaimed both a state bank holiday (President Roosevelt was proclaiming one for the nation) and a moratorium on all debts. The state banks reopened on March 14, but Langer retained the moratorium, soon restricting it to forbid foreclosures only on real property being farmed by the owner. On April 17 he exempted from the moratorium foreclosures by the federal government and its agencies.

The daily newspapers and the Democratic party opposed the moratorium, but the League, the Farmers' Union, and the Farm Holiday Association supported it. The *Leader*, started by Langer in July, 1933, liked to say that "human rights are more sacred than property rights."



When sheriff's sales continued in spite of the moratorium, angry crowds of farmers abused officials, making them slop the hogs, scrub the barn floor, and walk home. At the eviction sale of Martin Oyloer near Williston, members of the Farm Holiday Association bid in Oyloer's farming equipment for a few cents and returned it to him. Governor Langer finally used the National Guard to stop the sheriff's sales.

The moratorium helped morale in a time of great anxiety. North Dakotans were encouraged because they felt that the state government was doing everything in its power to help them. Most states tried some form of moratorium in the 1930's, but none took as broad or as effective action as North Dakota. South Dakota, for example, had about 12,000 more foreclosures on farms than North Dakota. The moratorium was continued by Langer's successors, and then in 1937 the legislature passed a moratorium law, which it re-enacted in 1939 and 1941 and finally dropped in 1943.<sup>8</sup>

As the depression and the moratorium largely destroyed the value of farm land as security for private lenders, the farm-mortgage business passed into the hands of public agencies. In the 1930's bankers persuaded their farmer debtors to refinance their loans with federal agencies. By 1945 the commercial banks of North Dakota held only 1.3 percent of the farm-mortgage debt; the Federal Land Bank and the Federal Farm Mortgage Corporation held 50.9 percent and insurance companies 16.7 percent.

The moratorium did not prevent foreclosure by the federal agencies, which therefore acquired title to much land. In 1939, with the end of the moratorium on tax foreclosures, the counties took over some 2,000,000 acres. Taxes had not been paid on some of it for ten or twelve years. The state land department had lent nearly seventeen million dollars on farms and had foreclosed on more than 821,000 acres when the loans became delinquent. By 1942 the Bank of North Dakota owned nearly 1,600,000 acres of land, the Federal Land Bank an estimated 1,000,000, and the United States Department of Agriculture over 1,000,000—both original public domain and submarginal land recently purchased.<sup>9</sup>

## **FEDERAL RELIEF**

The depression emphasized North Dakota's dependence on outside resources in a new way. Significant as Langer's wheat embargo, debt moratorium, and budget cuts undoubtedly were, a flood of money sent in by the federal government from the rest of the nation did the chief work in relieving the suffering of the terrible 1930's.

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<sup>8</sup>William W. Phillips, "The North Dakota Moratorium" (Seminar paper, Department of History, University of North Dakota, 1951), pp. 12-47.

<sup>9</sup>Taylor and Penn, *Management of Public Land in North Dakota*, pp. 8, 11; William E. Koenker, "[Banking Trends in North Dakota, 1922-1947](#)" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1949). pp. 25-55.

By the end of 1932 the counties and private charity could no longer carry the relief burden. In January, 1933, Governor Langer appointed a state emergency relief committee with Supreme Court Judge A. M. Christianson as chairman. The 1933 legislature appropriated no money for relief, but Christianson's committee, working feverishly in the crisis, borrowed \$492,000 from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and organized county relief committees to distribute the funds. On June 1, 1933, the committee began to receive its money from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (F.E.R.A.), headed by Harry L. Hopkins.

Relief soon became the biggest business in the state. The committee furnished groceries on relief orders, started a state-wide garden program, gave medical aid, and set relief clients to mining their own lignite on school lands. A large part of early relief was stock feed, in return for which farmers built roads. After the Civil Works Administration (C.W.A.), supervised by the Christianson committee in North Dakota, began an employment program on November 15, 1933, most of the needy performed useful work for wages. The C.W.A. built and repaired roads, constructed skating rinks, swimming pools, and tennis courts, bound and catalogued library books, rendered nursing service, and served school lunches. At the peak of its program it employed about thirty-seven thousand persons in North Dakota.

When the C.W.A. was discontinued on March 15, 1934, its work projects were taken over by the F.E.R.A., which employed about 21,000 workers at a minimum wage of thirty cents an hour and had a weekly payroll of some \$250,000. In April, 148,000 persons, or more than a fifth of North Dakota's population, were receiving relief. By the time the F.E.R.A. was discontinued on December 15, 1935, it had built 114 dams, 34 wells, 60 bridges, 2,300 miles of streets and highways, 986 sanitary privies, 70 public buildings, 14 swimming pools, 11 playgrounds, 88 tennis courts, 32 golf courses, 108 skating rinks, 40 baseball diamonds, 36 airports, and 23 parks.

Many F.E.R.A. projects did not deal with construction. The F.E.R.A. hired teachers (1,985 in 1934) to keep schools open; it gave part-time employment to needy college students; it ran camps for transients; it trained social workers; it mixed grasshopper bait; it organized recreational programs; it sponsored the arts and historical research. By December 15, 1935, it had enrolled some 12,000 North Dakota boys in 28 companies of the Civilian Conservation Corps. They planted trees, made parks, and earned \$30 a month, \$25 of which was sent home to their families.

Such activities maintained the morale and the economy of a stricken people. From February, 1933, to the end of December, 1935, relief in North Dakota cost over \$36,000,000. The federal government furnished more than \$32,000,000, the counties \$3,500,000, and the state only \$139,000 (all of it in December, 1935). In March, 1935, after the terrible drought of 1934, some 37 percent of the state's people were on relief,

ranging from 72 percent in Divide County in the parched northwestern corner to none in Traill in the Red River Valley, which received its first federal help in November, 1935.

On March 1, 1934, by long-distance telephone, Harry Hopkins took control of federal relief in North Dakota away from the state emergency relief committee. Early in 1935 the legislature created the Public Welfare Board and passed a sales tax to provide money for its work. The relief program was then reorganized. In December a new division of responsibilities went into effect. The Public Welfare Board, using state and federal money, would care for the aged, mothers and dependent children, the unemployable needy, and needy employables not on work relief. The federal government would care for the others through new agencies. The Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration) would care for rural relief cases. The new Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) would give work relief to a specified number of "employables other than farmers."<sup>10</sup>

Relief activities expanded after the drought of 1936. By October nearly 61,000 persons were employed on W.P.A. projects, emergency conservation work, and the projects of other agencies. The peak relief expenditure was nearly \$18,000,000 in the last half of 1936. Late that year, about 330,000 persons (half the population) were on relief. Expenditures continued to be large. In May, 1938, for example, over 13,000 people were working on W.P.A. projects, nearly 4,000 were with the Civilian Conservation Corps, and more than 25,000 farm families were receiving grants from the Farm Security Administration. That year, nearly \$23,000,000, largely federal funds, was spent on relief programs in North Dakota. In 1939 the legislature appropriated nearly \$6,000,000 for relief and welfare. In January of that year, over 242,000 persons (about 37 percent of the population) were receiving assistance from a state or federal agency. About half of them were members of the nearly 31,000 farm families on relief.

In North Dakota the W.P.A. alone, between July 1, 1935, and June 30, 1942, built 20,373 miles of highways and streets, 721 new bridges and viaducts, 166 miles of sidewalks, 15,012 culverts, 503 new public buildings, 61 additions to public buildings, 680 outdoor recreational facilities (stadia, grandstands, fairgrounds, parks, playgrounds, athletic fields, swimming pools, and golf courses), 809 water wells, 2 irrigation projects, 39 sewage treatment plants, and 9 water treatment plants. It reconstructed 1,002 bridges and viaducts, 2,180 public buildings, and 1,721 culverts. It repaired 646,206 books, served 3,653,392 school lunches, and sewed 2,078,451 garments.

The W.P.A. also distributed surplus commodities, conducted literacy classes, and operated salvage programs. Directed by brilliant young Ethel

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<sup>10</sup>Federal Emergency Relief Administration for North Dakota, *Relief in Review in North Dakota* (Bismarck, 1936), pp. 15-124.

Schlasinger, it wrote one of the best books on the state ever produced: Federal Writers' Project, *North Dakota: A Guide to the Northern Prairie State* (1938). Aided by the National Park Service and a series of Civilian Conservation Corps camps and other work projects, the North Dakota State Historical Society developed sixteen newly acquired park areas (4,511 acres) and enlarged five older parks. The work on the North and South Roosevelt, Fort Abraham Lincoln, Lake Metigoshe, Turtle River, and Peace Garden parks and on the De Mores, Fort Abercrombie, Fort Rice, and White Stone Hill historic sites was especially important.<sup>11</sup>

In all, including both relief programs and payments made to farmers under farm programs (\$142,000,000 from 1934 through 1940), the federal government spent about \$266,000,000 in North Dakota from 1933 through 1940. This massive outpouring of federal funds by the Democratic administration in Washington was of the utmost importance to the state, contributing much to its survival and wellbeing. But such federal assistance did not make North Dakota a Democratic state, nor did it win more than temporary support for President Roosevelt's New Deal among a people long attached to liberal and progressive programs. Basically, North Dakotans were not very happy about their dependent position. This situation had obtained ever since the Indians of the region had first shown resentment at their dependence on the traders.

## THE BATTLE AGAINST LANGER

North Dakota politics in the 1930's was largely the story of determined attacks upon William Langer and his triumph over his adversaries. They were first made on Langer's political tactics. Soon after taking office as governor, he cleaned out the executive departments and appointed persons loyal to himself. He started a party newspaper, the *Leader*, and openly solicited his appointees to buy subscriptions equal to 5 percent of their annual salaries, a political tithe for the faithful. Langer defended this as an honest campaign-fund solicitation: the job-holders could recoup by reselling the subscriptions, and those who refused to subscribe were not fired. Young Harold McDonald solicited subscriptions for the *Leader*, not only in state offices, but also in the relief office, where the clerks were paid from federal funds. State employees pledged \$58,282 and relief employees only \$469.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [North Dakota Public Welfare Board](#), *Report, 1940-1942*, pp. 7, 96-101; "Special Report to Moses," pp. 5, 14; Works Progress Administration, [Report on Progress of the Works Program](#), December 15, 1936, pp. 55, 67-68, June 30, 1938, p. 114; Russell Reid, "Report of the North Dakota State Park Committee... December 31, 1940," [North Dakota Historical Quarterly](#), VIII (January 1941), 138-141.

<sup>12</sup>United States Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from North Dakota, Report... on the Protest of Various Citizens... to the Seating of William Langer, Senate Report No. 1010*, 77 Cong., 2d Sess., p. 26 (cited hereafter as *Langer Investigation*).

For such solicitation the Roosevelt Administration, cheered on by conservatives in the state, set out with considerable hypocrisy (it was then said to be levying assessments on postmasters in North Dakota) to destroy Langer. On March 1, 1934, Harry Hopkins removed the administration of relief from the state committee appointed by Langer. That spring, a federal grand jury indicted Langer and eight associates on charges of soliciting and collecting money for political purposes from federal employees and of conspiring, to obstruct the orderly operation of an act of Congress. After a long trial (May 22-June 17) at Bismarck before Judge Andrew A. Miller, an old enemy, Langer and his co-defendants were found guilty. Judge Miller, saying that he was "delighted and pleased" at the verdict, sentenced Langer to serve eighteen months in a federal penitentiary and to pay a \$10,000 fine. The Postmaster General took away the *Leader's* second-class mailing privileges.

In spite of his conviction and a split in the Nonpartisan League, Langer and the Langer League candidates (including Lynn J. Frazier, William Lemke, and Usher L. Burdick) easily defeated the slates of both the anti-Langer Leaguers (headed by T. H. H. Thoresen) and the Independents for the Republican nominations in the primary. Langer campaigned vigorously after his conviction. Many people considered him a martyr being legally tarred and feathered. At rallies they would stand reverently when he entered and then cheer mightily. Speakers would mention the crucifixion of Christ and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Langer was eventually cleared after a long legal battle. On May 7, 1935, nearly a year after the first trial, a federal circuit court of appeals reversed the original conviction. After a new conspiracy trial, November 1-15, the jury disagreed. After a perjury trial, December 3-6, Langer was found not guilty. After a third conspiracy trial, December 10-19, he was finally found innocent of the original charges.

Long before his vindication, the state supreme court had removed Langer from office. On July 17, 1934, it had ruled that because he had been convicted of a felony, the duties of governor had devolved upon the lieutenant governor, Ole H. Olson. Although crowds in the Bismarck streets shouted "We want Langer," Olson moved into the governor's office on July 19. After Langer's disqualification, the Republican state central committee chose his wife, Lydia, to take his place as Republican candidate for governor. During the campaign, old Leaguers, such as Gerald P. Nye, James H. Sinclair, and Olson, spoke for Democratic candidate Thomas H. Moodie, and he defeated Mrs. Langer. The other state offices, however, went to Langer supporters.

The election was scarcely over when Langer discovered that Moodie had voted in Minneapolis in 1930. The state constitution requires that the governor shall have resided in the state for the five years next preceding the election. Moodie had lived in North Dakota since 1898, but he had been an editorial writer on the *Minneapolis Tribune* from August, 1929, when he sold his newspaper in Mohall, to April, 1931, when he bought a

paper at Williston. On February 2, 1935, the state supreme court disqualified Moodie, and Lieutenant Governor Walter Welford became governor. North Dakota had had four governors in seven months.

Langer came back in 1936. When the Nonpartisan League convention endorsed Langer for governor, some delegates withdrew and endorsed Welford. In the June primary, Welford, supported by the conservatives, won the Republican nomination by a margin of only 695 votes. John Moses won the Democratic nomination for governor. When Langer filed as an Independent candidate in the fall election, it became a tight three-cornered race. Lemke, running for President of the United States as the candidate of the Union party as well as for re-election to the House, did not oppose Langer. Senators Frazier and Nye supported Welford, but Representative Burdick worked for Langer.

Moses, born in Norway, was a good vote getter. He campaigned tirelessly, speaking three or four times a day in English, Norwegian, and German. He appealed both to the immigrants and to the conservative Republicans, who had little use for Langer. Yet Langer's opponents could not unite on one candidate, and Langer was elected governor in November with only 36 percent of the votes. That year, President Roosevelt carried every county in North Dakota, getting 163,000 votes to less than 73,000 for Alfred M. Landon, the Republican candidate. Lemke, though re-elected to the House of Representatives, had only 13 percent of the state's vote for President (36,708) and only 891,886 votes in the nation.

In his second term, Langer was again the champion of the common man and the wheat farmer. Pointing out that many were "desperately hard up and... suffering for the lack of the necessities of life," he asked the legislature to appropriate nearly six million dollars for general relief, pensions for the aged, and child welfare—a sum equal to all appropriations for the 1933-1935 biennium. He coerced the legislature into passing an income tax to balance its renewal of the 1935 sales tax. When on the night of July 23, 1937, the grain trade reduced the price of lightweight 37-pound wheat from 89 cents per bushel to 37, Langer had the State Mill and Elevator offer 35 cents a bushel over the market price. The grain trade met the advanced price. Langer estimated that his bold maneuver had saved the farmers twelve million dollars. In 1938, with durum at 48 cents a bushel, Langer had the State Mill and Elevator offer 65 cents. Overnight the millers paid the higher price.<sup>13</sup> Such daring and imaginative acts won Langer the loyalty of thousands.

Other acts, however, won him the hostility and distrust of many. In 1937 and 1938, V. W. Brewer, a bond broker from Minneapolis, and Gregory Brunk, a lawyer from Des Moines, made profits of \$297,236 by buying the bonds of North Dakota counties at a discount and selling them to the Bank of North Dakota at par. Brewer, Brunk, and Frank A. Vogel,

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<sup>13</sup>John M. Holzworth, *The Fighting Governor: The Story of William Langer and the State of North Dakota* (Chicago: The Pointer Press, 1938), pp. 112-116.

manager of the bank, were all friends of Langer. Although the bank could legally have bought the bonds directly from the counties, it apparently refused to do so. While making the bond transactions, Brunk bought land said to be worth only \$5,718 from Langer, paying him \$56,800. Brunk never saw the land. The Great Northern Railroad was then fighting in the federal courts against taxes levied on its property in 1935 and 1936 by the state board of equalization, of which Governor Welford was chairman. In 1937 the board, with Langer as chairman, raised the assessment of the Great Northern's property by \$700,000 but reduced it in 1938 by \$3,000,000. The Great Northern employed Thomas Sullivan of Chicago as a special attorney at \$20,000 a year. Sullivan bought from Langer worthless stock in William Lemke's defunct Mexican Land Finance Company, paying \$25,000. Sullivan never asked for delivery of the stock.<sup>14</sup> These matters were first clearly disclosed by the testimony of the participants before the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections in 1941.

Rumors of them entered into the 1938 campaign. That spring, the League convention endorsed Langer for Nye's seat in the Senate; it also endorsed Burdick and Lemke for re-election to the House. Lemke had as yet taken no part in the opposition to Langer, but in 1938 he broke with him and supported Nye. In the Republican primary, Nye defeated Langer by 5,151 votes, but Lemke and Burdick and the rest of the League slate, many of them Langer men, won Republican nominations.

Langer filed as an Independent candidate for the Senate in the fall election. Langer sponsored an initiated measure to raise old-age pensions from thirty dollars a month to forty. To help Nye, Lemke and Nye agreed to support John Moses, the Democratic nominee for governor; in return, Moses was to have Jess J. Nygaard, the Democratic nominee for the Senate, fail to campaign. Nye was a national figure, but he was able to defeat Langer largely because the anti-Langer vote was not divided. Nygaard received only 19,244 votes; if he had campaigned, Langer, with 112,007 votes to 131,907 for Nye, would probably have gone to the Senate in 1938. Thus a coalition of conservative Republicans, Democrats, and Lemke-Frazier-Nye Leaguers were able to make Moses governor and to send Nye back to the Senate.

## **JOHN MOSES AS GOVERNOR**

The new governor was to compile a notable record. A six-foot-four giant, John Moses had come to the United States from Norway in 1905 at the age of twenty. After various jobs, he enrolled at the University of North Dakota, graduating from the arts college in 1914 and from the law school in 1915. After 1917 he practiced law in Hazen, farmed on the side, married, and raised a family of four. He was elected state's attorney of Mercer County five times and in 1934 was nominated by the Democrats

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<sup>14</sup>*Langer Investigation*, pp. 63-68, 72-75.

for attorney general.

Moses' first term as governor was largely an attack upon Langer. One issue was old-age pensions. Langer's initiated measure to raise pensions had passed overwhelmingly in November, carrying every county, but the 1939 legislature, backed by Moses, refused to appropriate money for the larger pensions. The League-controlled house passed a gross-transactions tax, but the anti-League senate defeated it. Langer then initiated three measures to finance the higher pensions: a gross-transactions tax, a prohibition of highway construction with diversion of highway funds to pensions, and the establishment of municipal liquor stores, whose profits would go for pensions. Langer campaigned tirelessly for his measures, but in the special election on July 11, 1939, they were defeated by more than four to one. Governor Moses, business and civic leaders, the North Dakota Taxpayers Association, and many members of the Nonpartisan League fought Langer's proposals.

Their defeat revealed Langer's declining influence. Moses had already moved to expose Langer's administration as governor. In January, 1939, he had appointed Clyde Duffy to investigate the State Hospital for the Insane and the Motor Vehicle Registration Department. Duffy reported irregularities in the department and the political assessment of employees at the hospital. Moses appointed Robert M. Stangler manager of the State Mill and Elevator, and the mill began to make a profit. In December, 1938, under Langer's manager, the mill had manufactured 22,142 barrels of flour with 267 employees; in December, 1939, under Stangler, it manufactured 42,087 barrels with 179 employees.

On July 29, 1937, the Langer-appointed Board of Administration had dismissed seven staff members, some with thirty-three years of service, from the Agriculture College. The college was promptly dropped from the North Central Association's accredited list. An initiated measure approved in June, 1938, created the Board of Higher Education to replace the Board of Administration as the governing body for the state's institutions of higher education. Before the new board took over on July 1, 1939, Moses had secured the reinstatement of the dismissed men and the restoration of the college to the accredited list. He said: "We have come to an end of forced contributions and 'political racketeering.'"<sup>15</sup>

Moses was also able to cut government expenditures. In January, 1939, many counties were bankrupt; 37 percent of the population was still on relief; three-fourths of the farm loans were delinquent; a third of the school districts were dependent on state aid. The state government was facing a deficit of two and one-half million dollars. Governor Moses ordered officials whom he had appointed to reduce expenditures by 18 percent and asked the elective heads of departments to cooperate in the economy plan. Public opinion supported him, and most department heads

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<sup>15</sup>Adam J. Schweitzer, "[John Moses and the New Deal in North Dakota](#)" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1954), pp. 100-121.



complied with his request

The economy move made Moses popular and helped to secure his re-election in 1940. He defeated Jack Patterson, lieutenant governor and League candidate, who had secured the Republican nomination. Roosevelt was running for a third term as President, but Moses, anxious not to offend his conservative Republican supporters, ignored the national campaign. Many newspapers supported Moses the Democrat for governor and Wendell Willkie the Republican for President. Moses won by a large majority: 173,000 votes to 101,000 for Patterson.

President Roosevelt, however, failed to carry North Dakota in 1940. Isolationist feelings aroused by the war crisis turned many voters against him; no important leader in the state urged his re-election. Senator Nye, who had supported Roosevelt in 1936, told North Dakotans to vote for Willkie and stay out of war. Willkie received nearly 155,000 votes to 124,000 for Roosevelt. Willkie ran best in the counties with a large German Russian population; Roosevelt ran best in strong Farmers' Union counties.<sup>16</sup>

In 1940, Langer sought Frazier's seat in the Senate. The loose anti-Langer coalition fell apart. Conservative Republicans turned against Lemke and Frazier, who had helped them defeat Langer in 1938. The conservatives believed that Langer was through in politics; they disliked Lemke's and Frazier's hostility to banks and insurance companies and also their isolationism. So the Republican convention refused to endorse Frazier; it withdrew its endorsement of Lemke, running for re-election to the House, when he supported Usher L. Burdick, endorsed by the League for the House. The Republican convention endorsed Thomas E. Whelan for Frazier's seat. Whelan was a prominent member of the American Legion and no isolationist; his potato partnership at St. Thomas labeled each sack: "To Hell with Hitler."

The Nonpartisan League convention endorsed Langer for the Senate. In the primary he defeated Frazier and Whelan, winning the Republican nomination with only 40 percent of the vote. Burdick and Lemke won the Republican nominations for the House.

After the primary, many conservatives urged Lemke to run against Langer in the fall. So Lemke, giving up his nomination for the House, filed as an Independent candidate for the Senate. Ambitious to be a senator, he thought that Moses could have Charles Vogel, the Democratic candidate for the Senate, hold back from campaigning as Jess J. Nygaard had done in 1938. But Vogel, an able Fargo attorney and Democratic national committeeman from North Dakota, campaigned vigorously. He believed in President Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies; he thought that Moses, by aiding Lemke, was weakening Roosevelt's

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<sup>16</sup>Map on Farmers' Union strength in Harold V. Knight, *Grass Roots: The Story of the North Dakota Farmers' Union* (Jamestown: North Dakota Farmers' Union, 1947), p. 70.

chances in North Dakota in order to secure his own re-election. Moses helped Lemke, however, while Lemke was attacking Roosevelt bitterly. In November, Langer was elected with 38 percent of the votes. He had 100,847 to 92,593 for Lemke and 69,847 for Vogel.

Langer's enemies made a determined effort to prevent the Senate from seating him. In 1941 the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections listened to much damaging testimony. Langer himself admitted having paid some \$525 to Gale B. Wyman, son of the federal judge who presided at his second and third trials in 1935. Although the committee decided that Langer was not entitled to be the senator from North Dakota, the Senate voted 52 to 30 to seat him. The political warfare of the 1930's had ended with Langer's triumph.

### **MOVING TOWARD ADJUSTMENT**

Yet the political struggle, revolving about one man, was essentially a side show. It was unrelated to solving the people's problems of adjustment to the demands of a semiarid spring-wheat country. North Dakota's settlers came mostly from more humid regions. In the wet years before the First World War, they plowed up much land better left for grazing and planted wheat, creating an economy with a narrow reserve. The misuse of the land lowered its productivity: the scant water supply was wasted, the range overgrazed, the light, dry soil exposed to the wind. Even after the price collapse that followed the First World War, the settlers still planted large acreages to wheat in a desperate endeavor to stay on the land and pay their debts and taxes. The quality of living went down; tenancy increased; the population became unstable; improvement was neglected. In the 1930's drought and depression merely accentuated trends long in the making.

The people needed to adjust their ways of life to the Great Plains environment, to learn to live on the land on its own terms, as the Indians had done centuries before. On September 30, 1936, President Roosevelt appointed the Great Plains Committee to report on a long-term program for "the efficient utilization of the resources of the Great Plains." Roosevelt himself wrote: "Perhaps in this area of relatively little rain, practices brought from the more humid portion of the country are not most suitable under the prevailing natural conditions."

In its report, *The Future of the Great Plains* (1936), the committee recommended many things—a summing up of current thinking—as part of an "intelligent adjustment to the ways of Nature." The federal and state governments, as well as communities and individuals, the committee insisted, must all respond to imperatives really dictated by the Great Plains themselves. These were, the committee said, the commands of the Plains. Conserve water—in the soil itself, in stock-watering facilities, and in small irrigation projects. Enlarge farms and ranches so that they are large enough to support families. Prevent the unwise expansion of cultivated areas in times of high rainfall and high prices. Let the

government hold the range land and set up cooperative grazing associations to prevent overgrazing. Make possible the use of large ranges for grazing in connection with dry farming and irrigation. Give tenants a stake in conservation and improvements by means of long-term standard leases. Help people stay on the land by taxing its income, thus cutting down tax delinquency. Consolidate local governments and change the pattern of settlement to reduce the cost of schools, roads, and other public services. Prevent the inflation of land values. Form soil-conservation districts and plant windbreaks to control erosion. Stop single-cash-crop agriculture.<sup>17</sup>

North Dakota moved very slowly to obey these imperatives. Institutional inertia, the natural attraction of inflationary schemes for those burdened with debt, the struggle for power between Langer and his opponents, and the attitude of the state's most popular leaders—all held back progress in adjustment. Langer himself, sometimes contemptuous of ideas (he hated the Roosevelt brain trusters who had tried to take his scalp) and preoccupied with maneuvers for his own personal power, tended to look upon life as struggle between the wicked exploiting interests and the virtuous common people.

Such an outlook, of course, had long been the prevailing one in the state. Actually, in a society like North Dakota's, where all worked hard and where the differences in wealth were not too great, all prospered or all suffered together. More important, this class-conflict philosophy sometimes seemed to blind its believers to the adjustments which the state needed to make to the semiarid Great Plains environment.

No important or influential leaders of the state worked nearly so hard to implement long-run adjustments, such as those recommended by the President's Great Plains Committee, as they did for less-significant short-run objectives. In Congress, for example, hard-working William Lemke put all his energy behind his bankruptcy and refinance proposals. He believed that his simple idea—reducing the burden of farm debts and inflating the money supply—would largely solve the problems of the farmers. After a quite heroic struggle, Lemke persuaded Congress to pass the bankruptcy proposal as the Frazier-Lemke Bankruptcy Act in June, 1934. Throughout the 1930's the North Dakota Legislature regularly passed resolutions in favor of the refinance proposal, the inflationary Townsend old-age-pension plan, and the cost-of-production scheme, by which the federal government would guarantee the farmers their cost of production without any controls. In 1935 it asked Congress to give the Bank of North Dakota authority to issue money backed by the securities of the state.

Along with this support for inflation, however, the legislature did provide some means for the adjustment of the state's economy. In 1935 it

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<sup>17</sup>Rupert N. Richardson (ed.), "[The 'Summary Foreword' of the Future of the Great Plains](#)," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXX (June 1943), 49-68.

created a state planning board (abolished in 1939) to help the people “realize the greatest possible benefit from the land, water, mineral, recreational and economic resources of the state.” The board—ten persons, including the state geologist, the dean of the Agricultural College, the head of the School of Forestry, the director of mining engineering at the university, and six others appointed by the governor was especially charged with making investigations and recommendations on land utilization. In the scramble for a living, too much land had been placed under cultivation and too many cattle had been put on the range. Also in 1935 the legislature passed the Cooperative Grazing Associations Act to conserve forage resources. Under its terms, ranchers could form associations to lease government-owned land and control grazing thereon.

A more comprehensive step was taken in 1937. In order to take advantage of the Federal Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, the legislature passed the Agricultural Conservation and Adjustment Act to protect the land and to cooperate with federal agencies in conserving it. Under the law, the Agricultural College Extension Service was to make an “agricultural plan” for the state each year; farmers would make adjustments in their use of the land and production for the market in return for money payments. By the Soil Conservation Districts Law, passed in 1937, farmers could form soil-conservation districts, which became governmental subdivisions of the state. The districts, by a two-thirds vote, could adopt land-use regulations, including the construction of dams and terraces, the adoption of contour furrowing and strip cropping, the planting of trees and grasses, and even the removal from cultivation of areas where erosion could not be controlled. Land-use regulations were enforceable in the courts.

The drought years made North Dakotans even more conscious of their water problem. In 1933 and again in 1935 the legislature revised the state’s irrigation laws and in 1935 passed the Water Conservation Districts Law, by which a water-conservation district could build dams and reservoirs and make regulations for the use of water. A law passed by the 1937 legislature created the State Water Conservation Commission, giving it broad powers to develop the state’s water resources. Many towns had to secure water by means of railroad shipment; in some towns the people had been purchasing drinking water from “water peddlers” for years.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1930’s it was widely believed that many counties had too small a population to justify a county government with a courthouse, county commissioners, and seven elected officials. By 1940 there were eleven counties with populations under 6,000; Billings County, the smallest, had only 2,531 people. The consolidation of some of the smaller counties seemed like a sensible way of reducing the cost of government. In the

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<sup>18</sup> North Dakota State Planning Board, *Trade Centers in North Dakota* (Bismarck, 1939), p. 83.

1930's the legislature passed a series of laws and constitutional amendments providing methods by which counties could consolidate and by which the number of county officials could be reduced by combining the duties of the county judge, the clerk of the district court, and the registrar of deeds, or by adopting an optional county-manager plan of government. No county was consolidated with a neighbor; none adopted a county-manager government.

Although adjustment to the harsh realities of North Dakota life came but slowly, some progress had been made. Federal payments to farmers for soil conservation and laws dealing with grazing and soil and water conservation were important steps. For the first time, North Dakota was planning a more intelligent use of its resources, a natural consequence of the principle that the government was responsible for the economy. The acts of the 1930's held promise for the future.