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The New Deal in Dawson County, Nebraska

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THE NEW DEAL IN DAWSON COUNTY, NEBRASKA

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of History
and the
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies
University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Jerold L. Simmons
June 1967
Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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Graduate Committee

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Department

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DAWSON AND SURROUNDING COUNTIES*

*From N. D. Searcy and A. R. Longwell, Nebraska Atlas.
PRECINCT AND RELIEF MAP OF DAWSON COUNTY

*Adapted from U.S. Army Geological Survey Maps and Dawson County Surveyor's Map.
CHAPTER I

DAWSON COUNTY

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 reflected a major change in the political thinking of the American people. Although this change was largely brought about by the economic difficulties of the 1930's, the success and popularity of the Roosevelt Administration solidified this change, forming among certain interest groups an almost permanent New Deal philosophy. The farmers of the Great Plains, particularly those of Nebraska, did not follow the pattern set by other economic groups. Even though they gave Roosevelt overwhelming support in 1932 and generally approved of the economic benefits of the New Deal farm program, by 1940 they had returned to their traditionally Republican voting habits. The purpose of this study was to find out how the New Deal affected the people of this region and why this farm area turned away from Roosevelt. In order to accomplish this goal, a detailed examination was made of Dawson County, Nebraska, in the 1930's.

Dawson County is situated on the extreme western edge of the corn belt in central Nebraska.\(^1\) Its geography and

\(^1\)See map, page iv.
economy indicate that it is largely typical of the Great Plains, and its pattern of voting in the Twentieth Century has generally followed that of Nebraska and the northern plains area. Consequently, the reactions of the people of Dawson County to the New Deal should be representative of those reactions of the general region. Further explanation of the county's geographical and economic setting is necessary to illustrate its value as a sample of Great Plains opinion.

Dawson County is located near the center of Nebraska astride the Platte River. This primary tributary of the Missouri is the county's dominant geographical feature, flowing diagonally across it from the northwest to the southeast. The channel of the Platte is extremely wide as it passes through the county—at several places being over a mile in width. The breadth of the river bed does not, however, indicate accurately the amount of water which the Platte carries. Most of the time, the Platte is merely a

\[\text{2With the exceptions of the elections of 1900 and 1908, when William Jennings Bryan was a candidate, Dawson County voted with the nation, Nebraska and the surrounding counties in all presidential elections from 1900 through 1932. Dawson voted with the majority of counties in Nebraska since 1904 with no exceptions. Edgar Eugene Robinson, The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932 (Stanford, California: The Stanford University Press, 1934), pp. 66-67, 263.}

\[\text{3Harold Stevens (Director) and John Stuart (Compiler), "Report on the Overall Economic Development Program for Dawson County Redevelopment Area: Dawson County, Nebraska" (Extension Service, University of Nebraska, College of Agriculture and United States Department of Agriculture cooperating, 1964), p. 25. ( Mimeographed)\]
meandering stream weaving its way among sandbars overgrown with willows, cottonwoods, and other foliage. In extremely dry years, when the demand for irrigation water from the Platte is great, the river may be dry.4

The valley created by this great stream is broad and fertile and includes nearly half of the total land area of the county. At its broadest point near the town of Cozad, the valley is over eighteen miles wide. The three major towns—Lexington, Cozad, and Gothenburg—as well as two of the county's four remaining villages are located within the valley.5

The Platte valley has always served as the natural route to the West. Although the Mormon and Oregon Trails passed through the county, they contributed little to its early settlement. The greatest impetus for settlement came with the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and the subsequent completion of the Union Pacific Railroad.6

Dawson County was organized by an act of the state legislature in 1871 and by 1877 had grown to a population of 2,716 with eight organized villages. The early settlers were nearly all farmers, most of whom took advantage of the Government's liberal land disposal policies to obtain their

4Ibid., p. 26. Several small tributaries of the Platte also flow through the county, such as Plum Creek, Buffalo Creek, Elm Creek, and Wood River, but these streams do not join the river within the confines of the county.

5Ibid., p. 20.

6Ibid., pp. 22-24.
land. By the early 1900's most of the tillable land had been homesteaded, and the farmers were beginning to solve the many problems inherent in farming the semi-arid, treeless high plains. The county's population grew rapidly during the first half-century of settlement, and while no particular nationality dominated this settlement, emigrants from northern Europe arrived in the greatest numbers. 7

The early homesteaders tended to congregate in the fertile valley. The rolling hills flanking the valley on the north and south were largely the domain of the cattlemen. In good years these hills were covered with grass which provided summer grazing for livestock, but in dry years the grass burned, and the cattlemen had to look elsewhere for feed. These hills merge into a tableland which extends beyond the boundaries of the county. 8 The tableland is veined with canyons and gorges and is covered with soil which is only slightly less productive than that of the valley. 9 The upland portions of the county include approximately fifty-one per cent of the land area—fourteen per cent in the southwest and thirty-seven per cent in the northeast. 10

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7 Ibid.
9 Stevens and Stuart, "Overall Economic Development Program," p. 49.
10 Ibid., p. 25. See map, p. v.
As Dawson is primarily an agricultural county, the natural conditions affecting the growth of crops and livestock are vital to the county's economic well-being. The farmers of the uplands and the valley are blessed with excellent soil which is very productive when provided with sufficient moisture.\textsuperscript{11}

The vital variant in the production of crops is the availability of moisture. Since Dawson County is located in the high plains where adequate rainfall is, at best, inconsistent, the farmer's economic position prior to the advent of extensive well irrigation was precarious. The county's annual average rainfall totals about twenty-two inches, and fortunately, the majority of the rain falls during the early portion of the 150-day growing season.\textsuperscript{12} Since farmers generally estimate that a rainfall of thirty inches is required to produce a satisfactory corn crop, the problem of inadequate moisture has always plagued the county.\textsuperscript{13}

To compensate for the inconsistency and lack of rainfall, a system of irrigation ditches was constructed during the 1890's.\textsuperscript{14} Five major canals were constructed, and by

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., pp. 49-50.


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 35.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 33.
1935, there were over five hundred miles of ditches with
45,000 acres under permanent irrigation rights within the
county. Since the source of water for the canals was the
Platte, which often ran very low (occasionally even running
dry) during the critical growing season, the system of canals
did not provide sufficient irrigation for the county.

Well irrigation, which was later to become a great
stabilizing factor for the county's agriculture, was not used
extensively prior to the 1930's. In 1932, there were less
than one hundred wells in the county, which irrigated under
three thousand acres. Most of these were located in the
valley. Therefore, many farmers in the county, especially
those in the upland areas which could neither be ditch nor
well-irrigated, were forced to rely on fickle "Mother Nature"
for their indispensable moisture.

One factor which to some degree modified the effects
of extremely dry periods, such as the mid-1930's, was the
relatively high water table. The county water table normally
remains at the level of the Platte, and though it does not
materially aid the upland farmers, it does insure moisture

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16 Stevens and Stuart, "Overall Economic Development
Program," p. 33.

17 The Lexington Clipper, April 25, 1935, p. 1; James
C. Adams (Dawson County Agent), "Annual Report of Cooperating
Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Dawson County, State
of Nebraska, 1940," p. 45.
for one of the valley farmers' most important crops, alfalfa. Even in the driest years, farmers in the valley can depend upon the extensive root system of the alfalfa to reach down to the life-giving sub-surface water. As late as 1960, over fifty per cent of the county's alfalfa was irrigated by the high water table.

Agriculture in Dawson County was fairly well diversified at the beginning of the 1930's. According to the figures of the county agent, in 1929, fifty-seven per cent of the cropland was planted to corn, twelve per cent to alfalfa, and seventeen per cent to wheat and other grains. While corn and wheat were cultivated throughout the county, alfalfa was almost strictly limited to the valley. With nearly 50,000 acres of alfalfa planted annually in the county, the value of this crop to the farms in the valley could easily be seen. During the Thirties, alfalfa was

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18 The Lexington Clipper, April 25, 1935, p. 1. Alfalfa has been known to send roots down through the soil as far as twenty feet to water. Since the water table in the valley rarely drops below this level, alfalfa production is relatively stable in this area. Corn and wheat, however, do not have such well-developed root structures and rarely can reach water which is beyond eight feet below the surface. Stevens and Stuart, "Overall Economic Development Program," p. 32; John E. Weaver, Root Development of Field Crops (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1926), pp. 161, 191, 229.

19 Ibid., p. 36.

20 Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1940," p. 52a. These percentages come from a special report inserted within the regular annual report causing the special pagination.

21 Ibid., 1936, p. 70.
the county's leading export crop. Nearly one-half of the total production was sent outside of the county, while virtually all of the corn crop was consumed within the county. Other crops which were grown in the county during the 1930's included sugar beets, potatoes, barley, rye, wild hay, and oats.22

While nearly seventy per cent of the land area of the county was devoted to the production of crops, livestock production accounted for over three-fourths of the total farm income.23 The availability of alfalfa, corn, and pasture land made the county an ideal feeding ground for livestock.24 In 1930, the farmers and ranchers of Dawson County fed 47,342 cattle, 101,600 hogs and 57,629 sheep.25

In 1930, the average farm in Dawson County included 285 acres with an approximate value of $19,340.26 These figures, however, accurately reflected neither the average valley farm nor the average upland farm. The average valley farm included fewer acres with a higher value per acre. In the table lands the farms were somewhat larger with less

22Ibid., 1940, p. 52.


value per acre, and in the hills where the land was sharply rolling and used primarily for pasture, land holdings were extremely large with low per acre values. 27

By 1930, the population of Dawson County was divided nearly equally between town and farm residents. Of the county's 17,875 persons, 8,612 resided in the seven towns and villages; however, 1,515 of these persons lived in villages of under six hundred residents. 28 The population density totaled about eighteen persons per square mile, the bulk of whom resided in the Platte valley. 29 While the county had no particularly dominant nationalities, races, or religions, it demonstrated most of the ethnic characteristics of the Great Plains—North European protestantism. 30

Since manufacturing did not play a large role in the life of the county, the towns were tied economically to agriculture. As late as 1939, there were only sixteen small manufacturing firms employing an approximate total of 112 persons in the county. 31 The towns and villages provided

27 This evaluation was made by examining the 1932 county assessment records and a 1932 map of Dawson County which included all of the land holdings in the county. The records and map are in the files of the Dawson County Assessor's office in the county courthouse in Lexington.

28 The Lexington Clipper, January 9, 1941, p. 1.

29 County Data Book, 1940, p. 248.


31 County Data Book, 1940, p. 252.
essential services for the farmer, and in turn, were quite
dependent on his business. The editor of The Lexington
Clipper estimated in 1933 that the business firms of that
community relied on the farmer for seventy-five per cent of
their business. This estimate was probably accurate,
since the other papers in the county made frequent refer­
ences to the importance of the farmer in their editorials
and frequent appeals to farm business in their advertise­
ments.

Due to the relatively equal populations of the three
major towns, none has ever effectively dominated the
county's political, social or economic life. In this respect
Dawson County was perhaps unique in the Great Plains region.
Each of the county's three leading communities, however,
probably exerted some influence over its surrounding area.
Lexington, the largest town, with a 1930 population of 2,962,
is situated in the east-central portion of the county.
Cosad, fourteen miles west of Lexington, had the smallest
population of the three, with 1,813 persons. Gothenburg,
near the western edge of the county, had a 1930 population
of 2,322. The villages of the county provided services for

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32 The Lexington Clipper, January 5, 1933, p. 2.
Samuell Lubell, in The Future of American Politics, maintains
that while small rural towns in the Middle West were depen­
dent on agriculture for their prosperity, the townspeople
identified themselves with business interests, not the inter­
est of the farmer. Samuell Lubell, The Future of American
Politics (2nd ed. rev.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday and
more localized areas. Overton, the biggest of the villages, situated near the eastern border of the county near the Platte, had a 1930 population of 600. Farnam, in the extreme southwestern corner, had 394 persons, while Sumner and Eddyville, in the northeastern portion of the county, had populations of 297 and 224 respectively. The towns and villages of the county were populated largely by retired farmers, landowners, small businessmen and professional men, and the employees of the over 450 retail and wholesale stores and service establishments.

In some respects, Dawson County in the 1930's resembled the Great Plains in miniature. Due to its varied topography, it provided a combined picture of both the marginal and the prosperous farmer. The county's agriculture, while reasonably diversified, was concentrated toward the production of livestock and common midwestern crops. The major towns of the county provided a picture of the midwestern "main street," and its villages were typical of those found throughout the American farm belt. Consequently, a study of how the severe conditions of the early Thirties affected the attitudes of the people of the county should provide some general insight on rural attitudes in the Great Plains during the Depression.

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34 County Data Book, 1940, pp. 252-53.
CHAPTER II

THE DEPRESSION AND THE 1932 ELECTION

The depression of the 1930's did not reach the central portion of Nebraska until 1931. While farm prices did begin to sag late in 1929 and dropped sharply the following Fall, it was not until the harvest of 1931 that the disheartening effects of this decline were actually felt.\(^1\) The continued price descent through 1932 placed the already weakened economy in a state of collapse. Farmers stood by helplessly as the falling prices drastically reduced their income and purchasing power.\(^2\) Even the above average crop yields of the first three years of the decade only caused frustration for the farmer, for after the harvest he often found that his costs exceeded his receipts.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) The index of farm purchasing power, which was based on a 1909-1914 average, dropped from 90 in 1928 to 62 in 1931, and to a disastrous 53 in 1932. Farm income dropped to the index figure of 41 for the same period. Glover, "Drouth and Depression in Custer County," pp. 6-7; Rolf Waldemar Ordal, "History of the Federal Farm Program in Nebraska" (unpublished Master's thesis, Graduate College, University of Nebraska, 1941), p. 39.

\(^3\) The excellent harvests of the early 1930's were brought by adequate rainfall. The county received 28.17
Farm prices continued downward through 1932 to all-time lows. Corn, the most universal crop in the county, had dropped from a high of 71¢ per bushel in 1928, to 13¢ in 1932. Wheat fell from 94¢ to 27¢. Alfalfa, the county's second-ranking crop, declined from $10 per ton to $4.10. Livestock prices took a similar slide as cattle, which had sold for $12.60 per hundredweight in 1928, went to $4.10 in 1932. Hogs dropped from $11.50 to $2.30 and sheep from $9 to $2.35.  

The price decline affected the county in varying degrees of severity. While the corn and wheat prices caused individual farmers considerable grief, their effect on the county's economy was relatively moderate, since local livestock consumed most of the corn, and wheat constituted only eight per cent of the county's cropland. The decline of alfalfa and livestock prices, however, caused great economic dislocations. These commodities were responsible for bringing substantial outside income into the county. Since the sale of cattle, hogs, and sheep ordinarily accounted for

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5James C. Adams (Dawson County Agent), "Annual Report of Cooperating Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Dawson County, State of Nebraska, 1930," p. 52; "1940," p. 52a. The "a" denotes a special report inserted within the regular annual report.
over seventy per cent of the local farm revenue, the extreme price decline in these commodities brought near disaster to the economic life of the county. The sub-standard price for alfalfa precipitated a financial crisis of major proportions which was only averted late in 1932. During the 1920's, about one-half of the county's annual alfalfa crop was normally shipped to Kansas City to be sold to buyers for the Wisconsin dairy industry. In 1932, however, since the cost of shipping a ton of alfalfa to Kansas City was $5.20, and alfalfa was selling for only $4.90 per ton, the cost of shipping alone exceeded the price received. Consequently, it appeared as if nearly one-half of the county's total production would not be exported. But, the catastrophe was avoided in November when the Union Pacific management, after frequent urging by state and local officials, reduced the freight rate on alfalfa by sixty cents a ton.

Farmers who specialized in minor crops also felt the bite of the price decline in the Fall of 1932. The potato farmers, most of whom were situated near Cozad, were faced with prices similar to those of other commodities. The Cozad Local reported that one farmer, after shipping 170 sacks of excellent potatoes which had cost sixty-seven dollars to produce, received only $5.69 for the whole load. The people

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6The Cozad Local, September 27, 1932, p. 1; Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1932, p. 3.
7The Cozad Local, October 11, 1932, p. 1.
of Cozad, in response to the local crisis, initiated an "eat more potatoes" campaign which, though well-intentioned, probably aided the farmers only slightly.\textsuperscript{9}

The most tragic manifestation of the decline in farm income could be seen in the rapid increase in farm foreclosures. The farm mortgage problem had been building since the period of farm expansion during and just following World War I, and the price calamity of 1931 and 1932 caused many farms to fall under the sheriff's hammer on the steps of the courthouse. Late in the Twenties, farm foreclosures generally averaged under fifteen per year in the county, but by 1932, the number had more than doubled.\textsuperscript{10}

One reason for the jump in foreclosures was the lack of credit facilities for the farmer. Federal farm credit had existed since the pre-war years, but due to complicated administration, many farmers were unwilling, or unable, to take advantage of it.\textsuperscript{11} The money crisis forced insurance companies and local banks to push for the repayment of loans, and with private sources of capital dry, and public relief not yet in sight, foreclosures were inevitable.

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., September 20, 1932, p. 1; August 16, 1932, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{10}Farm foreclosures in the county totaled twelve in 1930, fifteen in 1931, and thirty-four in 1932. Sale Docket of Dawson County, Nebraska, III, 108-201 (from the files of the Clerk of the District Court, Dawson County Courthouse, Lexington, Nebraska).

\textsuperscript{11}Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 308.
And so came the agents of the banks and insurance companies to squeeze from the farmer what slim resources were left to him. When the farmer could pay no more, matters were turned over to the local courts. Local lawyers were faced with the problem of finding ways to postpone legal action until the crops were harvested, for if this were possible, it was hoped that the farmer could make a large enough payment to forestall foreclosure for another year. Judges were usually sympathetic to these appeals, but often they were forced to award ownership to the forecloser. Tax foreclosures were responsible for much ill will in the county. Irate farmers often threatened sheriffs, judges, or anyone else connected with the forced sale of farms. Occasionally they even banded together to obstruct the foreclosure sale of a neighbor's land. By refusing to bid themselves, and by preventing outside bidding, they made it possible for the foreclosed landowner to retain his farm for a pittance. Farm tenants were also hard hit by the foreclosures, since farm consolidations, which were the result of foreclosures, frequently forced them from the land.

Since over one-half of the county's farmers were tenants,

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12 Personal Interview by author with William Stewart, prominent local lawyer and Republican leader, Lexington, Nebraska, August 16, 1966.


14 Kjar Interview, August 16, 1966.
dispossessed tenants became a serious problem in 1932.15

The towns and villages of the county also felt the squeeze of low farm prices and general economic stagnation. The number of business failures was increasing and the local merchants who kept their doors open were generally in trouble and were often carried for extended periods by the local banks.16 Fortunately, the banking crisis, which brought widespread economic chaos throughout the country in the early 1930's, was not felt so severely in the county. Although the highest mortality rate for banks was recorded in areas dependent upon staple crops, Dawson County fared much better than might have been expected.17 While the number of banks in Dawson County was greatly reduced during the Thirties, most of this reduction took place after Roosevelt's Bank Holiday of March, 1933. With the exception


16 Senator Kjar estimated business failures to average from three to five annually in Lexington alone in the early Thirties. This estimate was probably valid since Nebraska business failures jumped from 202 in 1930 to 360 in 1932. Kjar Interview, August 16, 1966; Personal Interview by author with William Young, President of the Cozad State Bank, Cozad, Nebraska, August 15, 1966; Edgar Z. Palmer, Statistical Abstract of Nebraska Business, Nebraska Economic and Business Reports, No. 1 (Lincoln, Nebraska: Department of Business Administration, University of Nebraska, 1957), p. 48.

of the failure of an Overton bank in November, 1929, which was largely the result of mismanagement, few county depositors lost appreciable amounts of money. The fact that four bank consolidations occurred after 1932 indicated, however, that although the banks stayed open, many were in difficult straits. If these banks were under great pressure in 1932, it was reflected neither in the newspapers of the county nor in the private records of the banks. In fact, one of the banks which was later involved in a 1933 consolidation recorded in the July, 1932, meeting of its board of directors:

There have been no withdrawals of large deposits by customers of late months—confidence in banks appears to prevail in this community.

While this statement of confidence by the bank directors in Cozad was frequently supported by editorial statements in the county's papers predicting the return of prosperity, real optimism was probably not prevalent in 1932. It would be most difficult to believe that any towns, as dependent upon agricultural prosperity as were those in Dawson County, could have avoided the tremendous dislocations seven in 1931, and five in 1932. Glover, "Drouth and Depression in Guster County," p. 10.


20 Minutes of the Meeting of the Directors of the Cozad State Bank, Cozad, Nebraska, July 30, 1932 (in the files of the bank at Cozad, Nebraska).
which accompanied the economic conditions of 1932. In all probability, unemployment was high, due not only to the increased foreclosures, but also to the decreased buying power of the farmer, which would logically force small businesses to lay off employees.\footnote{No figures are available giving an accurate assessment of unemployment in the county at this time. The 1930 figure of three per cent would obviously not hold true for 1932. U. S., Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Unemployment, 1, 632.}

While the unemployment problem undoubtedly caused some problems through the Summer of 1932, farm work probably moderated its effects. After the harvest, however, with farm work unavailable and Winter approaching, the county faced a crisis.\footnote{It should be noted that the county newspapers made little mention of local unemployment problems. In fact, the papers generally played down any ill effects of Depression. This, however, was not surprising, for it was common practice among small town papers to engage in local "boosterism."}

This fact was demonstrated in October when both Lexington and Cozad formed welfare committees for the collection and distribution of essentials for the needy.\footnote{Dawson County Pioneer, October 7, 1932, p. 1; The Cozad Local, September 30, 1932, p. 1.}

These committees worked diligently to relieve the difficulties of the unemployed, but the continued existence of petty thievery and numerous transients in the county indicated that some larger relief agency was needed.\footnote{Dawson County Pioneer, December 2, 1932, p. 1; January 29, 1933, p. 1. The transient problem was primarily
As conditions continued to worsen both locally and nationally through 1932, the people of Dawson County gradually came to look more and more to Washington for some sort of solution to their problems. While this represented a partial shift in attitudes, the change was quite natural. The problems which affected the farmer in Dawson County in 1932 were of national, and not local, origin. His harvest had been good. It was the price situation which drove his income downward. Therefore, as did his Populist forefathers, he began to seek assistance from the only public body truly capable of influencing prices—the Federal Government. To a very large degree, prior to 1933, the farmer was disappointed.

President Herbert Hoover's farm program centered around the Federal Farm Board, established under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929. The Farm Board was designed to improve the marketing organizations, bargaining power, and credit arrangements of agriculture. Yet as a means of solving the problems of a major depression, "it was wholly inadequate and doomed to failure from the beginning."25 At limited to those towns in the county which were situated on the Union Pacific mainline.

The welfare committees usually provided direct relief to the needy. The Lexington Committee, however, did establish a woodpile at which men could work for their handouts, thus avoiding the outright dole. Kjar Interview, August 16, 1966.

first the Farm Board attempted to promote larger and stronger marketing cooperatives, but as the price trend continued downward, the Board eventually tried to stabilize prices by buying surpluses.26 The surplus buying, however, tended to put a premium on production, creating even greater surpluses and forcing the prices down further.27 By the Fall of 1932, the price situation was sufficient evidence to convince the farmers of Dawson County, and the nation, that Hoover's program would not work.28

What the farmers specifically advocated to replace the Farm Board cannot be determined; however, it can be assumed that their desires leaned toward more direct Federal involvement. A mild attempt was made in the last year of the Hoover Administration to provide some direct relief in the form of emergency seed loans.29 But only forty-eight local farmers received benefits from this program, a fact which attested to the paucity of assistance from Washington.30


27 Mitchell, Depression Decade, p. 69.

28 For a complete discussion of the Farm Board, see Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939 (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), pp. 404-34, or Benedict, Farm Policies, pp. 239-67.

29 Dawson County Pioneer, March 18, 1932, p. 1.

In spite of the failure of the Hoover Administration to relieve the severe economic dislocations of the early 1930's, widespread condemnation of the President did not find expression in the local newspapers. Three of the four major papers in the county were solidly Republican and generally supported Hoover's concept of the limited nature of the Federal Government.\textsuperscript{31} They emphasized the proposition that Washington's primary role in times of depression was to economize, not to spend.\textsuperscript{32} In fact, The Cozad Local's attachment to Hoover was so strong that when farm prices took a slight turn for the better in August, 1932, the President's program was given credit.\textsuperscript{33} The 1932 election, however, clearly demonstrated that these Republican papers did not accurately reflect the opinion of the majority of the county's voters toward Hoover.

Dawson County, possibly due to its cross-section of farming conditions, has been fairly representative of the voting habits of its surrounding area in Nebraska, the Great Plains, and the nation. In the presidential elections from

\textsuperscript{31}The only paper printed by a Democrat was The Gothenburg Times, and for the most part, it remained neutral throughout the decade, as did The Lexington Clipper and Dawson County Pioneer, whose editors were Republicans. The Cozad Local, however, was more openly Republican.

\textsuperscript{32}The Cozad Local, June 7, 1932, p. 2; July 12, 1932, p. 7; November 1, 1932, p. 2; Dawson County Pioneer, February 19, 1932, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{33}The Cozad Local, August 23, 1932, p. 2.
1900 through 1928, the county, with only two exceptions, voted with the nation and the northern Great Plains. During the Twenties, the county had established a firm tradition of Republicanism. Only in 1924 was the GOP candidate's majority narrow, as the combined totals for the Progressive, Robert M. LaFollette, and the Democrat, John W. Davis, nearly equaled the votes for Calvin Coolidge. In 1920 and 1928, however, the Republican candidates compiled strong majorities. Harding, in 1920, carried the county by a two to one margin; Hoover's majority in 1928 was even greater.

The Hoover landslide in 1928 clearly demonstrated the strength of the Republican tradition in Dawson County. In the primary elections, nearly eighty per cent of the 2,546 voters chose Republican ballots. When the national parties had picked their candidates, the county was forced to choose between "the lesser of two evils." While Alfred E. Smith and the Democrats made a strong appeal to the Mid-

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34 Edgar Eugene Robinson, The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932 (Stanford, California: The Stanford University Press, 1934), pp. 32, 263. The elections of 1900 and 1908 were the exceptions, and in both cases Nebraska's William Jennings Bryan was the Democratic candidate.

35 Ibid., p. 263. An evaluation of the voting trends in Dawson County's economic area shows that during the 1920's the Republican majorities were very similar in the entire corn and livestock producing areas of Nebraska. Charles Joseph Knibbs, "The Political Map of Nebraska, 1900-1934" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska, 1935), p. 145.

36 Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 96, 103. (In the office of the County Clerk)
western farm vote, the Hoover landslide showed that Dawson County would not vote for a wet, Catholic, Tammany Democrat. The fact that many farmers blamed Hoover for the low wartime price of wheat and identified him with the eastern industrial interests and opposition to McNary-Haugenism, made the Republican victory seem even more impressive. That Hoover lacked any large following in the county had become evident in the April primary when he had received only eighty of the more than 2,500 Republican votes cast. Therefore, it was more than likely that the Republican landslide reflected Hoover's popularity less than the unpopularity of Smith and the Democrats.

Even after economic conditions had begun to deteriorate, the Republican tradition persisted. In the 1930 primary, over eighty per cent of those voting again chose Republican ballots. In the general election, though Nebraska returned only two Republicans to Congress, Dawson County voted strongly for the conservative Republican

37 Gilbert C. Fite, "The Agricultural Issue in the Presidential Campaign of 1928," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXVII (March, 1951), 653-57, 669. The McNary-Haugen bill of the 1920's represented an attempt to provide parity prices for agricultural goods through indirect government purchasing of the surpluses for sale overseas. The bill had considerable farm support, and when President Calvin Coolidge vetoed it twice in 1927 and 1928, a large number of farmers were alienated. Hoover's opposition to the bill while serving as Secretary of Commerce under Coolidge made his candidacy somewhat unpopular in farm areas.

38 Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 96.

39 Ibid., II, 116, 123.
Robert G. Simmons for Congress, as well as for the nominal Republican Senator, George W. Norris.  

The real test of the Republican tradition in Dawson County came in 1932. Between 1930 and 1932, the Depression hit the county with full force, and with prices falling and foreclosures rising, attitudes began to change. The prospect of foreclosures may have been the strongest inducement to this change.

Men and women who have lived industrious, comfortable, and contented lives have faced bravely the loss of luxuries and comforts, but there is a decided change in their attitude toward the financial and economic powers that be when conditions take away their homes and imperil the continued existence of their families.  

By April, 1932, it had become apparent that the Hoover Administration was in political trouble in the Midwest. In Nebraska, the Republicans' share of the party preference ballots fell off sharply in the primary, and the trend was even stronger in Dawson County. The number of GOP ballots

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40 Ibid., II, 129. It should be noted, however, that both Norris and Simmons had strong personal followings in the county and their party affiliations may have had little to do with their elections. This was particularly true of Norris, since he was a constant critic of the Hoover Administration and a McNary-Haugenite.


dropped from 1,988 in 1928 to 1,239 in 1932, with Hoover receiving only 156 preference votes in the latter year. The Democratic share of the ballots increased from 558 to 1,982.\(^{44}\)

By the end of August, Hoover's chances of capturing the farm vote had declined even further. The "Bonus Army" episode in July convinced many people that Hoover lacked sympathy with the plight of the common man.\(^ {45} \) The President's statements on providing assistance to agriculture also cost him dearly in the corn belt. On August 11, he said:

> There is no relief to the farmer by extending government bureaucracy to control his production and thus curtail his liberties, nor by subsidies that bring only more bureaucracy and ultimate collapse. I shall oppose it.

The candidacy of a Democrat with far more farm appeal than Al Smith also weakened Hoover's position. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, though a New Yorker, exhibited many qualifications which drew farmers to his side. First of all, Roosevelt's acceptable social background and religious affiliation counteracted the Catholic-immigrant association which Smith had attached to the Democratic standard. His

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\(^{44}\) Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 96, 103, 134, 139.


home in Dutchess County gave him some claim to an agrarian heritage. Roosevelt's progressiveness as a governor, his repudiation of the League of Nations, and his early battles with Tammany Hall also brought many adherents, as did the Roosevelt name, which had long been popular in Nebraska.47

Through the Summer of 1932, the Roosevelt appeal gradually began to capture the imagination of Nebraskans. FDR's concept of the "forgotten man" came at a time when many farmers felt that the present Administration was not concerned with their plight. Even more than this, Roosevelt promised action, leadership and new ideas at a time when many felt that there was a void in these areas in Washington.48

Beginning in September, Hoover made a determined attempt to recapture the farm vote of the Midwest by retracting statements opposing assistance for the farmer and promising immediate aid.49 Roosevelt met Hoover's belated efforts with an increased appeal to agricultural areas, culminating with a speech in Kansas on September 14. In his famous Topeka speech, Roosevelt advocated population re-adjustment, the easing of financial burdens through tax

49Slichter, "FDR and the Farm Problem," p. 239.
reductions and farm credit, the refinancing of farm mortgagess, and a vague plan to bring about adequate farm prices.\textsuperscript{50} Previously, Roosevelt had also supported tariff reduction and land planning to interest the farmer.\textsuperscript{51}

While Roosevelt's campaign undoubtedly brought many local farmers to his side, his appeal apparently had less effect on the town merchants. In August, 1932, \textit{The Cozad Local} evaluated the Democratic candidate:

\begin{quote}
Mr. Roosevelt has as little conception of the needs of the territory west of New York state as any other man whose physical and mental conditions have confined him to \textit{a} small area. \ldots We will not waver in our republicanism.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

The merchant mentality was more clearly demonstrated in a straw vote held by the Lexington Chamber of Commerce shortly before the election. Hoover won a remarkable two to one majority over Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{53}

By election time the attention of many Nebraskans centered on three major issues in the campaign. The first and most obvious was the farm question, which included the problems of prices, mortgages, and tariffs. The second issue revolved around the question of relief and its relation


\textsuperscript{51}Slichter, "FDR and the Farm Problem," pp. 240-42.

\textsuperscript{52}The Cozad Local, August 12, 1932, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., November 4, 1932, p. 1.
to sound economic policy. The final issue, the question of prohibition, was revived late in the campaign by the Republicans, in a vain attempt to draw the "dry" vote. The pressing economic situation, however, caused the "noble experiment" to take a relatively insignificant position in the campaign.

These specific issues, however, did not determine the outcome of the 1932 election. The deciding factors were of a more general, yet more obvious, nature. The deplorable economic conditions naturally caused a great deal of resentment toward Hoover and the Republicans. There was also an obvious difference between general attitudes of the candidates toward the responsibility of the Federal Government. Roosevelt had said he would act, while Hoover had already demonstrated that he would not. This difference was probably responsible for deciding the votes of many townspeople and farmers, for, while they may not have been able to agree on the specific measures which were needed, they were agreed "that the government must do something to help."  

54 Fisher, "Response of Nebraskans," pp. 101, 104-07. The Cozad Local was obviously influenced by the liquor question, for in virtually every issue throughout the campaign, an editorial appeared advocating the maintenance of the Eighteenth Amendment.

The 1932 election in Nebraska resulted in "the most substantial protest vote in the history of the state," Roosevelt received sixty-three per cent of the vote, the largest majority which Nebraska had ever accorded a presidential candidate. He carried ninety-one counties, and his party won control of every major state office.

The Democratic landslide was only slightly less substantial in Dawson County where Roosevelt received fifty-nine per cent of the vote and carried all but two of twenty-two precincts. In the county, as in the state, Democratic candidates won majorities in all major races. While Dawson County had given both Harding in 1920 and Hoover in 1928, greater majorities than Roosevelt, these facts obscure the real significance of the local vote. The scope of the protest vote in 1932 was far more evident in the thirty-two per cent of the county voters who shifted their allegiance from Hoover to Roosevelt.

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56 Olson, *History of Nebraska*, p. 305.
58 *Dawson County Abstract of Votes*, II, 147.
59 *Dawson County Pioneer*, November 11, 1932, p. 1.
60 Robinson, *The Presidential Vote*, p. 263.
61 *Dawson County Abstract of Votes*, II, 111, 147. This figure was reached by comparing the Republican totals for the two elections. The increase in the total number of ballots in 1932 (613) was logically assumed to go to the Democratic majority. Hence, the Republican voting loss
By examining the local precinct returns it becomes evident that while the rejection of the Republican Party was virtually universal within the county, it was particularly strong in certain geographical areas. The western one-third of the county accorded Roosevelt very large majorities ranging from lows of under sixty per cent in Farnam and Gothenburg precincts to a high of nearly ninety per cent in German precinct. Although this area had given Hoover comparatively mild support in 1928, the Republican-to-Democrat voting shift was remarkable. In Blaine precinct, where the greatest shift occurred, sixty-five per cent of the voters switched their support from Hoover to Roosevelt. FDR's strength in the western third of the county may have been due to the influence of the mildly Democratic Gothenburg Times, but it was more likely that economic factors were decisive. The western third of the county included many marginal farmers who must have been more severely affected by the Depression than were their counterparts in the more fertile valley. The farmers in these precincts also produced a majority of the county's wheat crop. Since they were more dependent upon market prices than were the corn and alfalfa farmers who sold much of their produce to local

(2,266) was compared with the 1928 total number of votes (7,050) giving the approximate figure of thirty-two per cent.

62 Ibid.
livestock feeders, these western wheat growers probably looked more to Washington for help.

While it would seem logical that livestock feeders would also look to the Federal Government to restore normal price levels for cattle and hogs, apparently this was not the case in Dawson County. Hoover won majorities in only two of the county's precincts in 1932, and both of these were strong livestock producers. Grant precinct, located in the eastern portion of the county, had a large number of hog farmers, and Platte precinct, located southwest of Grant, led the county in numbers of cattle and hogs per farm.63 The Hoover majorities in these two precincts seem to indicate that the livestock producer held on to his concepts of Republican individualism far longer than did the wheat farmer.

The towns of the county, while far from giving majorities to Hoover, were somewhat more moderate in their support of Roosevelt than were the western rural areas. Of the county's western precincts, Gothenburg and Farnam, both of which contained sizable portions of town dwellers, were mildest in their support of FDR. Lexington, in the east-central portion of the county, gave Roosevelt less than fifty-six per cent of its vote, and the second ward of that

63 Ibid., II, 147; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1940," p. 55.
town, the home of many merchants, voted for Hoover. Overton, at the extreme eastern edge of the county, accorded Roosevelt only fifty-three per cent of its vote. The comparatively mild majorities won by the Democrats in the towns indicated that sizable numbers of local merchants were not yet ready to reject the Republican leadership. Rural precincts in the valley seemed to follow the lead of the towns, for their voting percentages were generally similar to those of the nearest community.

The reversal of the voting habits of a decade by one-third of the voting population gave a fairly clear view of the general attitude toward the Republican Administration. The people of Dawson County felt that there was need for a change. Political ideals, traditional party appeals, and even specific campaign issues, probably had less influence upon the outcome of the election than the general economic conditions. As in most democratic societies, the political alteration was brought about more by pragmatic than by idealistic thinking. The Republican plan had not succeeded. Therefore, the Democrats and FDR were to be given a chance.

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64 Ibid., II, 147.
65 Ibid.
CHAPTER III

THE NEW DEAL, THE DROUGHT, AND
THE 1934 ELECTIONS

The election of 1932 ushered in an era of great political change in the United States. The size of the Democratic landslide indicated that a strong majority of the American people were in favor of some sort of change, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal represented the vehicle through which this change was to be carried out. For millions of people, the New Deal was a response to intolerable living conditions and to Hoover's unwillingness or inability to alleviate those conditions. It was truly "born of a need for action."¹

The thinking of the people of Dawson County corresponded with that of the rest of the nation. While their concepts of what specific form this action should assume undoubtedly differed from the views of the urban East, they did desire a change. The people of the county wanted, among

other things, an agricultural program which would bring prosperity back to the farm. Their disappointment with the actions of Congress prior to Roosevelt's inauguration was apparent in the county newspapers. The editor of The Cozad Local claimed that while the farmer was suffering and banks were closing, Congress was "only dealing with beer." Their disillusionment with the Federal Government ended, however, when Roosevelt took office on March 4, 1933.

The first of the Roosevelt programs to have an impact on the county was the Bank Holiday proclamation on March 6, 1933. The people of Dawson County were fully aware of the banking crisis which had gripped the nation in the early months of that year. Although none of the local banks failed during that period, the rash of failures throughout the nation could not help but have caused some concern over the conditions of the local banks. The Bank Holiday caught the county off guard. Many people were caught short of cash due to the bank closings, but the business firms provided credit for essential goods. Evidently, the situation was accepted optimistically, for there was no sign of panic in the newspapers. The Dawson County Pioneer claimed that "everybody is good natured and is making the best out of it."2

2The Cozad Local, February 14, 1933, p. 2.
3Dawson County Pioneer, March 10, 1933, p. 1.
4Ibid.
The optimistic acceptance of the Bank Holiday was characteristic of the manner in which most of the early New Deal programs were received in the county. The mere fact that Roosevelt was acting brought hope to the people and gave them confidence in their new President. Two of the county's most Republican newspapers described the effects of the first weeks of the Roosevelt presidency. The Lexington Clipper noted that "the people have unbounded confidence in President Roosevelt as a leader and all are radiating that confidence," and The Cozad Local stated: "The vigorous manner with which he is attacking our national problems is serving to inspire confidence in the wisdom of his program." Further confidence in Roosevelt and his program was apparent when the banks of the county reopened with deposits far exceeding withdrawals.

The Bank Holiday may have promoted early confidence in the new President, but it could readily be seen that action in other areas was needed. Roosevelt responded with action. The first "one hundred days" of his Administration was one of the most productive legislative periods in American history. The vigor of the new Administration caught the spirit of the people of Dawson County. Of the many Federal

\[ \text{The Lexington Clipper, March 16, 1933, p. 2; The Cozad Local, March 24, 1933, p. 2.} \]

\[ \text{The Lexington Clipper, March 16, 1933, p. 2; The Cozad Local, March 17, 1933, p. 1.} \]
programs inaugurated during this period, the Bank Holiday, and the reform acts in banking and the stock exchange were among the most popular. The Cozad Local said that the bank reform law of June 16, 1933, would bring money "out of hiding," and put banking on a "sound basis." The Economy Act of March, 1933, which provided for sharp cutbacks in Government salaries and veterans' pensions, must also have found local approval, for county papers had frequently advocated reductions in Federal spending as a means of ending the Depression.

The establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration, while receiving less local comment, also contributed to the growing faith in the Roosevelt Administration. The CCC was the first of the New Deal relief agencies and was aimed at preventing the young men of America from glutting the already overcrowded labor market. The employment of over two hundred of the county's needy young men on constructive reforestation and soil conservation projects during the 1930's, probably brought the CCC as much general approval as any other New Deal agency.

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7 Personal Interview by author with William Stewart, prominent local lawyer and Republican leader, Lexington, Nebraska, August 16, 1966.

8 The Cozad Local, July 18, 1933, p. 2.


10 The number of CCC recruits from April, 1933 through April, 1940 totaled 218, according to the yearly listings in the county newspapers.
The Public Works Administration was also well-received in the county. The aim of this agency was to stimulate the American economy through a program of large-scale public works. Since the PWA was not oriented toward direct relief as were several other New Deal agencies, it was generally acceptable to even the more conservative elements in the county. Several local PWA projects were announced in 1933 which were eventually to relieve unemployment and bolster the county's economy. Of more significance, however, was the PWA approval, in November, 1933, of the $11,000,000 Sutherland Reservoir project in western Nebraska. Since this project would provide increased irrigation facilities for the county, it was heartily endorsed by local farmers.  

Of all the early New Deal programs, the one which attracted the most attention in the county was the Agricultural Adjustment Act of May 12, 1933. The fact that farm prices during the first quarter of 1933 were extremely low caused even the most conservative farmer to feel that the Federal Government must do something.  

The other projects included a $36,000 post office for Lexington, an $8,000 pumping plant for Gothenburg, a $30,000 school building for Eddyville, and a $14,000 water works project for Lexington. Dawson County Pioneer, November 17, 1933, p. 1, April 20, 1934, p. 1; The Lexington Clipper, November 16, 1933, p. 8; James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), pp. 331-32.

the Government must do, however, was probably not clear in the minds of those in the county. Between 1920 and 1933, many plans for assisting the farmer had been discussed, but none had been sufficiently popular to shut off discussion of the others. The goal, however, was simple and concrete—the achievement of a parity ratio between farm and non-farm prices. Farmers generally felt that the establishment of parity prices was the responsibility of the Federal Government, because in the past, the Government had forced the economy out of balance by aiding business and labor. Hence, Washington should right the balance.

The early passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act met with hearty approval in the county. Farm attitude had been "Do anything, but do something," and the fact that the President had pushed through an entirely new farm program was enough to generate enthusiasm. The individual commodity programs were not made known to the public until later in

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the year, but when they were, most of them received the back-
ing of the county newspapers. The corn-hog program, due to
its local economic importance, received the most attention,
but the wheat and other programs were also approved.

The first of the AAA programs to go into operation in
the county was the wheat program. Through July and August,
frequent articles appeared in the county papers explaining
the provisions of the program. Most significant to the far-
mer was the grant of a twenty-eight to thirty cents per
bushel payment for reduced production. Even with this
inducement, the farmers of Dawson County were not anxious
to sign wheat contracts immediately. This may have been
due to two factors. First, by the time the program was
fully explained, the dry weather of early Winter prevented
many farmers from seeding wheat. Secondly, the rapid
price increase in the second quarter of 1933 probably caused
many farmers to feel that more could be gained by full

16Dawson County Pioneer, August 4, 1933, p. 1.
17James C. Adams (Dawson County Agent), "Annual Report
of Cooperating Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Dawson
County, State of Nebraska, 1940," p. 61. It would be diffi-
cult to determine the exact percentage of eligible farmers who
participated in the wheat program. While over one thousand
county farmers raised some wheat, only about half of these
had sufficient wheat acreage to benefit from the program.
Therefore, the 217 farmers who signed up probably constituted
about forty per cent of all eligible wheat farmers. Personal
Interview by author with James C. Adams, Brady, Nebraska,
August 24, 1966; The Cozad Local, August 11, 1939, p. 8.
production. The value of the wheat program to the 217 farmers who signed became particularly evident in 1954 when drought destroyed nearly eighty per cent of the county's wheat crop. In that year, the farmers who signed contracts received as much from their reduction payments as they did from the wheat which they sold.

The corn-hog program, which was first explained to the county farmers in November of 1953, received a far greater degree of initial acceptance. This may have been due partially to the mild recession in farm prices in the latter half of 1953. In the first year of the corn-hog program, 1,510 farmers signed applications. Since this total included nearly seventy-five per cent of the farmers in the county, the local importance of this program was readily apparent. The payments of thirty cents per bushel of corn retired from production and five dollars per head for hog reduction were eventually to provide large amounts of money to bolster the county's economy.

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23 Rolf Waldemar Ordal, "History of the Federal Farm Program in Nebraska" (unpublished Master's thesis, Graduate College, University of Nebraska, 1941), p. 44.
An added feature of the corn-hog program which significantly increased its attractiveness was the crop loan. The Commodity Credit Corporation provided loans of forty-five cents per bushel on corn, which provided the farmer with sufficient capital to meet the immediate demands of his creditors following the harvest and also allowed him to hold his corn off the market until the price was satisfactory. In 1934, the forty-five cent corn loan for farm storage was thirty to fifty per cent over the market price. Therefore, farmers preferred the loans to marketing their crops, and when the prices rose in 1935, they were able to sell their corn for a reasonable price and pay off the commodity loan.

Another feature of the New Deal farm program which contributed greatly to Roosevelt's early popularity in Dawson County was the expansion and reorganization of farm credit under the Farm Credit Administration established on June 16, 1933. Four types of credit institutions were placed under the control of the FCA: Federal Land Banks which provided long-term farm mortgage credit; Federal Intermediate Credit Banks which provided discounts for short-term production credit; Production Credit Corporations which served as holding companies to assist in organizing and supervising

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24 Ibid.; The CCC was established by an executive order of October 16, 1933. Benedict, Farm Policies, p. 332.

local Production Credit Associations through which the farmer could get credit from the Intermediate Banks; and Banks for Cooperatives which provided long-term loans to cooperatives. The farm credit made available by these institutions was probably more significant in bringing about farm recovery than were the various crop programs of the AAA.

The popularity of the New Deal reached a peak in the Fall and Winter of 1933-1934 in Dawson County. Two entirely new and different agencies engendered much of this popularity—the National Recovery Administration and the Civil Works Administration. Both of these programs became active in the towns during the Autumn of 1933 and immediately demonstrated to county citizens the new role which the Federal Government was assuming.

The Civil Works Administration was created on November 8, 1933, and within a few weeks the Dawson County Welfare Committee had been transformed into a local CWA committee and had begun hiring workers. The CWA was created to ease the economic distress of the unemployed during the Winter months, and by early January, 1934, the project was


27Benedict, Farm Policies, p. 280; Personal Interview by author with Raymond Block, farmer, Gothenburg, Nebraska, August 15, 1966.
already having some success.\textsuperscript{28} As the Dawson County Pioneer stated: "The CWA has been doing a great job for the unemployed, and right here in Lexington it has relieved a great many households."\textsuperscript{29} The Pioneer could have gone on to say that a great number of households in the county were in dire need of help when the CWA came to the rescue. Throughout 1933 the county had been plagued with unemployment. Only during the planting and harvest seasons, when farm work drained off surplus labor, was there any relief from the problem. In early 1933, the Lexington "woodpile" was providing assistance for as many as 131 workers per month, and reports of local petty thievery were frequently appearing in the papers.\textsuperscript{30} Therefore, it is logical to assume that when the CWA was inaugurated in November, which was after the Fall harvest, unemployment was widespread.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Dawson County Pioneer, January 5, 1934, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{30} The Lexington Clipper, May 18, 1933, p. 1; Dawson County Pioneer, June 2, 1933, p. 1, September 29, 1933, p. 1, and October 6, 1933, p. 1. The Lexington "woodpile" had been established by the local welfare committee in 1932 to provide work for needy men.
\item Some of the thievery referred to may have been brought about by transients, many of whom followed the mainline of the Union Pacific Railroad. Some of the thievery, however, probably involved local residents in dire need, for ordinarily only groceries or gasoline were stolen.
\item \textsuperscript{31} As no exact figures on unemployment are available for this portion of 1933, the statement is only an assumption. It should be noted, however, that after CWA employment was terminated in the Spring of 1934, unemployment registration
The CWA engaged in many projects within the county in order to put people to work. These projects ranged from clearing road ditches of weeds to building extensive water works systems within the towns. At the peak of activity in January and February of 1934, over 250 men were employed by the CWA at an average salary of fifteen dollars per week.32 Between November, 1933, and March, 1934, the CWA poured over $36,000 into the county, almost ninety per cent of which was paid directly to the workers.33

The popularity of the CWA could be attributed largely to its timing. The plight of the unemployed could not be ignored by the people of the county, and yet there was little that they could do individually. With Winter just around the corner, the CWA came as a godsend to both the unemployed and those who would have had to care for them. Although the Public Works Administration was closer akin to the county's conservative ideals, it never achieved the popularity of the CWA, partially because it was conceived before the threat of Winter had appeared.


33 Dawson County Pioneer, January 12, 1934, p. 1. The figure ($36,000) represents a compilation of the CWA expendi-
Of all the early New Deal agencies, the one which received the most enthusiastic response in the county newspapers was the National Recovery Administration. Created under the National Industrial Recovery Act of June 16, 1933, this agency represented the New Deal's first attempt at reforming and regulating industry. The purpose of the NRA was to bring about the formation of codes to regulate business and thereby bring about recovery from the Depression. These codes were to regulate business practices and set wage and hour standards for small, local businesses as well as major industries.  

The big push for compliance with the objectives of the NRA began in early August, and the county newspapers reacted very favorably to General Hugh Johnson's national campaign. From August through October, pro-NRA propaganda flooded the local periodicals, and in some instances, virtually an entire edition was devoted to spreading the NRA word. The extensive NRA campaign evidently had an immediate effect on the businessmen of the county. As early as August 4, over seventy-five county businessmen met in Lexington to establish a local code dealing with working

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34 Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt, pp. 57-58.

35 For examples of these NRA-dominated issues, see The Gothenburg Times, August 9, 1933, or The Cozad Local, August 15, 1933.
hours and other details. The Lexington Clipper reported that

all businessmen of this city and the county are responding to the efforts of our government in a splendid, unselfish manner, and the spirit which seems to be uniform in all parts of the county will do much to better conditions.

The Clipper later credited the National Recovery Administration with increasing local employment in Lexington, and stated that the NRA would indirectly bring about a rise in farm prices by giving consumers more money with which to buy farm goods.

While the NRA was later to become the most universally hated of the New Deal programs, in the Fall of 1933, it was among the most popular. The great enthusiasm which the NRA campaign engendered caused that period to be the zenith of New Deal popularity in Dawson County. While other early New Deal agencies, such as the FCA, CWA, and AAA, all contributed to the popularity, it was the NRA campaign which molded this enthusiasm into a spirit of unity behind the President. It should be noted that the initial popularity of the NRA was probably due less to its program than its campaign. While the other New Deal programs concentrated on achieving compliance through monetary inducements, the NRA was forced to use more psychological methods. Consequently, it relied on

36 Dawson County Pioneer, August 4, 1933, p. 1.
37 The Lexington Clipper, August 10, 1933, p. 4.
38 Ibid., September 7, 1933, p. 4.
propaganda. The appeal was directed at every business and every consumer in the nation, and the effect was overwhelming. By the end of 1933, President Roosevelt's popularity could not be challenged. There appeared to be a feeling that the country was moving again and that the Government in Washington was finally responding to the needs of the Midwest. This feeling was most aptly described by the editor of The Gothenburg Times:

We may not approve of all of the steps that have been taken but we cannot but be conscious of the fact that the President has evidenced a desire to do something for the great Middle West and that in many instances, this desire has been translated into definite action.\(^{39}\)

The Roosevelt Administration could not maintain the high level of popularity which it had attained in 1935. Eventually, almost imperceptibly, Dawson County began a gradual return to its traditional conservatism. It is impossible to say exactly why or when this gradual trend began, but it was apparent by mid-1934 that the great enthusiasm which the NRA campaign generated had begun to wane. Possibly the effects of the campaign were wearing off, for in early 1934, the county newspapers discontinued their constant urgings to comply with "Blue Eagle" codes. Likewise, on March 31, the CWA terminated its activities in the county due to Roosevelt's fear that relief work would "become a

habit with the country." The dissolution of such a popular agency when hard times were far from over may have also contributed to this gradual decline in New Deal popularity.

The beginnings of conservative reaction to the policies of Roosevelt originated at this time. A conservative tradition had been firmly established in the county during the 1920's, which placed emphasis upon limited government and states' rights. Many of the early Roosevelt programs violated this tradition, causing some concern along main street. The Republican editor of The Lexington Clipper commented that in the first three months of the Roosevelt Administration, few measures were passed with which he disagreed, but after that there was a shift toward "big Government" which he could not condone. Some of the conservative reaction may have been caused by a feeling of local pride, for a number of people felt that Dawson County did not need Federal help to survive the Depression. In July, a statement by the county clerk appeared in The Cozad Local which demonstrated this pride:

Dawson County . . . feels able to care for any cases of distress that may arise within . . . [its]

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41 Personal Interview by author with Lloyd Kain, editor of The Lexington Clipper, Lexington, Nebraska, August 11, 1965.
limits. . . . Dawson County, as a county, has not received any direct federal relief . . . at any time.

This feeling of local pride and distrust of Washington may not have reflected the majority feeling within the county, but it did serve to show that New Deal popularity was hardly universal in early 1934. The rise of anti-New Deal sentiment was particularly evident in the primary elections held in April. Although Democratic ballots were chosen slightly more frequently than Republican (2,476 Democratic ballots to 2,418 Republican ballots), the nearly even split indicated that a number of people had returned to the "party of Lincoln."43

Possibly the biggest factor in reducing Roosevelt's popular hold on the people of Dawson County was the disillusionment brought about by the severe economic conditions in 1934. Unemployment in the towns was high; thievery was again prevalent; and, contrary to the notions of the county clerk, the need for relief was immediate.44 Farm conditions were even more depressing. Unlike the price and surplus problems

42 The Cozad Local, July 13, 1934, p. 1. It might appear that since considerable Federal funds had been directed into the county, the county clerk was ignoring the facts. In truth, however, as a political entity, Dawson County had received no direct relief. Therefore, although the implication was misleading, the statement was technically true.

43 Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 156, 160.

which plagued the farmer from 1931 to 1933, the problems of 1934 were scarcity and drought. As early as March, the Dawson County Pioneer was predicting that the mighty Platte would run dry without heavy Spring rains. The rains did not come, and the Platte was dry for nearly eight months.\(^45\) By June, the feed situation in the county was critical, and there was considerable fear that many cattle might starve.\(^46\) Nearly all hope of salvaging reasonable harvests of grain was destroyed when, in July, the temperature rose to over 100 degrees for sixteen consecutive days.\(^47\) Rainfall for the entire year totaled only 10.88 inches.\(^48\)

The effects of drought and high temperatures on many farms were disastrous. Of the county's two major grains, the drought destroyed from seventy to eighty per cent of the wheat and from twenty to thirty per cent of the corn.\(^49\) These losses brought a severe drop in farm income. Even with the low prices of 1933, the value of the county's corn crop had exceeded two million dollars, while in 1934, its value was under $180,000. The wheat crop in 1933 was worth

\(^{45}\) Dawson County Pioneer, March 30, 1934, p. 1; December 21, 1934, p. 7.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., June 1, 1934, p. 1.


\(^{48}\) The Lexington Clipper, May 23, 1935, p. 3.

\(^{49}\) Schmieding, "Geographic Patterns," pp. 26-27.
over $120,000 but dropped to less than $56,000 in 1934. The loss of twenty to thirty per cent of the county's corn crop caused even greater problems for the local livestock industry. Corn and hill grass were the principle sources of feed for the cattlemen. With the hill grass burning under the July sun and much of the corn similarly destroyed, the cattleman was faced with the choice of either selling his stock before they were ready or letting them starve. The most tragic result of the drought was the rash of foreclosures which occurred toward the end of 1934. The forty-one farm foreclosures completed in 1934 represented the highest total in the county's history, past or present. These foreclosures emphasized the critical conditions on the farms, and also caused increased unemployment problems for the towns.

The one bright spot in the county's economic picture was alfalfa. The drought and high temperatures only slightly

50 Nebraska Agricultural Statistics: Annual Reports, 1933 and 1934, (Lincoln, Nebraska: State-Federal Division of Agricultural Statistics, 1933 and 1934), 1933, pp. 4, 10; 1934, pp. 4, 10.

51 The Federal Government did alleviate the cattleman's difficulty somewhat by purchasing cattle in the county to prevent their starving. Infra, p. 57.

52 Sale Docket of Dawson County, Nebraska, III, 248-310 (from the files of the clerk of the District Court, Dawson County Courthouse, Lexington, Nebraska). While the foreclosures were quite evenly distributed throughout the county, precincts with large numbers of marginal farmers, such as Lincoln and Logan at the eastern edge of the county, had slightly higher percentages of foreclosures per farm.
damaged the alfalfa, due to the crop's unique root structure which was able to reach the lifegiving sub-surface water. Since the drought destroyed many of the other sources of livestock feed, including hay which did not have the advantage of the valley's high water table, the price of alfalfa rose to astronomical heights. By the end of the year, it was selling for $19.50 per ton, or nearly six times the amount it had sold for in early 1933. Since alfalfa, even in 1934, could be expected to produce from four to five tons per acre, the valley farmers who had established stands of this crop could expect huge profits. The income from alfalfa was magnified by the drought losses in other crops. Due to the price rise, the value of the crop jumped from $516,000 in 1933 to over $2,200,000 in 1934. Since a good share of this crop was shipped out of the county (nearly

53 Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1933, p. 3; 1934, p. 3.

54 Dawson County Pioneer, September 21, 1934, p. 1.
Alfalfa requires from two to four years to develop from the time of planting. Prior to this, yields will ordinarily be very low, particularly if there is little moisture to nurture the young crop. Therefore, for a farmer to have effectively capitalized on the greatly increased alfalfa price, he would have had to have seeded his alfalfa no later than 1932. It should also be noted that some alfalfa which could not reach water was also profitable to the farmer. If a farmer's stand of alfalfa were good, although it might not be able to reach water, it still would develop sufficiently to produce alfalfa seed. Since high quality seed was selling for $9.80 per bushel and seed harvests averaged over two bushels per acre, the farmer could still reap a large profit from his land. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1936," p. 35.

eight thousand carloads and probably twenty-five per cent more by trucks), nearly one million dollars in "foreign" money was injected into the county's economy at a critical time. James Adams, Dawson County Agent during the Thirties, accurately described local feeling when he stated that "in 1934, alfalfa was a wonderful crop and, a life-saver."57

The relative prosperity of the valley alfalfa farmer, however, could not totally erase the other crop losses in the farm community. The foreclosures, unemployment, and low prices showed people that the Depression was not over and that the New Deal had no quick remedies. The drought and continued Depression stifled the early optimism and enthusiasm which had been generated in the Fall of 1933.

Even the far-flung, economically beneficial activities of the AAA could not revitalize this early enthusiasm. While it would be difficult to assess the popularity of the wheat program within the county, the corn-hog referendum of October, 1934, provided an excellent gauge for judging farm opinion of that program. Nearly twelve hundred farmers took part in the referendum, 230 of whom had not participated in the 1934 program.58 Question one of the referendum read:

57 Adams Interview, August 24, 1966.
"Do you favor a corn-hog program for 1935?" In response to this question, 362 farmers voted yes and 803 voted no.59

In view of the fact that the corn-hog referendum carried favorably by a slight majority in Nebraska and nationally by a majority of sixty-nine per cent, examination of the county's overwhelming rejection of the program is in order.60 Apparently, the farmers in the valley were strongest in their opposition to the program. Of the five precincts voting most heavily against continuance, four were in the valley. Only four precincts voted to continue the program, and these were all located in the upland areas of the county.61 The distinction between the voting of the upland and valley precincts indicated that the marginal farmer generally approved the program, while the more prosperous farmer rejected it. The valley farmer, who was riding high on his alfalfa profits, probably could not see the value of payments for reduced production. This was not, however, the evaluation made by County Agent Adams, who cited low hog quotas and irritating mid-year alterations in the program as reasons for the farmers' dissatisfaction.62 In conclusion,

59 It should be noted that the farmers who had not participated in the program voted against continuance far more strongly than those within the program. Among the non-participants the vote was 211 to 17 against continuance, while among participants it was 592 to 345 against. Ibid., p. 72.

60 Dawson County Pioneer, October 19, 1934, p. 1.
62 Adams Interview, August 24, 1966.
he noted that "many farmers did not like to vote for a program until they were certain as to the exact requirements of the program they were voting for." Since the exact provisions of the 1935 program had not yet been made public, the farmers rejected it.

The AAA did engage in other activities which were more popular than the original corn-hog program. The most popular of these were the AAA loans. Feed and seed loans, which were made in the county as an emergency drought measure, provided 132 farmers with nearly $13,000 worth of working capital. This total was relatively insignificant, however, when compared to the loans made on corn stored in the county. Corn loans were made to 1,020 farmers for a total of $533,643. It appears unlikely that the farmers would have voted to reject the continuance of this lucrative program.

County income was bolstered by one other AAA program which, like the corn-hog, was not destined to be extremely popular in 1934. The buying of cattle was inaugurated in July as an emergency measure to prevent wholesale starvation of the cattle herds. The government bought 8,886 head of cattle at an average price of $13.74 per head. Many local

63 Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1934," p. 44.
64 Ibid., 1934, p. 72. The exact total was $12,883.
65 Ibid., 1934, p. 74.
66 Ibid., 1934, p. 74. The total expenditure for cattle was $122,136, which was distributed to 601 cattle feeders.
cattle feeders resented this extremely low price but were, nevertheless, forced by economic necessity to sell. The spectacle of the slaughter of over half of these cattle at a time when hunger was common in the cities contributed to the resentment of this program. 67

By the time of the general election in November, it was apparent that New Deal farm programs did not have the overwhelming support of the county's farmers. The drought, with its consequential decrease in farm production, caused many farmers to doubt the wisdom of the whole commodity reduction concept. 68 "Why," they must have asked, "was it necessary to limit production, when the periodic catastrophes of nature could be counted on to destroy the surpluses."

Other criticisms of the New Deal farm program were also present in the county. Many small farmers felt that the AAA aided the big farmer and absentee landowner at their expense. They realized that the big farmer could reduce his labor costs when he curtailed production, but that they were unable to do so because they hired no labor. 69 Some livestock feeders also felt that the processing taxes on cattle

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and hogs, used to finance the programs, were depressing the prices of those commodities.\textsuperscript{70}

By November, 1934, the citizens of Dawson County were apparently undecided as to the relative merits of the Roosevelt Administration. The drought and continued Depression had wiped out much of the enthusiasm of the preceding fall. A good deal of this indecision probably stemmed from the fact that the Roosevelt Administration had inaugurated so many new programs that a large number of the people could not decide whether the total New Deal was good or bad. They probably approved of the CCC because of the conservation aspects of that program and because it provided aid to the unemployed youth of the area. They probably approved of the FWA because of the Sutherland Project which was to provide irrigation for the county and because of the several local projects which were already under way. They may also have approved of the already defunct CWA because it had given sustenance to many who were in dire need. They definitely did approve of the new credit arrangements provided by the New Deal. Federal Land Bank and Commissioner loans

\textsuperscript{70}The Cozad Local, April 20, 1934, p. 2. Other general complaints which were probably frequent in the county but were not noted in the local papers were that the curtailment program was leading to greater unemployment in the cities; the high taxes necessary to finance the program were retarding economic recovery; and the removal of marginal lands from production was merely causing more intensive cultivation of the better lands and was, therefore, accomplishing nothing. Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939 (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, \textsuperscript{1941}), pp. 490-91.
had provided many farmers with the means to maintain their farms, and the FCA's and other agencies promised to remove the specter of foreclosure from the farm picture forever.\(^{71}\)

Several of the other New Deal agencies were receiving only qualified approval at the end of 1934. Main street grumblings were already noticeable concerning the NRA, and farm opinion on the continuance of the AAA was hardly favorable.\(^{72}\) The second question included in the corn-hog referendum of October requested that farmers give their attitudes on continuing the entire AAA program in 1936. Their answer was negative by a resounding five to one.\(^{73}\) This

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\(^{71}\) The Federal Land Bank and Commissioner loans totaled $1,368,000 in the county from the formation of the FCA to November, 1934. Dawson County Pioneer, November 16, 1934, p. 3. Commissioner loans for the refinancing of farm debts had been provided in the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act of May, 1933, and were administered by the Land Banks. While Dawson County had no local Production Credit Associations, local loans were serviced by the associations at Broken Bow in Custer County and North Platte in Lincoln County. The Production Credit Associations provided short-term operational loans which were particularly valuable to large scale livestock feeders. Harold Stevens (Director) and John Stuart (Compiler), "Report on the Overall Economic Development Program for Dawson County Redevelopment Area: Dawson County, Nebraska" (Extension Service, University of Nebraska, College of Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating, 1964), p. 93; Saloutos and Hicks, Agricultural Discontent, pp. 498-500.

\(^{72}\) While no particular criticism of the NRA appeared in the local papers in 1934, Lloyd Kain, owner-editor noted that by the Summer of that year, many local businessmen were disturbed with the regimentation of the NRA program. Kain Interview, August 11, 1966.

\(^{73}\) The vote was 891 against, to 162 for continuance of the AAA program in 1936. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1934," p. 72.
represented an even stronger rejection than the vote on the continuance of the corn-hog program for 1935.

The congressional elections of 1934 required many of the people of the county to choose between their political convictions and their pocketbooks. The whole philosophy of the New Deal ran counter to their traditional conception of what the Federal Government should do. Yet many felt that at long last, Washington was paying some attention to the needs of the great Middle West.

The overwhelming national endorsement accorded the New Deal in 1934 was not seconded by the people of Dawson County. While Nebraska returned Democrats to all major state and national offices, the Republican Party made substantial gains in the county. The local GOP gains were most apparent in the contests for governor and United States Senator. The Republican gubernatorial candidate, Dwight Griswold, who had been defeated in his 1932 bid for the same office by 700 votes, carried the county in 1934 by nearly 600 votes. Robert G. Simmons, ex-congressman and Republican candidate for the Senate, also made a remarkable comeback. In 1932, local voters had rejected his bid for re-election to

74 Democrats won control of all Nebraska state offices with the exception of the Commissioner of Public Lands and Buildings. Democrat Edward R. Burke won the United States Senate race, and with the exception of the Third Congressional District, Democrats were victorious in all congressional races. Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 318; Nebraska Legislative Council, Nebraska Blue Book, 1934, (Lincoln, Nebraska: n.p., 1934), pp. 517-28.
Congress by over 450 votes, but in 1934 he carried the county by 95 votes. In the Fifth District congressional race, local voters were allowed to choose between two new candidates, and again they favored the Republican. Even in the contests for lesser state offices the GOP made gains. Republican Charles E. Allen of Cozad, who had been rejected by nearly 700 votes in his bid for the State Senate in 1932, carried the county in 1934 by over 800 votes. While Democratic candidates did receive majorities in the contests for Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, Treasurer and State Representative, their majorities were sharply reduced from 1932, thus further demonstrating a growth of Republican strength in the county.

While the GOP undoubtedly made rather large gains in the county, the 1934 vote did not indicate a complete rejection of the New Deal by local voters. In the first place,

The 1934 election totals were: for Governor, Griswold—3,764, Democrat R. L. Cochran—3,171; for United States Senator, Simmons—3,463, Democrat Edward E. Burke—3,368. It should be noted that the Democrats who had defeated both Griswold and Simmons in 1932 were not opposing them in 1934. Governor Charles W. Bryan had attempted to run for the Senate but was defeated in the primary by Burke. Congressman Terry Carpenter, who had defeated Simmons in 1932, was also a primary victim in his bid for Governor. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 169-71; The Cozad Local, November 11, 1932, p. 1; Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 316.

The totals were: Republican Albert N. Mathers—3,422, Democrat Harry B. Coffee—3,319. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 170.

The Cozad Local, November 11, 1932, p. 1; November 9, 1934, p. 1.

Ibid.
the Republican margins of victory in both the Senate and congressional races were very slim, and in the Senate contest, Simmons, a proven vote-getter in western Nebraska, was competing against the comparatively unknown Edward R. Burke.

Secondly, the Democrats did maintain slight margins in the races for five of the seven lesser state posts, thus showing that the county was far from ready to completely reverse the 1932 vote. Finally, it has never been conclusively established that off-year elections truly reflect the attitude of the public toward the Administration in Washington. Therefore, the local vote in 1934 may have been influenced less by New Deal actions than by the popularity of the individual candidates.

An examination of the 1934 vote by precincts revealed only a few clear trends in the county. The Democrats retained most of their strength in precincts such as Lincoln and Logan which contained large numbers of marginal farmers and in precincts which included numerous wheat farmers such as German and Fairview. Farmers in these precincts apparently approved the New Deal's credit arrangements and the AAA wheat program. The major towns of the county also remained slightly Democratic, thus indicating that main street had not yet totally rejected the New Deal. Farmers who specialized in livestock production, however, were less inclined to support

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Simmons had represented the Sixth District in Congress from 1920 through 1932. As a result of the 1930 census, Nebraska lost one congressional seat in Washington, and the old Sixth District became the new Fifth District in 1932. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, pp. 303-05.
the Roosevelt Administration. The three strongest Republican precincts in 1934, Grant, Hillside, and Platte, were all leaders in the production of cattle and hogs. Apparently, the farmers in these precincts were alienated by the slaughter of livestock and/or the corn-hog program. Finally, the alfalfa producers also evidenced a slight trend toward the GOP. These farmers may have felt that the AAA program helped them little and that their alfalfa profits would be destroyed through high taxes to aid other economic groups.

The only clear and sound conclusion which could be drawn from the election results of 1934 was that Franklin Roosevelt no longer had the overwhelming support which he had held in 1932. Obviously, many county citizens who had voted Democratic in 1932 had not chosen to follow the Roosevelt line, and no longer felt that the New Deal was their only means of salvation.

80 These precincts had also voted strongly against the continuation of the corn-hog program.

81 Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 169-73.
CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND NEW DEAL AND THE 1936 ELECTIONS

With the advent of 1935, Dawson County again regained the optimism which the previous year's drought had nearly withered. The county newspapers led the people in turning their backs on the adversity of 1934, and predicted that 1935 would be a year of prosperity. There were some valid reasons for these optimistic predictions, for in early 1935, Dawson County was in considerably better economic shape than some surrounding counties. February of 1935 was the peak month for relief in Nebraska, and while the state was carrying over fifteen per cent of its population on relief, Dawson County's load was only 1.6 per cent.¹ Even after

¹The counties which surrounded Dawson ranged in relief loads of from 28.7 per cent in Custer County to 2.3 per cent in Phelps County. "Report of the Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration, June 1, 1933-January 1, 1933" (Aurora, Nebraska: Burr Publishing Company, 1933), p. 17.

Dawson County's relatively light relief load may have been due to circumstances other than prosperity. In "A Study of the 1936 Relief Need in Nebraska," M. E. Holcomb noted that the one unnamed county, which did not report its complete case loads, had a unique method of handling its relief problems. He reported that "... there is one county that has achieved some fame for its handling of the relief problem. The method is very simple: the family is sent out of the county and told never to return; the county then fails to answer any letters requesting authorization for return, and, if forced to reply, offers to support the family in the county in which it is then residing. ... This
dust storms raged through the county in March, destroying valuable top-soil, the eternal faith in the benevolence of Mother Nature, which is indelibly etched in rural tradition, could be seen in the county's newspapers. When April and May brought welcome Spring showers and a rise in farm prices, it appeared as if their faith had been justified.\(^2\)

It was during this period of economic optimism that the first severe criticism of the New Deal began to appear. The agency at which this criticism was directed was that same agency which had initially received such an enthusiastic reception only eighteen months before—the NRA. In the first three months of 1935, the county's major papers all discontinued any reference to the NRA, and businesses began to disregard the provisions of its codes. The editor of *The Lexington Clipper* observed that "the only reason we can see for the statement that the NRA is better liked is because fewer people are adhering to it."\(^3\) When the Supreme

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Court ruled the act establishing the agency unconstitutional in May, The Clipper's editor commented: "Now that the American Eagle has triumphed over the Blue Eagle, we are all a darned sight better off."4

The spurt of legislative activity commonly called the second New Deal which followed the invalidation of the NRA received very little comment in the newspapers of Dawson County. The Social Security legislation, the omnibus bank bill, and the Wagner Labor Relations Act, all met with some disapproval in the county. The banking bill was opposed by the papers because it would allow too much government control of the economy.5 In a sense, the opposition to the new banking law was characteristic of the new attitude in the county, for replacing the unquestioning faith in the initial Bank Holiday and Banking Act of 1933, was a rather apprehensive suspension of any new extension of governmental authority. The criticism of social security and the new labor law probably came from main street businessmen, and the more prosperous farmers who identified themselves with management.6 Other


5Ibid., June 27, 1935, p. 4; The Dawson Local, June 7, 1935, p. 5. It should be noted that the local papers were rather vague in their criticism of specific New Deal measures. They rarely pointed out what particular aspects of the measures they found offensive. Apparently, the papers assumed that local citizens would be informed of the specific provisions of Federal enactments by radio or The World Herald, for most local comments on national affairs were brief.

6Murray R. Benedict, Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950: A Study of Their Origins and Development
portions of the "second" New Deal enacted in the Summer of 1935, such as the Farm Credit Act of 1935 and the new rural electrification program, were more warmly received. What is somewhat surprising is that the establishment of the two agencies which were later to be most frequently cited as examples of New Deal socialism, the Works Progress Administration and the Resettlement Administration, received virtually no comment in the county papers.

The county's growing conservatism became more and more apparent through 1935. The most graphic illustration of the fear of government spending occurred in Lexington when the local school board received a tentative PWA grant of $25,000 toward the construction of a new elementary school. A vote to allow a bond issue to provide for the remaining $35,000 was held, and the town voters rejected the proposal by a two to one majority. When the PWA increased their grant to $54,000 and offered a $66,000 loan to provide for the construction of two schools, the voters again rejected the offer. The editor of the local paper was somewhat surprised by these votes and noted that while the public might be right if a method of avoiding debt or a better "Santa Claus" could be

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found, the vote was a mistake if the community itself had
to pay for the needed schools.8

It is difficult to explain the voters' rejection of
the Federal grants, but whatever the reasons, this attitude
evidently remained fairly constant, for the county received
relatively little Federal money. By May, 1935, there were
only four PWA projects, at a cost of about $94,000, in the
county.9 While some of the cause of the scarcity of projects
may be attributed to the slow start for which Harold Ickes'
agency was noted, the pride of the town and county leaders
must also have been a factor. The lack of liberal Democratic
leaders may also have restricted the number of Federal pro­
jects, for it was commonly recognized that without a loyal
Democrat to plead the local case, Federal funds were diffi­
cult to obtain.10

The Works Progress Administration was designed to
compensate for the PWA's slowness and indirect effect.
Established in April, 1935, this agency's primary function

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8Ibid., March 28, 1935, p. 1; October 3, 1935, p. 1;
November 21, 1935, pp. 1, 4.

Two PWA projects which were not directly employed in Dawson
County but did relieve some of the county's unemployment
were the Sutherland and Tri-County irrigation projects. In
July, 1935, the Sutherland group was employing 2,300 persons
from central and western Nebraska, and the Tri-County, which
was to be an even greater undertaking, was begun in March,

10Personal Interview by author with William Stewart,
prominent local lawyer and Republican leader, Lexington,
Nebraska, August 16, 1966.
was to provide employment to 3,500,000 persons who were still on relief. The impact of this new agency was not felt until the Fall of 1935 when various local governments began to request WPA funds. The fact that unemployment in Dawson County was not high in 1935 retarded the initial economic influence of the WPA, but the sight of men raking leaves and burning out road ditches in lieu of more constructive work soon brought criticism of the new agency. Many people thought of the WPA as a joke and satirical comments, such as the one directed at a WPA exhibit, were frequent: "Wouldn't it be nice to give each visitor a souvenir silver plated shovel with a padded arm rest?" When the WPA became better organized and began working on more constructive projects, it was accepted in a somewhat better light. Marion Menke, a Lexington cattleman and Democrat, described how the less conservative element in the county accepted the WPA, when he noted


12 Two projects were approved by the WPA in 1935—a $6,000 swimming pool for Gothenburg, and a $25,000 armory for Lexington. The county also applied for $19,000 to build the approaches for a proposed bridge across the Platte near the center of the county, at Darr. The Gothenburg Times, September 11, 1935, Sect. 1, p. 1; The Lexington Clipper, September 5, 1935, p. 1; October 31, 1935, p. 1.


that those who worked for the agency, "had to eat." The total political impact of the WPA would be difficult to measure. While it is probably true that the agency alienated some of the conservatives in the county, it is probably just as true that the WPA workers tended to vote for the Roosevelt Administration. For the two to four hundred persons who worked for the WPA in 1935 and 1936, that agency soon became "the personalized symbol of Uncle Sam as a friend, provider and employer."

By the end of 1935, the most popular New Deal program in Dawson County was the AAA. While the NRA, the banking programs, and the relief-work programs had declined in favor, the AAA had gained support. The most obvious evidence of growing farm approval of the AAA came in the dramatic reversal of farm opinion shown in the wheat and corn-hog referendums of 1935. In 1934, the corn-hog farmers had voted overwhelmingly to discontinue the whole AAA program. In 1935 those same corn-hog farmers voted 1,170 to 319 to continue their program. This dramatic vote of approval was seconded

15 Personal Interview by author with Marion Menke, local cattleman, Lexington, Nebraska, August 24, 1966.

16 Dixon Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 96. The number of WPA workers cited was an estimate given by James C. Adams, who served on the WPA local board in the 1930's, and was checked by the author through the infrequent references made in the county newspapers to employment on specific projects. Personal Interview by author with James C. Adams, Brady, Nebraska, August 24, 1966.
by the wheat farmers who voted 201 to 34 in favor of their program. 17

At first glance this dramatic reversal of farm opinion is difficult to understand. Why should farmers, in 1934 when drought had robbed them of any real chance of profit, reject the Federal farm program which provided them with money on which to live, and then turn around in 1935, when production was good, and endorse that same program? The first logical explanation would be that there must have been a significant increase in AAA payments. The facts, however, do not bear this out. Taking the corn-hog program as an example, in 1934 the payments to Dawson County farmers totaled slightly over half a million dollars. That total was only increased by fifty thousand dollars in 1935. 18 The number of farmers involved in the program also did not vary appreciably, for contracts for the 1935 program were signed by 1,505 farmers as compared to the 1,510 signed for 1934. 19 The county's farmers


18 The Gosad Local, September 7, 1934, p. 1; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1935," p. 22. The corn-hog referendum was used as an example because of the high percentage of farmers participating in the program and because that program held referendums in both 1934 and 1935. The wheat program was not voted on in 1934, and its popularity was generally considered to be high in both years. Therefore, the corn-hog vote was far more characteristic of the growing approval of the AAA in 1935.

19 Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1935," p. 22; 1934, p. 38. It is interesting to note that although local farmers rejected the corn-hog program in the 1934 referendum,
were not led to favor the program by any appreciable improvement in its administration, for in 1935, as in 1934, last minute revisions in quotas caused confusion and some resentment. The only plausible explanation for the extraordinary change in attitude toward the program was that by October of 1935, Dawson County farmers had been convinced that the new program would work. They had seen the prices of their commodities rise during 1934 because of scarcity, but were surprised and pleased when in 1935, with crop production back to near normal, the prices remained relatively high. Even more gratifying to the corn-hog farmer was the fact that hog prices had nearly doubled since 1934. Therefore, the determining factor in the new popularity of the AAA appears to have been a belief that the farm program was proving successful in bringing about a return to natural farm prosperity, through increased prices.

The emergency loan programs of the Federal Government also tended to gain support for the farm program among the less fortunate farmers of the county. The Emergency Drought Loans and Feed and Seed Loans granted by the AAA totaled

the sign-up for the 1935 program which took place in the months following the referendum evidenced no decline in participation.

20Ibid., 1935, p. 22.

21In December, 1934, hog prices had averaged $4.90 per hundredweight; in October of 1935, when the corn-hog referendum was held, the price had jumped to $9.50. Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1934, p. 3; 1935, p. 3.
nearly $100,000. Though these loans were of short duration, they were a great help to the many farmers who did not have sufficient funds with which to raise a crop in 1935. The Resettlement Administration, which did not get underway until late in the year, also contributed over $10,000 in grants and loans to twenty-seven of the county's poorer farmers.

By the time of the Supreme Court's invalidation of the AAA in January, 1936, it had become increasingly apparent that the Federal farm program had not only gained the acceptance of the county's farmers, but had become quite important to the county's economy. Even though the Government payments in the county constituted less than the state average of fourteen per cent of the gross farm income, the half million dollars plus per year which it did provide probably brought considerable recovery to both farms and towns.

The gradual return to farm prosperity which began in 1935, continued through 1936, despite the difficulties of drought and grasshoppers. The combination of natural disasters and the crop reduction programs of the AAA had virtually

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22 The exact totals were 295 Emergency Drought Loans for $63,073, and 218 Feed and Seed Loans for $35,110.75. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1935," pp. 5, 9.

23 Ibid., p. 41.

eliminated the surpluses which had plagued the country in 1932. Based on an average of the 1909-1914 farm prices, national farm income had risen from an index figure of 65 in 1932 to 114 in 1936. Murray R. Benedict, in Farm Policies of the United States, evaluated the position of the farmer in 1936:

Agriculture thus was the beneficiary both of the general economic recovery and of a variety of governmental programs and natural phenomena which put it, relatively, in the best position it had held since 1919.

The natural phenomena which served to keep surpluses down and prices high caused considerable grief for the local farmers in 1936. In July, swarms of grasshoppers combined with high temperatures and little moisture to damage county crops. The most severely injured crop was alfalfa, which the hoppers caught just before the second cutting, causing an estimated loss of over $600,000. The burning August sun and inadequate rainfall withered many farmers' corn crops.


27 Benedict, Farm Policies, p. 354.

causing Dawson, along with over one thousand other counties, to be classed as a drought county. 29

While the relatively high farm prices allowed the farmer who could raise a crop in 1936 to make a reasonable profit, many were hit hard by the crop failures. The Gothenburg Times estimated that 220 farm families would need assistance during the coming Winter, most of whom were from the marginal southwestern and northeastern portions of the county. 30 These farm families and those in more enviable circumstances probably appreciated the many farm loan plans made available to them by the Federal Government. The Resettlement Administration made rehabilitation and resettlement loans totaling over $50,000 to fifty-one families, and the local County Agent distributed another $14,800 in Feed and Seed Loans and emergency grants. 31 The FCA also provided help to many who were in financial straits. County Agent Adams noted that

the various branches of the Farm Credit Administration have assisted materially in carrying Dawson County farmers through the crucial period caused by the depression and a series of crop failures in addition. 32

29 The Gothenburg Times, August 19, 1936, Sect. 1, p. 1. The total rainfall for 1936 at Lexington was only 15.14 inches, nearly seven inches below normal. The Lexington Clipper, August 5, 1937, p. 2.


32 Ibid.
The most active of the FCA lending agencies, the Federal Land Bank, had, by September, 1936, made 544 loans in the county totaling $1,895,900, since its reorganization in the Summer of 1933. This figure represented roughly sixty-six per cent of the total farm mortgage credit and demonstrated the enormous influence which the revitalized farm credit system had on the county.  

A direct result of the Supreme Court's invalidation of the AAA in January, 1936 was the enactment of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act in late February. This act provided for payments to farmers who replaced soil-depleting crops with soil-conserving crops, and on the surface changed the emphasis of the New Deal farm program from crop reduction to soil conservation.  

While the farmers of the county had long been in favor of soil conservation, one aspect of the new program caused considerable concern. The alfalfa growers immediately felt that a program which provided subsidies for the production of alfalfa and other legume crops would cause an overproduction of these crops and destroy alfalfa as a cash commodity. In a meeting held in Cozad in March, a large group of businessmen and farmers from five central Nebraska counties decided to send a protest

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note to their representatives in Washington. While the meeting achieved no concrete results short of a disdainful reply by Senator George W. Norris, it did show the unpopularity of the new act among not only the farmers, but also the merchants of the area.\(^{35}\) Although the new program provided no benefits for the corn-hog producer and was criticized by the alfalfa farmers, nearly all of the county's farmers signed up under the new provisions.\(^{36}\)

While the total impact of the New Deal farm program on the county farmers is difficult to judge, some generalizations can be drawn. First of all, the original AAA, while it received some criticism for the slaughter of cattle and pigs, for favoring the big farmer over the small farmer, and for its alleged attempts to regiment and socialize agri-

\(^{35}\) The Cozad Local, March 10, 1936, p. 1; The Lexington Clipper, March 12, 1936, pp. 1, 5. The meeting was officially called by the Chambers of Commerce of the various communities sending representatives, but farmers were invited to attend. Senator Norris, responding to this grumbling, declared that "in other words Congress is asked to keep anybody from planting or producing a crop which will come into competition with anybody else who is now producing similar crops."

The Cozad Local, March 17, 1936, p. 1.

\(^{36}\) Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939 (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), p. 505; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1936," p. 22. Eighteen hundred work sheets were measured out in the county to check compliance in 1936, but no figures were given by the County Agent as to the number who proved their compliance in these measurements under the provisions of the new act.
culture, was still favored by the county's farmers. Government subsidies and the rise in prices had evidently outweighed the various criticisms. The new Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment plan met with some disapproval, but when 1936 farm prices rose to heights of well over a dollar per bushel for both corn and wheat, farmers assumed that the New Deal formula would continue to work. The most universally popular of the New Deal farm-orientated programs, however, continued to be the new system of farm credit. Up to the end of 1936, no criticism of the FCA, its affiliated agencies, or other farm loan programs appeared in the county newspapers. Therefore, when the general elections approached in the Fall of 1936, the Roosevelt forces could count upon the support of many farmers, especially those who had not been disappointed by the provisions of the conservation act.

The political campaign of 1936 was watched by the people of Dawson County very closely. They could not view with detachment this campaign which "brought to the fore the whole New Deal conception of government." They must have realized that even though the Republican candidate, Alfred Landon, did not advocate a complete eradication of New Deal programs, a victory by that party would have indicated a

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37 Personal Interview by author with Lloyd Kain, editor of The Lexington Clipper, Lexington, Nebraska, August 11, 1966.
38 Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1936, p. 3.
rejection of Roosevelt and the new direction which the Federal Government had taken during the previous four years. Even with the intense partisan interest in the 1936 campaign, only one of the major newspapers of the county came out with definite stands supporting a candidate. The Gothenburg Times and The Lexington Clipper remained remarkably neutral during the campaign, although their respective editors later admitted following a particular political persuasion.\(^\text{40}\) The Cozad Local, however, was far from neutral. Immediately after the national nominating conventions, The Local came out for the Republican candidate and began stressing his Kansas background and moderate stand on economic issues. Through the Summer of 1936, The Local began to take issue with many of the Roosevelt programs, criticizing in particular increased Government spending and debts. The Trade Agreements Act of 1934 was also criticized for allegedly allowing price-depressing farm imports. Yet until the end of August, no personal condemnation was aimed directly at Roosevelt.\(^\text{41}\)

\(^{40}\) Russell Holmes, editor of The Gothenburg Times, in an editorial comment following the election, remarked that he was a Democrat. The editor of The Clipper, Lloyd Kain, frankly admitted he was a Republican far before the election, and though he kept his newspaper relatively neutral, he privately worked as Republican County Chairman toward the rejuvenation of the GOP. The Gothenburg Times, November 11, 1936, Sect. 2, p. 4; The Lexington Clipper, August 27, 1936, p. 4.

\(^{41}\) The first overt criticism of FDR by The Cozad Local came in the form of a political cartoon on August 28. Thereafter, frequent cartoons were aimed at Roosevelt's broken campaign promises, his family background, and his attempts to buy votes with give-away programs. The Cozad Local, August 28, 1936, p. 1.
on the part of The Local's editor to denounce FDR personally demonstrated the obvious admiration which a large portion of the citizens held for the President. A good example of how The Local evaluated the merits of the respective candidates appeared late in the Summer when both candidates spoke within three weeks of each other at North Platte, approximately forty-five miles west of Cozad. Landon's talk received two columns on the front page and a flattering picture, while Roosevelt's visit merited only seventeen lines.42

In late September and October, The Local attempted to make it appear as if the entire country was swinging to Landon by making use of the Literary Digest polls, statements by Walter Lippman, and other devices.43

One anachronism in The Local's traditionally conservative campaign against the Roosevelt Administration was the support which it gave to the Townsend movement. While the Townsend plan never attracted large numbers of adherents in the county, in early 1936, two local clubs were formed to push for the adoption of the plan.44 The Townsend plan called for the payment of a monthly pension of $200 to persons

42 Ibid., August 18, 1936, p. 1; September 4, 1936, p. 1.

43 Ibid., September 11, 1936, p. 2; September 25, 1936, p. 2; October 30, 1936, p. 2.

44 Townsend clubs were formed in Lexington in January and in Cozad in March of 1936. The Lexington Clipper, January 30, 1936, p. 1; The Cozad Local, March 13, 1936, p. 1.
over sixty, on the conditions that they retire from any
gainful work and spend the money within the month in which
they received it.45 Although the plan had far more kinship
with socialism than some of the other programs which The
Local criticized for that reason, the paper advocated the
proposal as "a movement of the people."46 A Dawson County
writer hired by The Local to report the progress of the move­
ment in the vicinity claimed that if the program were not
put into effect, the "13,000,000 unemployed will go Commun­
istic or socialistic."47 Not all of the papers demonstrated
approval of the program. The editor of The Gothenburg Times
showed his reaction to the Townsendites when he noted that

several cars displaying banners of the "Townsend
Caravan" with California licenses went through town
Sunday afternoon. . . . The cars we noticed were of
the larger, higher-priced variety.

The local Republican Party made a valiant effort,
prior to and during, the campaign to revitalize itself and
regain the support which it had lost since 1932. The impetus
for this Republican resurgence came from an unofficial meet­
ing of some eight thousand midwestern Republicans in Spring­
field, Illinois, in June, 1935.49 Two local young GOP

45William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and
the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper and Row, /1962/),
pp. 103-06.

46The Cozad Local, April 7, 1936, p. 3.
47Ibid., April 14, 1936, p. 5.
followers had attended this meeting and soon after returning started a campaign to hold rallies in each precinct in the county. These two leaders were Lloyd Kain and William Stewart, both of Lexington, and the rallies which they organized soon became effective tools in molding Republican support in the eastern half of the county. The local Republicans, in making their appeal to the citizens of the county, tended to harp on one theme—Government regimentation—and they brought considerable attention to the already defunct NRA to support their case.

Governor Landon gave the local Republicans some support in their campaign to regain control of the county. Several leaders were allowed to accompany the candidate in his railroad trip across the county in August, and Kain introduced the Governor when he spoke in Lexington on the 27th. Landon's general campaign left much to be desired. He accused the New Dealers of doing nothing for the farmers and then "turned around and promised the farmers pretty much

50 Personal Interviews by author with William Stewart and Lloyd Kain, Lexington, Nebraska, August 8, and August 11, 1966, respectively. Mr. Kain explained that since he and Mr. Stewart were both well-known in the eastern portion of the county, the rallies there were well-attended and quite successful. But since neither was as well-acquainted with the people in the western portion, rallies there were not as effective.

51 Stewart Interview, August 16, 1966.

52 The Lexington Clipper, August 27, 1936, p. 1.
of the same thing." One thing which did become apparent in Landon's campaign and in the campaign of the local Republicans, was that while they would criticize Roosevelt's methods, his ultimate objectives and some of his new programs were not to be attacked. As Peter H. Odegard, when considering the accomplishments of Roosevelt's first term in his Prologue to November, 1940, noted:

There was . . . a fairly general acceptance of much that had seemed radical or revolutionary in the first New Deal. The social security program, the need for federal relief of unemployment, . . . the policy of insuring federal bank deposits, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Housing Authority, the Public Works Administration, the flood control and conservation program, . . . and the need for federal intervention in some form to help debt-ridden, bankrupt and surplus strangled farmers were now generally approved. The customary criticism of these and other phases of the first New Deal was that their objectives were sound but the specific remedies were badly conceived and/or badly administered.

The Roosevelt landslide in the national elections of 1936 demonstrated the people's faith in the ideals of the New Deal. FDR swamped Landon nationally, in Nebraska, and in Dawson County. Despite the warnings of The Cozad Local and the efforts of local Republicans, the people of the

53 Saloutos and Hicks, Agricultural Discontent, p. 509.
54 Peter H. Odegard, Prologue to November, 1940 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. 4.
55 Nebraska Legislative Council, Nebraska Blue Book, 1936, p. 458.
county voted to maintain the Roosevelt Administration 4,021 to 3,573. The 448 vote majority was a tribute both to the personality of the President and to his program. The many varied activities of Roosevelt, especially his fireside chats, had drawn considerable attention to him personally and with this attention came some support. Even the most severe critics in the county had not yet questioned the President's sincerity, and many were undoubtedly convinced that he had their best interests at heart. His continuous catering to the poor and underprivileged endeared Roosevelt to a large number of voters, for in this they perceived an element of Christian charity.

The New Deal programs were also responsible for Roosevelt's victory in Dawson County. Of the major New Deal legislation of the first "hundred days," only the ill-fated NRA met with hearty disapproval. Only when the Roosevelt Administration turned to more radical programs in 1935 were large numbers of specific measures greeted with concern. Even then the criticism was not widespread or vehement. Not until the election campaign in the Summer of 1936 did the criticism become loud, and this censure sounded much like the typical partisan cries of a party out of power, looking for issues. The focus of the vocal opposition was centered in the newspaper in Cozad, and the fact that Cozad gave Roosevelt the strongest majority of any of the three towns

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56 Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 192.
of the county, indicated that The Cozad Local did not accurately reflect the feelings of that area. Therefore, it would appear that due to Roosevelt's personal popularity, and the lack of specific concrete issues, the Republicans did not have much chance of weakening FDR's hold on the people of Dawson County.

On the surface the 448 vote majority seemed to indicate that Roosevelt did retain his popular hold. Yet this majority, compared to his 1,654 vote margin in 1932, showed that over 1,100 individuals turned their backs on him. The fact that FDR increased his popular majority in only one of the county's twenty-two precincts demonstrated that in the past four years, he had indeed lost ground. Why had the President lost support? No clear, definitive answer can be given, but the most logical assumption is that at some time within the four-year period, the Roosevelt Administration had alienated some voters, or at least caused some to doubt the value of its programs.

The election results of 1936 give only the barest clues as to which groups within the county rejected the New Deal. The only economic group which evidenced a marked

\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}}\]

\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}, II, 192, 147.}\]

\[\text{\textit{Ibid.}, II, 192.}\]
tendency to switch their votes from the Democratic ticket were the cattlemen. All five precincts which showed the greatest Republican gains in 1936 contained sizable portions of pastureland. What specifically alienated the cattlemen is difficult to decipher. It may have been the low cattle prices or the distasteful slaughter of livestock which accompanied the Government's cattle buying campaign of 1934. It may have been that the crop reduction payments of the AAA and the conservation payments of the new plan did not provide equivalent benefits for them. It may have been that they felt the agricultural policies of the New Deal were driving up prices on corn and other necessities faster than on cattle. It may even have been the ill-fated United States—Argentina Sanitary Convention of 1935 which would have allowed Argentine beef into America. Whatever the reason, the cattlemen disapproved.

60 These precincts were Buffalo, Hillside, Lincoln, Platte, and Wood River. Ibid.

61 Cattle prices had shown a marked rise under the New Deal from a low of $3.90 per hundredweight in December, 1933 to a high of $8.80 in May, 1935. Prices slipped somewhat in 1936 to $6.50 in August, but by November they were again over $7. It should be noted, however, that the 1936 price was still well below 1928 levels when cattle sold for as high as $12.60. Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1928, 1933, 1934, 1935, and 1936, pp. 118, 3, 3, 3, and 3, respectively.

62 This trade treaty negotiated by Secretary of State Cordell Hull died in the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee. John T. Schlebecker, Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961 (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 147.
The farmers who specialized in alfalfa also seem to have shown some disapproval of the New Deal's policies. Three of the strongest Republican precincts, Grant, Overton, and Coyote, were large producers of alfalfa, and of the strongest Democratic precincts, none produced a high percentage of the crop. These farmers undoubtedly opposed the new conservation act because of the competition it promised, and also may have been influenced by their economic success in 1934. In that year, when the alfalfa producer made great gains due to a lack of other available feed, these farmers may have begun to question the need for a Federal farm program of any sort. Even though alfalfa growers were spread throughout most of the county, and their defection may explain some of the general decline of Democratic votes, it should be noted that few of the county's farmers specialized in the production of alfalfa. To most

63 Ibid.; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1940," p. 52a. The "a" indicates a separately numbered report which was inserted within the regular County Agent's report for 1940.

64 It should be noted that the alfalfa farmers' fears of reduced prices were not justified. In July, 1935, well before the passage of the soil-conservation act, the price of alfalfa had dropped from $13.60 per ton to $7.60. The price declined steadily for one year and then in July, 1936, due to drought conditions, jumped again to $10 and to $12 in August. Although alfalfa prices declined gradually through 1937 and 1938, it was apparent that competition produced by the 1936 act was far less to blame than was the increased production brought about by increased rainfall. Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1938, pp. 5, 5, 5, and 5, respectively.
farmers alfalfa constituted only one of several crops which were grown on their land.

More important than the defection of the cattleman and alfalfa grower was the fact that the farmer in trouble tended to remain with Roosevelt. Seven precincts showed only minor or no Democratic losses in the 1936 election, and all of those precincts contained significant portions of marginal lands. In each case the marginal lands were, or had been, farmed in relatively small acreages, and were consequently the site of many foreclosures. For these farmers, the predominant factor in their decision to support Roosevelt was probably the new farm credit system of the New Deal. The FCA, RA, Emergency Drought, and Feed and Seed Loans all worked to allow many farmers to continue in their chosen vocations. Since six of these precincts also ranked relatively high in the production of wheat, the popularity of the AAA wheat program may also have contributed to their decision to vote for Roosevelt. The new conservation act was not unfavorable to wheat growers, and the high price of

65 These precincts included: Farnam, where the Democrats gained support; Holmes, Antelope, and German, where Democratic losses were very slight; and Logan, Kennebec and Ringgold, where the losses were somewhat larger but far below the county average. Of these precincts, Logan, Farnam, Kennebec, and Antelope had high rates of foreclosures from 1930 to 1936, ranging from an approximate one per every six families in Farnam and Logan, to one per twelve families in Antelope. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 192; Sale Docket of Dawson County Nebraska, III, 19-444.

wheat in the Fall of 1936 probably convinced many farmers that the farm program was beneficial.\textsuperscript{67}

The method of dividing town precincts so that both rural and city dwellers were included in each ward make valid conclusions difficult to achieve in the evaluation of the town vote. One obvious generalization, however, could be made—the town vote shifted to a far less degree than in the average rural precinct. While Roosevelt's percentage of the votes declined in each of the county's towns, the shift was, in no instance, great. Roosevelt retained fairly strong majorities in both Cozad and Gothenburg and lost Lexington by only seventeen votes.\textsuperscript{68} This tends to indicate that main street opposition to Roosevelt had either not fully materialized or was counteracted by voting shifts of other groups.

An analysis of ward voting in Lexington revealed that the residents of the second ward were far more opposed to Roosevelt than those of the other two wards. Ward two contained the town's more prosperous element, while in wards one and three, numerous WPA workers resided. The residents

\textsuperscript{67}The price of wheat in October of 1936 was $1.09 per bushel. \textit{Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1936}, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{68}The 1936 totals for the town precincts were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Precinct</th>
<th>Roosevelt</th>
<th>Landon</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lexington Precinct</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cozad Precinct</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gothenburg Precinct</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>420</td>
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</table>

Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 192.
of ward two probably found Roosevelt's NRA and other "socialistic" measures far more objectionable than those who lived in the other two wards. Since the first and third wards gave Roosevelt slim majorities, one could logically assume that the lower income families tended to support the President. The fact that these two wards gave Roosevelt considerably more support in 1932 than in 1936, however, seems to indicate that the GWA and WPA were not the deciding factors in bringing lower class support to Roosevelt. FDR, in fact, lost far more votes in these two wards than in the more prosperous second ward. 69 Therefore, the premise that main street opposition was counteracted by the votes of WPA workers cannot be relied upon. The pro-social security "Aged" vote in other areas might have been great enough to neutralize a voting change by town merchants, but in Dawson County most of the elderly were made up of retired farmers who would not have approved of the social security legislation. Since there was no apparent vote to cancel a sizable voting shift by the more prosperous element, it must be assumed that main street did not vote radically different in 1936 than it had in 1932. In fact, the merchants had already

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Roosevelt 1932</th>
<th>Roosevelt 1936</th>
<th>Hoover 1932</th>
<th>Landon 1936</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Ward</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Ward</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Ward</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69 The ward totals in Lexington in 1932 and 1936 were: 

Ibid., II, 147, 192.
demonstrated their adherence to the GOP in 1932, and only strengthened their position moderately in 1936. The less prosperous elements in the towns, possibly somewhat influenced by the vocal anti-Roosevelt merchants and press, had become slightly less enthusiastic about the New Deal by 1936.

The 1936 election results in Dawson County revealed a curious East-West split in the voting. The eastern half of the county, with the exception of only three precincts, was solidly Republican, while the western half was universally Democratic. There are only two logical explanations for this split. First the local Republican rallies had been organized by leaders in the eastern half and were more successful in that region. Secondly, most of the wheat-producing areas in the county were in the western half, and the popularity of the wheat program may have influenced that area.

The preceding analysis provides only a partial explanation for Roosevelt's overall loss of support in the county, but this partial explanation may be all that is possible. No one can say for certain exactly why individuals vote the way they do. Consequently, partial explanations and educated guesses must suffice.

In shying away from Roosevelt in 1936 some Dawson County voters may have been demonstrating a natural fear of the New Deal's government by experiment. Roosevelt's fiscal programs were quite different from those practiced during
the Twenties and probably ran counter to the traditional political concepts of numerous individuals. The multitude of new and varied programs enacted during Roosevelt's first term probably also cost him some support, for most enactments were bound to bring some opponents. Since the county had gone so overwhelmingly Democratic in 1932, any increase in Roosevelt's margin would have been truly phenomenal. The fact that he maintained a reasonable portion of that majority is probably just as significant as any decline which occurred.70

Roosevelt's 1936 victory probably caused both jubilation and concern among local Democrats. The President's margin of victory was solid, but his loss of votes represented only the beginning of a trend which was to become stronger and stronger during his second term. A conservative reaction, which was eventually to bring about a return to traditional Republicanism in Dawson County, was on its way.

70It should be noted that Roosevelt also suffered a moderate decline in support throughout Nebraska. From 62 per cent of the vote in 1932, his margin of victory in 1936 dropped to 56 per cent. James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 318.
CHAPTER V

THE RECESSION AND THE 1938 ELECTIONS

Early in 1937 great optimism was evident across the nation. It appeared as if the Depression had been conquered, and the recent elections demonstrated that the nation was willing to give the New Dealers credit for the victory. Industrial production and general business activity, though still below the level of the late 1920's, had progressed so far from the depths of 1932, that it seemed as if the country were actually prosperous. In Dawson County prospects for prosperity were particularly good. Farm prices were as high as at any time since 1929, and for the first time in recent years, early Spring rains brought the prospect of abundant harvests which would allow the farmer to take full advantage of the price rise.¹

The only factor which appeared to threaten these harvests was the grasshopper. By July the problem of grasshoppers was widespread, and farmers were urgently requesting Federally-supplied poison bait.² Even though the Government responded with sufficient poison to cover 48,000 acres of

Dawson County cropland, few farmers saved their Spring seedings of alfalfa, and the wheat crop suffered irreparable damage. In 1938, the hoppers returned to cut the economically vital alfalfa crop in half and destroy an estimated half million dollars worth of crops.

With the return of relative prosperity in early 1937, the people of Dawson County began to turn their attention to non-economic issues, and the Roosevelt Administration provided one issue about which the people could get thoroughly riled. In February of that year, President Roosevelt presented to Congress his plan for reorganizing the court system of the United States. To the conservative-minded citizens of Dawson County, the plan violated the long-held precept of separation of powers and threatened the existence of constitutional government in the United States. The Omaha World Herald remarked that Roosevelt's plan implied that "the constitution should no longer serve as a possible barrier to the will of the president and of a congress.

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accepting his leadership," and The Cosad Local seconded that evaluation.5

Just as the court-packing plan unleashed conservative critics of the New Deal across the nation, in Dawson County, conservatives now felt free to speak. Conservatives gained further ammunition from the outbreak of labor strife which became public in early 1937. Editorials in both The Lexington Clipper and The Cosad Local criticized sit-down strikes and implied that the Wagner Act should be amended. The papers opposed the act, suggesting that it had given organized labor too much power, and had promoted labor strife, thus causing an undue rise in the cost of living.6 From the specific issues raised by the court-packing plan and the labor unrest, the conservative arguments eventually returned to the more traditional lines of questioning public spending, the national debt, and governmental regimentation. In August, 1937, the editor of The Cosad Local praised business and industrial leaders for expanding production facilities in the face of

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5 *Morning World Herald: Omaha, February 7, 1937, p. 4.* The Cosad Local emulated The Herald’s arguments throughout the Spring of 1937.

"higher labor costs, increased taxation, and harassment by a multiplicity of governmental regulatory agencies." ⁷

In the Autumn of 1937 the prosperity bubble burst, and the American economy went into a severe recession. Premature cutbacks in Federal spending ordered by President Roosevelt and improved farm production brought a sharp decline in farm prices. The price of corn suffered the most serious decline of all locally-grown farm commodities, falling from a high of $1.20 per bushel in July to $.51 per bushel by the end of the year; and other farm products followed suit. ⁸ Local businesses felt the bind of decreased farm income as, across the entire state, business failures increased by nearly one-third. ⁹ The County Agent noted that in Dawson County local businessmen were experiencing their poorest year in some time. ¹⁰

While the recession obviously caused serious problems for the businessmen and valley farmers, the individuals most adversely affected were the farmers in the hills. These farmers were not, however, suffering from a decline in farm

⁷ The Cozad Local, August 31, 1937, p. 2.


prices alone. Four years of drought, combined with hail and grasshoppers, forced many of the already heavily mortgaged hill farmers to leave the land.\textsuperscript{11} In commenting on the plight of the hill farmer, County Agent Adams noted that much of the hill land should never have been broken. The lack of sub-surface water and irrigation, coupled with successive drought years, robbed the soil of its reserve moisture. Consequently, most hill farmers could raise little, and the return for what they could sell was usually taken by creditors.\textsuperscript{12}

By the end of 1937, the hill farmer had become the primary concern of the Farm Security Administration, a recently-created Federal agency whose primary purpose was to deal with farm tenancy. When the new FSA administrator, Virgil Sykes, arrived in Lexington in late Summer, he was met with fifty-three loan applications and a list of 155 farm families on direct relief. Mr. Sykes described the farmers applying for loans as "discouraged, desperate and generally ashamed of their financial condition."\textsuperscript{13} By early 1938, the FSA had 159 small loans in force and 160 families

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 8.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 1938, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{13}Personal Interview by author with Virgil Sykes, retired FSA administrator, North Platte, Nebraska, August 19, 1966.
on direct monthly grants.¹⁴ The value of the FSA loans and grants was noted by County Agent Adams, who credited them with allowing many farmers in the critical hill precincts to stay on the farm.¹⁵ Other FSA activities also brought aid to local farmers, such as the work of the Farm Debt Adjustment Committee. This committee, made up of local volunteer members, met with needy farmers and their creditors to arrange for realistic debt extensions and reductions which would allow farmers to meet their obligations. From 1937 through 1938, the committee adjusted thirty farm debts resulting in a debt reduction of $10,896.¹⁶ FSA farm tenant loans, established under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act of 1937, also brought hope to county farmers. The purpose of these loans was to provide long-term, low-rate credit for farm tenants so that they might purchase their own farms. In the Spring of 1938, Dawson County received the first two tenancy loans offered in the central United States, and by the end of the year, the county had received five such loans.

¹⁴ The total money loaned was $64,615 in 1938. The grants averaged about $20 per month per family and totaled $12,072. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1938," p. 45.


totaling over $46,000.\textsuperscript{17} The popularity of this loan pro-
gram could be seen both in the county newspapers and in the
seventy-six applications which were made for the five avail-
able loans.\textsuperscript{18}

The continued subsidies of the AAA also provided aid
for the county's unfortunate hill farmers as well as the
more prosperous valley farmers. Of the 1,560 farm owners
who signed applications under the Conservation Act of 1937,
283 were dry land farmers. Conservation payments in 1937
amounted to over one quarter of a million dollars.\textsuperscript{19} In
1938, however, AAA payments to Dawson County declined markedly.
The new Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 brought a con-
siderably modified farm program, and many of the county's
farmers were reluctant to participate. This program provided
for conservation payments, commodity loans, crop insurance,
and a quota system which could be called into effect by a
referendum vote of the farmers.\textsuperscript{20} Although the county news-
papers urged the farmers to give the new program a fair
trial, only forty-five per cent signed up under the second

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., April 7, 1938, Sect. 1, p. 4; The Lexington
Clipper, August 10, 1939, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{18}Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1938," p. 45.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 1937, p. 5; Nebraska Legislative Council,
Nebraska Blue Book, 1940 (Lincoln, Nebraska: n.p., 1940),
p. 593.

\textsuperscript{20}Rolf Waldemar Ordal, "History of the Federal Farm
Program in Nebraska" (unpublished Master's thesis, Graduate
College, University of Nebraska, 1941), pp. 46–47.
\end{footnotes}
AAA. While the rather high acreage reduction requirements forced some farmers to avoid participation, the program's newness was probably the decisive factor in causing the scanty sign-up. Many farmers chose to wait and see if the benefits of the program would offset the advantages of independent production. The reluctance of farmers to participate caused AAA payments to Dawson County to drop over $60,000 from the 1937 total. The county's loss was further demonstrated by George A. Anthony, chairman of the local conservation committee, who noted that by full participation in the 1938 program, county farmers would have received $512,432 instead of the $199,198 which they collected.

While the FSA and AAA brought both relief and income to the farmers of Dawson County, three other New Deal agencies were promoting programs which were to have a more lasting effect. The REA, FWA and FCA sponsored programs which were to eventually bring a better life for the farmer through electricity, irrigation, and security from foreclosure.

By 1957, the crisis in farm credit was largely over. Farms which had been mortgaged beyond their feasible limits had already been foreclosed upon, and those which held the possibility of repayment had had their debts either read-

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justed or refinanced. Although the activities of the FSA debt adjustment committee and the loans of various other New Deal agencies had played a large role in restoring a reasonable farm debt situation, the FCA, with its local Production Credit Associations and Federal Farm Loan Associations, should receive a majority of the credit. The Dawson County Farm Loan Association, formed in 1919 under credit legislation passed during the Administration of Woodrow Wilson, had, by 1937, made 322 loans in the county, totaling over two million dollars. Most of these loans had been made since 1935 under the revitalized system of farm credit provided by the New Deal. This association provided the farmer with the necessary long-range capital, not only for continued operation in hard times, but also for expansion in machinery and land. The most important contribution of the FCA was, however, its significant reduction of the prospect of farm foreclosure. In 1937, farm foreclosures numbered less than half the totals of 1933 and 1934, and further decline seemed likely.


24In June, 1937, the local association held over $500,000 in emergency Government loans alone. The Lexington Clipper, June 22, 1937, p. 1.

25There were eighteen farm foreclosures in 1937. It should be noted that due to the recession there was a slight rise in foreclosures in 1938, to 25, but in 1939, the number again declined to 19. Sale Docket of Dawson County, Nebraska, III, 445-642; IV, 1-82.
The continued activity of the FWA in the field of irrigation also benefited the farmer. The Sutherland and Tri-County projects continued to be extremely popular in the county, especially when farmers could see the tangible benefits of irrigation. In 1937, even after three years of severe drought had reduced the water table, farmers in the valley produced an extremely good corn crop, due primarily to irrigation.\textsuperscript{26} The popularity which irrigation achieved could be seen in the more than 250 new wells which were installed during 1937 and 1938.\textsuperscript{27} In 1938, over 3,500 farmers joined to form the Dawson County Pump Irrigation District in order to facilitate the purchase of irrigation pumps from the FWA.\textsuperscript{28} Farmers who felt that ditch irrigation was more suited to their needs were gratified when the state director of the FWA predicted that by the end of 1939, FWA projects would be irrigating 220,000 acres of farmland in Nebraska.\textsuperscript{29}

Early in 1937, the Dawson County Public Power District announced plans which were eventually to provide the farmer with a far better life. Through an REA loan, the district

\textsuperscript{26} Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1937," p. 9.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 8.

\textsuperscript{28} The new district hoped to get a PWA grant for forty-five per cent and a loan for the remainder of the money necessary to buy irrigation pumps for all of the members. The Lexington Clipper, September 22, 1938, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{29} The Gothenburg Times, September 1, 1938, Sect. 1, p. 1.
planned to construct an extensive system of rural electrical lines which would "provide the benefits of electric service without the necessity of the farmer making an investment for line construction." By the end of 1938, the district had signed up 721 customers and had received an REA loan of $318,000 for construction of 273 miles of line.

New Deal agencies such as the WPA and PWA also continued to contribute to the economies of the towns of Dawson County. The cutback in Federal spending for relief and public works, which President Roosevelt ordered in June, 1937, received no note in the county newspapers, and while only one major public works project was inaugurated in the county between the President's cutback and the end of the year, most projects which were already underway were continued. At that time WPA projects included the extension and repair of the sanitary sewer system and water mains, the construction of a new seven-acre park, the improvement of the county fair grounds, and a soon-to-be initiated recreation program. PWA projects within the county were, however,

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32. The Lexington Clipper, February 17, 1938, p. 2.
more limited than those of the WPA. From early 1937 to December, 1938, no new FWA projects or grants were announced.

The President's cutback on public works, and his eventual return to that program in April, 1938, apparently had little adverse effect on Dawson County. Although few new projects were started after June, 1937, the projects already underway served to keep the relatively few unemployed in the county occupied. In commenting on the WPA projects in the county, the editor of The Lexington Clipper noted that the projects had "lifted the charity load from the taxpayers."

The effect which the various New Deal agencies had on political attitudes in the county is hard to determine. While it would appear that numerous loans, grants and subsidies of the farm-oriented agencies would have endeared the New Deal to farmers and local businessmen, New Deal popularity declined in 1937-1938. Yet this does not necessarily indicate that the voters of Dawson County disapproved of the AAA, FSA, FCA, or any other of the various New Deal agencies. In fact, the county newspapers showed little

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33 While it would be difficult to determine the total number of FWA grants applied for in 1937 and 1938, two known applications were denied—an application for a loan-grant combination to construct a sewage disposal plant in Lexington, and a similar request for funds to purchase irrigation pumps by the county Pump Irrigation District. Ibid., September 29, 1938, p. 4; Personal Interview by author with William Stewart, prominent local lawyer and Republican leader, Lexington, Nebraska, August 16, 1966.

34 The Lexington Clipper, February 17, 1938, p. 2.
inclination to criticize any individual agency. While some mild criticism of the WPA and FSA was existent, it probably only represented the feelings of the county's more prosperous element who resented tax increases and believed that too much tax money was being spent on unworthy recipients. County farmers probably resented the amounts of money being channeled into the great cities. The reaction of farmers in Ohio was noted by Robert and Helen Lynd in *Middletown in Transition*:

> The farmers of the county, with their strong tradition of fending for themselves and their habit of seeing in taxes the major dragon in the path of the farmer, could make no sense of the way public tax funds were being squandered to carry the unthrifty city population.  

In 1937-1938, the *Omaha World Herald*, a major opinion-forming media in the county, began to take a very anti-WPA stand. Throughout the period, the paper hammered at Government "boondoggles," commenting that "there is a strong 'gimme' influence at work in American politics today and it is not healthy." In May, 1938, the claim was made that WPA workers were being encouraged to vote for New Deal candidates.


37 Ibid., May 19, 1938, p. 10.
The most popular agencies were those which were aimed at long-range goals and were somewhat indirect in nature. Through agencies such as the FCA and PWA, Washington dealt less directly with the individual, and consequently, these agencies fit more closely within the traditional concept of the role of the Federal Government. The very indirectness of these agencies, however, meant that they would be less likely to demonstrate to their recipients the contribution which the New Deal was making. Agencies such as the WPA and FSA, in which the individual received his paycheck directly from the Government, caused some concern. By the Fall of 1938, the majority of Dawson County citizens appeared to have arrived at some consensus on the mode of government used by the New Deal. Agencies which provided funds for tangible, necessary, long-range services, and which worked through a local district or committee, were generally favored. Agencies which provided direct funds for relief work were generally questioned. Their view toward the AAA, however, violated this principle to some degree, but in this instance, economic considerations outweighed political principles.

The Congressional elections in the Fall of 1938 resulted in a national rejection of the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt. While the election results in Dawson County appeared, at first glance, to run counter to the national trend, closer examination revealed a local decline in Roosevelt's popularity. In the only race which involved a
national office, a Democrat won. In this race for the congressional seat from the fifth district, however, the Democratic candidate, Harry B. Coffee, was far from being an ardent New Dealer. Coffee had opposed the Administration on such issues as the court-packing plan, wages and hours proposals, and social security extension, and was to eventually openly oppose Roosevelt's candidacy in 1940. Therefore, his victory could not truly be considered a victory for the Roosevelt forces. The gubernatorial race was complicated by the fact that it contained two Democratic and one Republican candidates. The two Democrats, Governor Roy L. Cochran and ex-Governor Charles W. Bryan, split the local Democratic vote and allowed the Republican, Charles J. Warner, to carry the county. The only actual liberal candidate, Bryan, ran a poor third.

The congressional and gubernatorial races gave very little indication of the general attitudes in the county toward the Administration in Washington. Coffee's political leanings and the Democratic division in the gubernatorial contest blurred the national issues from the scene. A

38U. S., Congressional Record, 75th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1938, LXXI, Part 2, 1835; The Lexington Clipper, November 7, 1940, p. 1; Personal Interview by author with retired Nebraska Representative, Harry B. Coffee, Omaha, Nebraska, March 8, 1967.

39The county totals in the gubernatorial race were: Warner—2,901; Cochran—2,662; and Bryan—1,182. Bryan was running by petition. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 210.
clearer picture emerged, however, from the balloting for lesser state offices. A complete reversal of the 1936 results was brought about by Republican victories in four out of the five state contests. This dramatic shift and the strength which the state Republicans evidenced in virtually every precinct, demonstrated the resurgence of the Republican Party in Dawson County.  

The Republican gains in the 1938 elections reflected, to a considerable degree, a repudiation of Roosevelt, personally. The President brought much of the new criticism upon himself by making three political blunders in 1937 and 1938, which cost him support in the Great Plains. His attempt to pack the Supreme Court offended many conservatives who felt that the Court represented the last fortress of constitutional government. His attempt to purge the Democratic Party of opponents of New Deal liberalism in the 1938 primary elections also caused concern among traditional states' righters, who felt that Roosevelt was interfering in an area where he had no place.

40 Only three of the county's twenty-two precincts showed any consistency in voting for Democratic candidates for the lesser state offices—German, Fairview, and Ringgold. Each of these had given Roosevelt very strong support in 1932 and 1936. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 211-14.

41 Lloyd Kain, Albert Kjar, and others interviewed considered the court-packing plan a major factor in turning the county against the President.

42 In May, 1938, the Omaha World Herald editorially criticized an "elimination committee" in Washington, made up of Thomas Corcoran, Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, James...
While the court-packing plan and purge were contributing factors, the decisive factor in bringing an eclipse to Roosevelt's popularity in Dawson County was the recession. Much of Roosevelt's main street support in 1936 had been based on the assumption that the New Deal had brought the country out of its worst depression. The economic success of the Roosevelt Administration meant that many of its programs, though they violated long-held traditions, would be accepted. When the 1937 recession hit the country with its business stagnation and increased unemployment, this argument was smashed. Many, who had always feared New Deal liberalism but had supported it because of the improving economic conditions, now changed allegiance.

The recession also weakened Roosevelt's farm support in the county. The farmers did not oppose the AAA subsidies; they opposed the drastically low farm prices. They even the reduced participation in the 1938 farm program did not indicate any basic ideological opposition to the principles of the New Deal farm legislation, for when the program proved

Roosevelt, and David Miles, formed for the purpose of eliminating New Deal opponents. The paper claimed that the committee was using both public money and public jobs to defeat Iowa's Democratic Senator Guy Gillette, and remarked that the voters would not stand for this kind of thing for long. While President Roosevelt was not mentioned personally, the fact that all members of the committee were high-ranking New Dealers implied his involvement in the action. The Morning World Herald: Omaha, May 31, 1938, p. 7.

successful in 1938, farmer sign-ups for the 1939 program again reached their 1935-1938 levels. This high level of participation at the end of the decade tends to show that while farmers may have opposed the general principles of an active, positive government embodied in the New Deal, and opposed liberal programs aimed at aiding other economic groups, they favored a positive program which aided agriculture.

In the Autumn of 1938 the voters of Dawson County were not voting against specific New Deal agencies so much as they were voting against Roosevelt and the Roosevelt Recession. The attitudes thus formulated required only the clear-cut test later provided by the 1940 elections to become plainly evident.

\[44\] Infra., p. 113.

CHAPTER VI

THE WILLKIE LANDSLIDE

During 1939 and 1940, in the face of constantly increasing Federal expenditures, the New Deal continued to lose friends in Dawson County. The trend which was at first barely evident in the Fall of 1934, slightly clearer in 1936 and 1938, was by 1940 completely discernible to even the casual observer. The 1940 election resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Republican Party in Dawson County. To understand this apparently total rejection of the New Deal requires a detailed examination of the attitudes and conditions existent in the county at the end of the decade.

First of all, the return of prosperity was very slow in coming. The Roosevelt Recession had destroyed much of the faith which many held that the New Deal could bring the return of pre-war prosperity. During 1939 and 1940, although conditions gradually seemed to improve, the sluggishness of the economy prevented any wholesale return to the previous faith. In 1939, a survey conducted by the local county agent’s office revealed that fifty-five percent of the county’s families earned less than one thousand
dollars per year. The persistent problem of relative poverty for such a high percentage of the local population was probably due to two factors—low farm production and low farm prices—resulting in both adversity on the farm and economic stagnation in the towns. Major crop and livestock prices remained low during 1939 and 1940 with only wheat prices showing some tendency to rise above the recession levels. Few county farmers, however, could take advantage of the wheat prices, owing to extensive wheat failures caused by the continued drought. There was not, however, as much suffering on the farms as had been the case in previous years, due both to the activities of the FSA and AAA, and to the fact that by the end of the decade nearly all of the very marginal farmers had left the land.

Towards the end of the decade, the AAA significantly increased its contribution to the county's economy, and

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1 This survey reached families comprising nearly one-tenth of the county's population. A majority of those surveyed lived on farms, but the study did show nearly equal income division between town and farm families. James C. Adams (Dawson County Agent), "Annual Report of Cooperating Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Dawson County, State of Nebraska, 1939," p. 45.


thereby brought some relief to the county's farmers. The lucrative inducements offered by the 1938 adjustment act had proven during the year that participating in the farm program was sound business. Therefore, county farmers gave up their policy of waiting and watching and signed up for the 1939 program. Participation jumped from forty-five per cent in 1938 to seventy-eight per cent in 1939, and eighty per cent in 1940. By participating, farmers were eligible for corn and wheat parity payments and loans, wheat insurance, sugar beet subsidies, and payments for planting soil-conserving crops. In 1939 the total received by county farmers under all AAA programs amounted to approximately $760,000 or nearly $275 per farm. While the 1940 total declined sharply to $565,000, that amount still represented a very significant contribution to the county's economy.

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5. The Gothenburg Times, May 11, 1939, Sect. 1, p. 1; May 9, 1940, Sect. 1, p. 1.

6. It should be noted that the 1939 total represents the amount received from all AAA programs. The $199,000 paid for participation in the 1938 program included only $11,000 more than the amount received from conservation payments. Other portions of the 1938 program were not yet fully underway, and consequently even those farmers who complied with the program were unable to take full advantage of it. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1939," p. 37; The Gothenburg Times, March 30, 1939, Sect. 1, p. 1; Nebraska Legislative Council, Nebraska Blue Book, 1940 (Lincoln, Nebraska: n.p., 1940), p. 393.

7. The decline of AAA payments in 1940 included all parts of the program except those sections dealing with wheat. The decline resulted from a decrease in subsidies and loans due to a slight rise in farm prices. Personal Interview by author with James C. Adams, retired County Agent, Brady, Nebraska, August 24, 1966; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1940," p. 33.
One of the most popular aspects of the new farm program was wheat insurance. In years of high crop failures, farmers could still receive up to seventy-five per cent of their average harvests by investing only a minimal amount of money. In 1938, only seventy-eight wheat growers applied for insurance on their 1939 crops, but in 1940, 446 policy applications were filed.8

The FSA also continued to make significant contributions to the welfare of the county's more unfortunate farmers. By 1940, that agency had loans with one out of every eight farmers in the county and had given subsistence grants to well over 300 farm families. The grants were intended to enable these families to remain on the farm and return to self-sufficiency. In this they were successful, for by January, 1940, only fourteen families were receiving FSA grants—a reduction of 124 from the same month in 1938.9 The FSA Tenant Purchase Loans were also a big success in encouraging the tenant to look toward the ownership of his own farm. By the end of the decade, the FSA had completed sixteen tenant purchase loans totaling nearly $160,000.10

The local Federal Farm Loan Association complemented the FSA attempt to reduce farm tenancy in Dawson County. At

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8 The 1940 applications represented virtually all major wheat growers in the county. The Lexington Clipper, October 12, 1939, p. 2; March 13, 1941, p. 8.
10 Ibid., December 26, 1940, p. 1.
the end of the decade, the local representative of the FCA still had 280 Land Bank Loans and 194 Commissioner Loans on the books totaling over $1,800,000. The Federal Government, however, added restrictions in 1939 and 1940 which limited the Association's ability to make further loans. The county agent noted that while the local association had served a very definite purpose in the county, if farm tenancy is to show a decrease in the county, it will only be when associations such as the farm loan association can make loans to worthy borrowers.

The REA also worked to better the lot of the farmer. In January, 1940, construction was begun on the rural power lines which were to bring electricity to the local farms, and by the end of that year, 467 farm homes and 86 irrigation wells were receiving electric power. The local REA was also granted a $10,000 loan which was to be relicoaned to members for the installation of wiring and plumbing, in addition to the $427,000 granted for the installation of the power lines.

The total impact of all the aspects of the New Deal farm program on the citizens of Dawson County would be difficult to measure in terms of dollars and cents. It

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11Ibid., March 6, 1941, p. 6.


14The Lexington Clipper, September 28, 1939, p. 1; November 9, 1939, p. 1.
could truly be said that "more was done for the farmer under the New Deal than ever attempted before by Federal action."\textsuperscript{15} The Federal Government had injected from $200,000 to $750,000 per year into the county since 1933 under the various AAA programs through a multitude of subsidies, inducements, and loans. Through the RA and its offspring, the FSA, Washington added another $557,000 in various types of loans and $63,000 in grants.\textsuperscript{16} The various agencies of the FCA also contributed well over $3,000,000 in loans to the county's economy.\textsuperscript{17} The REA and PWA also made contributions which, though less direct in terms of money, greatly benefited the farmers of the county. Rural electrification brought not only added convenience to farm living, but also provided the means for utilizing more advanced and efficient machinery on the farm. PWA irrigation would also eventually

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item These totals were arrived at from figures given in the "County Agent's Reports, 1935-1940" and in The Gothenburg Times, February 29, 1940, Sect. 2, p. 6.
\item This total was arrived at by comparing the totals listed in The Gothenburg Times with an estimate given by the director of the local land bank association. An exact figure was made difficult to attain by the combining of three county land banks in 1937, which caused a merging of the individual county figures. The estimate may be somewhat low, since by September, 1935, FCA loans already totaled $1,895,900. If the rate of borrowing were to have continued at that pace, the 1940 total would have been close to $4,000,000. The Gothenburg Times, September 23, 1936, Sect. 1, p. 1; Personal Interview by author with Carl Yeutter, retired director of the local Federal Land Bank Association, Lexington, Nebraska, August 30, 1966.
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insure increased harvests in the area and open possibilities for the introduction of new and different crops.

The Depression, the drought, and the New Deal farm program all brought numerous adjustments within the county during the 1930's. Low farm prices and reduced production forced many from the land who were either inefficient or were farming land which could not support a family. It should be noted, however, that New Deal subsidies, loans, and grants to farmers kept many on the land who might never have been able to survive the hard times alone. In so doing, the New Deal may have retarded natural adjustments in farm population and organization, for by providing just enough money to hang on, many farmers were encouraged to stay on the land who might have been better off in other occupations in the cities. Yet in spite of Washington's encouragement to stay on the farm, significant adjustments in the county's population did occur during the 1930's, as 13.9 per cent of the farm population moved to town.\(^1\)

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19 With the exception of Coyote, Gozad, and Lexington, all precincts in the county declined in population in the 1930's. The decline in rural precincts amounted to a loss of 1,280 persons. Lexington and Gozad precincts gained exactly the same number of new residents as the rural precincts lost, causing a 22.3 per cent increase in their populations. The rural precincts which declined most severely in population were those which had either a small village or a high percentage of farmers on marginal lands. U. S., Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Population, III, Part 2, 112; Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population, II, Part 4, 570.
Economic conditions and the farm program brought further adjustments in livestock and crop production. The number of hogs in the county seriously declined from an average of 80,000 in the early 1930's to 30,000 by 1939. Sheep production grew from a rather unimportant position early in the decade to one of great significance by 1940 when Dawson County became Nebraska's greatest sheep producer. AAA subsidies and FSA loans also brought greater diversity in the production of farm crops, as farmers tended to plant less corn and more sorghums and legumes. AAA subsidies for sugar beets and the extension of irrigation caused more and more farmers to turn to that

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20 The decline in the hog population of the county could be attributed both to the hog reduction campaign of the first AAA and the shortage of grain caused by the drought. Cattle feeders could better absorb the higher grain prices caused by the shortage and consequently, the number of cattle remained relatively stable. The sharpest decline in the swine population occurred in 1934-1935 when the number of hogs was reduced from 45,151 to 16,722. The number of cattle declined in the same two year span from 53,100 to 42,708. The Lexington Clipper, February 23, 1939, p. 10; The Cozad Local, December 30, 1938, p. 1; Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1934, p. 70; 1935, p. 70.

21 The increase in the sheep population occurred almost entirely in 1940, and was apparently the result of the establishment of an enormous sheep-feeding operation near Cozad. The Cozad Local, September 13, 1940, p. 1.

22 Between 1929 and 1939 county farmers reduced their corn acreage by sixteen per cent while increasing their sorghum acreage by eight per cent and their alfalfa acreage by four per cent. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1940," p. 52a. (The "a" denotes a separately paged insert within the agent's report.)
crop. The success of alfalfa during the decade made farmers look on that crop as a form of drought insurance, and the increased production brought the establishment of a new alfalfa dehydrating industry within the county. Conservation aspects of the New Deal farm program also encouraged more judicious use of farm land and promoted better overall farming practices.

As successful as the New Deal agricultural program may have been in bringing about a better life on the farm, the Roosevelt Administration failed to achieve several of its specific goals. FSA and FCA loans were not successful in relieving the problem of farm tenancy during the 1930's. Although the actual number of farm tenants declined during the decade, the percentage of farm tenancy increased from 52.7 per cent in 1930, to 54.7 per cent in 1940. Farm prices also remained low during the Thirties. Although a combination


24 Edmund Douglas Hinkle, "Changing Patterns of Population Distribution in Nebraska, 1930-1960" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Geography, University of Nebraska, 1963), p. 72. Although Hinkle attributes much of the local town population growth in the 1930's to the new industry, alfalfa dehydrating probably did not serve as a major source of income or employment for the county until World War II. Personal Interview by author with Wilbur M. Simmons, local farmer and feed salesman, Lexington, Nebraska, March 2, 1967.


of drought and AAA scarcity policies brought some rise in prices in 1936 and 1937, the recession of the last years of the decade demonstrated that the farm economy would never again be completely independent in times of peace and normal production.\(^\text{27}\)

To gauge the total impact of the agricultural policy of the New Deal on the thinking of the farmers of Dawson County would be as difficult a task as estimating the total expenditures of New Deal agencies in the county. Changes in attitude cannot be measured in terms of dollars and cents, or in terms of the success or failure of a specific program, or even in terms of changes in voting trends. It is, however, apparent that some change in attitude did occur with regard to farm attitudes toward the Federal Government. While the farmer probably began to change his ideas about the role of the Government during the 1920's, his thoughts were not translated into action until 1933. During the 1930's the farmer gradually formed his opinions about the new role of the Government in relation to agriculture into a firm, though rather self-contradictory, political philosophy. At first the farmer supported nearly all phases of New Deal positivism. Toward the end of the decade, however, he became somewhat

\(^{27}\)Corn and hog prices best demonstrate the stagnant farm price situation. Corn, which had reached a high of $1.27 per bushel in May, 1937, fell to a low of 35\(\$\) in 1938 and remained below 65\(\$\) through the end of the decade. Hogs, which had sold for as high as $11.15 per hundredweight in August, 1937, dropped steadily to a low of $4.65 in February of 1940. Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, 1937, p. 3; 1938, p. 3; 1939-1940, p. 11.
more suspicious and skeptical of Government innovation. He supported the positive aspects of the New Deal farm program, but not as a positive program, only as a program benefiting agriculture. At no time during the decade did the farm program suffer from severe criticism in the county papers; indeed, newspaper comment was almost universally favorable. The only minor exception to the universal acceptance was the farm relief program of the RA and RSA, and criticism of these agencies was mild and infrequent. The most politically radical of the New Deal projects, rural electrification and public-controlled irrigation, received the warmest support, thereby amply demonstrating that the farmer's conservatism did not preclude his supporting positive Federal programs aimed at agriculture. The Populist Movement of the 1890's and the McNary-Haugen Movement of the 1920's had suggested that the farmer would approve of an active farm program. The New Deal proved this to be true. In 1940, County Agent Adams observed that

Looking back over the past seven years there has been a great deal of change in the thinking of the farm people. They are depending more and more upon the government to solve their problems and to assist financially. They have realized that as individuals they cannot ever hope to live as they have in the

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past and must depend upon a larger and stronger national organization.  

New Deal programs directed toward industrial recovery and unemployment relief also had a significant effect upon the thinking of local citizens. The FWA remained generally popular throughout the decade due to the prospect of vastly extended irrigation facilities through the Sutherland and Tri-County projects and through loans and grants for well irrigation. On July 13, 1939, the first water from the Sutherland project appeared in the county, and from that time forward, Sutherland water, supplemented by water from the over five hundred local wells, greatly increased the productiveness of the county's agriculture. The value of these projects was clearly demonstrated in the first ten months of 1940 when the county received over ten inches less than the average amount of rain. Non-irrigated land suffered heavy damage while the irrigated land in the valley produced good corn and beet crops. The FWA had also contributed over $100,000 to the county's towns in loans and grants for the construction of several public buildings.  

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32 This total is an approximate figure reached through consulting the periodic announcements in county papers of the various FWA grants and loans.
The UFA, though less popular than the FWA among local residents, also produced great changes in Dawson County. In April, 1940, The Lexington Clipper listed the accomplishments of the WFA in the county, noting that they constituted a "gigantic face lifting." The list included the construction of 42 miles of farm-to-market roads; 2 miles of street improvements; 2,940 feet of new or improved sidewalks; 18 new bridges; 87 new or improved culverts; 5 new buildings and the improvement of 8 others; 1 new park and the improvement of 6 others; 1 water pumping station; 3 new wells; 27,339 feet of new or improved water mains; 10,924 feet of new or improved sewer lines; and the cataloguing of 1,200 library volumes. The variety and scope of these projects indicated that the WFA did produce great changes in the county. Not only were many facilities created and improved, but also the money expended on these projects must have contributed significantly to the county's economy. Even more important was the fact that many individuals were provided with the means to survive the hard times. The Gothenburg Times noted that

the City of Gothenburg, as well as Dawson County, realizes that many people, especially the heads of families, need outside assistance in the struggle to maintain the simplest living. The WPA has made it possible for a number of needy people to obtain employment and honorably

\[33\] The Lexington Clipper, April 25, 1940, p. 5.

\[34\] Ibid.
support themselves and their loved ones by constructive labor.  

While the contributions of the WPA, FWA and the increased AAA subsidies undoubtedly brought some economic improvement, the return of prosperity in the cities did not occur until the impetus of war was felt in the Midwest in 1941. Public works continued, but unemployment also remained. In 1940, the county's unemployment rate of eight per cent was probably as high as at any time during the Depression, with the exception of 1932-33. Added to the 3.2 per cent engaged in relief work, the unemployment rate clearly demonstrated that prosperity had not yet returned. Business failures also caused problems in the towns, as was indicated by The Lexington Clipper's reference to empty buildings on main street.


36 U. S., Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: Population, II, Part 4, 635. It should be noted that since agricultural labor and labor in the new dehydrating industry was seasonal, census figures on unemployment could vary considerably depending on the season in which the figures were collected.

37 Unemployment in the towns was more prevalent than the county average. Of Lexington's total 1940 work force, 8.4 per cent were unemployed and 7 per cent were on relief work. Ibid., II, Part 4, 635, 698.

The nagging economic problems of the towns clearly demonstrated their dependence upon farm prosperity. While AAA payments undoubtedly prevented conditions from becoming serious, they could not truly replace the income brought by prosperous farmers. AAA subsidies kept the farmer buying necessities, but the continued low farm prices prevented him from purchasing luxuries. The index of farm purchasing power in 1939 and 1940, though well above the level of the early 1930's, remained below the 1935-1937 levels, and was not to reach respectable levels until 1941. Until higher farm prices returned, Government payments, whether by the AAA or through public employment, could not bring prosperity to Dawson County.

The failure of the New Deal to bring an end to the recession brought a gradual increase in newspaper criticism of the Roosevelt Administration. As at prior times in the 1930's, the criticism was not directed at specific agencies, but followed instead the more general lines of denouncing the total effect of New Deal policies. The papers criticized increased public spending as being no way to get the


40 Between 1936 and 1940, The Lexington Clipper had gradually joined The Cozad Local in denouncing the Roosevelt Administration. The Gothenburg Times remained outwardly neutral throughout the decade, but its general approval of the New Deal farm policy and public works indicated that the paper was far more Democratic than the Lexington or Cozad papers.
country out of the recession. Spending, it was argued, would only lead to higher taxes and increased public debt, which in turn would cause more economic difficulties. The Lexington Clipper stated that the country was moving toward financial ruin "not only because of debts and deficits themselves but because there has been no serious inclination to chart a course that will ultimately bring government spending under control." New Deal experimentation also received censure in the papers. The Cozad Local cited thirty-nine national emergencies which the Administration had claimed in the last six years of the decade, each one accompanied by reform proposals, most of which "were simply springboards for some new fangled experimenting or planning." The war in Europe became the source of considerable comment in the papers from its beginning through 1940. While most statements advocated non-intervention and evidenced little direct criticism of the Administration, during the political campaign prior to the 1940 election, the editor of The Lexington Clipper tied the national security issue to the anti-Roosevelt arguments. In August, 1940, he drew a parallel between the fall of France and conditions in the United States:

France carried "social reform" to the point of national decay. Politically we have been following a parallel path. We too have been chasing rainbows.

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41 The Lexington Clipper, September 5, 1940, p. 4.
42 The Cozad Local, April 7, 1939, p. 4.
of unreasoned reform surrounded by burgeoning bureaucracy, skyrocketing debt, and crumbling initiative.\textsuperscript{43}

Later in the same month he criticized the unwillingness of the government to sacrifice relief programs to provide for national defense. In so doing he probably summarized the whole main street argument against the New Deal.

The professional politicians talk much of sacrifice, in noble words. But it is a rare politician who is willing to sacrifice one thin dime of patronage that might cost a vote to support a principle. Money still goes out for farm relief schemes doomed to failure—for unnecessary tax-built and tax-subsidized government electric plants, for government credit schemes of all kinds, and for a thousand and one purposes which are in no way a true function of government,\textsuperscript{44} but which are prolific sources of votes and power.

The 1940 campaign evoked a great deal of interest in Dawson County, as Wendell Willkie seemed to capture the imagination of nearly all who for one reason or another opposed Roosevelt. Although Willkie had been a relatively unknown figure prior to 1940 and had represented interests which were hardly in line with those of the county, his campaign received very favorable treatment in the county papers. The reason for his favorable reception stemmed from two sources. First of all, many local citizens were looking for some alternative to Franklin Roosevelt. Secondly, Willkie seemed to advocate many of the changes which they felt were necessary to restore the Federal Government to its

\textsuperscript{43} The Lexington Clipper, August 1, 1940, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., August 15, 1940, p. 6.
rightful posture in American society. Willkie did not advocate the elimination of the New Deal programs or reforms which the county had liked, nor did he make any specific proposals which would have run counter to the interests of an agriculturally-oriented area. His very general campaign aimed at the elimination of bureaucracy, high taxes, government deficits, and the establishment of sound business practices in government appealed to the voters of the county. The general personal attributes which Willkie demonstrated throughout the campaign also brought him some support.

Mr. Willkie . . . gave the appearance of a homely, unaffected citizen, deeply concerned for his country's welfare but without snap solutions for social problems, tolerant of others, a staunch defender of civil rights, willing to give credit where credit is due, politically ambitious but only in the sense that every American would like to be President, and above all a successful businessman and one with a sense of humor.  

The favorable treatment which Willkie's campaign received stood in contrast to the treatment afforded Roosevelt, whose campaign was largely ignored by the county papers. Aside from the general criticisms leveled at spending, taxes, and the debt, little reference was made to Roosevelt personally. One issue appeared to gain growing importance after the Democratic convention in July—the third term. While no direct charges were made that a third term for Roosevelt would bring any drastic change in the American system of government, subtle comments, such as the inclusion

of the text of Jefferson's refusal to accept the third term, were frequently inserted in the papers. The third term, though it did not play a prominent role in the anti-New Deal campaign waged by the Cozad and Lexington papers, was probably a very important factor in swinging the county to Willkie. A third term for Roosevelt would have been a serious break with tradition, and the voters of Dawson County were very tradition-minded in 1940. Even more important was the growing fear that President Roosevelt had become power hungry, and the third term appeared to be clear evidence that the President was attempting to establish a dictatorship. Roosevelt's court-packing plan in 1937 and his attempt to purge the Democratic Party in the 1938 primaries also had contributed to this growing distrust, but the third term seemed to be the deciding factor in convincing the local voters that FDR no longer had their best interests at heart.

Another factor which probably contributed indirectly to the growing distrust of the President was the source of his political support. It was apparent by 1940 that the Democrats had made a concerted effort to capture the voting power of the urban masses through legislation benefiting

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46 The Lexington Clipper, August 8, 1940, p. 6.  
47 Lloyd Kain, Albert Kjar, Donald Montgomery, Raymond Block and others cited the third term issue as one of the most important in bringing the county back to the Republican Party in 1940.
organized labor and relief workers. If the Roosevelt Administration allowed these groups, whose interests were radically different from those of the farmer and local businessman, to dominate its legislative program, then the farmer would have to look elsewhere for political expression. Therefore, Roosevelt's urban support brought out the native rural distrust of the teeming cities and caused it to be directed at the Democratic Party.

By November, 1940, the issues in the campaign had become fairly clear to the people of Dawson County. Government spending, the national debt, high taxes, New Deal experimentation, the decline of states' rights, the growth of bureaucracy, and governmental regimentation had all received attention in the county papers. Distrust of President Roosevelt, precipitated by his decision to run for a third term, had also become a prominent factor in the thinking of the county's citizens. Foreign policy had also become an issue late in the campaign. While through the early portions of the campaign there was little apparent difference between the candidates' attitudes on foreign affairs, Willkie's appeal to the isolationist vote, late in the campaign, probably brought him some support in the country. In contrast to the obviously pro-British attitude of President Roosevelt, Willkie's statements probably had considerable appeal for the over 1,500 first generation German-Americans in the
county. The German-American vote, however, might have been canceled by the votes of people who feared switching presidents at a time when the Allied war effort in Europe had apparently collapsed.

The one issue which was probably dominant in the campaign, however, remained somewhat in the background. The Roosevelt Recession was not frequently mentioned during the campaign, yet it undoubtedly permeated the thoughts of the voters of Dawson County. Criticisms of spending, debts, taxes, experimentation, bureaucracy, and professors in government, all appeared far more viable in the light of the failure of the Roosevelt Administration to bring the return of real prosperity. The reason that the recession did not play a more overt role in the campaign was that economic conditions were not severe in comparison to the early 1930's. Yet it could not be contended that the prosperity promised by the New Dealers had actually arrived. Farm prices were still low and the AAA payments could not replace the kind of income which dollar corn could bring. Local businessmen, who had benefited little by direct action from the New Deal, were also vitally interested in farm prices because of their dependence upon farm business. To both the farmer and the businessman the New Deal had failed to

bring the desired results, and, consequently, a political change was in order. 49

The outcome of the 1940 election in Dawson County was never in doubt, but few people could have anticipated the magnitude of Willkie’s victory. Willkie carried the county by nearly a two to one majority—5,445 to 2,803. His sixty-six per cent of the total vote was seven per cent higher than Roosevelt’s had been in 1932, when the country was wallowing in the depths of a depression, and thirteen per cent higher than Roosevelt could muster after four years of providing relief. 50 Willkie’s victory meant doom for the few remaining Democrats who held state offices. With only one exception, the voters of Dawson County gave strong majorities to Republican candidates, and that exception was Representative Harry Coffee who had openly opposed Roosevelt’s third term bid. 51 Nebraska followed a similar pattern as only two Democrats now represented the state in either national or major state offices. 52

49 For a complete discussion of the issues involved in the 1940 campaign, see Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Election (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, [1944]).

50 Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 147, 192, 230.

51 Ibid., II, 231-36; The Lexington Clipper, November 7, 1940, p. 1.

52 In addition to Coffee, who was elected by the Fifth District, the Nebraska Second District elected a Democratic Representative. Nebraska Blue Book, 1940, pp. 409-13.
An evaluation of the precinct results revealed that the Willkie trend was consistent throughout the county. The Republican candidate's precinct majorities varied from fifty-five per cent to eighty-seven per cent, and in seventeen of the county's twenty-two precincts, he received over sixty per cent of the vote. Roosevelt was unable to garner a majority in any of the precincts. Even the county's western wheat-producing precincts, where his strength had been greatest in 1936, rejected him. The strength of the Willkie landslide in the county was further evidenced by the fact that there was virtually no variation between town and rural voting and only slight variations in the voting of different crop groups in the county.\footnote{\textit{Dawson County Abstract of Votes}, II, 230.}

While the consistency and magnitude of the Willkie victory were by far the most important aspects of the 1940 election, some consideration should be given to what slight variations there were in voting. Four of the five precincts which gave Willkie less than sixty per cent of the vote were western wheat producers. These four precincts had given Roosevelt strong support in both 1932 and 1936.\footnote{The precincts were Antelope, Fairview, Gillan and Farnam. \textit{Ibid.}} Yet two precincts in the same economic area of the county, which had also previously supported Roosevelt, were among the strongest Willkie precincts in 1940. A possible reason for the local
difference may have been that the two precincts in question had large numbers of German-American voters, who would have opposed Roosevelt's pro-British posture. The only other precinct which seemed to vary from the general trend was Kennebec precinct, where evidently the heavy Roman Catholic population modified the Willkie victory. Surrounded by strong Willkie precincts, Kennebec still gave Roosevelt nearly forty-four per cent of the vote.

The size of the Willkie landslide in Dawson County demonstrated what had become increasingly apparent since 1938. The county was fearful of Roosevelt, disillusioned with the New Deal, and tired of experimenting. Even though the county might approve of many of the New Deal projects and agencies, these could not outweigh the growth of conservative opposition to the President, particularly in view of the fact that most of the county recognized that Willkie had little intention of eliminating the more successful and popular New Deal programs. While no one could accurately judge the exact elements which brought the Willkie landslide, two factors appeared to have been decisive. The

55The two precincts were German and Holmes. German gave Willkie seventy-five per cent of the vote, and Holmes gave the Republican an eighty-seven per cent majority. Ibid. Samuel Lubell claimed that in 1940 sufficient numbers of German-American isolationists supported Willkie to swing Nebraska back to the Republican Party. Samuel Lubell, The Future of American Politics (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958), p. 140.

56Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 230.
Roosevelt Recession dictated that Willkie would win in 1940, but the unnatural fear with which the voters viewed Roosevelt turned Willkie's victory into a rout.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The election of 1940 in Dawson County represented the culmination of a conservative reaction to the New Deal which began early in 1934. From that year through the end of the decade, opposition to the Roosevelt Administration grew continually in the county. At first, the anti-Roosevelt sentiment evolved slowly, but in the closing years of the decade it seemed to snowball, finally culminating in the almost total rejection of the New Deal in 1940. Why did Dawson County reject the New Deal? The answers are varied and complex.

First of all, it is important to note that the New Deal never received an overwhelming local endorsement at the polls. Roosevelt's large majority in 1932 came not as a result of any widespread approval of his proposed programs, but came instead from a general protest against Hoover and the Depression. Undeniably in the Autumn of 1933, under the influence of the NRA campaign and the obvious vigor of the new Administration, the county was united behind the President. Yet by the end of 1934, the effects of the NRA campaign had worn off, and the continuation of economic difficulties demonstrated to the people that the New Deal had no quick remedies. Consequently, Republican candidates
made significant gains in the county in 1934. Through 1935 and 1936, in the face of growing Federal expenditures and improving economic conditions, the New Deal continued to lose local support, and although Roosevelt carried the county in 1936, his popular majority was cut by over one thousand votes. When the 1937 recession destroyed the remaining local faith in New Deal economic policies, the Roosevelt Administration could no longer command the support of a majority of the voters in the county. The growth of conservative sentiment and distrust of Roosevelt continued through the end of the decade so that by 1940, the New Deal could find few supporters in Dawson County.

The return to Republicanism, however, did not mean that local voters rejected all aspects of the New Deal. Washington's increased interest in the welfare of the farmer found much favor in the county. Although cattlemen and alfalfa growers evidenced some reluctance to support the New Deal farm program, the AAA was generally well-received. The greatly expanded farm credit facilities were universally popular as were the Government's projects aimed at providing irrigation and electrification for the farms. Even the RA and FSA programs of farm relief, which did evoke some local criticism, were acceptable in times of great need. While urban oriented programs were less popular in the county, with the exception of the NRA, none were subjected to severe criticism until late in the decade. Even then, if the
programs did not directly employ workers or promote slothfulness, they were favorably accepted.

In general then, the county did not disapprove of most New Deal agencies. In fact, those agencies which either benefited agriculture or operated in an indirect manner were usually well-liked. Nor did local citizens dislike the general aims of the New Deal. Everyone wanted prosperity, and few people in the county prior to 1937 felt that the Roosevelt Administration was working toward any objective other than recovery from the Depression. The county did, however, disapprove of the general effects of the New Deal program. Local citizens could see nothing but future problems in the growth of the national debt. They feared the growth of bureaucracy and regimentation by Government agencies and disliked the increases in taxation. Most of all, when the recession of 1937 returned the county to near 1933 conditions, local citizens felt that this was the result of the "new-fangled" economic policies of the Roosevelt Administration.

Other more general factors also contributed to the decline in Roosevelt's popularity. The New Deal concept of an active Federal Government with a positive program came into conflict with the traditional belief in individualistic virtues long held sacred by farmers and small businessmen. Although farmers accepted the AAA payments and approved of Washington's interest in their welfare, they generally felt that increased farm income through higher farm prices was
far superior to Government subsidies. In time of economic stress the conflict between traditional concepts and New Deal payments was largely forgotten, but when better economic conditions returned, farmers could afford the luxury of political philosophy.

The native rural distrust of the cities also caused the loss of some New Deal support in the county. After the 1936 election it became increasingly clear to local voters that the Democratic Party was gradually becoming the party of the urban masses and minority groups. Since the interests of urban groups contrasted sharply with those of the rural businessman and farmer, the rural voter would naturally turn to a party which he hoped would better represent his interests. Therefore, the return of rural areas to the Republican Party represented somewhat of a new alignment. They were not returning to the Republican Party of the Twenties so much as they were turning away from the Democratic Party of the late Thirties.

In conjunction with the growing concern over the New Deal's catering to the urban masses, the county evidenced increasing distrust of President Roosevelt, personally. The court-packing plan and 1938 primary purge caused some of this fear, but Roosevelt's decision to seek a third term was probably the most influential factor. Likewise, it is generally known that the American voter has a strong tendency to reject any administration after a few years, under
the perhaps irrational belief that a change in government is a worthy goal in itself. This natural inclination to replace an administration which had long held power was fully activated by Roosevelt's bid for the third term. By 1940, many persons in the county believed that Roosevelt was power-hungry and was utilizing socialistic measures to build a vast political machine to perpetuate his hold on the country. While fear and distrust are virtually impossible to document, they obviously played a major role in producing the Willkie landslide in 1940. The natural trend toward conservatism would probably have produced a Willkie victory without this fear, but when the fear of Roosevelt was added to this conservative trend, a landslide was inevitable.

Although the Roosevelt Administration was rejected at the polls in the 1940 election, the eight years of New Deal activity had an enormous impact upon Dawson County. Between 1933 and 1941, the Federal Government had contributed large sums of money to prevent local economic hardship and better the lives of local citizens. The farmer was in far better condition in 1940 than he had been in 1933, primarily because the Government had assumed partial responsibility for his security. The local businessman also benefited from Federal expenditures, for the increased revenue in the hands of county citizens expanded local purchasing power.

The impact of the New Deal brought a great change in the thinking of the people of Dawson County. Roosevelt
may not have carried the county in 1940, but few people wanted a complete return to pre-Roosevelt days. Those specific aspects of the Roosevelt program which benefited the county could not be opposed by any politician who expected to gain local popularity, for county citizens only opposed the general theory of government implied in the New Deal and not the specific application of that theory. Therein lies much of the significance of this study. The rise of political conservatism in Dawson County, and, it might be suggested, throughout the high plains, came not as the result of opposition to specific New Deal programs but came instead from a distrust of Roosevelt personally and the New Deal as a theory. By 1940 the pattern was set. Dawson County, Nebraska, and the high plains would continue in their chosen paths of general opposition to Democratic liberalism but would never advocate the repeal of the specific gains of the New Deal.
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A sociological study of the effects of depression upon rural areas.


An extremely detailed study of the first two years of the AAA wheat program.


A study of the development of each power project in the state.


A collection of articles on the attitude of the American people toward the New Deal with an introduction and commentary by Freidel.
A thorough study of the WPA on a national scale, but little discussion of that agency at local levels was included.


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An attempt to explain the 1936 landslide in economic terms. The author claimed that those receiving benefit payments from the government reflected Roosevelt. A rather biased interpretation.


A study of the influences upon voters during an election. The study was conducted during the 1940 campaign in Erie County, Ohio, where a representative control group was chosen for a series of interviews.


The most complete one-volume history of the New Deal.


Of general background value to this study.


A perceptive analysis of group voting in the United States.

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