

MR. FITE, a professor in history in the University of Oklahoma, has received assistance from the Social Science Research Council to begin a study of state aid to distressed western farmers in the late nineteenth century.

Some Farmers' Accounts of **HARDSHIP** on the **FRONTIER**

Edited by GILBERT C. FITE

IN 1870 much of southwestern Minnesota still awaited the settler's plow. It was a raw frontier, full of promise. Before that promise could be realized, however, the settlers were subjected to a series of hardships and setbacks which severely tested their self-reliance and perseverance. Pioneers on every successive frontier experienced privation and suffering, but those who migrated to southwestern Minnesota were confronted with an unusual number of natural reverses and hazards as they sought to establish farms.

Settlers, who had only recently occupied the new country, suffered heavy losses from extensive prairie fires in 1871. Some pioneer farmers lost hay, grain, stables, machinery, livestock, and even their houses. For example, a farmer near Albion in Wright County wrote to Governor Horace Austin on November 7 that a fire had burned four stacks of hay, his stable, a henhouse, a hog house and two hogs, an ox yoke and plow, and all his fencing. Henry A. Castle, who investigated the results of several fires for Governor Austin, reported that in the neighborhood of Morris several families were in dire need. One farmer had lost all his hay, his wagon, plow, and harrow. He was very poor, according to Castle, "with a family of

seven children, a cow, a yoke of oxen and no money."¹

Destruction and loss from hail struck many southwestern Minnesota farmers in the early 1870s. A letter to Governor Austin dated December 4, 1871, said that twenty families in Pope County had lost their crop and were "almost destitute." Hail in the Butternut Valley in Blue Earth County did untold damage to crops on July 7, 1871, and forced numerous desperate settlers in that vicinity to ask for charity.²

The greatest threat to the region's development, however, was the series of grasshopper scourges which hit parts of the area during the years between 1873 and 1877. Describing the western part of Martin County in June, 1874, one correspondent of

¹ George Eagy to Austin, November 7, 1871; Castle to Austin, November 2, 1871, file no. 259, Governor's Collection, in the Minnesota State Archives. All documents cited in this article may be found in this collection. The editor wishes to express his appreciation to Mr. Robert M. Brown and Mr. Fred Thibodeau for their co-operation during his research in the Minnesota State Archives. Some financial assistance for this project was provided by the University of Oklahoma Faculty Research Committee.

² Ole Peterson to Austin, December 4, 1871; affidavits of Hans Madsen and M. O. Strom, December 2, 1871, file no. 259.

the governor declared that it was "entirely stripped of all crops."³ From Lake Shetek came a report that grasshoppers were "very numerous and destructive," and that they had devoured "fully one-half of all the crops in this [Murray] county."⁴ Grasshopper damage was repeated during the next three years. In 1877 some farmers declared that they had not raised a full crop in four years.

Such natural hazards as these brought unusual hardship to thinly settled communities and to farmers who had very little capital or ready cash. Most pioneer settlers spent nearly all their funds to construct buildings and to plant their first crop. If it was damaged or destroyed, they were left destitute and had to depend upon charity or upon expensive credit. One farmer told Governor Austin in 1871 that he had mortgaged 160 acres of land for two hundred dollars on which he was paying twenty per cent interest.⁵

Sparse population on the frontier and the lack of an established tax base contributed to individual hardship. Governor Austin reported to the legislature in January, 1873, that there were only 530, 560 and 1,260 people in Murray, Rock and Nobles counties respectively. Such newly organized counties, with meager population and limited tax resources, were in no position to take full responsibility for their needy citizens. Consequently, there were numerous requests for private charity from outside the stricken area, and a widespread demand for state aid.⁶

During periods of severe hardship, many farmers described their condition in letters

to the governor and other state officers. The official files throughout the 1870s include hundreds of communications from distressed pioneers pleading for help. Many of these letters have been preserved in the Minnesota State Archives. They constitute a source of agricultural history which has been left untapped, not only in Minnesota but elsewhere. Those here presented are only a sampling from the multitude available. They tell of the needs, frustrations, and sufferings of farmers on the Minnesota frontier during a most trying period of settlement.

As accounts of want and destitution in the southwestern counties poured into St. Paul after the fires and hailstorms of 1871, Governor Austin issued a proclamation "calling for aid and setting forth the urgent necessity which existed for immediate and systematic efforts for relief." The response was prompt and generous; cash, clothing, and provisions were donated by Minnesotans and by citizens of Eastern states who heard of the appeal. Austin entrusted the supervision and issuing of these supplies to his private secretary, Andrew R. McGill, and he appointed a number of commissioners to survey local conditions and investigate cases of need.⁷ Despite hard work and good intentions, this hastily improvised machinery for distributing relief frequently lacked efficiency. Some of its shortcomings are revealed in the following pleas for additional help. On Christmas Eve, 1871, a farmer from Green Isle in Sibley County wrote to Governor Austin:

I received a boxe of Clothes between me and James D—— it Contained 1 over coat and a caba [*cape*] 2 pair of toren pants 1 pair of vest old that would fit a boy of 12 year old 2 pair of drauers 2 old quilts 2 comforters for the neck 1 hat 1-1/2 pair of socks 1 pair of inside shirts torn and no womens Clothing whatever we divided them between us without any difficulty whatever but Dear Governer this is poor recompense for what i have lost by the fire when you sent your printed form to have it sworn to by witnesses i did so i had to be taken to hen-

³ William Bird, Jr., to Cushman K. Davis, June 2, 1874, file no. 321.

⁴ Leonard Aldrich to Davis, June 3, 1874, file no. 321.

⁵ Affidavit of Samuel D. Thompson, December 30, 1871, file no. 259.

⁶ Horace Austin, *Annual Message to the Legislature of Minnesota*, 37 (St. Paul, 1873); Walter N. Trenerry, "The Minnesota Legislator and the Grasshopper, 1873-77," in *Minnesota History*, 36:54-61 (June, 1958).

⁷ Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1872, p. 400.

derson in a waggon 20 miles not been able to go with rheumatism and there swore to my Losses signed by responsible persons. . . . it is hard to see my feew head of stock starving with the hunger and i not able to buy 1 ton of hay to help them and my field open without a real or fence to keep any thing out of it and i have no help to fence nor i am not able to do it myself i am old besides i am laid up with rheumatism so dear Governor i hope that you will not forget a poor helpless family that was and is trying to raise his family i would not trouble your Escclency but necessity compels me as i am not able to help myself i wish you a Merry Cristmast and a happy New Year.⁸

On December 25, 1871, an Alexandria woman wrote what was apparently her second letter to the governor:

Pleas pardon me for troubleing you again. I asked one favor of ya & it was kindly granted & now I will thank ya a thousand times. Mr. Aaker has helped us a little, for which to you we are Sincerely thankfull Mr. Aaker told us that he was expecting a Box of clothing from Saint Cloud & for us to come over & get some & we went but there was nothing in the Box that we could wear the clothing was mostly for children & young

men & girls & as we are so very needy I thought I would ask ya to send us some from Saint Paul We are very much in want of boots & Shoes & all kinds of Clothing Socks & under & over garments. My husband has not had a sock on his feet this winter & he sufferes with the cold very much. we both suffer with cold for want of clothing to keep us warm. Now Dear Gov if ya will fix up a Package of the clothing that has been sent in & send it to me ya will be doing a deed of kindness which I will never forget we have not boght any clothing since we came here for it has took all we could raise to live without buying Clothes If ya send anything Pleas send it as soon as ya get this for we do need them so much. Mr. S—— is a very large man over six feet tall & wears No 11 Boots. I am medium sisse & wear No 5 shoes Pleas write to me if ya send the things.⁹

⁸ Edward C—— to Austin, file no. 259. The names of applicants for aid have been omitted. Otherwise these letters have been reproduced without change or editing, unless some explanation appeared necessary for clarity.

⁹ Mrs. W. W. S—— to Austin, file no. 259. The "Mr. Aaker" referred to is probably Lars K. Aaker, who went to Alexandria in 1869 as register of the United States land office and later operated a store in the town. See Constant Larson, ed., *History of Douglas and Grant Counties, Minnesota*, 1:246, 302 (Indianapolis, 1916).

THE Aaker store on the main street of Alexandria in the 1870s



On April 13, 1872, Browning Nichols, a member of the newly created board of commissioners of Lac qui Parle County, appealed to the governor on behalf of destitute settlers in his area:

I have just received a letter from Abner Tibbetts of New Ulm with a petition enclosed that was Sent to you prying for help for Anna A—— of this County She is a widow woman with two Small children and is very poor and no doubt but needs help She is living with Mr. L—— her Brotherin-law and is a woman that does a good deal of work We have a good many up here in our County that are ve[r]y destitute and really need help and if you have any more funds in your hands for that purpose thare is Some that I would be glad to see helped if they could not get more than enough to buy two or three bushels of Seed potatoes it would help them a good deal I think Mrs. A—— is deserving of help but no more So than Some others up here if you have any funds in your hands that you can spare for the poor up here I will be glad to spend time in looking them up and See that it is fairly divided amongst them.¹⁰

THE FOLLOWING YEAR, 1873, saw the first major grasshopper invasion, which left a path of destruction and poverty in south-western Minnesota. In 1874 the plague spread to twenty-eight counties, reaching north as far as Polk and east to include Sibley and Blue Earth. The legislature of that year appropriated five thousand dollars for direct relief and twenty-five thousand dollars for the purchase of seed grain.¹¹ The difficulties involved in distribution of aid are reflected in a letter written by an elderly Watonwan County farmer and addressed to Governor Cushman K. Davis on July 20, 1874:

¹⁰ Nichols to Austin, file no. 288.

¹¹ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:97-99 (St. Paul, 1926); Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1874, p. 251, 253.

I have observed in the papers that you pretends to help and aid people whose grain has been destroyed by Grasshoppers; and the people of Minnesota is very much indebted to you for your Generosity. Yet there is many very many whose sufferings and hardships has not yet been prevented and many Sufferers have hitherto tried all in their power to help themselves, but they are now obliged to place the matter before the Father of the State and other generous people in hope to obtain relief. For this reason I the Undersigned your humble servant have dared to make out a statement of my present condition accompanied by the signature of the Justice of the Peace in hope that it may find relief for me among the generous and kindhearted people of St. Paul and as I hope with you will [receive?] full assistance.

I am 74 years old my wife is 63 year old We live on a homestead in Sec 8 Town of Long Lake Watonwan County in this State. We have a small Farm under cultivation only sufficient to support us when we gets a good crop but our crops has now ben destroyed two year in succession and we can see nothing but starvation in the future if relief do not come in time to prevent its approach. The grasshoppers have only left a little corn and potatoes at present. We have no cattle for sale We lost a cow this Summer by Disease and we have now only a heifer and a calf. We did not receive any thing from the relief comitee last Winter for We could not leave our home on account of our age and we have 7 miles to St James where the articles was distributed. It would take about 100 Dollars to support us during the year and to buy seed wheat for next year. I however do not expect as much. but if I could get as much as a loan on 3 years time with resonabl intiest it would satisfy me the best. But if this cannot be had I will ask you to aid us with provitions gathered among the good People of St. Paul or if you could colect by subscription money enough for me to buy a cow and I should send receipt for every thing received. Oh! most



A sod farmhouse of the 1870s in Lac qui Parle County

honorable governor I hope you will help us poor old mortals so that we can support us during this hard year. We can not help us self for we are too old to earn any Thing by labor.¹²

On August 21, 1874, a disheartened Brown County woman wrote "To the Governor of the Stait of Minnesota" as follows:

No doubt you will be surprised at receiving a letter on such business as I am about to write, my apology is necesity we have lived on our claim three years last spring last year our crops were destroyed or nearly, consequently we owe for last years seed, this spring we sold our teem for this reson we do not owe for our seed this year, but our wheat is intirly destroyed so that it cannot be harvested my husband took a great deal of panes in getting the ground ready for it, for we realy need the wheat to pay debts as well as other things. it is rather discouraging to leave all our dear friends and come here and instead of making something having to go in debt. I heard through a friend a few days since, that persons who had there crops destroyed by grasshoppers were allowed to travel on the cars free of charge, to there friends where they could be helped, or a place where they were going to work. now if this is the case I would be very thankfull

if you would send husband and I a ticket or pass which ever is required, to take us to Canandagua N. Y. where our friends are. . . . We have two small children and I expect there will soon be another added and if I could get to my friends I should have good care, and they think there would be no doubt but my husband could get work there through the winter. My health has been very poor for over two years, so poor that we have had to have help a great part of the time, and medicine that I have has cost a great deal it has made us poor. It is necessary to go the first of next month, then we shall need no other help. if I had been able to have been left alone perhaps we should not have been obliged to have asked so great a favor. I have written this in the absence of my husband but I am so anxious to go where we can help ourselves a little.¹³

From Richwood Township in Becker County came the following letter, dated March 21, 1875:

Being informed that it is a sume of money raised by the government of the State of Minnesota for the relive and Suport of those persons that has Suffered from the destruc-

¹² Johannes J—— to Davis, file no. 321.

¹³ Mrs. John S—— to Davis, file no. 321.

tion of their Crops by the Grasshoppers: being driven to the action to apply to your honer for a Smal part thereof: not being able to Support our self on the account not being anny Woork to be got:

I Olen J—— with Wife and Six Children: the Oldest about ten years Came to the County four years ago: poor; the grasshoppers has destroid the Crope more ore lase every year but one: I got along very well as long as I could get planty woork but sence this Money Crees Cam on, and the woork stoped: it is no plase were a man can mak a cent: ¹⁴

And allso one Svante J—— Creppeld upp by Reumatism and not able to Support hem Self, and do requier imidiat reliev: for to prevent Suffering. ¹⁵

The quiet desperation of those who had borne the scourge the longest is reflected in a terse note of May 13, 1875, from Seward Township in Nobles County:

No time since the grasshopper invasion have provisions been scarcer here than at present And for one I am at a loss to know what to do. My family consists of Eight persons, and ere this reaches you will be entirely out of provisions. I cannot buy any thing having nothing to buy with, and as for credit, that is out of the question. The relief Committee here have nothing to distribute. What then can I do. The 26th of April last, the Government issued to me 150 lbs of Flour and 75 lbs Bacon. ¹⁶ We having nothing else whatever to subsist upon, have Consumed about all of it. And as stated above, ere this reaches you all will be gone. And then I know not what to do. ¹⁷

¹⁴ The writer was evidently referring to effects of the panic of 1873.

¹⁵ Olen J—— to Davis, file no. 361.

¹⁶ These relief supplies, provided under a Congressional appropriation of \$150,000, were distributed by the United States Army early in 1875. See United States, *Statutes at Large*, vol. 18, part 3, p. 314.

¹⁷ Frederick B—— to Davis, file no. 361.

¹⁸ Peter Z—— to Davis, file no. 361.

The grasshopper ravages were less extensive in 1875 than during the two previous years, and as the season advanced, the settlers pinned their hopes on a promising crop. For many, however, time was running out. The father of a family in the vicinity of Sacred Heart, Renville County, wrote on June 1:

I am oblige to call on you for help for i am in Such a position that i can not help myself i hav a Family of a Wif ant 7 Children ant i dont now where i will get anymore Provisions for them ontill the new Crop comes in everthing wat i hav is a Mortgage on et ant i can not get trust for anything like Flouer or other Provisions of any Kint my Flouer is all gone ant i dont now wat to do my Familie is in Such a position that i am oblige to coll on your honer for help Now ef you want Sent me Somthing pleas sent et to Beaver Falls or Willmar. ¹⁸

A letter of the same date from Frithjof Riis, a county commissioner of Cottonwood County, reported similar conditions in that area:

I saw a few days ago G. A. Purdy chm. Board of County Commissioners and I asked him if there would be any more relief flour, and he said no, by the way you wrote to him. I will now ask you if it is possible that we can not receive any more aid from State or any other source. I have today had an old man 69 years old 4 in the family and asked me for flour he had not enough for one baking, and when I said no he cried, and said he did not know where to get any. Now if State relief is suspended entirely, it is too bad, it would have been far better for the people if relief had been suspended last fall, and not helped them along untill now, because now they have got their fields sown into Wheat, Oats and Corn, etc and cannot leave, without getting their fields destroyed or damaged to a great extent. I have in my district many famyls that are about on

the verge of starvation, and will have to leave if they do not get help. The crops are now looking splendid, I never saw the prospects better for a good crop. Do let me know immediatly if you cannot do something for these people. The county has not any funds to help them out of their destitution and I do not know what to do with them. I do hope you will do all you can to relieve the poor sufferers, the case is very urging. I do hope the good Lord will give us a good crop, and stop the suffering it is our prayer allmost from every house.¹⁹

Still the end had not come. In 1876 new swarms of grasshoppers, descending from the Red River Valley, spread destruction even farther through the state, visiting forty counties and damaging five hundred thousand acres of crops.²⁰ The human side of this story was revealed in the stream of letters which continued to pour across the governor's desk. John S. Pillsbury succeeded Davis as chief executive in January, 1876, and it was to him that a Jackson County farmer addressed the following undated communication:

If you got any more Relief Provision I wish you would Send me Some as I have none and I want to Stay at home and Put in some Croap and try and Raise Something for next winter. there is no work to Be had around Here even at 25 Cents a Day. now if you cant help those that want to help themselves I think it is not Wright to help thooes that never lost 5 Doller worth Since they came on this Pararie as it has Been the Case with a Good Many around Here. these is Some around here that Has Been away all last Summer and they Got more Help than thooes that Stayed here and lost there Croaps. Now I lost over \$100 worth of Seed last Season Have only 20 Bushels of wheat and a few Potatoes and now if you cant send me what will keep us until I get through Seeding I will have to leave my plase without any Croaps. I have 80 acres under cultivation we are 8 in the family the

Oldest of the children is only 10 years old Six children in all. trusting you will help soon.²¹

From Charlestown in Redwood County came another plea, dated February 15, probably 1877:

I your obedient servant will state in this letter my desire in regard of some aid. I will state how long i have suffert with the Grasshopper Plague; I have suffert with them since 19th June 1873 and i don't know how much more we all have to suffer with them this year. Here i will state to your Ex. how much I received from those men from Winona, one sack of white flour and a sack of corn meal, a few lbs. of Pork and a few other articles; and a few pieces of old clothing for my children.²² Here i will give you the number of my Family which they depend on me. We are as follows 7 childern and me, and my Wife The childern age are asa follows: One Boy 15 year one girl is 13 years sec: girl 10 years, third girl 6 years, the sec: Boy 5 years, the fourth girl 3 years and fifth a Boy of 4 Weeks old, that is the numeration of my Family. If your Ex: could favor me with some aid, I will acknowledge thankfully for it. I shall here mentioned once more that is all I have received since any aid was distributed. . . . And if your Ex. would assisting my Brether with some aid he would acknowledge thankfully to your Ex. he is a small Family 2 childern him and his Wife, One Boy 12 years the other Boy 6 years old.²³

The spring and early summer months of 1877 saw the farmers' last bitter struggle with the locust hordes — a struggle to which Governor Pillsbury gave active leadership and encouragement. The following note

¹⁹ Riis to Davis, file no. 361.

²⁰ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3:105.

²¹ D. W. N—— to Pillsbury, file no. 386.

²² These were apparently donations handled by some private charitable group.

²³ George L. W—— to Pillsbury, file no. 386.

from Sacred Heart in Renville County was evidently written on March 21, 1877, in response to a promise of help from the governor:

yours came duely to hand, I will be very Thankful to you if you will Send Something to my Family as we have Baked [?] the last of our Flower in the house and the Prospects looks Poor for anny more the Children is Bare Footed. Please send what you have and we will be thankfull.²⁴

THE NEEDS of these and hundreds of other destitute farmers were met by both private charity and state aid. Space does not permit a full account of the relief efforts, but it is important to point out that help was provided. For example, during 1871 over \$15,400 in cash was received by the governor's relief committee for distribution among suffering frontier settlers in Minnesota. In addition, contributions of clothing, bedding, and provisions came to an estimated value of eleven thousand dollars. In late 1874 and early 1875 a committee appointed by Governor Davis and headed by General Henry H. Sibley collected money and supplies for the state's grasshopper-ridden farmers. By January, 1875, Sibley reported that \$18,959 had been received. Of this amount \$10,800 had been donated by counties outside the stricken area, following an urgent appeal by Governor Davis that such action be taken. The state legislature later reimbursed the counties and some individuals for their donations.²⁵ Relief from



A settler's home on the prairie

private sources continued to be provided through the winter of 1876-77.

Once awakened to the extent of the emergency, the legislature did not turn its back on needy citizens. In January, 1873, the lawmakers appropriated five thousand dollars for medicines and medical care, while in the following year an additional five thousand dollars was provided for direct relief, plus twenty-five thousand dollars to help farmers buy seed grain. In 1875 another twenty thousand dollars was appropriated for "the immediate relief of the suffering settlers on the frontier," and other funds were made available with which to buy seed. Further state aid was provided for suffering settlers in 1876 and 1877.²⁶

The large amounts of money and goods distributed by private charity to Minnesota farmers in the 1870s indicate a philanthropic spirit among both individuals and organized groups who fared better than the destitute farmers. Legislative help demonstrated that there was no basic philosophical objection to providing state aid to suffering and needy citizens when it seemed in the best interests of the individuals and the state.

THE INDEX for volume 36 of *Minnesota History* is now available. While the supply lasts, members and subscribers may receive copies by writing to Mrs. Phyllis Sandstrom, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul 1.

²⁴ Henry F. B—— to Pillsbury, file no. 386.

²⁵ Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1872, p. 401; *Senate Journal*, 1875, p. 97-106; Trenerry, in *Minnesota History*, 36:55. A large amount of correspondence relating to the work of the later committee may be found in box 15 of the Sibley Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁶ Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1873, p. 254; 1874, p. 251, 253; 1875, p. 182; Trenerry, in *Minnesota History*, 36:57-59.

THE PICTURE on page 208 is used through the courtesy of the Lac qui Parle County Historical Society; the others are from the Minnesota Historical Society's collection.



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