

Bridges Across the Chasm of Despair*

The Depression Years in Rhode Island

BY MARY C. N. TANNER

Where can Hungry Eat?

RFC

Where Slumber Tonight?

Depression



Norman S. Case
Governor Rhode Island
1928-1933

Photographs in this article courtesy of
Leo P. Reardon and
Providence Public Library.

A HEADLINE on page 1 of *The Providence Journal*, October 25, 1932, asked, "Where Can Hungry Eat?" "Where Slumber Tonight?" The answer for some of the jobless men and women who had spent the day looking for work was the Salvation Army, which had provided 76,092 meals and rooms for 22,420 lodgers during the first eight months of 1932.¹

The Depression was both more prolonged and more acute for Rhode Island than for the United States as a whole. During the 1930's the average decline in manufacturing for the nation was 3%; for Rhode Island the decline was 20%.² The chief reason for this disaster was the collapse of the cotton textile industry, which had dominated the state's economy for so many years. The number of cotton textile workers in Rhode Island fell from 21,833 in 1929 to 13,089 two years later — a loss of 40%.³ Since half of the gainfully employed residents of the state were in manufacturing or mechanical industries Rhode Island was highly vulnerable, and as the depression widened and deepened, the hardships of jobless workers and their families intensified.

With 29% of the total work force idle, unemployment became the over-riding issue of the gubernatorial contest of 1932. Theodore Francis Green, running hard for the position he had missed previously, attacked Republican Governor Norman S. Case's program of state loans to municipalities as inadequate. Democrat Green also excoriated the Republican plan for a large bond issue to build a bridge across Narragansett Bay. He asserted that a bridge must be built "to cross over the chasm of despair."⁴ The Depression was advantageous to Green, for unemployment caused the various ethnic minorities to unite in sufficiently impressive numbers to achieve a Democratic victory. He was elected governor, and the long period of Republican domination ended.

On January 31, 1933, the Grand Committee received the new governor's \$6 million program for unemployment relief. When the legislative hearing was held, approximately 700 unemployed men entered the State House. A crowd milled around the corridors and packed the hearing room. About fifty men went to the executive chambers. Governor Green later met with five of their representatives, who told him they were "becoming desperate."⁵ Several jobless men spoke after the formal hearing was concluded. One said that he would like to show those untouched by the Depression "what it was like to see little tots with hardly any clothes on crawling around a cold kitchen floor, opening bread boxes only to find not a hard slice of bread."⁶

The crisis demanded action. On February 15, the General Assembly, "in a manner almost unprecedented,"⁷ passed a \$6 million relief measure which Governor Green signed at once. Emergency funds (made available through the R.F.C.) were to be released to the towns and cities immediately; \$2,500,000 in loans already made to municipalities were canceled, and steps were taken to arrange an R.F.C. loan to be secured by a \$3 million bond issue.

Governor Green moved vigorously to redeem his campaign slogan, "humanity first."⁸ Emergency funds and relief supplies were distributed. Unemployed youths

*Adaptation of a phrase used by Theodore Francis Green in his campaign for governor, 1932.

were recruited for the Civilian Conservation Corps. PWA projects were undertaken to revive the shattered building construction industry. Seven branch offices of the National Reemployment Service were set up to recruit the necessary labor. This state and federal effort reduced unemployment from 115,000 in 1932 to 108,000 in 1933.⁹

The Roosevelt Administration's recovery program was greeted by unprecedented displays of enthusiasm and loyalty. On October 2, 1933, church bells, whistles, and firecrackers announced the start of a parade in which 70,000 people marched on a two-mile route around the business center of Providence to demonstrate Rhode Island's support for the National Recovery Administration. Blue Eagle emblems, waving flags, confetti, and ticker tape were everywhere. Thousands more turned out to watch the marching bands and colorful floats. Among them was Miss NRA, dressed in white satin, seated on a sparkling throne beside a horn of plenty. Governor Green, in formal morning attire, and wearing an immense red, white, and blue carnation, walked near the head of the parade.¹⁰ Merchants demonstrated their spirit by NRA sales. The Outlet ran a full-page ad in the *Sunday Journal* urging "EVERYBODY to do his PART to make the GLORIOUS CAUSE of the NATIONAL RECOVERY ACT a pronounced success."¹¹ There were bargains (for those with cash). Children's shoes were 66 cents a pair and Coty's Jasmin perfume, 95 cents a dram.

Pawtucket, Warwick, the Valley towns, and other communities paraded for Recovery. Over ten thousand East Providence residents marched in the pouring rain, singing "Can't We Take It."¹² At Narragansett Governor Green hailed the NRA for ending child labor and for establishing the minimum wage.¹³ A picturesque float in the Smithfield parade showed the slaying of "Old Man Depression,"¹⁴ but he remained formidably alive.

In September, 1934, the Rhode Island mills were swept into the national strike called by the United Textile Union. Although the *Journal* estimated that 9 out of 10 employees in the Blackstone Valley wanted to stay at their jobs, mill workers found themselves facing hostile pickets.¹⁵ An outbreak of violence in Saylesville caused the State Police to be summoned. The troopers were commended by the *Journal* for their self-control in handling 1000 strikers without using firearms.¹⁶ However, the force was not large enough to stop the rioting which spread to Central Falls — where men battled among the gravestones of the Moshassuck Cemetery — and to Woonsocket — where strikers used company-owned houses of the Woonsocket Rayon Company as arsenals from which they carried stones to throw at the plant.¹⁷ Governor Green called out the National Guard, which found it necessary to use firearms to restore order — an action that the *Journal* regretted, but considered the only alternative to mob rule.¹⁸ The riots left at least two dead and several wounded. In Woonsocket there was a "trail of smashed windows, wrecked autos, and looted stores."¹⁹

The conflict revealed the evils of the method used to maintain order at the plants. Deputy sheriffs were hired by mill owners from the High Sheriff. Governor Green charged that the system enabled the latter to obtain compensation from the mill for the services of a deputy who was paid \$5 while the Sheriff himself pocketed \$6. The governor also stated that the untrained deputies had helped to cause the violence.²⁰ If reactionaries promoted strife, so did radicals, who were present during the riots. Governor Green ordered the arrest of fifteen Communists, eleven of whom were pictured on the front page of the *Journal*.²¹ With the National Guard keeping watch in five communities, order was soon restored. A few days later the nationwide strike was over.

There were disputes in a variety of trades and industries as workers protested wage cuts and unions worked for the recognition given them by federal law. Thirty-five "major strikes" occurred in 1935, nineteen of them in the textile industry.



Theodore F. Green
Governor Rhode Island
1933-1937

PWA

Emergency Funds

NRA

Blue Eagle

CCC



*WPA Project
Murals on walls of
Providence
Public Library*

EPWC

Apples for Sale

WPA

Job Wanted

UCB

However, these controversies were settled peacefully.²² In general those who did have jobs were grateful for them and worked long and hard to do their part to hasten recovery. French Canadian and other workers of foreign descent in a large cotton textile mill are reported to have borne no resentment against their Yankee employer. The depression was a tragedy for everyone.

However, Rhode Islanders could take comfort from the accomplishments of the work relief program, even though some regarded the cost as appalling. Road construction was well under way with funds appropriated by the state to match federal grants. Contractors were required to prove that all labor had been secured in compliance with standards imposed by the National Recovery Act.²³ Federal regulations stipulated that certain funds be spent in cities to relieve the worst unemployment. This represented a change in Rhode Island's road policy which had previously concentrated on primary roads outside large cities.²⁴ By the end of 1936, there were 416 miles of new and reconstructed roads.²⁵

In October, 1936, the Emergency Public Works Commission issued a progress report. The state institutions at Howard and the Wallum Lake Sanitarium were being provided with badly needed facilities. New buildings at the University of Rhode Island increased the capacity for service; modernization at Hillsgrove gave the state one of the finest airports in the nation; and the development of Point Judith Harbor was regarded as highly advantageous to southern Rhode Island. These projects provided daily employment for 2500 men and gave the state a more enlightened image. Speaking of the construction program, as applied to Howard, Governor Green said that Rhode Island was "entering upon a new era in its care of those committed to its charge. . . . A new spirit of humanity in government is finding . . . embodiment in these buildings."²⁶

The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration showed the concern of the New Deal for young people, who had great difficulty in finding jobs. By December, 1934, over 4500 Rhode Islanders had enrolled in the CCC.²⁷ These recruits improved forest stands, dug water holes to prevent fires, built gravel roads, fought blister rust and soil erosion, and developed recreational facilities. The NYA helped many students to complete their education. Unemployed girls from needy families also benefited from the NYA programs, one of which offered an opportunity for work, study, and recreation at the Betsy Williams Country House in Chepachet.²⁸

In the early summer of 1935 the Works Progress Administration was established in Rhode Island. To some it was outrageous, deservedly responsible for the word "boondoggle." To others, the WPA was salvation. The first project provided jobs for 1000 women making clothes for the poor. WPA swept on to 276 other projects involving over 60,000 people.

Whether citizens "hated it, ignored it, or lived by it," the WPA left "a thousand memories and markers . . . the building at Scarborough Beach, the small bronze plates in streets and sidewalks, the pictures in the public buildings, the miles of mosquito ditches."²⁹

Administrators often selected enterprises which would not only restore people's confidence in themselves, but would also contribute to the general welfare. Twenty-two nursery schools were established where underprivileged children received cod liver oil with juice and crackers. Under the sponsorship of the Rhode Island State Library, the WPA trained a staff to recatalogue and repair books. This service, along with the distribution of new books, was primarily designed to encourage higher standards and new interest in small-town libraries.³⁰

Professional artists, employed by the WPA at a monthly salary of \$65-\$94, painted murals for the State House cafeteria and panels for the public library. One of the most valuable art projects was the photographing of 19th century Rhode Island mills by Joseph McCarthy. An accompanying text on the history of mill

architecture and mill villages (with maps) was written by Samuel Green.³¹ Researchers and writers were employed on several projects, including the multivolume *Ships Documents of Rhode Island* and a well-known contribution to the American Guide Series, *Rhode Island, a Guide to the Smallest State*.

WPA labor helped make possible the state's achievement of national prominence in two fields — roadside beautification and the preparation of regional base maps on land use, utilities, and zoning for the State Planning Board, the first project of its kind in the nation.³²

The work of the WPA was evident everywhere — in street signs put up, school lunches served, public buildings repaired, historical markers erected, concerts given, sidewalks built, and in classes taught.

The WPA experienced both internal problems and external criticism. The first administrator, who followed a "work or no relief" policy, was accused of being a "bitter Republican." He subsequently resigned, commenting, (WPA is) "full of fire and vinegar . . . I'm going fishing."³³ Opponents accused its leaders of wasting money on silly projects, its workers for "leaning on their shovels," and the whole organization for playing politics. Observant citizens noted that the number on its rolls reached a high point just before an election. However, no Rhode Islander could fail to be impressed with the magnificent work of the WPA in clearing up the debris left by the 1938 hurricane.

Meanwhile, the state government moved toward erecting a more permanent defense against mass unemployment. A special commission appointed by the General Assembly concluded that technological changes demanded a system of unemployment insurance. No longer could society expect the individual to save enough for his own security when even large corporations were engulfed by the Depression. Unemployment insurance, financed by employer and employee contributions, would not only help those immediately concerned, but also the taxpayers in general, who bore a large share of the financial burden of direct relief.³⁴ The General Assembly acted on the Commission's recommendations, thus making Rhode Island one of the first fifteen states to take advantage of the provisions of the federal Social Security Act.

The task of setting up the administrative machinery for insuring approximately 225,000 workers was formidable. Detailed quarterly reports had to be secured from 5,500 employers, many of whom had little experience in keeping payroll records. The largest accounting system ever to be established in the state was required. Experienced personnel were not readily available, so training courses had to be set up. To inform workers and the general public about this very important new experiment, the Unemployment Compensation Board made radio broadcasts, distributed thousands of leaflets, and showed a film, "Your Job Insurance," at practically every movie theater in the state. The Unemployment Compensation Board was also given authority over the State Employment Service as a way of emphasizing the main objective of the program — to get people back to work. Paying compensation benefits was secondary.

The law enabled the worker, unemployed through no fault of his own, to receive, "as a matter of right, not of charity, 50 per cent of his full-time weekly wages (with a maximum of \$15 a week) up to 20 weeks in any 52 consecutive weeks."³⁵ In a first annual report the Board refuted the criticism that "loafers" would profit from the system and that worker morale would break down. On the contrary, it was claimed, Rhode Island's skilled, loyal workers would gain self-confidence with greater security.

Laborers were grateful for the minimum wages and unemployment compensation. The Democratic party which provided them was rewarded with the firm support of the working men of the state for years to come.

The payment of the first benefits coincided with the sharp recession that began in

SSA

New Deal

UCB

Benefit Claims

NYA



WPA Project
Photographing
19th Century
Rhode Island Mills

Job Wanted

PWA

Depression

NRA

Job Insurance

RFC

Blue Eagle

WPA

New Deal

CCC

the fall of 1937. In the early months of 1938, Rhode Island had the highest per capita unemployment rate in the country.³⁶ As an "avalanche of unemployed workers" presented their claims, the staff in the Benefit Claims section worked a 12-hour day. The unit that prepared the records of wages earned operated 24 hours a day in three shifts. During the year 1938, 121,394 workers received a total of \$9,293,286 from the Unemployment Compensation Fund. Weekly payments averaged \$10 for a period of ten weeks. Happily, the fund remained solvent.³⁷

One of the tasks assigned to the Unemployment Compensation Board was to determine the causes of unemployment, the "father of all our problems."³⁸ With the changing industrial and business picture always before it in the form of accurate, comprehensive statistics, the Board studied structural changes in the state's economy. One conclusion reached was that manufacturing would continue to be the source of the basic wealth of the state. However, to maintain a high rate of employment, Rhode Islanders would be forced to realize that changes would continue and that some might be even more significant than the decline in cotton textiles.

Despite some improvement, conditions were still depressed in 1939, with approximately 15% of the population on relief.³⁹ Rapid gains awaited the stimulation of industrial production for national defense. The transition became evident as the federal-state employment service was utilized to provide labor for defense industry. The CCC became a source of trained manpower for the national emergency and channeled its young men into defense plants and to the army. The last Rhode Island camp closed in 1942. The WPA set up adult classes for instruction in mechanics. Those trained went into industry, and the WPA concluded its operations in the state in 1943.

Although unemployment persisted through the decade, its impact was greatly reduced and, at the same time, much that was new and constructive was accomplished in the Depression years. From the perspective of the 1970's, the "Iron Decade" emerges as a time when "bridges were built across the chasm of despair" and when much energy and substantial resources in Rhode Island and in the nation were dedicated to "humanity first."

1. *The Providence Journal*, October 25, 1932.
2. Kurt B. Mayer, *Economic Development and Population Growth in Rhode Island*, Providence, 1953, p. 59.
3. *The Providence Journal Almanac*, 1935, p. 81.
4. Erwin L. Levine, *Theodore Francis Green, The Rhode Island Years*, Providence, 1963, p. 142.
5. *The Providence Journal*, February 9, 1933.
6. *Ibid.*, February 9, 1933.
7. *Ibid.*, February 16, 1933.
8. Erwin L. Levine, *Theodore Francis Green, The Rhode Island Years*, Providence, 1963, p. 199.
9. *Report of the R. I. Unemployment Insurance Fund Commission*, 1936, Appendix A.
10. *The Providence Journal*, October 3, 1933.
11. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1933.
12. *Ibid.*, October 10, 1933.
13. *Ibid.*, October 25, 1933.
14. *Ibid.*, October 15, 1933.
15. *Ibid.*, September 16, 1934.
16. *Ibid.*, September 11, 1934.
17. *Ibid.*, September 12, 1934.
18. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1934.
19. *Ibid.*, September 14, 1934.
20. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1934. See also Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170.
21. *The Providence Journal*, September 14, 1934.
22. See the *Annual Report of the Department of Labor*, 1935.
23. *First Annual Report, Department of Public Works*, 1935, p. 6.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
25. *Second Annual Report of the Department of Public Works*, 1936, p. 47.
26. *Dedication of Rhode Island's Twelve Million Dollar Emergency Public Works Program*, Providence, 1936. Providence Public Library.
27. *The Providence Journal*, December 9, 1934.
28. *Betsy Williams Country House. An Educational Program for Unemployed Young Women*, Providence, 1936. Providence Public Library.
29. *The Providence Journal*, January 17, 1943.
30. Elizabeth Gallup Myer, "Rhode Island's Statewide Library Project" in the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, May, 1942. Providence Public Library.
31. *Rhode Island Mills and Mill Villages*. Rhode Island Art Project. WPA Photographs made for Nickerson Architectural Collection, Providence Public Library.
32. *Project Guide to the Professional and Service Division*, WPA for R. I. Providence Public Library.
33. Clipping from the *Providence Journal* (N.D.). Providence Public Library collection.
34. Report of the R. I. Unemployment Insurance Fund Commission to the General Assembly, 1936, pp. 14 ff.
35. *First Annual Report of the Rhode Island Unemployment Compensation Board*, 1936, p. 16.
36. *Second Annual Report of the Rhode Island Unemployment Compensation Board*, 1937, p. 15.
37. *Third Annual Report of the Rhode Island Unemployment Compensation Board*, 1938, p. 4.
38. *Second Annual Report of the Rhode Island Unemployment Compensation Board*, 1937, p. 15.
39. *Fourth Annual Report of the Rhode Island Unemployment Compensation Board*, 1939, p. 1.