

## "Thousands of our men are getting practically nothing at all to do"

### Public Works Relief Programs in Regina and Saskatoon, 1929-1940

Patrick H. Brennan

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Résumé de l'article

Les programmes de travail mis en œuvre dans les villes de la Saskatchewan entre 1929 et 1932 et entre 1938 et 1940 pour venir en aide aux chômeurs n'ont pas été un échec. Réalisés avec un minimum inévitable de « mauvaise gestion » et de « gaspillage », ces programmes ont produit des biens utiles et créé des emplois dont on avait grandement besoin; il n'est pas surprenant qu'ils aient reçu l'appui à la fois des contribuables locaux et des chômeurs aptes à l'emploi. Ce que les administrations et des chômeurs de Régina et de Saskatoon pour qu'encore plus de fonds de secours soient consacrés à ces « programmes d'emploi et de salaires » constituent une condamnation de la réponse du gouvernement fédéral à la crise de administrations locales se trouvaient en vertu du principe taré de « responsabilité locale ». À ce titre, l'histoire de ces programmes vient contredire l'impression largement répandue selon laquelle les villes des Prairies n'ont pas réussi à faire preuve de suffisamment de leadership ou d'initiative pour faire face au chômage des années 30.

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*Public Works Relief Programs in Regina and Saskatoon, 1929-1940*

**Patrick H. Brennan**

**Abstract**

***Unemployment relief work programs undertaken in Saskatchewan cities during 1929-32 and 1938-40 were not a failure. Carried out with an unavoidable minimum of “mismanagement” and “waste,” they produced useful assets and badly needed employment, and not surprisingly were strongly supported by local taxpayers and the able-bodied unemployed alike. This record and the determined if too often unsuccessful efforts by the administrations and unemployed in Regina and Saskatoon to have even more relief money channelled into such “work and wages schemes” are an indictment of the federal response to the unemployment crisis and the impossible situation in which the flawed doctrine of “local responsibility” placed local governments. As such, the history of these programs serves as a useful corrective to the widespread impression that Prairie cities failed to show sufficient leadership or initiative in dealing with the unemployment crisis during the 1930s.***

At the outset of the Depression, civic administrations and taxpayers alike in Saskatchewan shared the prevailing view that at least the married jobless should be provided with work, not “doles.”<sup>1</sup> Regina and Saskatoon, the province’s two largest urban centres,<sup>2</sup> joined other Canadian cities in clamouring for financial assistance from the senior governments to provide as much work as possible. Although the resultant shared-cost public works programs proved costly, in Saskatchewan the projects constructed were useful and created badly-needed employment. Within two years, however, public works relief (or unemployment relief work—the terms were used interchangeably) on a national scale foundered on the twin shoals of “sound finance” and the constitutional doctrine of “local responsibility.”<sup>3</sup> In its place, Ottawa fell back on the cheaper but unpopular system of “direct relief.” Neither Saskatoon nor Regina ever willingly accepted this decision, and throughout the remainder of the 1930s both municipalities persisted in attempts to revive unemployment relief work. Unfortunately, financially strapped provincial authorities could offer little more than sympathy and the federal government, for a variety of reasons beginning with cost, was uninterested. Only in the last year of the Depression would Ottawa, under the guise of “work and wages,” once more make it possible for the two cities to undertake unemployment relief works on a significant scale.

Public works relief alone could never have eliminated the crushing burden of unemployment; in that assessment Ottawa was correct. However, the Saskatchewan experience with public works relief does not support the view that the approach was inherently inefficient and extravagant, and in the process, sheds light on the staggering administrative obstacles Canadian cities faced in trying

to deal constructively with the unemployment crisis.

Although seasonal unemployment had been a fixture in Prairie cities throughout the 1920s, conditions during the winter of 1929-30 evoked widespread talk of a “crisis” and the need for “emergency measures.” Both Regina and Saskatoon were prepared to carry out capital works to create winter employment, primarily for their resident married jobless, provided the senior governments agreed to cover any excess costs.<sup>4</sup> Ottawa refused, but with the offer of provincial assistance, both cities went ahead. The resultant programs generated \$200,000 in wages which proved enough to see most of their unemployed through the winter.

Choosing to emphasize productive work over the “dole” followed naturally from the prevailing attitude about the “demoralizing” effects of direct relief. At the same time, restricting the available work to resident married men and those single men with dependents reflected the conviction that the future prosperity of both communities depended on retaining this “settled” work force. Finally, an emergency program based on public works which were soon slated to be carried out anyway and could now be partially financed by the province made good economic sense to any municipality.

When spring brought no significant decline in unemployment levels, both Saskatoon and Regina launched ambitious public works programs and then pressed the senior governments for assistance in financing them.<sup>5</sup> Once again, the provincial government proved co-operative, authorizing Regina to proceed with the needed re-construction of the Albert Street bridge on a shared-cost basis. Here was an opportunity, as a local editor enthused:

**Résumé**

***Les programmes de travail mis en oeuvre dans les villes de la Saskatchewan entre 1929 et 1932 et entre 1938 et 1940 pour venir en aide aux chômeurs n'ont pas été un échec. Réalisés avec un minimum inévitable de "mauvaise gestion" et de "gaspillage", ces programmes ont produit des biens utiles et créé des emplois dont on avait grandement besoin; il n'est pas surprenant qu'ils aient reçu l'appui à la fois des contribuables locaux et des chômeurs aptes à l'emploi. Ce administrations et des chômeurs de Regina et de Saskatoon pour qu'encore plus de fonds de secours soient consacrés à ces "programmes d'emploi et de salaires" constituent une condamnation de la réponse du gouvernement fédéral à la crise de administrations locales se trouvaient en vertu du principe taré de "responsabilité locale". À ce titre, l'histoire de ces programmes vient contredire l'impression largement répandue selon laquelle les villes des Prairies n'ont pas réussi à faire preuve de suffisamment de leadership ou d'initiative pour faire face au chômage des années 30.***

... for the city to spend some money to good advantage and at the same time to increase the amount of employment. The work will have to be done sooner or later [and while] the tax rate is important, ... it should be borne in mind that the tax rate is low in many a community that will never amount to a grain of salt.<sup>6</sup>

Though the Anderson government's commitment was welcome, attention throughout the province was now rivetted on Ottawa. During the just completed federal election campaign, Conservative leader R.B. Bennett had relentlessly attacked the King government's inaction in the face of the growing unemployment crisis. As evidenced by the stunning, one-sided defeat suffered by Finance Minister (and former Premier) Charles Dunning in Regina, urban Saskatchewan had embraced Bennett's message enthusiastically. Like his Liberal predecessor, the new Prime Minister firmly believed that unemployment relief became a federal responsibility only when the burden threatened to overwhelm provinces and municipalities financially. Where they differed was in their assessment of the current situation: to his credit Bennett admitted it was a crisis and was prepared to act. To reinforce the point, his government promptly introduced the Unemployment Relief Act, with the bulk of its \$20 million appropriation earmarked for the creation of "useful and suitable work for the unemployed." In the case of municipal public works, Ottawa agreed to match provincial grants up to 25 percent of approved costs. Leaving most of the administration in provincial hands preserved the facade of local responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

Word that Dominion funds would be forthcoming triggered a collective sigh of relief in Regina and Saskatoon, for by late summer all of their planned public works were rapidly nearing completion and there was no possibility of starting

others without firm assurances of cost-sharing. The two cities quickly drew up plans for a total of \$2.5 million in winter construction for inclusion under the federal initiative.<sup>8</sup> After brief scrutiny, the provincial cabinet's relief committee promptly forwarded these to Ottawa for final approval. The initial batch of projects authorized included a major (and badly needed) expansion of Regina's waterworks system, as well as an underpass and storm sewers in Saskatoon, well over \$1 million of construction.

Unfortunately, delays in obtaining approval from Ottawa for Regina's full work relief program meant that by year's end the city was hard-pressed to provide jobs for 250 of the over 1,700 married and nearly 1,600 single men registered with its relief department. Privately, Mayor James Balfour, who like everyone else in the city's administration considered the "dole" a complete loss to the community, complained bitterly that "thousands of our married men are practically getting nothing at all to do and we are simply supplying them with ... food supplies. ..." <sup>9</sup> From October through March, 1931, relief work wages totalled a meagre \$90,000, far short of the city's admittedly ambitious goal of providing unemployed married men with winter earnings of at least \$50 a month. Even by restricting the work to those already on the relief rolls, and in the process setting an unhappy precedent, there was simply too little work and too many unemployed.<sup>10</sup>

As if the lack of work was not enough of a problem, controversy erupted between the city and its jobless over the running of the program. Unseemly squabbling with Ottawa over what constituted a fair wage for common labour in Regina was followed by Commissioner R.J. Westgate's heavy-handed order to investigate the qualifications of all tradesmen on relief in order to determine which of

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*Official opening of the Albert Memorial Bridge, November 1930. This was Regina's first major unemployment relief work project. Saskatchewan Archives Board. R-B1065(1)*

them were "less qualified and might be willing to accept a lower rate of wages."<sup>11</sup> Federal regulations required that contractors pay skilled workers at established rates; Westgate's goal was to maximize the amount of "common labour" on the city's various projects and he had been attempting to ensure that unemployed skilled tradesmen would work for labourers' pay when the job in question called for it.

To "encourage" the co-operation of the unemployed, the city had begun striking men (though not their dependents) off the relief rolls if they refused any relief

job offered them. Not surprisingly, both the unemployed and local trade unionists were strongly opposed, and as the winter dragged on, complaints steadily increased. All were investigated, many by committees which included trade union representatives or by the officials of the Department of Railways, Labour and Industries, the provincial department responsible for overseeing the Unemployment Relief Act in Saskatchewan urban centres. The evidence gathered in these inquiries indicates that while incompetence, understaffing, language problems, and "honest errors" persisted in the administration of the relief work projects,

occurrences of favouritism and discrimination, along ethnic, religious or other lines, were infrequent. As one frustrated alderman pointed out:

It seems to me that it is not thoroughly realized what a very difficult problem we have in dealing [with the unemployed] who are daily clamouring for work, work which we have not available at present. No authority, Federal, Provincial or Municipal could cope with such a situation without disappointment and in some cases unwarranted complaints.<sup>12</sup>

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He was basically correct, of course, but resentment among the city's unemployed was understandable and not easily allayed.

By the end of October Ottawa had also confirmed a schedule of tripartite unemployment relief works for Saskatoon. The arrangements put in place by Saskatoon officials for allocating labour on these projects were even more *ad hoc* than Regina's. By December, under the pressure of 1,800 applicants, the system began to break down and with it, the patience of the city's unemployed.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, by year's end 450 men were toiling on the city's public works relief program, nearly a third of them on entirely municipal undertakings. During the remaining months of the winter, the city completed the greater part of its planned program, generating about \$170,000 in wages, or almost six times the amount spent on direct relief over the same period.<sup>14</sup> Still, there was never enough work and by mid-winter a labour alderman was publicly complaining that some married men were receiving only a week's work in every eight or nine.<sup>15</sup>

During the summer of 1931—the first year of general drought in Saskatchewan—conditions in the province were deteriorating at an alarming rate. Since the economies of both Regina and Saskatoon were almost totally dependent on the wheat economy, the impact of this disaster was immediate and devastating. With the volume of retail trade and construction plummeting, urban unemployment soared. Not surprisingly, in both cities there was almost universal support for a continuation of the unemployment relief works program; indeed, if possible on a considerably expanded scale. Apart from the perceived merit of work over direct relief, a belief which was quite sincerely held, self-interest was certainly a strong consideration. After all, unemployment relief work schemes of the tri-

partite variety meant cities could obtain useful public works at a fraction of their ordinary cost, and defer actual payment of their portion of the expenditure for up to thirty years. In contrast, Saskatchewan cities were still required to cover their share of direct relief out of current revenue, a bleak prospect indeed when one remembers that their share, if so-called administrative costs not subject to cost-sharing were included, now hovered around 50 percent. In a reference to such projects at their June meeting, delegates to the Union of Saskatchewan Municipalities (Urban Section) conference pointedly reminded Ottawa that “any expenditure to protect the social life of our people is productive and therefore economical.” Newspaper editorials, too, regularly urged a start on the “many other useful works that could be performed by these [jobless] men with dignity to themselves [and] satisfaction to the community. . . .”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the unemployed themselves, while never more than loosely organized in either Regina or Saskatoon, were increasingly vocal in pressing their demands for work and the abolition of the “dole.”<sup>17</sup> Given the alarming state of provincial and municipal finances in Saskatchewan, however, it was clear to everyone that any continuation of public works relief would depend entirely on decisions made in Ottawa. Local and provincial officials could only plan . . . and wait.

Frustrated with the Depression's intractability, Prime Minister Bennett had convinced himself that reports of desperate drought and unemployment conditions pouring in from civic and provincial officials in the West were greatly exaggerated. In June, to gather firsthand evidence on the true state of affairs, he despatched a delegation headed by Labour Minister Gideon Robertson. Officially, the jobless rate among males in both Regina and Saskatoon stood at 27 percent that month, and to make matters

worse, during the preceding twelve months fully one-third of the male work force had been unemployed, the average period being a staggering 31 weeks. Robertson was genuinely moved by what he saw and heard, and within days of his return the federal government dramatically announced plans to meet “the greatest national calamity that has ever overtaken this country.”<sup>19</sup> The Unemployment and Farm Relief Act (1931), which followed within a month, possessed all the failings associated with the “temporary” and “emergency” aspects of its predecessor. Although it was clear that the major thrust would once again be jointly funded public works construction, regulations and particularly the size of the appropriation were kept purposefully vague. Bennett privately acknowledged that this was necessary to avoid unseemly squabbling among the provinces and thus prevent “prodigal” expenditures. Not unexpectedly, the federal government intended to exercise much tighter administrative control over its new relief work program.

Bennett's fears were not without justification, for Ottawa's announcement elicited a flood of submissions which soon surpassed the \$200 million mark. Saskatoon and Regina were not outdone, quickly drawing up their own lists of projects easily adapted to relief work purposes, in other words those which minimized materials costs and maximized “pick and shovel” work. The Department of Railways, Labour and Industries preferred smaller schemes on the grounds that they tended to create more labour per relief dollar expended while cities still eyed large projects and most of their proposals reflected this. Formally, however, the province only required that projects be “sensible” (that is, legitimately useful on more than just work-creation grounds) and budget a minimum of 60 percent of their cost for labour; those which qualified they promptly forwarded to Ottawa.<sup>21</sup>

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After such a promising beginning, however, interminable delays followed while the senior governments negotiated the financial terms so critical to the participation of Saskatchewan cities. One can readily appreciate the difficulty of dealing with day-to-day relief problems while trying to plan for the future without the benefit of any definite information on administrative regulations or financing. Efficient co-ordination under such circumstances was all but impossible and misunderstandings on the part of civic officials, who were often reduced to acting on rumour, were inevitable. Indeed, they risked Ottawa's wrath even in attempting to communicate directly with their federal counterparts because this would violate the sacred doctrine of “local responsibility.” Yet an increasingly suspicious federal relief bureaucracy seized upon any failure to follow regulations as proof of municipal incompetence or worse.

On the assumption that Ottawa would eventually approve the project, a group of Regina aldermen had managed to persuade their colleagues to proceed with construction of a water reservoir to provide badly needed work.<sup>22</sup> Word that the province had “acquiesced” in this manoeuvre infuriated federal officials and Bennett in particular. For some time now, Premier Anderson's government had been compelled to seek federal assistance simply to meet its basic responsibilities but these requests had only served to confirm the Prime Minister's suspicion “that money is being expended in [Saskatchewan] without a due regard to the fact that it is not easy to obtain it.”<sup>23</sup> Unfair though the accusations were, Anderson soon had no choice but to comply with what amounted to a federal ultimatum that he replace his treasurer with someone who inspired more confidence in Ottawa.<sup>24</sup>

Within days of the August 18 passage of the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act,

Ottawa confirmed that cities in the Western provinces would see their share of the costs of work relief projects reduced by half to 25 percent. In order to finance their portion, Regina and Saskatoon would “sell” their now all but unsaleable debentures to the provincial treasury. The funds to carry out this paper transaction, plus pay the province's own 25 percent share, ultimately had to come from the federal government, such “loans” being “secured” by the transfer of almost equally worthless Saskatchewan treasury bills. It was an elaborate charade carried out to satisfy Ottawa's demand that constitutional appearances be maintained.<sup>25</sup> Although it now seemed the way was open for an immediate start on the main program of relief work in Regina and Saskatoon, the two senior governments did not sign a formal relief accord until September 29, at which time the Premier revealed that the budget for municipal relief work programs in the province had been pared by 80 percent to a mere \$1.5 million.

It was mid-October before Regina received notification from the Department of Railways, Labour and Industries that Ottawa had sanctioned a \$600,000 expenditure which the city was free to allocate on any of the works it had already submitted. Alarmed city officials quickly realized that the two projects already underway, the water reservoir and the dredging and beautification of Wascana Lake, would absorb most of these funds.<sup>26</sup> However, two weeks later the promise of an additional appropriation enabled the city to make a start on the pipeline supplying the reservoir which they hoped would employ over 1,000 men for three months during the critical winter months. Ottawa's apparent lack of concern over which projects the city proceeded with seemed to indicate that the federal government's preoccupation was now simply the magnitude of its budgetary involvement. This conclusion

was borne out during succeeding months by such financial pettiness as disallowing the \$1000 purchase price of the land for the reservoir and several hundred dollars more for surveys and blueprints on the grounds that such expenditures did not directly create any work for the unemployed.<sup>27</sup> Cities, moreover, had to finance the entire cost of construction while awaiting federal reimbursement; time-consuming audits delayed this for months, and the resulting interest charges were a heavy burden on municipal finance.

Regina's frustrations paled when compared to Saskatoon's, however. By mid-October, 1931, Ottawa had sanctioned only \$300,000 (for storm sewers) of a \$2 million relief work program submitted in July and there had been no word at all on the key project, an \$850,000 traffic bridge. Incredibly, federal officials had somehow concluded that the provincial cabinet had rejected the project, a misconception quickly dispelled by Premier Anderson. Offering no explanation, Ottawa then arbitrarily announced that it would not consider more than \$700,000 under the shared-cost arrangements, leaving the city to absorb the remainder or forego the project entirely. Faced with the equally unappealing choices of further burdening taxpayers, 40 percent of whom were already in arrears, or a winter with virtually no work relief, council reluctantly accepted the federal terms.<sup>28</sup>

The total public works relief appropriation authorized for Regina under the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act (1931) amounted to \$1,171,080, of which the city actually spent slightly over \$1 million during the fifteen months required to complete the reservoir, pipeline and lake schemes as well as various street improvements and storm sewer construction, in the process generating an impressive \$680,000 in wages. Unfortunately, almost two-thirds of this came

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after the winter was over; the unpredictable and disjointed fashion in which the federal bureaucracy dealt with their overall schedule had stymied the city's best efforts to stagger the projects and thus ensure a reasonably regular flow of work.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, from December through March, when there were never fewer than 1,900 married men on Regina's relief rolls, there were usually eight or nine "reliefers" for every spot on a city work gang and all too frequently no work for these men at all. Spring brought a significant improvement and by the middle of June there were "only" 1,700 men vying for 700 jobs.<sup>30</sup> Average monthly earnings from September, 1931 through April, 1932 were a meagre \$25. Although this figure doubled during the ensuing six months and certainly represented a marked improvement over the previous year, it was obviously inadequate to meet even the barest needs of Regina's jobless. Most men earned so little that they were back on relief as soon as the work was rotated; indeed, in recognition of this, the city had ceased discontinuing direct relief to those who were working. Instead, the men had been paid only 10 cents an hour in cash, with the relief department "retaining" the remainder.

The Saskatoon unemployment relief work program, consisting of the bridge and storm sewers, generated a large amount of employment for that city's married jobless during the winter of 1931-32. Work on the bridge started in December and during the next six months over 1,400 men were employed in its construction, earning an average of \$23 per month (although like Regina, Saskatoon was now paying its "reliefers" only a quarter of their "wages" in cash). Between the two projects, the city was able to provide jobs for almost 750 men daily during January, an impressive achievement but one which fell far short of meeting the needs of the 1,700 married Saskatoon men then

on relief. To the surprise of no one, direct relief expenditures in both cities were soaring.<sup>31</sup>

Regulations governing eligibility for relief work, like direct relief, tightened considerably during the 1931-2 season. While Saskatoon continued to accept single men without dependents as long as they were taxpayers and not on relief, Regina increasingly began restricting its public works relief jobs to married "reliefers" with children, arguing that such men had been "checked out" and clearly had the strongest "claim" on a job. However, this policy virtually ensured that all married men with children who were laid off for any length of time would be driven onto the relief rolls.<sup>32</sup>

Rather unrealistically, both cities had intended to provide full-time work on public works projects for all "deserving" unemployed, but the very high levels of unemployment combined with drastic cutbacks in anticipated funding made this impossible. Instead, available work was rotated. Regina changed shifts weekly, with those considered "more needy" being recalled sooner than others, whereas Saskatoon used twelve-day shifts with every man theoretically receiving an equal amount of work. Administered by overworked relief departments, the rotation system frequently broke down and continued to be much criticized by the unemployed. Yet the fact that both cities managed to provide 90 percent of their able-bodied married "reliefers" with at least some employment during the fall and winter months attests to a considerable measure of fairness. That said, there is strong evidence that the obsession of some Regina officials with the threat of "communist subversion" led to the speedy dismissal of a handful of "politically active" reliefers from work crews. Saskatoon council was no friend of "rabble rousers" either but overall its willingness to co-operate with

a grievance committee nominated by a newly formed married unemployed men's association produced a more harmonious atmosphere than had prevailed the previous year.<sup>33</sup>

One thing is certainly clear: the desire of the overwhelming majority of the able-bodied "reliefers" to work rather than suffer the indignities of the "dole" had not diminished. Engineering Department staff who were in daily contact with the men reported favourably on the willingness of frequently ill-clad and undernourished men to work under the most difficult conditions. Private contractors, too, seemed generally satisfied with the bulk of the workmen they were required to hire. While men in both cities continued to lose their relief eligibility if they refused assignments (a policy the unemployed married men's associations now endorsed), the opportunity to escape the boredom of joblessness, obtain some degree of economic independence, and maintain their dignity seems to have been more important.<sup>34</sup>

The bleak financial situation faced by both levels of government in Saskatchewan fed widespread rumours throughout the winter that a shift from public works to less costly direct relief was imminent. Despite the Prime Minister's New Year's optimism that the worst of the Depression was over, the financial implications of unemployment and drought relief were becoming an obsession in Ottawa. In February, federal officials ominously informed their Saskatchewan counterparts that the province's urban relief work effort should be scaled down. In fact, virtually the entire appropriation had already been committed. Regardless, by this time Prime Minister Bennett had already decided upon a new course; a Federal-Provincial relief conference called for April was merely a forum for presenting this *fait accompli* to the public as the product of a genuine consensus.

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*The Broadway Bridge under construction, October 1932. This was the largest unemployment relief work scheme completed in Saskatoon as part of the 1931-1932 shared cost program. Saskatoon Public Library, Local History Room. A-202*

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For the four Western premiers the proceedings must have been a grim ordeal with Bennett sternly lecturing them on their collective failure to practice “fiscal prudence” and carry out their constitutional responsibilities to the unemployed. Upon his return, a chastened Premier Anderson cautioned a delegation of unemployed Saskatoon men that for the foreseeable future depression conditions made it “obviously impossible” to provide public work for everyone desiring it. Ottawa did make one concession: federal funds for projects already approved but not yet completed or, in some instances, even started, would not be cut off May 1 as had been feared.

From the federal government’s perspective, public works relief, an initiative conceived two years earlier “as a system of stimulation to employment ... [now] threatened to become a widespread and persistent [fixture],” and under the circumstances their concerns were valid. Moreover, Ottawa’s conviction that Western cities were incapable of undertaking such programs without “widespread extravagance and inefficiency” was now unshakable.<sup>37</sup> Yet the experience in Regina and Saskatoon, where the projects undertaken had produced useful assets within budgeted expenditures, clearly refuted the latter allegation. If the costs were somewhat “excessive” by pre-Depression standards, decisions to maximize manual labour and complete much of the work out of season, not “reckless” administration, were responsible. Nevertheless, as a method of delivering subsistence relief on the required scale, which is what public works relief had become in Saskatchewan cities, the program was proving a dubious solution, financially and otherwise. For officials in Regina and Saskatoon, however, the debate was academic; they had no choice but to accept Ottawa’s verdict that Canada could no longer afford to create employment

through the construction of shared-cost public works.

The inevitable result of this policy was a dramatic rise in municipal direct relief costs—and short-term municipal debt in the form of the five-year debentures which cities in the province could now issue to cover the cost. It is hardly any wonder, then, that civic officials hoped 1933 would bring about a change of heart at Ottawa. But it was not to be; that year’s Relief Act did provide some funds for shared-cost work relief projects, but under financial terms which made the participation of a poor province like Saskatchewan impossible. Speaking at the Regina Board of Trade that October, however, the Prime Minister had alluded to improved economic conditions justifying “moderate [soon altered to “extensive”] public works undertakings for relief” in 1934.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, what the federal government had in mind were purely federal public works, the need for which was limited in a recently settled province like Saskatchewan. Nevertheless, provincial and municipal officials were bitterly disappointed when they learned that Ottawa had authorized only one project for the province—a \$460,000 federal building in Regina—and even work on that would be delayed until the following spring.<sup>39</sup>

In 1934, the Anderson government itself became a casualty of depression conditions when every member was defeated at the polls. During their five-year term, the Premier and his colleagues had worked tirelessly to ameliorate the unprecedented suffering being endured in urban and rural Saskatchewan, but the problems had simply overwhelmed them. The new Premier, Liberal James Gardiner, offered a delegation of city representatives sympathy but no concrete pledges of assistance for work-creation schemes; the desperate crisis in the drought area, he reminded them, must

have first call on his government’s extremely limited resources.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, a few months later, the province did agree to participate in a limited public works program proposed by the Regina council. The city’s plan, which had the strong backing of the two local unemployed associations, was intended to provide married unemployed men with extra cash earnings equal to one-quarter of their normal direct relief allotment. Carried out in the autumn of 1934, the program generated \$50,000 in wages, a figure which was dwarfed by the year’s direct relief bill of almost \$1,500,000, nearly half of which fell on the weary shoulders of Regina taxpayers.<sup>41</sup>

Ottawa’s only “concession” to municipal public works relief during 1935 was to permit cities and provinces to use part of their monthly direct relief grants to cover the labour costs of any such projects they wished to undertake.<sup>42</sup> In Saskatchewan, where these grants were not even large enough to cover their intended purpose, this option was of only theoretical interest. Consequently, with one exception, no unemployment relief work projects were undertaken in the province during 1935. That exception involved a provincially approved plan to “pay” married “reliefers” in Regina the prevailing fair wage for any required trade but withhold all earnings. Each man would work enough to “earn” his monthly direct relief quota plus 10 percent to cover other needs. From the outset, the thousand or so men taken on resented what was, after all, little more than the “dole” with a work test, and within a month made their point by going on strike. Council agreed to hear their complaints and by agreeing to suspend the program defused the confrontation.<sup>43</sup>

Five years earlier, R.B. Bennett had rashly promised that there would be work for all and that no man would have to suffer the humiliation of the “dole.” Perfor-

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mance, unfortunately, had fallen considerably short of expectation, and nowhere more than in Saskatchewan. Now his government faced the cheerless prospect of an election. As one of the embattled Prime Minister's Saskatchewan backbenchers had warned some months earlier: “An idle machine does not go on the dole and doesn't vote, but an idle man does. ...”<sup>44</sup> In Saskatchewan as elsewhere, the outcome of the 1935 federal poll was a foregone conclusion. There was little reason, however, for the province's hard-pressed cities to expect innovation from the new Liberal government. Both Mackenzie King and his trusted finance minister, Charles Dunning, were fiscal conservatives who shared Bennett's suspicion that municipal administration of relief had been and continued to be chronically wasteful and hence a prime target for financial economies.<sup>45</sup>

During 1936, an average of one-quarter of Regina's male work force was unemployed and expenditures on direct relief reached a new peak.<sup>46</sup> City council, now dominated by a coalition of labour aldermen and benefitting from the vigorous leadership of Mayor A.C. Ellison, another labour man, was determined to replace the “dole” with a suitable “work and wages” program. That spring, Ellison travelled to Ottawa to press for a \$400,000 loan the city intended to use to build municipally-owned rental housing. All of the labour would be recruited from among the city's unemployed construction workers. Unfortunately, while the scheme's self-liquidating aspect impressed Labour Minister Norman Rogers, his fear that its approval would spark an avalanche of similar requests from other cities doomed the proposal.<sup>47</sup>

Several months later, when the National Employment Commission held hearings at Regina, officials from the province's two largest cities jointly proposed a feder-

ally financed program of essential civic improvements on the “work and wages” principle. With almost no maintenance, let alone additions, to their sewer, water and electrical systems since 1932, no one disputed that the need for such work was becoming desperate.<sup>48</sup> Two months later, however, the commissioners issued a preliminary report recommending a “very substantial reduction” in public works expenditures, a conclusion which matched Rogers' own views that “of themselves public works and an increase in government payrolls did not offer an effective remedy for unemployment.”<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, when Regina tried to obtain federal financing for a still more ambitious “work and wages” housing scheme in the spring of 1937, it was turned down flat. For Ellison and his labour colleagues, the apparent equanimity with which the federal government seemed to accept direct relief as an indefinite solution to unemployment was incomprehensible. Thus, the following spring, after consulting with the union of the married unemployed men, council authorized its own small-scale program of relief work. Participation was made voluntary and workers, now with collective bargaining rights, would be paid 10 cents per hour in cash in addition to their normal direct relief. But the first shift of 250 men had hardly begun their two-week stint when they began complaining that the bulk of the work was useless. Most of the projects certainly lacked “glamour” and council sympathized with the men's frustration, but with almost no money to buy materials, Engineering Department officials could hardly be blamed for selecting the projects they had. Work continued on them throughout the summer of 1938.<sup>50</sup>

That autumn, Regina attained the dubious distinction of having spent a total of \$10 million on direct relief. For disillusioned

civic officials and taxpayers alike, the milestone served as a bitter reminder of the futility of passive relief which had seen such an enormous sum expended to no lasting purpose.<sup>51</sup>

Yet 1938 had also brought some good news. The passage of the Municipal Improvements Assistance Act heralded a welcome change in the federal attitude toward public works relief. Officially the legislation was intended “to create employment ... by providing funds to municipalities at a low rate of interest to assist them in constructing or making extensions or improvements to, or renewals of ... any ... self-liquidating project for which there is urgent need and which will assist in the relief of unemployment.”<sup>52</sup> Reaction in Saskatoon and Regina was generally favourable, although there was some grumbling over what amounted to a \$200,000 loan “ceiling” for smaller cities and the limited amount of employment suitable projects (which would inevitably require large expenditures on materials) were bound to generate. Still, as Mayor Ellison was quick to point out, at least the King government had finally accepted the principle of subsidizing municipal borrowing for relief work purposes.<sup>53</sup> Their reservations aside, city and provincial officials both agreed that everything must be done to ensure projects were approved and work started before the onset of winter.

Regina quickly decided to apply for a \$140,000 loan to purchase and install new generating equipment for its electrical utility while Saskatoon, after several false starts (a swimming pool and transit buses were rejected by Ottawa as “frills,” albeit self-liquidating ones), decided on a \$190,000 program of sewer and water main construction and street improvements. Strictly speaking, neither of the latter projects were “self-liquidating,” but at the province's urging Ottawa had agreed to interpret the term more lib-

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erally for Saskatchewan centres. Provincial officials had simply pointed out the obvious: after six years of virtually complete neglect, the need for such essential maintenance could not be put off any longer.<sup>54</sup> Unhappily, when it came to approving loan applications, the federal bureaucracy moved at its usual glacial pace with a predictable result: neither city was able to start work on its projects before the following spring.<sup>55</sup>

While the Municipal Improvements Assistance Act, despite its failings, was welcome, what the cities really sought was a revival of shared-cost public works relief along the lines of the 1930 and 1931 programs and their hopes were soon to be at least partially answered. In the Speech from the Throne delivered in January 1939, direct relief, for nearly seven years the mainstay of public unemployment assistance, was dismissed as “ineffective.” Accordingly, it would give way to “... the acceptance of responsibility by the Federal authority for a program of public works that will nourish useful expenditure in the Provincial and Municipal sphere as well as Federal purposes.”<sup>56</sup> Within a matter of days, Labour Minister Rogers announced the Civic Improvements Plan, a scheme whereby the senior governments would absorb the entire labour cost of any additional municipal public works beyond those ordinarily planned by cities and towns and which were being specifically undertaken as an alternative to direct relief.

In Saskatchewan, however, initial reaction to the “Rogers Works Plan” (as it was promptly dubbed) was decidedly negative. Once again, Ottawa had ignored the impossible financial predicament of the province’s cities. Where would money for materials come from, disbelieving civic officials wondered aloud?<sup>57</sup> Consultations between the two senior governments and between the province and its urban municipalities proceeded intermit-

tently through the spring. For the latter, the whole procedure assumed an all too familiar pattern, and by June, municipal patience had run out.<sup>58</sup> As one Saskatchewan Liberal MP lamented, delays in implementing relief work legislation would once again guarantee “that work that should have started in July [will get] going about the same time Santa Claus comes down the chimney.”<sup>59</sup>

When a formal agreement to implement the Civic Improvements Plan in Saskatchewan was finally signed on June 30, it became clear that the Patterson government’s straitened finances would limit the program to an overall expenditure of \$1,250,000. When broken down, the shares of Regina and Saskatoon were \$300,000 and \$200,000, respectively. In this last summer of the Depression, the two cities still had over one-sixth of their residents on the “dole.”<sup>60</sup> Regina immediately submitted dozens of different projects for provincial approval, from parks and recreational facilities to roadwork and general maintenance, with 80 percent of the expenditure earmarked for wages, and Saskatoon quickly followed suit. As usual, the province acted expeditiously, but this time the authorization process in Ottawa, too, moved swiftly and by mid-August, a mere six weeks after the Dominion-provincial agreement had been struck, “work and wages” programs were actually underway.<sup>61</sup>

Both city administrations, whether out of habit or from wishful thinking, assumed married “reliefers” would have priority on Civic Improvements Plan schemes and that they would rotate labour in the traditional way. However, federal authorities rejected both practices as contrary to the spirit of “work and wages.” To avoid any “misunderstandings,” the province ordered city officials to ensure that no compulsion was used in hiring, that all men were taken on full-time for the dura-

tion of the project, and that every man received the prevailing wage for the work done in cash. As well, at least one-third of the work force had to be drawn from unemployed men who were *not* on relief.<sup>62</sup>

Among the jobless in Regina and Saskatoon, there was overwhelming support for “work and wages.” Work rotation, which gave one no sense of real independence from the “dole,” had lost its attraction early in the Depression, and the desire to earn a full salary had never been in question. When work began on a \$250,000 flood control weir in Saskatoon (city council had finally convinced Ottawa to finance this separate “work and wages” project under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration), 700 men applied for the 200 openings even though the wages of those with large families were actually going to be lower than their direct relief over the six-month duration of the job.<sup>63</sup>

Both cities continued to submit projects for inclusion under the Civic Improvements Plan, the great majority of them inexpensive and labour intensive. In Regina’s case, the final total reached seventy-four and ran the gamut from street gravelling, grading, and paving to tree planting, the painting and re-roofing of public buildings, incinerator improvements, a plant nursery, and the construction of sewer and water lines and sidewalks.<sup>64</sup> By the late summer of 1939, largely as a result of the Civic Improvements Plan, some 500 unemployed men were working on public works relief projects in Regina and a further 350 in Saskatoon.

Although the immediate prospects for work in Saskatchewan would remain bleak, the outbreak of war in early September was bound to have a significant impact on the need for work-creation programs nationally. On September 9,

Ottawa had confidentially informed the various provincial governments that it was considering an early termination of the Civic Improvements Plan. An alarmed Patterson government forcefully reminded Dominion authorities that Saskatchewan's unemployment rate remained very high and it was unlikely (to say the least) that any of the works approved, with their minimal demands on construction materials or skilled labour, would interfere with the war effort.<sup>65</sup> This prompt action at least saved all of the projects already authorized, but making further submissions was pointless as municipalities were soon instructed. Regardless of the justifications advanced, in Saskatchewan the abrupt reduction in the scale of the “work and wages” program was not well received. Municipal governments, business and labour groups, the unemployed, and the public at large had all strongly supported the Civic Improvements Plan. In all respects, the performance of the program had fulfilled expectations with the effort put forward by the workers being specifically singled out.<sup>66</sup> In Regina, the thirty projects undertaken employed nearly 600 men, paying them an average of \$200, and the earnings of the nearly 500 men who worked on Saskatoon's twelve projects were comparable.<sup>67</sup> By 1939, the federal government seemed to have concluded that shared-cost “work and wages” programs should form part of a balanced approach to dealing with the chronic unemployment of able-bodied workers, especially in the construction trades which, in the case of Saskatchewan, constituted the largest group of unemployed throughout the 1930s. As it was, by 1940 the war would all but eliminate unemployment, even in Saskatchewan cities, and with it the need for public works relief.

At the outset of the Great Depression, three premises shaped thinking on unemployment. Firstly, joblessness and its

relief were essentially emergency problems. Secondly, the responsibility for dealing with the socio-economic consequences of joblessness was (and should continue to be) primarily municipal and provincial. And thirdly, “active” measures to relieve unemployment—that is, work creation—were superior to passive assistance.<sup>68</sup> Developments during the 1930s cast serious doubts on all these assumptions. As the Saskatchewan experience with public works relief revealed all too vividly, the “local responsibility” doctrine crippled the formation of either effective long-term unemployment policies or the administration of such short-term policies as were developed. And urban municipalities, the level of government which in effect delivered the “service,” had virtually no input into policy-making at all. Certainly, the provision of unemployment relief work on a large enough scale to meet the needs of even the married “elite” of the unemployed was financially impossible and one might reasonably say of questionable wisdom, too.

But at the same time the shared-cost programs undertaken in Saskatchewan cities were not “boondoggles.” With rare exception, the projects were efficiently carried out and at least modestly effective in meeting their employment and other objectives. Unfortunately, for much of the period financial constraints transformed “unemployment relief work” into little more than a means of distributing direct relief without as great a stigma of failure attached to the recipient and in a way that produced some permanent assets for the community as a whole. Proper “work and wages” programs, which the cities and certainly the unemployed would have preferred, were seldom possible.

Had unemployment not reached (and remained at) such unprecedented levels in Saskatchewan during the Depression, the verdict on public works relief, and

particularly the Bennett programs, would have been a much more favourable one. But even considering the circumstances which prevailed, it is hard to believe more could not have been done, especially in the areas of housing and essential municipal capital improvements and maintenance. What was lacking at the local and provincial level was not the will but the resources. Only the federal government could act. Unfortunately, in Saskatchewan, city governments, taxpayers, and the unemployed bore the burden. As Regina Commissioner R.J. Westgate lamented in 1939: “There can be no doubt about the effect that the lack of employment, during recent years, has had upon the greatest asset of [our] community—its people.”<sup>69</sup>

### ***Endnotes***

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  14. SCM, various monthly unemployment relief committee reports for 1931
  15. Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix*, 20 Jan. and 21 Feb. 1931 and SCM, 30 Mar. 1931
  16. Regina *Daily Star*, 15 May 1931. Union of Saskatchewan Municipalities, *Saskatchewan Municipal Record*, July 1931, 6
  17. Regina, Finance (file 31a) 1931, Redhead to council, 17 June 1931
  18. *Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. 6, 66-73, 1268-70, 1280 and 1284; Regina *Daily Star*, 26 June 1931; and SCM, 29 June 1931
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