Chapter 11--Iowa & the Great Depression, from A New History of Iowa

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Iowans suffered terribly during the Great Depression, which followed almost a decade of economic misery in the state. The stock market crash of 1929 did not cause the depression, but it helped undermine a fragile economy. There were many causes of the crisis, ranging from a slowing economy to weak manufacturing and financial sectors. Iowa was hit hard by the economic calamity—the banking system in the state collapsed, as did farm prices. Foreclosures and unemployment destroyed lives and bred despair, leading to desperate rural protests. Franklin Roosevelt’s election brought the New Deal, stabilized the financial and agricultural sectors, employed tens of thousands of Iowans, and helped bring electricity to many parts of the state. While the New Deal was an incomplete success, it had a profound impact on the lives of most Iowans.

There were many causes of the Great Depression and there is no consensus on its origins almost a century after it occurred. The famous speculative mania of Wall Street, as well as the long agricultural depression that afflicted Iowa and rural America in the 1920s, contributed to it. On the surface, the postwar years seemed to be a prosperous, booming time. But income growth had been limited to the wealthiest and millions of families lived near subsistence levels. Late in the decade, the American economy had begun to slow; parts of Europe and Asia fell into recession. In October 1929 the stock market plummeted, after having doubled in value since early 1928. The crash did not cause the depression, but it contributed to the economic downturn that was in the making. By 1926 auto manufacturing had slowed, as did housing construction. Business inventories had begun to rise in 1928, demonstrating slowing consumer demand. But, even as business slowed, the stock market boomed, fed by easy credit and greed for greater gains. Wall Street’s decline presaged an overall economic deterioration. Commodity prices crashed. Corn prices fell almost 80% in three years. In 1930, the economy contracted by 12.6% and unemployment began to climb. By 1932 the United States, and the state of Iowa, were in the midst of the greatest economic crisis in the country’s history.¹

The nation did not immediately fall into the horrific “hard times” that we associate with the period. Only a couple of million Americans—about two percent—had invested in the stock market, so the economic pain was initially limited. But wealth was destroyed and personal spending fell as Wall Street tumbled, especially among the richest. Business confidence was damaged and banks reduced credit to cover their losses. The shaky American financial system contributed greatly to this brewing disaster. It had always been unstable, and hundreds of banks had failed each year during the 1920s, destroying depositors’ savings as the institutions went bankrupt. Over 1,300 banks collapsed in 1930, with more than 2,000 failing in 1931. Panicked mobs of depositors besieged banks. As the crisis accelerated in 1930, employers reduced spending and began to lay off workers. Within one year of the October crash, almost three million workers lost their jobs and unemployment approached 10%.²

By late 1931, the economic crisis had turned into the Great Depression. International commerce collapsed as nations built trade barriers in vain attempts to stimulate their own economies. England, a pillar of the world economy, abandoned the gold standard. Other nations followed, undermining the flow of capital from country to country. International investors started to withdraw gold from the United States, precipitating a series of banking crises in late 1931 that lasted until early 1933. Attempting to halt the flow of capital out of the country, the Federal Reserve increased interest rates—exactly the opposite of the financial stimulus that the nation needed. The American economy, beset by a myriad of crises, shrank by more than 20% in 1931 and unemployment climbed above 15%. More than half of Americans who had jobs worked part time. By March 1933 the financial system had collapsed across most of the country and 34 states had closed their banks. Unemployment reached nearly 25% in 1933. The stock market had fallen 90% by that year and the economy was in free fall.3

President Herbert Hoover struggled unsuccessfully to handle the growing crisis throughout most of his presidency. His conservative political ideology limited his ability to adequately combat the calamity. Hoover’s emphasis upon individual effort and his belief that America provided boundless economic opportunity restricted his response. He believed that cooperative endeavor and charitable aid could fight the crisis. He also feared that too much federal aid would undermine the work ethic of Americans. Hoover spent more money on federal construction programs than previous presidents and established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to assist large businesses and financial institutions. But these measures were not enough. In New York City scores of people starved to death. As the economy contracted and the nation suffered, Hoover gained a reputation as a heartless figure that refused to help millions of Americans in misery.4

Life had been difficult even before the Depression for many. One-third of the population of the United States survived on less than one hundred dollars a month in the 1920s, but this small amount of money seemed a fortune in the next decade. Slim Collier, a bartender from Waterloo, did not live in a house with running water until he was eleven. In the late 1930s, Collier and others who were desperate for work gathered at four a.m. in the hopes of being chosen by farmers to labor for fifteen cents an hour. When he joined the army in 1941 he was one of two recruits in his company who had completed the eighth grade. John R. Ortega wrote that his grandmother had died in childbirth in 1927, leaving behind eight children. His family lived in a “drafty shed” in Buffalo Center, where his infant sister Josephine died from pneumonia. Ortega’s father did not have the money to buy a casket, so he built one for his daughter. Men at the stockyards in Sioux City worked seven days a week in conditions so cold that their lunches froze solid. Slim Collier told historian Studs Terkel that the once the Depression hit, the “dominant thing was helpless despair and submission. There was anger and rebellion among a few, but, by and large, that quiet desperation and submission.”5

As the economy contracted, the prices of almost everything declined, even as income to purchase them evaporated. Falling commodity prices for farm goods such as corn, pork, and eggs cut family income. In late 1932 a bushel of corn earned a farmer ten cents. Property prices tumbled leaving many with debts that exceeded the value of their land. The collapsing banking system destroyed savings, eliminated credit for people and businesses, and left the United States with a cash shortage. In some Iowa counties lenders owned almost thirty percent of the farmland, the original owners having lost it after falling behind on payments. Arthur Leaf lost his home, land, livestock, and almost all of his possessions in 1930. His church also expelled him. To survive he sold magazine and newspaper subscriptions, tools, groceries, and nursery stock, travelling by car from town to town. His wife Marie cared for their children in his absence. He worked on a farm they rented on weekends. Forty years after the depression, Oscar Heline bitterly remembered the foreclosure process. “First they’d take your farm, then they took your livestock, then your farm machinery. Even your household goods. And they’d move you off.” Property prices had been falling since the early 1920s, down almost seventy percent in eastern Johnson County by the middle of the 1930s. In one township in the county, the average sale price fell below one hundred dollars an acre in 1936.

Iowa led the nation in bank failures from 1921 to 1931, with an average of 87 banks failing each year. More than one-half of the banks in the state in 1921 had closed or had their assets liquidated by 1933. The state’s economy had suffered from low commodity prices since the early 1920s and the depressed agricultural economy strained not only family budgets, but also jeopardized the survival of local banks that served the small towns and rural population of the state. Iowa had the largest total mortgage debt in the country—more than twice any other state. This was, in part, due to the increasing cost of land during and immediately after World War One. Land prices had doubled between 1914 and 1920 and the total of mortgage loans had increased by almost as much. A combination of low prices and high debt left Iowans in a precarious economic situation.

Bank deposits fell in Iowa in the 1920s, even as they increased across the country. The failure of Iowa banks cost its citizens $201 million dollars from 1920 to 1930, as depositors were unprotected by any insurance on their accounts. As the financial system collapsed in the United States and in Iowa, people hoarded cash or withdrew their savings. This further undermined the stability of banks. In the first six months of 1932 deposits fell by seventeen percent in Iowa. “These were good hard-working people whose entire savings disappeared like smoke,” wrote James Hearst. One of Hearst’s neighbors killed himself so his family could live off the insurance proceeds. Forty Iowa banks failed in just two days in January 1933. By early 1933 the banking system in Iowa was “essentially bankrupt,” argued historian Calvin W. Coquillette. The state legislature passed, and the governor signed, emergency legislation to slow the banking panic in

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Iowa. This law allowed banks to restrict withdrawals. By the time Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in March 1933, the economy of Iowa had ground to a halt.  

In the 1930s the environment seemed to conspire with the depression to spread misery. The winter of 1935-1936 was one of the coldest in Iowa history. Faye Elsie Tomilinson Wookey recalled that the temperature in February did not rise above zero and that it could fall to twenty-five degrees below zero at night. The town of Red Oak got 43 inches of snow in January and February. Wookey and her family slept next to their stove. A scorching summer followed the brutal winter. In the summer they slept outside on cots to try and stay cool. It was often more then 100 degrees during the day. There was no rain and wells went dry. Strong winds brought red dirt from the central Plains that covered them while they slept at night. Irma J. Long remembered the hellish summer: “heat, heat, heat. We have been literally buried in it.” The high temperature “stifles and burns and saturates everything.” The blistering summer killed more than 400 Iowans, she wrote. One day it was 116 degrees.  

Iowans had long been attracted to farming and most people in the state lived in rural areas. Diaries and letters from the early 1930s revealed how the depression undermined the ability for Iowa’s farm families to make an adequate living. Elmer Powers, who lived Boone County, expressed the fulfillment that came from farming, writing in his diary, “the farm is by far the best place of all.” It was more than a business or a way to accumulate wealth, he noted. A farm was “life itself,” and to “be close and work with nature is one of life’s greatest opportunities.” James Hearst wrote that a farm was “part of our life, like our own flesh and blood.”  

However, this way of life was threatened by debt and low prices. Elmer Powers wrote in October 1931 that such prices for crops were “hard, cruel, bitter facts” and that “the scars of these days are going to show on the farms of this community for years to come.” Martie Ward noted in her diary that some families desperately sold land for as little as twenty or forty dollars an acre. James andRuby Howorth recalled in an interview that their family had eaten raccoon and rabbit as children when food was scarce in the 1930s. Clara Ackerman noted in her diary in December 1932 that “there has been a terrible calamity in this county in the last week—five banks have closed—with only 3 left in the county. People have lost thousands of dollars. We only have $11.00 at this time.” Ackerman wrote that people dreaded what might come next. “A good many are reading the Book of Revelation trying to connect the prophecy with the present times.” There was “no branch of farming or stock raising” which offered any profit over production cost, she lamented. Gladys Moeller Lage’s family burned corn to stay warm, as they could not sell corn at a profit and could not afford to buy coal.  

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10 Grant and Purcell, Years of Struggle: The Farm Diary of Elmer G. Powers, 31-32; James Hearst, Time Like a Furrow (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Department, 1981), 134.  
11 December 21, 1930, Martie Ward to Rev. Leo R. Ward, Leo R. Ward Letters, SHSI-IAC; December 14, 1932, Clara Ackerman Diaries, SHSI-IAC; James and Ruby Howorth Interview Transcript, Tape 18,
Farmwomen such as Ackerman had critical roles in maintaining a family farm and helping it survive. The importance of their work increased during the depression. They completed an endless variety of tasks and helped earn money. James Hearst wrote about his mother that it seemed “a kind of miracle that she could accomplish all she did.” Much of what a family consumed was produced under the direction of women. They prepared and cooked a huge amount of food, cared for chickens and large gardens and orchards, while tending to children, laundry, and sewing. One woman reported to historian Deborah Fink that she tended to 300 chickens; another harvested 100 bushels of potatoes one year. Hearst recalled that his mother had cleaned everything from kerosene lamps to beds. Many milked cows and churned butter, butchered chickens and collected eggs. In the typical farm family of moderate means, female-production totaled almost one-half of net family income in the mid-1930s. Chickens or eggs might pay for doctor visits or store debts, while baking, cooking, churning or nursing assistance might go toward other costs. Income from their work helped to feed their families, too. Fay Goodman recalled that money earned from eggs and cream “was what you spent for groceries that week.” Inez Frick Henze Badger wrote that her family of thirteen survived off the money earned by her mother. “We lived on the egg and cream checks,” Badger recalled. Women also earned cash through sewing and mending, babysitting, selling tomato plants or quilts.12

The 1932 presidential election that ushered Franklin Roosevelt into office brought little immediate change to the United States. The crisis only worsened as the country awaited a new leader. By 1933 the nation’s economy had shrunk by one-half and farm income was down by two-thirds from the low levels of 1929. In North Dakota almost every farmer had been bankrupted by a combination of drought, grasshoppers, low prices and hail. In nearby South Dakota, mothers fed tumbleweed soup to their children. Urban areas suffered too. Chicago could not pay its teachers throughout the winter of 1932 and 1933. Iowa teachers did not receive regular paychecks either, remembered James Hearst. Across the nation, half of families were behind on mortgage payments. By 1933 millions had lost their housing to foreclosures. Marriage and divorce rates declined—they were too expensive—as did birthrates.13

The situation in Iowa was equally difficult. In November 1932, Powers lamented, “many people think that they do not have anything to be thankful for.” A local banker attempted suicide two days after Powers wrote this entry. As Christmas neared, he noted, “not many farm folks are talking about Christmas gifts.” Desperate unemployed women in Des Moines turned to prostitution to survive, charging from one to three dollars for sex. Families burned corn to stay warm over the winter, as they did not have the money for fuel. Robert Boland collected coal that had fallen off railcars to help heat his family’s house in Dubuque. A barter economy dominated rural parts of the state, as people exchanged food and clothing to survive. Families raised large

SHSI-IAC; Grant and Purcell, Years of Struggle, 31-32; Gladys Moeller Lage Memoir, Iowa Women’s Archive, University of Iowa Libraries, University of Iowa, Iowa City (IWA).
gardens and chickens to feed themselves, taking eggs and poultry to local stores in trade. They shared houses to save expenses and grew potatoes in their backyards. “In those last trying months under Hoover, a chaotic situation came frightfully close to anarchy,” wrote John M. Wilkinson.14

Harsh economic circumstances led to a series of protests in Iowa. In 1929 the state had mandated that farmers test cattle for bovine tuberculosis, resulting in a violent farm protest known as the Cow War. It was centered in eastern Iowa around the towns of Muscatine and Tipton. While Iowa farmers had usually supported high standards for the testing and grading of livestock and grain, this new requirement was badly timed and implemented. The state recruited a force of veterinarians that visited counties, searching for and eradicating tubercular livestock. Then they moved on to another county. Such a group of outsiders, who arrived when farmers were economically vulnerable and confiscated diseased cattle, proved highly unpopular. Compensation for cows that had been killed was often delayed. Farmers also argued that the payments that they received were below the value of their livestock. Families lost an average of $130 for each animal killed, a huge blow to family finances in the midst of the depression. Furthermore, farmers did not believe that the TB test was fully reliable.15

By 1931 resistance to the program was widespread, especially after some lost entire herds to the disease. Farmers armed themselves and barred state veterinarians from visiting their farms to test their animals. In March, mobs of hundreds of farmers blocked veterinarians from giving tests. Farmers flooded into Des Moines to protest the law later that month, but legislation supporting voluntary testing failed. The conflict flared up again when the state veterinarian was stopped from giving tests in August by another armed mob. In September, 450 farmers with clubs battled deputies in a fog of tear gas. Several people were injured and law enforcement was forced to retreat. In response, Governor Dan Turner sent 2,000 men from the Iowa National Guard into five counties to enforce the tests. Troops stayed for two months. Several years later the program was modified to use local vets to carry out the tests. There were no further incidents of resistance to the program and bovine tuberculosis, which could spread to children, was eliminated in Iowa.16

As the depression deepened, other desperate rural insurgencies sprang up, inspired, in part, by the Cow War. The most important of these was the Farmer’s Holiday Association, whose protests peaked in 1932 and 1933, just as the Great Depression was at its worst and farm prices at their lowest. This group was active across much of the Midwest, from the Dakotas to Iowa. It did not promote cooperatives, such as the populists wanted, and did not attempt to elect anyone to political office. Iowa farmer Milo Reno led the movement and was elected president of the state association in 1932. Born in southern Iowa, and reared in the populist tradition of

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fiery, idealistic rhetoric, he had opposed the compulsory testing of cattle for TB. Reno was the most vocal advocate in the state on behalf of struggling farm families. He argued that farmers deserved to earn their cost of production, with a guaranteed profit. The Farmer’s Holiday Association planned strikes, attempted to halt the movement of farm goods to market, and tried to halt foreclosures. In Iowa, its actions occurred in the northwest section of the state near Sioux City, often attracting hundreds of men, but never more than a small percentage of local farmers.17

The protest began in the summer of 1932, when farmers attempted to block highways and withhold farm products from market. They stopped vehicles and dumped milk into ditches, in a vain effort to reduce supply and increase prices. This occurred in scattered locations across the state, such as Council Bluffs and Des Moines. Mass arrests and jail time helped clear the roads and disrupt protests, but the relatively small number of those involved did not influence milk prices in the state. In the second phase of the protest, which occurred in early 1933, farmers attempted to halt foreclosures. In one confrontation with sheriff deputies a fight broke out, leaving at least one protestors injured. On April 27, 1933, the most serious violence occurred when several hundred men seized Judge Charles C. Bradley and threatened to hang him if he refused to halt foreclosures. That same day a mob of farmers fought a pitched battle with fifty deputies trying to halt another foreclosure. The governor of Iowa called out the National Guard and declared martial law in five Iowa counties, effectively crushing the protest. A few went to jail for their actions. The Farmers’ Holiday movement collapsed in the state in the mid-1930s. Many members lost their farms and their motivation for struggle; New Deal programs also provided financial assistance to those who had supported the association.18

When Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated as president on March 4, 1933—the last time before the date was moved to January—every sector of the American economy seemed to be failing. Roosevelt had promised the American people a “new deal,” a phrase that he had used in accepting the Democratic nomination for president. His administration cobbled together a set of programs to address the crises facing the country. The New Deal was a mix of plans to reform some sectors of the economy, such as banking, and provide work to the millions of unemployed. While it failed to end the Great Depression, the New Deal did much to reduce the misery of Americans and helped build the infrastructure that supported American prosperity in the 1940s and afterwards. Some of these programs were the messy result of political compromise, while others were hastily thrown together in the midst of a vast emergency. Simply put, it was an imperfect solution to an unprecedented crisis. Government spending more than doubled in the 1930s, but the New Deal did not bring socialism to the United States, as its worst critics cried. It helped Americans and it helped Iowans. It provided crucial relief to millions of people and helped save capitalism from its own failures.19

In early March 1933, the new president called Congress into emergency session. Addressing the collapse of the American banking system was the most important task. Credit was “the lubricant of capitalism,” wrote historian Michael E. Parrish, and it had evaporated, as

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18 Rodney D. Karr, “Farm Rebels in Plymouth County, Iowa,” 637-644; William C. Pratt, “Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s,” 139-140.

banks failed and states declared banking holidays. Roosevelt officially announced a nationwide banking holiday two days after taking office. On March 9, the Emergency Banking Act became law. It gave the federal government sweeping new powers to reorganize any bank and provide funding to improve its balance sheets by buying stock or assuming debts. Federal officials inspected banks, allowing solvent ones to reopen, while placing troubled ones under supervision. On March 14, Roosevelt explained what the government was doing to assist the financial sector in his first “fireside chat” over the radio. He reassured Americans that any bank that opened for business the next day would be solvent. Americans believed him. Deposits flooded back into the financial system and the banking crisis passed. Reforms later that year provided government insurance for deposits, administered by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), with costs shared by the government and banks.\(^\text{20}\)

Even as the banking emergency eased, Iowa’s farmers faced challenges as great as any in the nation. Henry A. Wallace, editor of the Iowa newspaper Wallace’s Farmer, became Secretary of Agriculture in 1933. Wallace’s father, Henry C., had been agriculture secretary in the 1920s and both men had been longtime advocates for struggling farmers. The younger Wallace was a progressive Republican from Iowa, who experimented with hybrid corn and had started a seed business in the 1920s. This company, Pioneer Hi-Bred, was funded by an inheritance his wife had received and was worth nearly ten billion dollars in 1999. Wallace’s articles, essays, and leaflets discussed topics that impacted agriculture, ranging from monetary policy to tariffs to the evils of big business. The ongoing crisis of American agriculture had helped convince him that the government needed to help farmers find markets overseas or reduce surpluses and raise prices. As agriculture secretary, Henry A. Wallace helped manage and usher in a revolution in policy that changed the relationship between farmers and their government. He was a pragmatic idealist, committed to social justice and the preservation of American agriculture.\(^\text{21}\)

One of the first tasks of Wallace and the new administration was to find a way to help American farmers. The greatest problem was low prices. One of the first pieces of New Deal legislation was the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). In part, it tried to increase farm prices by reducing livestock numbers and the amount of acreage planted. The government asked cotton growers to plow up their crop and paid farmers to slaughter millions of pigs to avoid a future pork surplus. Iowan Slim Collier recalled, “we went out and bought ‘em and killed ‘em. This is how desperate it was. It was the only way to raise the price of pigs.” One hundred million pounds of pork and lard from the slaughter was given to families in need. The AAA also paid wheat farmers to reduce their production for 1934. These measures helped increase the price of many crops. Iowa’s corn farms did not need to destroy any part of their crop, since a severe drought helped to reduce production in the mid-1930s. The government paid corn farmers thirty cents a bushel, based on average yields in earlier years, to avoid planting corn. Oscar Heline, a lifelong farmer, remembered how families felt as lives slowly improved. “It was Wallace who saved us, put us back on our feet. He understood our problems.” Farm income in Iowa more than doubled by 1935, when more than 85% of Iowa land was enrolled in AAA programs. More

\(^{20}\) Michael E. Parrish, \textit{Anxious Decades}, 289-293.

than two million acres of Iowa farmland went purposefully unplanted in 1934. Farmers signed 175,765 contracts for benefits totaling $73,000,000.22

While the financial system began to recover and farm prices started to rise in 1933, millions still suffered from hunger and unemployment. A variety of New Deal programs attempted to reduce unemployment. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided government jobs to 500,000 young men nationwide in its first two years. The CCC operated more than fifty camps across Iowa during the depression, starting in 1933. The CCC hired men between the ages of 18 and 25 to complete conservation work overseen by the army, ranging from planting trees to building campgrounds, roads, trails, cabins and bridges. In Iowa, the CCC built state parks and preserves and wildlife refuges. Nearly 13,000 men were employed at 34 Iowa camps by the end of 1933 and more than 30,000 Iowans had worked for the program by the time it ended. “The average enrollee was said to be twenty years old with an eighth grade education. He came from a family of six children,” one report noted. Because of regular meals and physical labor, workers gained, on average, ten pounds. They received $30 a month, with $22 to $25 automatically sent home. The money that Wilbur Putnam sent to his family in Dubuque helped his parents to pay back taxes on their home.23

CCC camps were located across the state and employed white, Latino and native men. Each location had about two hundred enrollees. Camps began with tents, but were upgraded to wooden barracks; they also had dining and recreation halls, which might have a pool table, checkers and card games. One of the first camps opened near Ledges State Park, south of Boone. Men planted 350,000 trees and completed projects to combat erosion. The CCC constructed dams, trails, fences, and parking lots around Eldora and Chariton. Crews from the Lenox camp built 701 structures by 1935, including dams and diversion ditches. The CCC’s Indian Division employed more than 100 Meskwaki. A camp in Tama enrolled about twenty men from the tribe, where they built a community and cultural center, as well as other infrastructure. Government employment provided much-needed income, as the depression had eliminated job opportunities nearby. There was so much demand for work among the Meskwaki that it was rotated among men, so as many as possible could earn an income.24

Sebastian Alvarez joined the CCC in 1934 after graduating from high school. He worked at a camp near Maquoketa. Much of the labor that he did reduced soil erosion—he helped build

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The Personal Side

25 Interview with Sebastian Alvarez, May 12, 1994, by Deborah Fink, 1-10, 13, 19-21, 27-30, SHSI-IAC.
million hot lunches to students in Iowa, a program that continued at many schools even after the WPA ended in the middle of the Second World War. Sixty-eight Iowa counties had nursery schools sponsored by the program.28

The WPA was an innovative and sometimes controversial program that also supported creative efforts in the arts, theater, and music. Detractors argued that it wasted money on arts programs and produced material critical of American society. Yet WPA projects also created lasting treasures in Iowa and across the country. Forty thousand unemployed writers worked for the Federal Writer’s Project, producing regional and state guidebooks, as well as collecting the stories of former slaves. More than 100 WPA workers helped write the Iowa state guide. Actors and playwrights working for the WPA’s Federal Theater Project performed plays across the country, while musicians gave concerts or taught students to play instruments. The Iowa Federal Theater Project presented more than twenty plays in Des Moines in the spring of 1937. In 1935 and 1936 the WPA’s Federal Music Project sponsored more than 100 concerts in Des Moines at parks, schools and other public places. Iowa artists on the WPA payroll produced more than 100 original paintings that were given to schools and libraries, as well as murals in public buildings still visible today.29

Another program, the National Youth Administration (NYA), helped young people between the ages of 16 and 25. It helped students attend college by providing work-study jobs. It also provided part-time employment to millions of high school students. In Sioux City, the NYA funded recreation and training for youth, including classes in carpentry and office work. Its young workers in Iowa also repaired buildings, landscaped highways, developed parks, and built more than 100 playgrounds. NYA employees helped establish new branch libraries, as well as travelling libraries, especially in rural areas. Women worked in hospitals and food preparation. The program employed more than 8,000 Iowans in February 1940.30

The Iowa artist Grant Wood, now famous for his American Gothic painting, completed work for the New Deal during the 1930s. Wood was born near Anamosa in 1891. A quiet and shy boy, his artistic talents developed in high school. He took drawing classes at the University of Iowa while working as a teacher at a one-room schoolhouse. Wood then enlisted in the army during the First World War, but the conflict ended before he was deployed overseas. In the 1920s he visited Europe several times, living in Paris and traveling to Italy to live with fellow painters. After his return to Cedar Falls in 1924, he set up a studio and home in a large spare room in a building owned by a friend. He was extraordinarily productive over the next eleven years at this location and most of his best-known work was produced during this time. In 1930 American Gothic won him immediate fame. He was briefly employed as the director of Iowa’s Public Works of Art Project in 1934. The artists that Wood hired, including Christian Petersen, painted murals at Iowa State University depicting Iowa’s cultural history—from farming to engineering. Later that year, he was appointed an associate professor of fine arts at the University of Iowa. He spent the rest of his career at the school, struggling to be accepted by his colleagues because of his homosexuality, lack of a college degree, and a style that was seen as

29 Parrish, Anxious Decades, 347-350; “History of Community House Sioux City, Iowa,” 205; Louise Rosenfield Noun, Iowa Women in the WPA, 69-70, 72, 76-79.

The New Deal also helped bring electricity to rural Iowans. In the 1920s, electrical companies focused on providing power to more populated and wealthier urban areas. It was unprofitable to build the necessary infrastructure for scattered homes in the countryside. Only about 10\% of farms in the United States had electricity in the 1930s, while 85\% of households in urban and suburban areas did. In Iowa less than fifteen percent of farms had power. Without electricity, rural homes lacked the comforts and conveniences that people in cities had. Women had to scrub laundry by hand in an outdoor tub; irons were heated on a fire. Food preservation was difficult without ice. Lanterns provided lighting in the absence of electricity. Private companies charged new rural customers up to a one thousand dollar deposit to extend service to country homes. It also cost twice as much per kilowatt-hour to provide electricity to such homes.\footnote{D. Clayton Brown, \textit{Electricity for Rural America: The Fight for the REA} (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), xii-xv, 3-5; Ronald R. Kline, \textit{Consumers in the Countryside: Technology and Society in Rural America} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 132; David E. Nye, \textit{Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 261, 299.}

The Roosevelt Administration proposed that the federal government provide long-term and low cost loans to local cooperatives that provided electrical service to areas without it. This would solve the problem of high costs in rural areas. The Rural Electrification Agency (REA) was created to manage this vast undertaking. Farmers and other residents combined to form a cooperative and recruit members, select officers, and apply for a loan to build distribution lines. Electricity was purchased from private companies. In Linn County, one cooperative’s application to the REA in 1937 showed that 569 farms desired power. The organization received a grant for $228,000 to build 200 miles of lines. By July 1939 the infrastructure had been built and farms began to be illuminated. The number of farms with power more than doubled by 1939 nationwide. By 1945 one-half of farmers had electricity.\footnote{D. Clayton Brown, \textit{Electricity for Rural America: The Fight for the REA}, 40-43, 68-70, 75; Harold Severson, \textit{Rural Iowa Turns on the Lights: The Story of the Electric Power Revolution in the Hawkeye State} (Midwest Historical Features, 1965), 46-50; David E. Nye, \textit{Electrifying America}, 321.}

Electricity changed life for rural people forever. James Hearst remembered that nothing transformed the rural world like the coming of electricity. “The break with the past gave us an entrance to the modern world,” he wrote. Bright lights replaced the “dim glow of smoky lanterns” and electricity ended much of the “hard arm and back work” of farming. Families could store food in a refrigerator, avoiding the need for an icebox. Electricity helped keep the home warm and powered a radio. “Everyone could play table games or read at any time of the day or night,” wrote Robert Seltz. An electric heater also helped keep sows and newborn piglets alive during the winter and kept water for animals from freezing. Hens produced more eggs with light. Electric water pumps eliminated the need to carry water to the home; they also brought indoor plumbing and an end to outdoor latrines. Mary Hagen recalled that electricity made water always available. “Wash water was no longer heated in a copper boiler over a two burner kerosene stove,” she wrote. Drinking water did not have to be carried from the well either, she
Livestock required lots of water and pumps saved an average of one-half hour of work each day. Rural schools brightened with new lights, too.\\(^{34}\)

The New Deal poured more than a billion dollars into Iowa during the Depression. The state received more money per capita than any other state in the Midwest, except for North and South Dakota, with the federal government spending $467 per person in Iowa. New Deal programs employed tens of thousands of people in the state, helped the farm economy recover, and began to bring electrical power to Iowa’s rural majority. While the New Deal did not end the Depression—it took enormous spending during World War Two to achieve this goal—it brought some relief and some recovery to Iowans. The financial system in the state stabilized and money from the government flowed into Iowa beginning in 1933. Iowa started to recover faster than anyone could have imagined, with car sales more than doubling by 1935 from their low point early in the decade. The WPA had almost 23,000 workers on its rolls that year and the CCC had more than 8,000. Unemployment remained high, though. The slow economic recovery continued into the late 1930s, interrupted by another economic downturn in 1937. Despite the recovery from the depths of the Depression by the end of the decade, corporations, banks, and insurance companies owned about twenty percent of Iowa farmland. But, thirty thousand farms in the state received electrical power in 1936. Sales tax revenue reached a new high in that year. Beer and cigarette sales increased that year, as well.\\(^{35}\)

The Great Depression left permanent scars on Americans. James Hearst recalled how the crisis affected his family. “We just dug in and faced what had to be faced and survived. But no one who weathered the depression ever escaped without a kind of obsession for security.” Arthur Leaf, the travelling salesman, eventually found success. Art and his wife Marie lived frugally, fearing hard times. They never bought a new car, but they found a new church. Marie taught in a rural school and their kids went to college. They bought a farm in Hamilton County and it off long before they died.\\(^{36}\)

As the decade came a close, the spread of fascism in Europe and Asia began to threaten the unsteady peace that had existed since the First World War. Even as Iowans struggled to rebuild their lives after the Depression, new challenges faced the United States. Americans wanted to avoid the brutality of a new war, especially those in Iowa who had suffered from tough economic times for almost twenty years. But the bitter reality of a world at war would drag the nation into its greatest conflict.

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\\(^{34}\) Robert Seltz, Between the Corn Rows: Stories of an Iowa Farm Family’s Survival in the Great Depression (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2012), 42; James Hearst, Time Like a Furrow (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Department, 1981), 9, 242, 245; Ronald Kline, Consumers in the Countryside: Technology and Society in Rural America, 265, 323; Mary Hagen Memoir, 10-11, IWA.
