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The CWA in Anderson County, Texas, 1933-1934

BY LYNN M. BURLBAW

During, and since, the economic downturn of 2008 much was made of the possible role of the Federal Government in reprising the public work projects of the New Deal Era to stimulate the economy and return people to work. The passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was an obvious attempt to reverse the economic trend of the country.

On Feb. 13, 2009, Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 at the urging of President Obama, who signed it into law four days later. A direct response to the economic crisis, the Recovery Act has three immediate goals:

- Create new jobs and save existing ones
- Spur economic activity and invest in long-term growth
- Foster unprecedented levels of accountability and transparency in government spending¹

The Act provided for numerous types of aid, such as

financial aid directly to local school districts,
expansion of the Child Tax Credit,
underwriting the computerization of health records,
infrastructure development and enhancement:

weatherizing of 75 percent of federal buildings and more
than one million private homes,
construction and repair of roads and bridges,
scientific research,
expansion of broadband and wireless service²

One condition many of the funded projects were to exhibit was what was

referred to as "shovel ready." The projects were to put people to work immediately, not in 6 months or a year but immediately upon funding. The stated goal of immediate employment echoes the requirement and need seen in 1933 when unemployment in the United States was approaching 25% of the work force. When President Roosevelt announced the Civil Works program in November of 1933, the

Regulations required that all projects should be operated on public property, should be socially and economically desirable, and of such nature as to be undertaken quickly. All projects were operated by force account and could not be used to reduce the normal expenditures of State and local government.³

Projects that would meet the criteria of "socially and economically desirable, and of such nature as to be undertaken quickly" were not described as a part of the program announcement in the fall of 1933 during the height of the Great Depression; several of these did not even exist at that time. However, creating and retaining jobs and spurring economic activity were goals Roosevelt directed Harry Hopkins to achieve in a few weeks.

Soon after taking office in the spring of 1933, Roosevelt began to address the issue of unemployment and job loss. An early agency was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration which instituted, among other programs, the Projects Works Administration (PWA). However, under the leadership of Harold Ickes, the PWA moved slowly in its task of approving projects and hiring unemployed workers and getting money into the hands of needy families. With the coming of winter 1933, predicted to be extremely harsh, Roosevelt's concern over families and children increased.

President Roosevelt formally created the new CWA by Executive Order on November 9, 1933. He diverted \$400 million from the PWA budget to finance short-term, light construction and named FERA head Harry Hopkins in charge of the operations through his state and county relief organizations.

While FERA would continue to supply direct relief, particularly to special groups like transients, drought victims, and self-help cooperatives, the CWA would employ 4 million on public projects. Conceived as an emergency stop-gap to create jobs, the CWA was an uneasy hybrid of social work compassion and engineering know-how.⁴

The CWA was seen as an immediate relief activity, one that would provide unskilled or low skilled workers with means to earn money instead or receiving handouts from soup kitchens or government agencies. Schlesinger (1959) wrote

CWA jobs, moreover, had to be easy to learn and short in duration; winter weather limited the type of project available; necessary tools were in short supply.

CWA tackled a tremendous variety of jobs. At its peak, it had about 400,000 projects in operation. About a third of CWA personnel worked on roads and highways. In the three and a half months of CWA's existence, they built or improved about 500,000 miles of secondary roads. Next in importance came schools—40,000 built or improved, wht 50,000 teachers employed in country schools or in city adult education, and large numbers of playgrounds developed. CWA gave the nation nearly 500 airports and improved 500 more. It developed parks, cleared waterways, fought insect pests, dug swimming pools and sewers.⁵

With the focus on getting money into the hands of Americans, Hopkins had to rely on existing networks and agencies to implement his plans. He had little time to develop an agency if he was to hire 4 million people in 30 days.

Of course, Hopkins paid a price for speed. In money, the cost was considerable – in the end, nearly a billion dollars. And there were administrative lapses to which Hopkins characteristically exposed before his critics could discover them. In January 1934 he lashed out at evidence of political interference and graft in CWA operations. “I never anticipated anything of the kind,” he told newspapermen. “I suppose I’m naïve and unsophisticated, but that’s the truth. I didn’t, and I feel badly about it.” He ordered investigations, shook up incompetent or tainted state organizations and began to bring in Army officers to strengthen the program against corruption.⁶

Several authors, the two previously cited, Schwartz and Schlesinger, T. A. McCormick and Clark Tibbitts , William Leuchtenburg and Forrest Walker

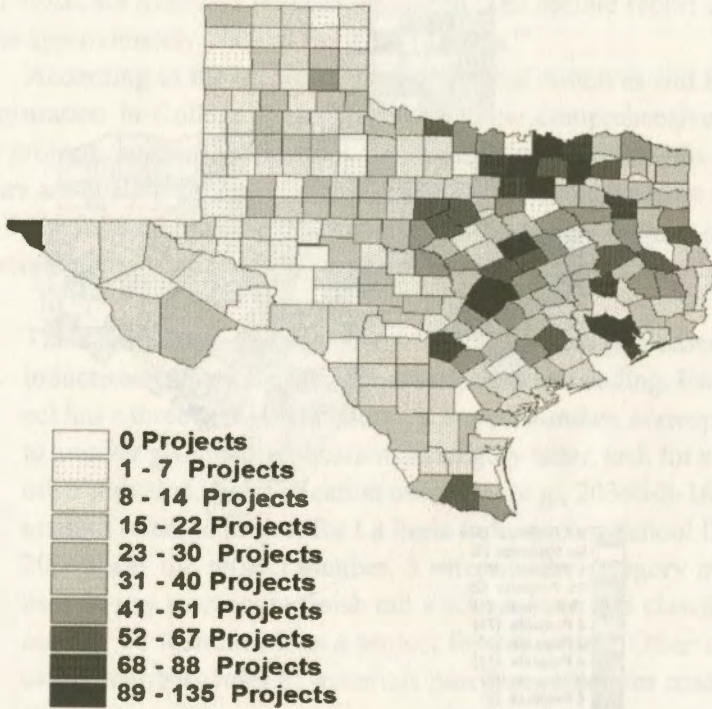
have written about the CWA.⁷ These authors, as well as the *Analysis of Civil Works Program Statistics*,⁸ completed in 1939 provide a broad overview of the CWA, as quoted above from Schlesinger, but no author has written about the details of the various projects undertaken by states. This may be appropriate as the CWA only lasted 6 months; however, the broad overview fails to show the ingenuity and desire of men and women to engage in productive work, however short-term that work may have been. This paper looks at the projects in one state, Texas, and in one county in Texas, as a way of understanding the types and scope of the work completed during that 6 month period.

CWA Projects in Texas

Texans enthusiastically and immediately embraced the CWA. Between November 1933 and March 1934, Texans submitted applications for 7218 county projects designed to put men and women to work in the State. Several projects were submitted at the state level which applied to multiple counties – there projects were primarily agricultural and related to land stabilization and reclamation. Project applications were submitted from 249 of the State's 254 counties. The counties not submitting applications were Irion, Jack, Kenedy, King and Kinney. Even Loving County, in west Texas with a population of only 195 people, submitted 3 applications for aid. These projects ranged from parent education to school teacher salary to building roads, clearing brush, painting buildings and, in the case of Willacy County in South Texas, cleaning up after the hurricane which hit the Texas coast in the fall of 1933.

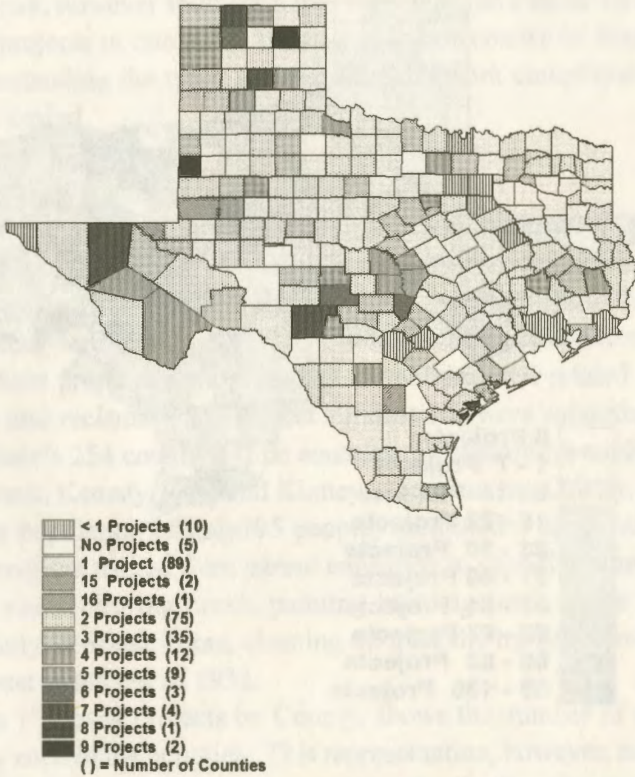
Map 1⁹, Texas Projects by County, shows the number of projects submitted by each of the counties. This representation, however, is distorted in that the population of Texas was not evenly distributed and counties such as Bexar (San Antonio), Travis (Austin), Harris (Houston) and Tarrant (Fort Worth) show up as having more projects. According to this map, the major portion of projects were in the area today known as the I-35 corridor (Dallas/Fort Worth to San Antonio) and North Central Texas.

Texas Projects by County



Possibly a more representative display, although there is distortion here also, in Map 2 which shows the applications per 1000 population of the counties. In this map, Loving (population 195 in 1930) and Andrews (population 736) counties in west Texas appear to have had numerous projects.

Projects Per 1000 County Population (1930 Census)



Map 2 shows that the projects were fairly evenly distributed when normalized by population.

Projects in Texas

Data for this project analysis comes from two documents related to the CWA in Texas. The first is the *Application for Approval of Civil Works Project*, C.W.A. Form L-3A, consisting of 4 pages. The second document is the *Report of Completed, Transferred, or Discontinued Projects*, C.W.A. Form S-16 consisting of 8 pages. The application form for all 7200+ projects in Texas are available through microfilm. The second report is available for approximately 7000 of the 7200 projects.¹⁰

According to the archivists at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD, there is no comprehensive listing of the projects, neither applications nor completion reports – the project numbers are available on microfilm. Preceding the project papers is a numeric listing of the projects in the county. Likewise there is not a guide to understanding the coding used to give projects identification numbers.

The classifications of categories for the projects was based on an inductive evaluation of project descriptions and coding. Each project has a three part identification; a project number, corresponding to number given the application, a category letter, and, for a lack of other direction, a classification number. - (e.g., 20360-S-16). This number refers to project for La Feria Independent School District: 20360 was the project number, S refers to the category of funds used to pay teachers to finish out a school year, and classification number 16 identifies it as a project for educators. Other classification numbers refer to materials purchase, labor for road work, etc.¹¹

To provide data to analyze for this project, information about each project was entered in an Excel spreadsheet, one sheet for the L-3 Applications and one sheet for the S-16 Reports, when available. The entries were marked so that the researcher would know if there was both the application and report available for a project. Included in the entries was all information completed by the applicants and reporting agencies for each project. .

Analysis of projects by the classification numbers provides the most information on a gross level of the types of projects submitted. The following table shows the number of projects for some of the categories based on the classification number.

| Classification Number | Description, brief | Number of Projects |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------|
| 4 | Ground work around school buildings | 436 |
| 5 | Sanitary work, including sanitary toilets | 528 |
| 6 | Road Projects | 2892 |
| 8 | Water Projects, run-off and waterway works | 273 |
| 9 | Repairs to Schools, outside | 881 |
| 10 | School Construction, new and remodeling | 351 |
| 11 | Clerical Support, school-based health program personnell, administrative districts | 533 |
| 15 | School lunch Programs | 38 |
| 16 | Teachers | 655 |

One example of a project under classification 6 (947-D-6) is the application from Lawrence McLester, Aransas County Commissioner, Precinct #2, who asked, on November 7, 1933, for \$163.80 for "Road repairing and cleaning from Sparks Colony to Market Street" (Document D711431).¹² The S-16 report on this project was filed on April 17, 1934, and showed that the work was started on November 20, 1933 and was completed on December 2nd with the expenditure of 592 man-hours. The project received a supplemental appropriation of \$47.25 making the total estimate of \$211.05 but the work was completed under budget for a total cost of \$210.80 (Document D711430).¹³

Numerous road projects were submitted. On the S-16 report on Project 1882-D-6 in Bexar County, only part of the work was completed as the project was discontinued by the closing of the CWA. What was done though was

Hauled 4200 cubic yards of gravel on 2 miles of Miller Road and grubbed two acres. Length of gravel haul 6 miles. Hauled 2100 cubic yards of gravel on 1 mile of the Judson Rd. Length of haul 6 miles. Grubbed 16 acres on Blanco, Jones, Maltsberger, Lockhill-Selma Rd. County forces prepared subgrade.¹⁴

This work was completed for a sum of \$10837.25

An example of sanitation work is the application from Kemp in Kaufman County which read

Removal of old chemical toilet system and installation of 12 closet combinations, inventory, urinal, drinking fountains, shower, bath and sewage connections (Project 6655-E-5).¹⁵

Further analysis of projects within a classification number reveals finer details. For instance, in classification number 16, Teachers, three category letters are found: R, S, and T. Projects with the R category were to support school and community libraries; hiring of librarians but also the repair and cataloging of books. For example, in Hill County, the Superintendent of Schools submitted a request:

Circulating library established in the office of the county superintendent for the purpose of supplying reading material to the rural schools and homes. The books in this library are to be checked out by some responsible person in the community, read for two weeks, then returned to the central library and a new selection of books taken out. (Project 10190-R-16).

S-type projects sought money to pay public school teachers for a number of months ranging from 1 to 3. This salary money was sought so that schools could remain open for the full nine months of their academic calendar, a happening that was threatened by a lack of school tax money collection in various counties. In Trinity County, the school district requested money

To make it possible to continue the school the full nine months term as it has heretofore operated. Last year, it was pay, thereby consisting one month's salary. This district is so heavily in debt that every dollar of local maintenance money collected is needed to pay old obligations for furniture, equipment, bonds, and interest. It will require \$2,700.00 for teachers' salaries over and about our income for that purpose and unless the aid in this amount can be secured the schools will have to close the 8th month (Project 20735-S-16).

Finally, T-types of projects were to pay teachers to teach in programs outside of the public school setting. Projects of this type were adult education, Americanization programs, English as a second language, and kindergarten. A few of these T-type projects included day care programs for poor mothers for whom lack of child care would have prevented them from taking available jobs. In Athens, TX, the county requested funds for four teachers

One nursery teacher for children under six years of age whose parents are on the relief rolls; one teacher for the instruction of adults on relief rolls of this district; one teacher for the instruction of negro adults on relief rolls; one teacher for vocation education instruction (Project 9226-T-16).

Anderson County, Texas

Examination of the projects proposed by one county provides greater details about the program. "Anderson County is located in East Texas between the Trinity and Neches Rivers. . . . Between 1880 and 1940 Anderson County was predominantly agricultural. Corn, cotton, sweet potatoes, hay, and, by the 1920s, peanuts were the most important crops. The timber industry gained importance in the 1930s." Between 1920 and 1930, the county's population grew 15% but during the decade of the 1930s, population growth was nearly non-existent (0.1 %).

Anderson County officials submitted 38 applications and 4 supplements between November 13, 1933 and March 8, 1934; almost half of the applications, 18, were submitted in the month of November. Five projects applications were submitted for city improvement (Palestine, Frankston and Elkhart), twenty-three were submitted by the county, and thirteen were submitted by school districts (Elkhart, Slocum, Neches Consolidated, Palestine and Anderson County). H.B.Grigsby, the CWA official responsible for approving applications, had an office in Palestine; as a result, the time between submission and approval was very short. The applications submitted on November 13 and November 17 were approved the same day, thus allowing men to begin working and drawing a pay-check almost immediately. Applications submitted on November 25 were approved on December 4.

Table 2: Illustrative CWA Projects from Anderson County

| Type/Number of Projects | Project Number | Description | Unskilled* | Semiskilled/ Skilled* | Status |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| City - Recreational (1) - 9466-C-1 | | Repairing Grandstand, and building and repairing fence around municipally owned ball park Palestine. | (6) 107.20 | (4) 96 | Complete |
| City - Streets (2) | 1735-C-6 | Grading, graveling, and ditching and general improvement to Elkhart Texas, City Streets. | (75) 3930 | (1) 75/ (7) 788 | Complete |
| City - Water (2) | 4020-C-5 | The laying of a supplementary sewer line to serve portion of the City not served by the present system. | (170) 24,480 | (8) 1440/ (6) 1620 | Transfer to WPA |
| County - Clerical (4) | 13577-D-11 | This work pertains to office work in the Negro county agent's department. Due to excessive amount work required by the Federal Government in its various activities requires additional office assistant. | (0)/ | (1) 144 | Transfer to WPA |
| County - Education (1) - 9876-T-16 | 11911-D-11 | Taking photographs of CWA projects in Anderson County. | | (1) 68 | Complete |
| County - Health (3) | 8950-B-5 | Emergency Education Project For general Education of Adults-County Wide. | | (7) 336 | Discontinued |
| County - Roads (17) | 1739-D-6 | Building of pit type toilets, and general sanitation work in Anderson Co. | (409) 22,400 | | Discontinued |
| | 4964-D-6 | Improve Boston road Precinct #2.-grade gravel, repair culverts and bridges | (30) 1575 | (1) 275/ (3) 1002.5 | N/A |
| | | Improve roads Loper store on Highway 22 to Henderson County line Precinct #4; Improve Montabla-Tennessee Colony road Sand clay Precinct # 4; Improve road Hanks Store to Union School House about 2 1/2 miles. | (93) 6273.5 | (5) 502.5/ (3) 457.5 | Complete |

**** Numbers in this column follow the same protocol as in previous column; however, the first set of numbers (those before the /) represent semi-skilled workers, the second set represents skilled workers.* Numbers in this column indicate the number of people employed (in parenthesis) and the amount in dollars paid for that classification on these projects.**

In Table 2: Illustrative CWA Projects from Anderson County, below, are the descriptions of some of the funded projects with the unskilled/semi-skilled hours required by the project and the ultimate status of the project. The table illustrates the wide variety of projects proposed and completed in the county.

| Type/Number of Projects | Project Number | Description | Unskilled* | Semiskilled/ Skilled* | Status |
|-------------------------|----------------|---|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| | 9134-D-6 | Place gravel on sand beds and clay hills and generally improve roads in Precinct # 1 | (180) 13230 | (4) 460/ (10) 735 | Complete |
| School - Building (5) | 184-E-10 | This project contemplates supplying the City of Elkhart Consolidated High School with a girl's physical instructor. There are more than 150 intermediate and high school female pupils enrolled who have no physical director on account of insufficient funds of the district to pay for service. This school has in the past held a conspicuous position in all inter-scholastic league contests and are sorely in need of an instructor. | (1) 84 | | Complete |
| | 11902-E-10 | This project will be a community of canning kitchen 18x24 feet. It will be covered with boards and built with logs. This building will be located on the Slocum School Campus, Slocum, Texas. | (?) 368.95 | | Complete |
| | 9411-E-10 | Building of an additional room in Lincoln-Douglas Colored School, Palestine, and general repairs to building. | (10) 336 | (8) 560/ (20) 1472 | Complete |
| School - Clerical (2) | 10181-R-11 | It is requested in this project that Elkhart Consolidated High School be supplied with a secretary to the school faculty and in addition, assist in all CWA road projects insofar as the district is affected. Practically all school bus lines are being improved in said district out of CWA funds. All of which requires secretarial assistance that the district is unable to supply. | (1) 84 | | Complete |
| School - Grounds (1) - | 7254-E-4 | The grading and leveling of various School Campus in the City of Palestine, | (12) 1632 | (1) 144 | Transferred to WPA |
| School - Teacher (3) | 9262-T-16 | Nursery school for mothers who are on relief or work for CWA and can't afford to pay for care while they work | | (2) 144/ (0) | N/A |
| | 20435-T-16 | Teacher of Adult Classes | | (0) (1) 180 | N/A |

** Numbers in this column follow the same protocol as in previous column; however, the first set of numbers (those before the /) represent semi-skilled workers, the second set represents skilled workers.

Table 3: Employment Information Summary for Anderson County shows the employment figures for the 6 months that the CWA was in effect in Anderson County. As shown on Table 2, the majority of the projects were classified as completed with a few cancelled and some transferred to the Work Projects Administration.

Table 3: Employment Information Summary for Anderson County (selected items)

| Classification | Men* Employed | Average Hourly Rate | Hours Employed | Total Salary Paid |
|----------------|------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Unskilled | 2066 | \$0.37 | 502,502 | 190,304 |
| Semi-Skilled | 139 | .52 | 50,632 | 18,551 |
| Skilled | 104 | .73 | 23,776 | 16,250 |
| Supervisory | 28 | .91 | 12,990 | 14,205 |
| | | | | |

* The reports make no distinction between male and female workers.

Other examples could be given and more details could be provided for each of these projects, however, reading numbers and descriptions of places unknown to many listeners is probably of little value. Of more interest, more numbers, is information about the numbers of people employed and the money they earned.

By November 23, 1933, 133,179 people had been hired in Texas, almost 17% of the total 806,015 hired nation-wide on that date. The high point of employment in Texas was January of 1934 when the January 18th payroll was distributed to 239,264 Texas workers. For the month of November, a short month for the payroll, a total of \$3,023,534 was paid to workers in Texas; by the end of the program, Texans had earned \$29,842,554.

By the time the CWA was discontinued in April of 1934, nationally, a total of 172,400 work projects had been completed. Of the projects, 56,460 were road and highway projects, 33,810 were public building, 13,980 were sanitary projects, 3,720 were for waterworks and other utilities, 2,830 were for recreation, 3,190 were for waterways and flood control, 12,740 were for erosion control, 1,420 were done at airports, 7,440 were for public welfare and health, and under public education, arts and research, 14,660 projects had been completed for education and

the arts at a cost of \$25,675,000 for this last category, 93% of which had gone directly to workers – no administrative costs are included in these figures.

For a hastily put together program, Hopkins was able to get unemployed Americans working and earning money in the cold winter of 1933-1934 (reports of weeks long sub zero temperatures were reported in the New York papers). In 1979, Forrest Walker wrote

The Civil Works Administration has been, however, largely overlooked by writers on the Great Depression. Neglect of this early New Deal enterprise is understandable, for it existed only four and a half months, and, although nearly a billion dollars were spent in its short operational period, it was soon dwarfed by the expenses and achievements on ensuing New Deal measures. Nevertheless the CWA merits a closer analysis than is usually given to it. A bold experiment, it was the first attempt by the federal government to give work to the unemployed instead of aiding the states in the problem of relief.

This article has provided a closer analysis of the work accomplished by men and women in one county in Texas in the early days of federal programs to relieve unemployment and improve the lives of Americans during those cold days of the winter of 1933-1934.

¹ The Recovery Act, retrieved from http://www.recovery.gov/About/Pages/The_Act.aspx

² Ibid.

³ Harrington, F. C. Analysis of Civil Works Program Statistics. Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, June 1939: 9-10.

⁴ Schwartz, Bonnie Fox. The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984: 38.

⁵ Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. The Age of Roosevelt. The Coming of the New Deal, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959: 270.

⁶ Ibid., 270-271.

⁷ Leuchtenburg, William E. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963; McCormick, T. C., and Clark Tibbitts. "The Relief Situation." American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 40, No. 6 (May, 1935), pp. 755-763; Walker, Forrest A. The Civil Works Administration. An Experiment in Federal Work Relief, 1933-1934, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979.

⁸ Harrington, op cit.

⁹ Maps were created by the author.

¹⁰ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Records of the Civil Works Administration, Texas, 1933-1934. (RG 69). National Archives and Records Administration. Archives II, College Park, MD>

¹¹ Burlbaw, Lynn. 2011. "Keeping Schools Open in Depression Era Texas: The CWA and the 1933-1934 School Year," East Texas Historical Journal, 49: 51-52.

¹² NARA, op cit.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Georgia Kemp Caraway, "Anderson County," Handbook of Texas Online, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hca01>.

²⁰ Harrington, op cit.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Walker, op cit: ii.