

Maine History

Volume 31
Number 3 *Winter-Spring, 1992. Vol. 31, No. 3 & 4*

Article 3

1-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

Condon, Richard H.. "Nearing the End: Maine's Rural Community, 1929-1945." *Maine History* 31, 3 (1992): 142-173. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol31/iss3/3>

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RICHARD H. CONDON

NEARING THE END: MAINE'S RURAL COMMUNITY,
1929-1945

On October 1, 1940 in Mechanic Falls, Maine, Mrs. Lillian Watson, mother of five, wrote a letter to the Farm Security Administration. She had just received a "Consumer's Guide" that told of a home weaving program in North Carolina. Was such training and a loom available in Maine? If not, she added, "could you tell me of something else I could do to increase our income?" Although the family had a large garden and she had already canned more than 300 quarts of vegetables, she noted, "it does not pay bills. We owe hospital, doctors, back rent, notes, etc." She explained that "the mill where my husband works is not running hardly any" and there were no other industries in the small town. Her husband had many talents and wanted desperately to work: "I always feel like a beggar every time we have an unemployment compensation check. That is not what we are looking for."¹

Mrs. Watson's letter does not call up the usual dramatic images of the "dirty thirties": Hoovervilles, breadlines, Okies. But the Great Depression was real for her, as it was for most Mainers. The 40 percent of them, like the Watsons, who lived in small towns but did not farm helped make Maine a very rural state; since only 20 per cent farmed, it was no Kansas or Iowa. But when commodity prices fell, farmers bought less, debts mounted, and their taxes went unpaid. The economic health of Maine's small towns was inextricably linked to the fate of Maine agriculture. Most rural Mainers owned their own land, raised their own vegetables, and cut their own wood.² Thus they staved off the worst effects of the Depression for some time.³ In the past, rural people like Mrs. Watson had simply worked harder in order to remain independent during hard times. But the 1930s were different: farmers were more dependent on commercial crops, and with the collapse of the market economy, even the hardest work often brought little reward. And as as the date of



Dexter, Maine, in the 1930s. Communities like Dexter experienced wrenching social changes as citizens confronted the profound economic crisis that decade brought. They turned first to family and community resources, then to the state, and finally to the federal government. This changing orientation signaled a reluctant break with the past.

Bert Call photo, courtesy Dexter Historical Society and the University of Maine Special Collections Department.

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Mrs. Watson's letter indicates, hard times persisted for eleven long years after the stock-market crash.

Local authorities, traditionally the only resort of the poor, were unable to deal effectively with unprecedented relief demands these years brought. Many failed to provide even minimum services. The state had always played a limited role, and except when managing federal policies and funds, it did little more in the Depression era, hobbled as it was by an antiquated fiscal system, decades of almost unbroken one-party rule, and leaders unwilling to experiment. In her letter, Mrs. Watson confidently looked beyond town and state to Washington, not for a hand out but for a hand up. Her response to hard times, a plea directed not to a familiar government in Augusta but to a far-off Washington administration, was telling. It illustrates a fundamental shift in orientation brought on by a decade of closer contacts with distant markets, distant cultures, and distant governmental authorities. How did this great transformation come about, and how did it affect the average Mainer?

When the Great Depression began, 40,000 Maine farms had already experienced decades of slow transition from extensive, subsistence "farming as a way of life" to intensive, commercial "farming for a living." On about one-half of them, the farmer and his family still made ends meet with varied and changing combinations of crops and livestock. They farmed a variety of crops, cut wood in winter, fished, if near the coast, or took part-time jobs in neighboring cities and towns. The other half, specializing in potatoes, milk, eggs, poultry, apples, sweet corn, or some combination thereof, generally did better, but they were also more likely to be challenged by interregional competition, victimized by high transportation costs, and caught up in an increasingly complex market system which made decisions for them.⁴ The Depression spread these pressures among a vastly larger share of the rural population.

First to feel the effects of the Depression were those farmers heavily committed to commercial crops. Maine's most notable commercial farmers were the potato growers of its huge northernmost county. Aroostook led the nation in yield per acre,



Farmers most heavily committed to commercial crops were first to feel the Depression. Strongly individualistic, Maine farmers often spurned cooperatives and common brand labels or advertising – tactics that helped cushion producers in other states against the worst effects of the Depression.

University of Maine Experiment Station, Special Collections Department.

potatoes raised, and in production of seed potatoes; in certain years, such as 1919 and 1925, high prices made farmers rich. But Americans were eating fewer potatoes, and those they consumed came increasingly from western producers.⁵ Failing to respond effectively, most of Aroostook's strongly individualistic growers spurned cooperatives, opposed a common brand label, and neglected to advertise – steps already taken by their ultimate conquerors in Idaho.⁶ Saddled with these preexisting handicaps, they were hit harder by the economic storms of the 1930s than their fellows elsewhere in Maine.

In 1929 “wonderful crops” of potatoes sold at the second-best prices of the decade. Hay, apples and sweet corn did very well, egg and broiler volume and prices rose, and milk returns increased. But only two years later the State Grange Master noted that apple growers and potato growers were facing some of the worst markets in recent years. Increased acreage and favorable weather produced a bumper crop of potatoes, which

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sold at prices far below the cost of production.⁷ The Maine farm price index had fallen in 1932 to 37 percent below pre-war conditions, compared to a wholesale price index that had fallen only 5 percent.⁸

Through the decade Maine farm prices remained below those of 1910-1914, the years selected by experts as agriculture's best. Potato growers, averaging only 83 percent of that standard, did worst; dairy and poultry farmers achieved about 93 percent of it. Apple growers (102 percent) had the most purchasing power, although the savage winter of 1933-1934 killed tens of thousands of trees and damaged the buds of many more. Production thus fell by more than two-thirds in 1934, but "fairly satisfactory returns" came the next year. The disaster also forced orchardists to convert to more hardy and popular varieties.⁹ The far more numerous dairy and poultry farmers endured "very unsatisfactory" prices for milk in 1933, and only "slightly better" conditions in 1934.¹⁰

Potato farmers in 1934 planted more acres and harvested record yields — the largest crop to that time.¹¹ The potatoes that were actually sold (and millions of bushels were simply dumped) went for thirty-five to forty cents for a 165-pound barrel; the crop brought in about \$8 million less than it had cost to produce. By the end of 1934 Aroostook farmers owed \$28 million, more than one-half the value of their real estate. To make matters worse, those smaller farmers and laborers who had once cut wood in the winter were now often idle, as pulpwood consumption fell by nearly one-fifth between 1930 and 1933. At the same time the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad carried less than one-quarter of the lumber it had hauled in 1929.¹²

General price statistics and crop estimates tell us little of the effects of the Depression as it affected other aspects of rural life. To supplement them, historians use the memories of survivors, contemporary newspapers, and annual town reports. Reports from twelve municipalities selected to represent the different sections of the state, the larger and smaller communities, regions of major crop specializations, and richer and poorer communities are full of the signs of hard times: growing lists of tax

delinquents, swelling payments for the town's poor and of wandering, homeless men and women, pay cuts for road laborers, teachers paid in scrip or not at all, and schools closed.¹³

Replies to President Roosevelt's September 1935 form letter asking clergy across the country to describe conditions in their areas provide other revealing information. For instance, the Rev. Augustine J. Alvery of Limestone, in central Aroostook County, minced no words: "General conditions are extremely bad...Aroostook...finds itself today bankrupt: taxes unpaid for the past three years, farms heavily mortgaged, many towns unable to operate their schools, universal beggary in sight peppered with rowdyism and sinking of public morality." Alvery suggested aid to Aroostook banks and a road-building program.¹⁴ Sixty miles northwest of Alvery's Limestone, conditions were probably worse in the St. John Valley. Here one local priest described the situation among the mainly French-speaking people: "in their miserable hovels conditions are most unhygienic: there is over-crowding, the cold penetrates freely during our rigorous winters, clothing and comforts are lacking. Numerous heads of families are demoralized...and heart-broken at the thought of debts accumulating through heavy taxes and other financial obligations." Desperately, he urged "the Father of our nation" to "help his children in distress...with immediate aid."¹⁵

Almost as depressed as Aroostook County were the coastal counties closest to New Brunswick. Many of Maine's 3,500 fishermen and 4,000 fish processing workers lived here; their income fell 50 percent during the 1930s. At Eastport, as Harry Hopkins' emissary Lorena Hickok found in 1933, Norwegian competition and whales which had recently eaten most of the herring and "scared the rest away," left the canneries running in only a "half-hearted sort of way." Town authorities bought some "old shacks," fixed them up, and moved some of the unemployed into them.¹⁶ The soil in that section was too thin for profitable farming, though some raked and canned wild blueberries. Some coastal men and women also tended lawns, cooked, and kept house at the "cottages" where the wealthy vacationed, or worked at the many large hotels of that day.



Hard times for farmers along the coast got even harder during the Depression. Odd-jobbing sometimes helped families scrape by, but some of the old standbys – seasonal work in the canneries, pulpwood cutting, town road work – grew scarce. Income at the eastern Maine fish processing plants dropped 50 percent.

Goode, THE FISHERIES AND FISHERY INDUSTRIES OF THE UNITED STATES (1887), plate 133.

Further south and west along the coast, and just inland from it, a hard life also got harder. Even fifty or seventy-five years earlier farming on the poor soil and broken terrain of Waldo, Knox, and Lincoln counties seldom supported a family. Logging and town road work brought a little cash for the mainly subsistence economy, and town jobs drew off many of the young people; but in the 1930s the demand for logs fell, towns could afford less for roads, and the outside jobs were gone. Long-time county agent and agricultural historian Clarence Day inspected two towns and parts of three others in 1934, finding that 122 of 428 farms were in “fair” condition, 226 “poor,” and 23 “falling to pieces.” A larger study over the next few years, covering nearly 2,000 farms in seventeen towns, proposed in vain to resettle the people on better land.¹⁷

Elsewhere, from the more populated southwestern counties where most of Maine’s larger towns were, to the foothills, the fertile Kennebec Valley and the central lowlands, general farm-

ing, usually emphasizing milk, eggs, or broilers, continued. Indeed, the flight from the farms so apparent in the 1920s slowed down in the early 1930s. In the most urban parts of the state such as Cumberland and York counties, some town people moved to the country where at least they could raise a garden and cut wood for subsistence. Thus the census counted more farms in 1935 than in 1930.¹⁸ Yet even here townspeople found life difficult. Ministers reported hard times to the president: "these country towns are too poor to repair their roads, let alone to improve them"; "two words will describe my parish: poverty-stricken."¹⁹

The response to the unprecedented crisis from individuals, town officials, and state politicians reflected Maine's strong rural orientation and a heavy reluctance to abandon traditional ways of dealing with hard times. This, along with a number of structural sources of inflexibility, made the adjustment to modernity in Maine particularly difficult.

Relief of poverty was by custom and law the responsibility of each town; the state only helped those individuals not resident for at least five years in any locality. Until the early 1930s there had been few "paupers." Their names, except those of veterans, were published in the annual town report and they lost their right to vote.²⁰ Now, in the small western Maine town of Bethel, for instance, "some of the names listed as receiving relief [were] from families never before — or since — known to need public assistance." Turner relieved fourteen families in 1932, thirty-six in 1933. They received food orders, not cash, and the able-bodied men among them were required to perform "some kind of labor for the town."²¹ Lorena Hickok blamed inadequate relief partly on "the town officials' lack of generosity and their inherent mistrust of anybody who can't get a job."²²

Aroostook County's town officials were hard-pressed, as might be expected in view of the virtual collapse of potato and lumber prices. In March 1932 the selectmen of Fort Kent reported that "the price of potatoes has been off all of the season, no lumbering of any kind is being done on the river, one Bank closed, tying up many thousands of the people's money, men walking the streets seeking work and unable to find it, even

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offering their service for their board..." By then, the number of "town paupers" had quadrupled since 1928; but now the 254 cases received, on average, only about one-third as much as the 61 cases in 1928.²³

If poor relief had been the towns' only duty, such unprecedented expenses would have strained their budgets. But towns also had other responsibilities, including road maintenance, never an easy task in Maine's climate. A common expedient was to use the able-bodied male "paupers" and those not yet reduced to beggary but still unable to pay all or part of their taxes, to work off at least some of their obligations on the roads. Thus, in 1933 Maine led the nation in the percentage of its citizens so employed.²⁴

Towns could not, of course, hire casual labor to teach, but they had to bear more than 80 percent of the cost of schools. Maine, indeed, ranked ninth from the bottom of the forty-eight states in its per capita support of education. The towns, especially the poorer ones that gained little from the state's weak attempts at equalization, had no choice except to slash their spending.²⁵ In town after town, superintendents deplored the cuts, denounced state policies, and praised teachers for their sacrifices. "The situation in the rural schools, poor enough in ordinary times, has become worse during this depression, until many towns... are unable to maintain any but the most meager type of educational program." Not only pupils but also teachers suffered. As the Turner superintendent pointed out in 1937, "Teachers in some towns are not paid, others are getting \$10-12 per week for 32 weeks. Clerks in the state-owned rum shops are getting \$18 per week for the year."²⁶ Despite such strategies for riding out the storm, Bethel, Buckfield, and every town in our sample faced severe financial difficulties as unpaid taxes mounted. In 1936 Fort Kent had \$58,039 in uncollected taxes; it owed \$11,652 in county tax, \$8,257 in state tax, \$11,451 in "accounts payable," and a crushing \$100,205 in "notes payable." The town was \$88,750 in the red, and it was not alone.²⁷ Conditions were so bad that the state created an Emergency Municipal Finance Board to help, and even in some cases run the affairs of towns

that could not meet their commitments. Fort Kent was one of twenty-seven towns and plantations which, by the start of 1939, had received more than \$1 million in aid. The Board had by then taken over the government of seven communities.²⁸

The state government's municipal rescue program was, unfortunately, an exception to its general role. Much more could have been done for both relief and recovery with a more effective fiscal system and more imaginative financial policies. With no sales or income tax, Maine in 1930 relied on a patchwork of fourteen taxes and ten other sources of revenue, the most important of which were automobile licenses and funded loans. Of the taxes, the 7.5 mill levy on real and personal property brought in the most, with the gasoline tax a fairly close second.²⁹ This structure hurt farmers; property tax totals had risen more than two and one-half times between 1910 and 1930, while farmers' purchasing power had increased only slightly. Only four states in 1929 taxed real and personal property at higher rates than Maine.³⁰ Year after year, Grangers urged the legislature to reduce this burden with taxes on intangible property and a state income tax. But that body, more friendly to wildland owners (taxed separately at a lower rate), paper companies, utilities and railroads, would not pass a state income tax, and the voters, in 1937, decisively rejected a sales tax.³¹ With tax reform, tax delinquencies would have been less serious, and the band-aid strategies of the Emergency Municipal Finance Board would have been less needed.

Such fiscal deficiencies could be overlooked in good times; in fact Maine had spent and borrowed freely in the 1920s, especially on roads, which absorbed in 1930 almost 50 percent of the total budget. The state, which owed less than \$300,000 in 1913 when the first Model-T's were just appearing, owed more than \$29 million in 1936.³² Therefore, especially in light of the pre-Keynesian horror of deficit financing, it would have been difficult to expand the state's share of poor relief. Townsfolk had traditionally considered "interference" by the state or federal government an insinuation that locals were unqualified to deal with their own problems.³³ In addition legislators, like the town

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leaders Lorena Hickok met, often objected philosophically (as well as financially) to relief.

Thus, in the fiscal year ending June 30, 1933, the state spent for relief only \$571,000; the next year, \$724,000; and in January 1935, Democratic Governor Louis J. Brann estimated that \$800,000 would be spent by June 30, 1935. By this time many cities and towns had reached the limit of their resources. Without federal relief – an amount ten times the state's outlay the situation would have been far worse. Brann felt that "the state must recognize its own responsibility to relieve distress and suffering where municipalities are unable to act," but state expenditures for relief under the Republican-dominated legislature rose only to \$1 million by 1939. Much of this was spent on the old age pensions enacted in 1936 and on matching funds for the federal programs passed in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act. Needs always exceeded revenue, forcing the state to borrow from other departments and to increase its debt limit.³⁴

Legislators did, beginning in 1935, start to help producers of Maine's two most important farm products: milk and potatoes. About one-sixth of all Maine farms in 1930 sold milk. They were concentrated in the more heavily populated section southwest of Bangor, especially in the lower Androscoggin and Kennebec valleys, and around Portland. Some produced milk for the Boston market; as interstate commerce, their sales came under the NRA's federal marketing agreements after 1933. These farmers, and the larger group that sold within the state, had long been troubled by a surplus which depressed prices, especially in the spring and summer months when cows gave more milk. Hard times had worsened the situation. To deal with it, Maine, like twenty-three other states, empowered a Milk Control Board to fix prices paid to producers as well as retail prices. Both were generally established, in any case, by the levels set under federal orders in the interstate market.³⁵ Despite this effort, dairy-farm purchasing power declined slightly in the later 1930s.³⁶

The Potato Branding Act of 1935 had more than a few similarities. It required farmers to pack and label spuds accord-

ing to U.S. standard grades, with each package bearing the producer's name. The idea was not new — even some growers admitted that Idaho potatoes were better packaged and graded — but “opposition from small growers, dealers, and shippers who did not want restrictions placed on marketing low quality spuds” had defeated it in 1931 and 1933. After 1935, however, farmers had to grade their potatoes according to federal standards to be eligible for federal subsidy programs. But opposition soon reappeared. Legislators only headed off a repeal movement by creating two new, lower state grades that allowed culls to be shipped if they were fit for human consumption.³⁷

A more helpful move was the 1937 tax of one cent per barrel shipped, to be divided among research into better handling methods, possible use of culls for by-products, market development, and advertising. The Department of Agriculture hired a New York advertising agency to plan and carry out a campaign in urban Eastern newspapers, on radio, in chain-store displays, and so on, using the new red, white, and blue state label. Although moderately successful, the drive was handicapped by a long tradition of unwillingness to accommodate customers, by a lack of “merchandising instinct,” and above all by the long-term decline in potato consumption. Idaho, and Maine's other competitors faced that too, but Idaho, at least, spent half again as much as Maine to advertise its product.³⁸

Peter Corriveau wrote in a 1983 University of Maine master's thesis that Maine did less than New Brunswick for its potato farmers. When the Canadian federal government seemed paralyzed, the province acted as a catalyst for better organization of the potato industry, bringing it a “modicum of relief.” Maine, in contrast, “influenced by powerful interests, turned away from helping farmers who were trying to help themselves.”³⁹

The State Department of Agriculture, headed for more than twenty years by the able and energetic Frank P. Washburn, a farmer and former president of the Washington County Farm Bureau, tried to help farmers develop better marketing strategies, but his funding and mandate were limited. The department was legally responsible for little more than inspecting seed

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potatoes and other products and testing fertilizers. It also tried to educate farmers by mounting, for instance, a substantial campaign to publicize the potato branding law. The department also maintained close and cordial relations with the University's Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension program.⁴⁰



State and federal programs provided research programs designed to boost production, protect and market crops, and develop income alternatives for rural Mainers. This Maine Experiment Station photo, taken in 1938, was used to demonstrate the effects of fertilizer on crops in the Kennebec Valley.

The Experiment Station was the older of these two University agencies. Set up in 1885, it antedated by two years the first federal act funding such work. Washington for many years provided all its money, and even in 1940 contributed more than the state did to the station's \$206,000 income. Its staff did extensive and carefully-focused research involving entomologists, plant pathologists, biologists, chemists, agricultural economists, and home economists.⁴¹ The role of the University's Farm Bureau, later called the Extension Service, was to take this work out to the farmers and their families and help them put it into practice. Here again, a small and informal start at the University required major outside help, first private, then federal, to

survive. By 1935 there were county agents, home demonstration agents (to work with women), and 4-H Club leaders in every county. A typical project was the improvement of dairy herds by encouraging dairy associations, butterfat testing, use of better bulls, and artificial insemination.⁴²

The Department of Agriculture, the Experiment Station, and the Farm Bureau/Maine Extension Service all tried to spread the gospel of cooperation. But traditionally individualistic Maine rural people were dubious, and cooperative ventures were few. One that survived and grew up, though the gestation was long, the birth-pangs severe, and the childhood hazardous, was the Maine Potato Growers, Inc. Its conception was a 1929 suggestion from A.L. Deering, director of the Agricultural Experiment Station. Deering's proposal got little response until the ruinous prices of 1931. In the spring of 1932, a small number of farmers agreed to market their entire crop cooperatively. Most, however, stood aloof, permitting a few large dealers to control most of the business to the disadvantage of farmers and small dealers. Because so few participated, the MPG lacked capital and lost money at first. In the late 1930s, however, it grew until it shipped almost 10 per cent of the crop. During the flush wartime years it doubled this share.⁴³

Times were still very hard in late 1935 when the Aroostook County Farm Bureau took the lead, with help from Maine Extension Service economists, in a group called the Aroostook County Council. Practically all interests were represented in its ranks: the Aroostook Federation of Farmers (mostly a fertilizer cooperative), the Grange, the Chamber of Commerce, bankers and Farm Credit Association people, dealers, shippers, and the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad. The Council's twelve recommendations, however, hardly pointed to radical change. Some, including "promotion of better methods of farm finance" and "establishment of more uniform methods of selling potatoes," were quite vague, though more practical suggestions, like advertising and soil conservation, were soon pursued. Others, such as better methods of utilizing culls and the introduction of "practical supplementary crops and livestock" are hardy perennials in Aroostook County.⁴⁴

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The federal government played only an indirect role in the formation of the County Council. That unusual example of cooperation owed much to the powerful emotions sparked by Washington's moves toward freer trade. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, certain that opening more foreign markets would help recovery, got Congress to agree in 1934 to allow negotiation of reciprocal trade agreements country-by-country. By early 1935, an agreement with Canada was under consideration. It included a clause lowering the duty on the first 750,000 bushels of Canadian seed potatoes imported each year from seventy-five cents to forty-five cents per hundred pounds. Aroostook reacted furiously, with mass meetings, letter-writing campaigns, and appeals to Hull and Roosevelt directed through Representative Ralph O. Brewster and Governor Brann. The campaign failed, but ironically Canadian exports to the United States continued at the same level in 1935-1938 as they had been in 1930-1935.⁴⁵

Rural Maine's reluctance to alter traditional ways of dealing with hard times carried over to its relations with the federal government. Relations between state leaders, even a Democrat like Brann, and Washington were sometimes tense. Maine was one of only two states that never cast its vote for FDR. Maine's small towns had been, with few exceptions, consistently and heavily Republican since the 1850s. In 1936, for example, our twelve-town sample averaged 61 percent for the GOP presidential candidate.⁴⁶ The Democratic party, based largely in mill towns with many Franco-Americans, was too weak to carry the state. Maine's rural Republicans were not convinced, as many were in the Midwest, that harder-than-usual times justified breaking tradition. The philosophy underlying the New Deal challenged rural individualism and the doctrine of self-reliance. This ideological posture, coupled with Roosevelt's seemingly unfavorable tariff policies, outweighed the benefits that came with the New Deal programs.

Still, federal programs implemented during the 1930s had far greater impact than local and state responses to the Depression. Before the New Deal, Herbert Hoover's 1929 farm legisla-

tion had done nothing for Maine. His Reconstruction Finance Corporation eventually included grants to states to use for relief. At first Governor William Tudor Gardiner thought that Maine could get along without any help, but in 1933 the state took some RFC money. Houlton received at least \$4,500; some farmers there and elsewhere were able to put in crops in 1933 and 1934 with RFC loans for fertilizer, seed, and spray material.⁴⁷ By planting time in 1933, however, Roosevelt's Hundred Days had begun. Of its flood of measures, relief and credit provisions mattered most to Maine farmers; the early agricultural recovery initiatives, except for milk pricing, were not helpful to them.

Direct federal relief to the jobless came in May 1933 with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), headed by Harry Hopkins. Half of its original \$500 million was set aside for the states on a matching (\$1 federal for every \$3 state) basis, while the rest would be granted where needs were too great for matching to work. Of the more than \$22 million spent on relief between April 1933 and December 1935 (when the FERA ended in Maine), the federal government advanced slightly more than half, the state a little more than one-tenth, with the rest coming from local funds.⁴⁸ In addition to outright relief, the program in Maine included winter work relief in 1933-1934, surplus commodities distribution, and rural rehabilitation.⁴⁹

During the year beginning July 1, 1934, 80,537 Mainers, on a monthly average, received relief. It is impossible to say how many of those were rural people, but Aroostook County, at 13,571, led the list. In 1934-1935 FERA spent \$14,644 in rural Vassalboro, a town of 1,815 people. The town's own outlay was \$55,000. FERA employed men at removing winter-killed apple trees, painting and repairing schools and other public buildings, and working on bridges. In addition, FERA distributed more than 5,000 pounds of fish, 100 boxes of rice, 1,100 pounds of potatoes, and 870 cans of meat in Vassalboro.⁵⁰

A small part of FERA, but a significant one for some farm families, was the rural rehabilitation program. The program had, at its peak 190 families in Maine. They received loans for livestock, equipment, seed, fertilizer, and household goods.

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Those who had lost their farms could be relocated; in fact, FERA proposed to purchase 12,000 acres of submarginal land in Camden and relocate the 91 families residing there. The plan also had a few clients in the St. John Valley. In 1934 only a half-dozen houses were repaired with FERA help, but the regional adviser found upon inspection that "on the whole a good piece of work has been done."⁵¹ When FERA ended, the new Resettlement Administration (RA) assumed its responsibilities, and when RA became in 1937 the Farm Security Administration (FSA) rehabilitation became even more important to Maine.

Another Hundred Days' relief program, far better known and more popular in Maine, was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), approved by Congress in late March 1933. By early 1937 more than 10,000 Mainers had enlisted in Roosevelt's "Tree Army." They and their compatriots from other states at the more than twenty Maine camps helped cut the Appalachian Trail, develop several state parks, improve Acadia National Park, fight insect pests and forest fires, clean up after the 1938 hurricane, and much more. As late as March 1939, three times the quota wanted to join. Fully half of the applicants were from Aroostook County.⁵²

The twenty-five dollars a month that CCC enlistees sent home helped many families, as had FERA's relief programs, but relief was essentially a short-term strategy. To survive as farmers, thousands of Mainers needed credit. Many Maine banks did not reopen after the March 1933 Bank Holiday, and those that did were extremely careful with loans. In all of 1933, Aroostook banks lent a measly \$148,000.⁵³ Nearly two decades earlier, Congress had created the Federal Land Bank. To build upon it in a hurry, the New Dealers provided for new, long-term, lower interest Land Bank Commissioner loans, which also allowed for extensions for delinquent borrowers.⁵⁴ They organized twelve regional corporations to provide groups of farmers with management and start-up capital to set up production credit associations.

Both new programs had a solid impact on Aroostook County. Between May 1933 and December 1941, 1,437 county

farmers — nearly one-fourth of the total — borrowed over \$3.4 million under the Land Bank Commissioner loan scheme. Even more important in 1934, 1935, and 1936 was the Aroostook Production Credit Association. It advanced more than \$6 million which was over half of the money Aroostook farmers borrowed to plant, spray, cultivate, and dig their crops in those years. It made, however, too many bad loans and in March 1937 went into receivership. Other agencies, especially the FSA, picked up the load.⁵⁵

The 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the New Deal's first major attempt at farm recovery, had far less importance to Maine than its relief and credit measures. The AAA's attempt to raise prices of staples like wheat, corn, and cotton by paying benefits (derived from a processing tax) to those farmers who cut back on planting increased the price of grain purchased by Maine dairy and poultry farmers, and also made prices higher in the stores. The law, on the other hand, allowed for minimum prices for interstate milk sales, a benefit to Maine dairymen who produced for the Boston market.⁵⁶

Maine's U.S. Representative from Aroostook County had attempted unsuccessfully to include potatoes on the AAA's list. In August 1935, Representative Warren of North Carolina persuaded Congress to do so. Maine farmers, made desperate by the 1934 disaster, backed the potato control law. When it passed, the harvest was at hand; the government ordered that 10 percent of the 1935 crop be plowed under.⁵⁷ For 1936, Washington targeted a crop of 222.6 million bushels, allocated 32.7 million of them (the largest quota) to Maine, and provided that any more potatoes marketed would be prohibitively taxed.⁵⁸ All of these plans, however, came to nothing when the Supreme Court struck down the AAA in January 1936.

Its replacements, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 and the so-called "Second AAA" of 1938, were little more relevant to Maine farmers, since both applied only to the "basic crops" which were not raised here. But the Soil Conservation Service, established in 1935 under the United States Department of Agriculture to control erosion, caught on:

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the Grange gave its blessing, and by 1940, 18,000 Maine farmers, nearly half the total, were participating in the program.⁵⁹ From 1937 through 1939, Maine received nearly \$2 million under it. Mainers (especially in Aroostook County), also benefited from the 1937 Marketing Agriculture Act, which set up the Federal Surplus Commodity Corporation to buy up surpluses in areas where two-thirds of the farmers would agree to limit their marketing. Even though Aroostook farmers were the only potato producers to reject the idea in 1937, the FSSC bought up much of the surplus that year anyway, diverting some of it to starch mills, and the rest to government relief and to exports.⁶⁰

In the later 1930s, relief—now more combined with efforts at rehabilitation—continued beside these attempts to stabilize production. The CCC continued until the early wartime years, as did the new agency created in 1935 to replace FERA, the Works Progress Administration. As the name implies, the WPA was designed to put to work “employable” persons who could not secure other work, leaving the “unemployables” to local and state authorities. It fell far short, however, of achieving this purpose. At its peak in Maine it employed 14,000 persons, averaging only 8,000; Lawrence Lashbrook’s study of the WPA in Maine estimates that at least 25,000 would have qualified. The WPA, however, did make a difference. By the end of 1935, its first year, 1,047 projects valued at over \$107 million were approved for the state. Three categories (roads, sewage plants, and sanitation projects) received more than 80 percent of the money, with smaller allocations to recreational work, sewing programs for women, white-collar positions for both genders, and even a small number of jobs for writers, artists, and musicians.⁶¹

Many towns used WPA funds put men to work on local roads and bridges; Buckfield, among others, also used them to repair schools and help orchardists.⁶² When the 1938 hurricane blew down millions of trees in western Maine, Governor Lewis G. Barrows asked for \$650,000 in clean-up funds. Three years later, former Governor Brann’s appeal for WPA help in eastern Maine received a personal promise from Roosevelt to ask “the

WPA man who is in charge in eastern Maine to let you know how we can help the unemployed down there.”⁶³

WPA aided some rural people, but the FSA's main purpose was to help the rural poor to stay on their farms. As such, it received bitter criticism from organizations like the American Farm Bureau Federation and influential politicians who saw the less well-off rural people as poor managers who ought to stop farming.⁶⁴ Congressional conservatives, calling it a “liberal attempt to redistribute wealth” kept it underfunded from the start. In 1946 the Farmers Home Administration took over its loan programs and liquidated the rest.⁶⁵

In Maine FSA lent millions of dollars to thousands of farmers in its Rural Rehabilitation program. Most of the recipients were in Aroostook County, where FSA began by rescuing farmers left high and dry in 1937 by the collapse of the Aroostook County Production Credit Association. At the end of 1939, Aroostook farmers comprised half of the agency's 2,400 Maine borrowers. Penobscot, Somerset, and Washington counties trailed far behind. Maine received more loans than any other of the eleven Northeastern states in FSA's Region 1.⁶⁶

The state's hardest-hit rural region, the St. John Valley, fittingly received most help. Here as elsewhere, FSA's Rural Rehabilitation agents worked closely with clients; indeed, they assumed many duties of county agents in an area where the latter had not worked before, largely because of the predominant use of French. FSA people, some of whom could speak French, advised farmers in preparing the annual farm plans necessary to get a production loan, even helping with the paperwork for other national and state agencies. Agents visited families several times during the season; female agents worked with wives in keeping farm records, gardening, canning, and child care.⁶⁷

Holding that families could not farm successfully without good health, FSA began as early as March 1938 to organize a group medical care plan in the county. At first the Aroostook Medical Society favored it, but the Maine Medical Society opposed it from the start. Negotiations dragged on, and FSA compromised, but to no avail. By the end of 1939 FSA admitted

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defeat, and Aroostook was prevented from joining the 634 counties in 31 other states where more than 300,000 rural people enjoyed such plans. FSA could, however, and did send in teams of doctors and dentists in the summer of 1940 to examine its clients and do the operations, fillings, and so on that were necessary. Tooth decay was the biggest problem they found; otherwise, children were generally in good health, and nutrition "seemed to be excellent" in the Valley.⁶⁸

FSA's extensive files on Maine farms include a wealth of detail about rural life in the Valley in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Some FSA clients failed or barely survived, but others prospered, like Claude Levesque of Van Buren. He received more than \$8,500 in loans between 1937 and 1942. Levesque, a grower of table stock, was more than \$3,700 in debt when he began with FSA. The agency shifted him to raising seed potatoes, taught him the latest techniques, and worked with him and his wife on record-keeping and canning vegetables. The last letter in his file, written on March 6, 1944, reveals that all his debts were paid and that his net worth is \$42,800.⁶⁹

Such successes were exceptional, but federal relief, employment, rehabilitation, and credit programs did much for Maine people which simply would not have been done by state and local governments alone. From 1933 through 1939 Maine received more than a quarter of a billion dollars (\$267,853,368, or \$336.07 per capita) in New Deal expenditures, loans, and insurance.⁷⁰

Despite all the efforts of local, state, and federal authorities, hard times persisted at the end of the decade. Maine farm proprietors' income, 100 percent of the national figure in 1930-1935, dropped to 82.1 percent in 1936-1941.⁷¹ Still, the trend was upward in Maine farming by 1940. Maine's production of eggs for local and Boston markets grew rapidly in the late 1930s and still faster once Lend Lease brought a new outlet in Britain after March 1941. Dairying, the mainstay of most central and southern Maine farmers, improved after a 1939 court decision upheld the federal marketing program. Milk prices were "quite satisfactory" in 1940 and "much higher" at the end of 1941.⁷² The



A variety of federal programs like the Farm Security Administration helped stem the tide of farm foreclosures and keep Maine people on their farms. They provided loans and in some cases jobs, introduced new techniques and new crops, and offered health care and other services that were not available through local or state government.

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defense build-up and its new jobs in 1941 finally brought Maine's premier crop out of the doldrums. Potato prices, never really good in the late 1930s, were "far below the cost of production" at the end of 1940. A year later, with Pearl Harbor only days away, the outlook for potatoes had improved considerably. Real prosperity in Aroostook County would come slowly, however; in 1942 nearly half the county's farms still owed delinquent taxes.⁷³

Although Maine's recovery from agricultural depression had been halting and partial, the hard years had brought important changes. Paradoxically, even the almost unchanged number of farms in 1940 meant that the movement toward the cities had been at least temporarily checked. Moreover, the long-standing outmigration from the state slowed to a trickle as opportunities elsewhere disappeared.⁷⁴

Responding to lower prices and government programs, farmers raised nearly 20,000 fewer acres of potatoes in 1939 than in 1932. Dairy farmers, however, kept 132,000 cows as compared to 124,000 in 1929. Poultry raising had expanded as well. Much less hay was raised, and farms used many fewer horses and more tractors: 19 percent in 1940, as opposed to only 8 percent of Maine farms in 1930, had tractors. More farms had trucks, while the proportion of those with automobiles remained nearly the same. In 1940 slightly over half the farmers could drive them directly onto an "all-weather" road, a situation which had changed little during the depression years.⁷⁵

The same era saw farmhouses with telephones decline substantially, but far more added electricity. In 1930 only 33.1 percent had power, but in 1940 electricity was extended to 54.1 of Maine farm homes. Such an increase was far below the national gain of 300 percent.⁷⁶ Maine, to be sure, had less far to go than many states, but the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), so effective elsewhere, was hamstrung here by the opposition of private power companies and by the slow response of the Public Utilities Commission to requests from the few cooperatives formed to take advantage of the REA.⁷⁷ Electrification continued at a surprisingly rapid pace in the early 1940s, exceeding 60 percent by 1944. In those prosperous war years purchasing power of the four leading types of Maine farms soared to 119

percent of the 1910-1914 base figure.⁷⁸ Potatoes led the way, with huge wartime crops selling at guaranteed high prices. Dairymen, though handicapped by short grain supplies early in the war, did better as it went on.⁷⁹ Producers of eggs and poultry, which were in high demand as well, continued to thrive. Even pulpwood and lumber sales rebounded, increasing farmers' ready cash.⁸⁰

During these good years, fear of postwar competition and renewed hard times was never far away. Nor could many forget that history's bloodiest war was making this possible. Though Maine was spared its physical destruction, casualty reports came home to every village and town.

On a less profound level, the good times also brought new problems with them. With higher prices came costs that nearly tripled during the war.⁸¹ Opening more farm deferments in early 1943 helped relieve an acute labor scarcity, and farmers also used teen-age boys, called "Victory Farm Volunteers," along with hundreds of young women from the Women's Emergency Farm Service, German P.O.W.'s (especially in the potato harvest), Boy Scouts, bean pickers in the "Crop Corps," and others. Farmers worked longer hours, averaging in one study 13.5 hours per day rather than 12.5 in peacetime. They put off necessary repairs and used more machinery, if they could get it. On the other hand, many families were finally able to settle back taxes and debts, and even save. Property taxes, which had peaked in 1940 when Maine had the highest rate of the 48 states, eased in the war years.⁸²

In addition to prosperity, the war years brought new strains to a rural society already shaken by years of depression. Teachers, still paid a pittance but now able to find better jobs, left in droves, so that hundreds of small schools could not open in September 1944.⁸³ Older pupils found jobs and left schools; those who stayed in school seemed more prone — at least to Dexter and Caribou school superintendents — to "juvenile delinquency." Not only the younger generation but also the infrastructure had less attention; shortages of labor and materials caused three-fourths of Maine's road mileage to remain "unimproved" in 1944.⁸⁴



World War II brought renewed prosperity, but it also created new strains in a rural society already shaken by years of depression. These events left their mark, as a self-reliant and relatively isolated people came in closer contact with national economic and political trends.

Bert Call photo.

Those years saw other changes which lasted far longer than rural Maine's brief postwar prosperity. Although the number of farms rose slightly statewide, Aroostook, which had lost more than 700 farms during the 1930s, lost 300 more. The farm population dropped by 10 percent during World War II, as men left for higher-paying jobs and stayed in them at war's end.⁸⁵ Those who stayed in northern Maine became more and more dependent on federal price-fixing programs. Already the trend toward concentration ("Get big or get out") appeared to be speeding up.

The Great Depression and World War II thus left their marks on Maine's rural people.⁸⁶ Although most - except the

potato growers – did not experience the abysmal prices, steep debts, and resulting foreclosures familiar to southern and western commercial farmers, perennial hard times got worse during the 1930s and 1940s. With fewer prospects in the cities, the flight from the land and the resulting trend to fewer, larger farms slowed here as it did nationally. But these currents ran faster again during World War II.

Throughout the entire period, self-reliant and relatively isolated people became more connected to national economic and political trends and lost much of their independence. The help they took with such reluctance from the New Dealers kept a bad situation from getting worse, but its accompanying regulations persisted after 1945. War brought a brief spurt of prosperity to rural families and their communities, but this worldwide cataclysm, like the Great Depression, brought irreversible change as well.⁸⁷ By 1945, in most areas of Maine, the end was in sight for rural communities centering economically and socially on farms. In all regions, Depression and war wiped away even the vestiges of traditional self-sufficiency, and fostered closer contact with alien cultures, broader market forces, and rules created by distant governments.

NOTES

I wish to thank the staff at Mantor Library, University of Maine at Farmington, especially Shirley Martin; the Special Collections staff at Fogler Library, University of Maine; Professor C. Stewart Doty, University of Maine for copies of many valuable items from the FSA files, especially the letter from Mrs. Watson, which gave me an introductory paragraph; and Rita Breton, who lent me her manuscript on this period.

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¹³This paper draws upon the 1929-1945 reports of twelve towns: from Aroostook County, Caribou, Fort Kent, and Oakfield; from eastern Maine,

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Machiasport; from central Maine, Dexter, Montville, Solon, and Vassalboro; from western and southwestern Maine, Farmington, Gorham, Oxford, and Turner.

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¹⁵The Rev. Emile Robitaille to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Daigle, Maine, November 1, 1935, FDRL, PPF 21A, Box 28; see also Robert Kelso to Harry Hopkins, July 6-8, 1933, FDRL, Hopkins Collection, Box 58, and Earl R. Robinson to Harry Hopkins, November 3, 1934, FDRL, Hopkins Collection, Box 58.

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