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Article Summary: Dawson County residents, initially attracted to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, flocked to the Democratic Party. By the late 1930s, however, central Nebraskans returned to the Republican Party. They had lost confidence in programs that they considered paternalistic.

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Major New Deal Agencies Active in Dawson County: Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Civil Works Administration (CWA), Commodity Credit Corporation, Farm Credit Administration (FCA), Farm Security Administration (FSA), National Recovery Administration (NRA), Public Works Administration (PWA), Resettlement Administration (RA), Rural Electrification Administration (REA), Works Progress Administration (WPA)

Photographs / Images: President Franklin D Roosevelt, Kansas Governor Alfred M Landon, and Nebraska Governor Robert L Cochran at the Des Moines, Iowa, drought conference, September 1936; National Recovery Act "Blue Eagle" poster

Dawson County Responds to the New Deal, 1933-1940

BY JEROLD SIMMONS

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal may well be the most popular political program of the 20th century. This array of new reform programs, regulatory agencies, and recovery measures won widespread public approval and attracted vast numbers of new voters to the Democratic Party. Yet, the voters of the Great Plains, particularly those of central Nebraska, refused to commit themselves permanently to the emerging New Deal coalition. In 1932 with the nation paralyzed by depression, central Nebraskans voted for Roosevelt out of desperation, and for a year following his inauguration in 1933, they seemed pleased with the activism of the new administration. But as the decade wore on, their enchantment with the New Deal began to fade, and by 1940 they had returned overwhelmingly to their traditionally Republican voting habits. In light of the substantial benefits which New Deal programs brought to central Nebraska, this voting pattern is puzzling. Why should voters who received so much reject the New Deal so completely? While there is no simple answer to this question, some insights can be gleaned through a detailed examination of one county's response to the New Deal.

Dawson County is an excellent vantage point from which to view the response of central Nebraskans to the New Deal. Its geography, economy, and population are characteristic of the region, and its 20th century voting patterns have mirrored those of surrounding counties and the state as a whole.

Astride the Platte River in the center of the state, Dawson County lies at the extreme western edge of the corn belt in a transitional zone between the eastern corn-producing and western wheat and grazing regions of Nebraska. The Platte Valley, which crosses the county from northwest to southeast, includes nearly one-half of the county's total land area, the

remainder being composed of rolling hills which merge into a broad tableland. At the end of the 1920s, Dawson's agriculture was reasonably diversified with roughly 50 percent of the cropland in corn, 12 percent in alfalfa, and 17 percent in wheat and other grains. While corn was cultivated throughout the county, alfalfa was limited primarily to the valley and wheat to the western half. Livestock was raised on most farms, with the lush prairie grasses of the hills and the corn and alfalfa of the valley providing the cattleman and hog producer with a ready supply of local feed. Prior to the development of extensive irrigation facilities, the valley farmer held a distinct advantage over his upland counterpart, benefiting from a modest system of ditch irrigation and an unusually high water table, which the deep-rooted alfalfa could reach even in the driest years. Upland farmers were almost totally dependent upon fickle mother nature for their moisture, leaving them more vulnerable during the drought-ridden 1930s.¹

Unlike many Nebraska counties, Dawson had no central town which dominated county life. Instead, three communities shared the role. Lexington in the east-central part of the county was county seat and the largest town, with a 1930 population of 2,962. Cozad, located 12 miles west of Lexington, had a population of 1,813, and Gothenburg, near the county's western border, had 2,322.² The fact of major trading centers adds to the county's usefulness as a model for studying central Nebraska attitudes. Each community had its own newspaper, and each paper reflected a slightly different political perspective. The *Gothenburg Times* was edited by a moderate Democrat, who rarely engaged in political commentary; the *Cozad Local* by an intensely partisan conservative Republican, who constantly expressed his views; and the *Lexington Clipper* by a more moderate Republican who was less inclined to exhibit his partisanship in print.³ Read together the three papers afford insights into the way the New Deal was perceived locally because the two-to-one Republican-over-Democrat affiliation by local editors roughly mirrored the partisan alignment among county voters at the onset of the New Deal.

Since its organization in 1871, Dawson County had shown a strong preference for the Republican Party in presidential contests. Prior to the New Deal, only Woodrow Wilson and Nebraska's William Jennings Bryan had been able to break this

Republican pattern, and Bryan's margins of victory were slim. During the 1920s Republican strength was overwhelming. Both Harding in 1920, and Hoover in 1928 carried the county by more than two-to-one majorities, and Coolidge in 1924 attracted more voters than his Democratic (John W. Davis) and Progressive (Senator Robert M. LaFollette) opponents combined. Even after economic conditions began to deteriorate at the end of the decade, the Republican attachment persisted, as was evident in the 1930 primaries when over 80 percent of voters selected Republican ballots.⁴ The county's two Republican newspapers reflected and reinforced this attachment. Both consistently praised the Republican commitment to limited government and expressed suspicion of proposals calling for federal regulation or financial assistance. The *Gothenburg Times*, however, perhaps reflecting the views of the county's western precincts, which included a higher percentage of marginal farmers, evidenced less fear of big government and as the decade progressed, a growing desire for an effective program of assistance to agriculture. But throughout the 1920s, the *Times* could only speak for a small minority of the county's voters. Faith in the Republican Party and its principles held firm. Only the great depression could shake that faith.

The depression did not reach the central portion of Nebraska until 1931. While farm prices did begin to sag late in 1929 and dropped sharply the following fall, it was not until the harvest of 1931 that the disheartening effects of the decline were fully felt, and the continued price descent through 1932 placed an already weakened farm economy in a state of utter collapse. By the autumn of 1932, corn, the county's chief crop, had dropped from a high of 71¢ per bushel in 1928 to 13¢ and wheat from 94¢ to 27¢. Alfalfa, the county's second-ranking crop, declined from \$10 per ton to \$4.10. Livestock prices took a similar slide, as cattle, which had sold for \$12.60 per hundred-weight in 1928, went to \$4.10 in 1932 and hogs from \$11.50 to \$2.30.⁵

The decline in farm prices affected the county in varying degrees of severity. While corn prices caused individual farmers considerable grief, their effect on the county's overall economic health was relatively moderate because local livestock consumed most of the corn. The decline in alfalfa and livestock prices, however, caused severe economic dislocations. These commodities were responsible for bringing substantial outside income

into the county. The sale of livestock alone ordinarily accounted for over 70 percent of local farm revenue, and alfalfa production, about half of which was normally shipped to Wisconsin dairy farmers, generated much of the rest. Consequently, the price slump in these commodities undermined the entire local economy. The result was a doubling of the annual number of farm foreclosures and a dramatic increase in local business failures and unemployment.⁶ In response, both Lexington and Cozad were forced to create special welfare committees to collect and distribute essentials to the local unemployed and the never-ending stream of transients passing through the county in search of work. The Lexington committee created a special "woodpile" where unemployed men could saw logs to stove-size lengths. They were paid in scrip, meals, or wood. By March, 1933, this woodpile was employing 121 men, and the welfare committee was providing relief to another 137 families in Lexington alone.⁷ Fortunately, however, the banking crisis which brought widespread chaos throughout the nation in 1932, was not felt so strongly in Dawson as in surrounding counties. Custer County, Dawson's northern neighbor, suffered 15 bank failures between 1930 and 1933, but Dawson had none. Apparently the banks of Dawson County were well managed, and residents retained their faith in those institutions. As late as July, 1932, the directors of the Cozad State Bank could boast that there had been "no withdrawals of large deposits by customers in late months. . . . Confidence in banks appears to prevail in this community."⁸

But the confidence expressed by these Cozad bankers and frequently echoed in the county press could not hide the growing desperation generated by the depression. Dawson County needed help, and its voters had nowhere to turn but to the federal government. Prior to 1933 they were disappointed in Washington's response. The Hoover Administration's farm program proved to be "wholly inadequate and doomed to failure from the beginning," and its efforts to relieve unemployment and restore prosperity appeared equally ineffective.⁹ By November, 1932, the voters of Dawson County, like those of the rest of Nebraska, had concluded that it was time for a change. The result was "the most substantial protest vote in the history of the state."¹⁰ Franklin Roosevelt carried all but two of Nebraska's 93 counties and won 63 percent of the popular vote in the state. His totals in Dawson County were only slightly less impressive: 60

percent of the popular vote and majorities in 20 of the county's 22 precincts.¹¹

The Roosevelt landslide of 1932 was based in large part on a recognized need for federal action to end the Depression, and once in office the new Administration responded with a vast array of new legislative proposals and executive actions. This flurry of activity in Washington had a dramatic impact across the country, generating new hope and confidence in the President. That optimism was apparent in Dawson County. Three weeks after Roosevelt's inauguration, some of the county's most ardently Republican editors were impressed. The editor of the *Cozad Local*, who during the 1932 campaign had expressed the opinion that Roosevelt's infirmities (crippled legs, polio ravaged), and his East Coast perspective would impair his ability to lead the country, now praised "the vigorous manner with which he is attacking our national problems" and expressed "confidence in the wisdom of his programs." The editor of the *Lexington Clipper*, co-chairman of the county GOP, was similarly impressed, noting that local residents had "unbounded confidence in President Roosevelt as a leader and all are radiating that confidence."¹² That spirit of optimism and trust in the Democratic Administration pervaded news stories throughout the spring and summer of 1933 and was evident whenever its editors discussed New Deal measures. For example, the Bank Holiday and subsequent banking reform legislation were given credit for bringing money "out of hiding" and putting the nation's banks on a "sound basis."¹³ The Economy Act, which provided for sharp cutbacks in government salaries and veterans' pensions, was also warmly received, as was the far-more-important Agricultural Adjustment Act. For over a decade farmers had demanded a comprehensive program to bolster farm prices, and while many remained suspicious of the system of commodity controls employed by the AAA, most seemed pleased that the new Administration had acted with dispatch.¹⁴

The New Deal's honeymoon in central Nebraska extended well beyond the famous first "100 days." In fact, its popularity did not peak until the fall and winter of 1933-1934. Surprisingly, that extended popularity seemed to stem less from the New Deal agricultural program than from two new agencies oriented toward urban America, the Civil Works Administration and the National Recovery Administration. Both agencies became active

in the county during the final six months of 1933 and quickly generated new support for the New Deal. The CWA was created on November 8, 1933, as a temporary relief-work agency to ease the economic distress of the unemployed during the approaching winter. Its impact was immediately felt in Dawson County. Within days of its creation, the county welfare committee reconstituted itself as a local CWA committee and began hiring workers. By the end of January, 1934, the committee was employing over 350 men on projects ranging from street improvements to the removal of weeds and debris from county roads and its efforts were winning the support of the local press. As the *Pioneer* put it, "The CWA has been doing a great job for the unemployed, and right here in Lexington it has relieved a great many households."¹⁵

The impact of the National Recovery Administration was even more dramatic. Created by the National Industrial Recovery Act of June, 1933, the NRA, symbolized by a Blue Eagle emblem, was the linchpin of the New Deal's program for economic recovery. It was designed to reform the American economy through codes of competition which would establish wages, hours, and other standards for each industry. The scope and complexity of the program dictated that the NRA rely primarily upon voluntary public compliance to achieve its objectives. To win this compliance NRA officials launched a major propaganda campaign in August, which quickly won widespread support in central Nebraska. The Dawson County press cooperated fully. From August through October, NRA news handouts were displayed prominently, and on one occasion an entire edition was devoted to spreading the NRA word.¹⁶ Initial results were impressive. As early as August 4, 75 county businessmen met in Lexington to establish a code covering working hours and wages. Within a month the local press had credited the NRA with increasing employment and predicted a rise in farm prices due to improved consumer purchasing power.¹⁷

While the NRA later became the most universally despised of the New Deal programs, during the fall of 1933, it was among the most popular. The great enthusiasm which its campaign engendered brought the zenith of New Deal popularity in Dawson County. Other New Deal agencies contributed to that popularity, but it was the NRA campaign which molded public enthusiasm into a spirit of unity behind the President. By the end

of the year, after the first AAA checks had arrived and the CWA had begun hiring laborers, Roosevelt's popularity could not be ignored. From the perspective of central Nebraskans, the New Deal appeared to be off to a marvelous start. It was responding to Midwestern needs and seemed to have the entire area moving toward prosperity. But there was always a significant number of standpat Republicans.

The Roosevelt Administration was not destined to maintain the high level of popular approval reached during the final six months of 1933. Gradually Dawson County began to return to the Republican fold. While it is difficult to say exactly why or when this process began, it is apparent that by mid-1934 the enthusiasm generated by the NRA campaign had dissipated. Unfortunately that agency's local activities never went much beyond the initial ballyhoo, and nationally it began to attract considerable criticism. In tune with this shifting sentiment, the Dawson County press stopped urging compliance with the Blue Eagle codes and ceased its predictions of rapid recovery.

The termination of CWA activities in March also diminished the New Deal's local popularity. While that agency had been created merely to see the nation through the winter, the soaring unemployment which followed its dissolution revealed that the depression was far from over. By mid-June nearly one-fifth of the county's work force had registered as unemployed, and local welfare agencies were once again swamped.¹⁸ Clearly, Roosevelt's "quick fix" had failed to materialize.

Evidence of disenchantment was quickly apparent. In the primary elections of April, 1934, barely 50 percent of the local voters selected Democratic ballots, a decline of 11 percent from 1932, and the congressional contests in the fall witnessed a similar softening of New Deal support.¹⁹ But central Nebraskans had not yet completely rejected the New Deal. Many were still impressed with its efforts. Yet, the enthusiasm of 1933, which followed the Administration's vigorous assault against the depression and had provided almost unquestioning approval of each new measure adopted, was gradually giving way to a more cautious and critical mood. In effect, Dawson County was entering a period of watchful waiting. From now on the New Deal was to be judged on how well its individual programs met the needs of central Nebraska.

By mid-summer, 1934, it was becoming increasingly apparent



President Franklin D. Roosevelt (seated) confers with Kansas Governor Alfred M. Landon (left) and Nebraska Governor Robert L. Cochran (immediately behind Roosevelt) at the Des Moines, Iowa, drought conference, September, 1936.

that those needs were changing. Over the preceding decade the paramount economic concerns of central Nebraskans revolved around the problems of surplus production and the consequent low farm prices. In 1934 the problems were scarcity and drought. Rainfall for the entire year totaled less than 11 inches, roughly half that normally received in the county and well below the minimum necessary to produce a reasonable harvest. High temperatures added to the devastation. In July local gauges rose above 100 degrees for 16 consecutive days. The results were disastrous. Between 70 and 80 percent of the county's wheat and nearly 30 percent of its corn crop produced nothing, and the rest was substandard.²⁰ The short corn crop created additional problems for local cattle feeders. With hill grasses burning under the July sun and without substitute forage to take up the slack, cattlemen faced a critical feed shortage which threatened to destroy their herds. The one bright spot in the county's economic picture was alfalfa. That crop's unique root structure, enabling it to take advantage of the high water table near the Platte, meant valley farmers could produce near normal harvests, and because the drought destroyed most other forms of livestock feed, the price of alfalfa soared. By the end of the year, it was selling for nearly \$20 per ton, almost five times its 1932 price.²¹ Yet, in 1934 the prosperity generated by alfalfa helped only the relatively few valley farmers who had large, well-established stands of the crop. The rest of the county was in dire straits.

In response to these new needs, the Roosevelt Administration provided emergency feed and seed loans to those hardest hit and a special program of hog and cattle purchases. These programs afforded only minimal relief. The feed and seed loans averaged less than \$100 per recipient, and the purchase price for cattle averaged only \$13.74. Even the more substantial AAA payments and crop loans and the extensive refinancing activities of the Federal Land Banks could not stem the growing tide of farm foreclosures. Many smaller farmers, already weakened by successive years of low prices, simply went bankrupt under the weight of the drought.²²

In 1935, however, central Nebraskans regained some of the optimism and confidence which the drought had withered. County papers once again predicted imminent prosperity as ample spring rains and a sharp increase in farm prices bolstered

local spirits. Paradoxically, it was during this period of renewed optimism that the first direct criticism of the New Deal appeared in the county press. Not surprisingly, the agency criticized was the NRA. By the end of 1934, the NRA had lost much of the support its 1933 campaign had generated. The complexity of its codes of competition, the increasing burden of red tape, and a growing resentment of bureaucracy all combined to undermine faith in the NRA experiment. By April, 1935, Dawson County papers had ceased all positive reference to the NRA and dropped the Blue Eagle symbol from their mastheads. Increasingly, local businessmen disregarded code provisions, causing one editor to observe that "the only reason we can see for the statement that the NRA is better liked is because fewer people are adhering to it." When the US Supreme Court invalidated the NRA the following month, the same editor exclaimed: "Now that the American Eagle has triumphed over the Blue Eagle, we are all a darned sight better off."²³

The spurt of legislative activity which followed the invalidation of the NRA received only modest comment in the county press, much of it negative. The Social Security Act, National Labor Relations Act, and the banking reform legislation of 1935 drew mild criticism, and the new work-relief program established under the Works Progress Administration was less popular than that conducted under the CWA in 1933. In each case local criticism reflected a growing concern about big government, unbalanced budgets, and excessive federal regulation. The new farm credit act and rural electrification program, however, were more warmly received, indicating that opposition to federal growth could be selective.²⁴

By the end of 1935, the most popular New Deal program in Dawson County was the AAA. In this respect farm opinion had shown a dramatic reversal within one year. In a special referendum conducted as part of the AAA's corn-hog program in October, 1934, local farmers had voted better than two to one against continuation of that program and five to one in favor of scrapping the entire AAA. While the county agent attributed the negative vote to low hog quotas and irritating mid-year alterations in the program, it nonetheless represented a dramatic rejection of the initial New Deal farm program. One year later, however, the corn-hog farmers voted to continue their program by better than a three-to-one margin, and wheat growers

endorsed theirs by nearly six-to-one.²⁵ Since there was no appreciable alteration in the program, the only plausible explanation for this change in attitude stems from the fact that by October, 1935, Dawson County farmers were convinced that the AAA was working. They had seen commodity prices rise modestly in 1934 because of scarcity but were surprised and pleased when in 1935 with production back to near normal prices remained relatively high. The New Deal program along with the drought seemed to be solving the basic problem that had plagued agriculture since World War I.

Although the AAA was invalidated by the Supreme Court the following January, the gradual return of farm prosperity continued into 1936. The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, which replaced the AAA in February, continued to reward farmers for reduced production, and prices continued to rise with both corn and wheat ultimately exceeding \$1.00 per bushel.²⁶ One aspect of the new program, however, caused local concern. Under the Soil Conservation Act, farmers received payments for converting land to soil-conserving crops, including alfalfa. While local farmers favored soil conservation, many feared that this inducement would cause overproduction and destroy alfalfa's value as a cash crop. In March local farmers and businessmen gathered to send a protest to Washington, but aside from a disdainful reply from Senator George Norris, their efforts achieved nothing. The feared price decline did not materialize, and ultimately most of the county's farmers signed up under the new program.²⁷

While high farm prices insured the continued popularity of the crop reduction program in 1936, low rainfall, high temperatures, and the hordes of grasshoppers which ravaged local farmers in July and August, brought increased awareness of New Deal emergency assistance programs. By late summer the *Gothenburg Times* estimated that at least 220 farm families would need federal assistance to maintain their farms. Most of them resided in the marginal hill and tablelands in the western half of the county.²⁸ For these families the crop reduction program was far less important than the emergency grants and feed and seed loans administered by the county agent and the rehabilitation and resettlement loans provided by the recently created Resettlement Administration. The various branches of the Farm Credit Administration also "assisted materially in carrying

Dawson County farmers through the crucial period" by providing the credit necessary to continue production and refinance mortgages.²⁹ By September, 1936, the Federal Land Bank had made 544 loans and accounted for roughly 66 percent of all farm mortgage credit in the county.³⁰

As the 1936 election approached, central Nebraskans began judging the New Deal on its merits. The campaign waged by Governor Alfred Landon of Kansas seemed to bring "to the fore the whole New Deal conception of government," forcing Nebraskans, like other Americans, to choose between competing philosophies.³¹ Landon, while not advocating complete eradication of the New Deal, seemed to promise a return to the Republican virtues of fiscal responsibility and laissez-faire. The Roosevelt record promised continued federal programs and spending. In light of the intense partisan interest in the campaign, it is surprising that only one of the local newspapers endorsed either candidate. The *Gothenburg Times* and *Lexington Clipper* remained neutral during the campaign, perhaps reflecting the uncertainty with which voters faced the election. The *Cozad Local*, however, was far from neutral. Its editor came out strongly for Landon and throughout the summer devoted increasing space to a critique of the New Deal. The *Local*, speaking of the concerns of county conservatives, expressed its growing skepticism of huge expenditures, mushrooming federal bureaucracies, and government paternalism. Rarely did its editor condemn specific New Deal agencies, preferring to protest their impact on the American system as they had known it. The NRA, by then defunct, was a major exception to this rule of general rather than specific condemnation because it seemed to offer a clear example of New Deal regimentation. The Trade Agreements Act of 1934 was another. It was condemned for allegedly allowing price-depressing farm imports. By the end of August, the *Local* shifted its emphasis from the New Deal to President Roosevelt, using political cartoons to draw attention to his east-coast origins, broken campaign promises, and attempts to buy votes with so-called give-away programs.

The election results, however, clearly demonstrated that the *Cozad Local* did not speak for Dawson County. Roosevelt won a majority of the county's votes just as he had in 1932. Yet the returns also demonstrated that approval of the New Deal was far from universal in central Nebraska. Compared with the over-

whelming landslide which Roosevelt received nationally and in Nebraska, his margin of victory in Dawson County was modest, less than 6 percent of the total vote. The President had indeed lost ground since 1932. His share of the popular vote dropped from 60 to 52 percent, and his support declined in 21 of the county's 22 precincts.³²

County precinct returns provide only general indications as to which local groups were most inclined to turn away from Roosevelt. Cattlemen were moving in this direction, as the five precincts showing the largest Republican gains in 1936 all contained sizeable portions of pastureland and large numbers of cattle. Large scale alfalfa growers followed a similar pattern, as the three strongest Landon precincts were large producers of alfalfa, while the strongest Roosevelt precincts grew little. Since these cattle and alfalfa precincts had provided the coolest reception to the New Deal farm program in the AAA referendums of 1934 and 1935, it is logical to assume that their return to Republicanism was prompted in part by their dissatisfaction with that program. Many cattlemen resented the fact that the AAA had driven up the price of corn and other sources of livestock feed more rapidly than the price of cattle, thus putting them in a cost/price bind. They also resented the administration's efforts to admit Argentine beef into the American market via the ill-fated US-Argentine Sanitary Convention of 1935.³³ Alfalfa growers were worried about the new competition promised by the 1936 conservation act.

But more significant than the defection of the cattleman and alfalfa grower was the fact that the farmer in trouble tended to remain with Roosevelt. Seven precincts showed only minor or no Democratic losses in 1936, and all of these contained a significant percentage of upland marginal farms. In each case the precinct had been the site of many foreclosures, and farmers there were probably more appreciative of the New Deal emergency drought and farm credit programs than were more prosperous valley farmers. Because six of these precincts also ranked at the top of the county in wheat acreage, the relative popularity of the AAA wheat program and high wheat prices in 1936 may also have contributed to Roosevelt's strength.³⁴

The town vote is much more difficult to gauge because each town ward included a large number of rural voters. Nonetheless, one obvious conclusion can be drawn—the town vote shifted far

less than the rural vote. While Roosevelt's percentages declined in each town, in no instance was the shift substantial. He retained strong majorities in both Cozad and Gothenburg and lost Lexington by only 17 votes; thus indicating that main street opposition to the New Deal had not yet fully materialized in Dawson County.³⁵ Town voters like their rural counterparts had not yet arrived at a consensus on the merits of the New Deal. Many were still pleased with Roosevelt's eclectic reform program; others were frightened by the changes it brought, but most were simply uncertain.

After 1936 the division and uncertainty reflected in that election disappeared. Over the next four years, the vast majority of Dawson County voters came to reject the New Deal and the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt. The initial phase of that rejection began early in Roosevelt's second term when he announced his controversial plan to reform the federal court system. This "court-packing" proposal was clearly Roosevelt's greatest single political mistake. It met with intense resistance in Congress and afforded the President's critics new evidence of his disdain for constitutional government. Within Dawson County it generated new and more intense criticism of the New Deal. Prior to the election of 1936, only the *Cozad Local* had been vigorous or consistent in its condemnation of Roosevelt, but with the announcement of the court-packing proposal, the *Lexington Clipper* joined in directing increasing criticism at the Roosevelt Administration and its philosophy.

The two papers gained new ammunition for their anti-New Deal offensive during the spring of 1937 with the outbreak of labor strife in the auto and steel industries. The editors of both papers condemned the new sit-down technique employed by the strikers and blamed the Roosevelt Administration for promoting industrial conflict. They argued that the National Labor Relations Act had given organized labor too much power and should be amended before labor militants destroyed the industrial order and drove the cost of living out of sight.³⁶ From the specific issues raised by the court-packing plan and labor unrest, conservative criticism moved to condemn spending programs, growing taxes, and federal regimentation. In August the *Cozad Local's* editor praised business leaders for expanding production facilities in the face of "higher labor costs, increased taxation, and harassment by a multiplicity of governmental regulatory

agencies.”³⁷ Such criticism, however, could hardly be telling as long as the economy continued to improve, as it did throughout most of 1937. But in the fall the prosperity bubble burst. Unemployment jumped to near 1932 levels and farm prices collapsed. Corn, which had sold for \$1.20 per bushel as late as July, plummeted to 51¢ by the end of the year, and other farm commodities followed suit.³⁸ This, combined with the twin ravages of drought and grasshoppers which once again visited the state in 1937, left local farmers in straightened circumstances. The conservative critique of the New Deal began to take on new meaning. Now New Deal experimentation and regimentation could be blamed for the recession, and the plight of local farmers could be used as evidence of the Roosevelt Administration’s failure.

As the recession worsened, federal programs were directed toward assisting the hard-pressed marginal farmer. His plight was the primary concern of the newly created Farm Security Administration, which through 1937 and 1938 was the most active federal agency in Dawson County. The FSA provided small loans and direct monthly grants to over 300 families who were in dire need, organized a volunteer debt adjustment committee which arranged 30 mortgage readjustments, and administered special loans to assist tenants in acquiring their own land. These actions in conjunction with the continued efforts of local lending institutions and the Farm Credit Administration prevented the anticipated rash of farm foreclosures.³⁹ The continued subsidies for crop reduction also provided assistance. By 1937 virtually every farmer in the county had signed up under the conservation act and was receiving payments. Participation declined the following year because of the uncertainty created by the new Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, but within a year the advantages of enrolling under the new program became clear, and sign-ups returned to near 1937 levels.⁴⁰

The activities of the FSA and AAA, however, did not generate economic recovery. Farm prices remained low for the remainder of the decade, and unemployment continued to plague the towns. Even with the relief-work activities of the WPA, which employed as many as 400 workers when funds were available, the county’s rate of unemployment was still at 8 percent as late as the spring of 1940. The persistence of the recession was obvious in

the results of an economic survey conducted in 1939 by the county agent. It revealed that 55 percent of all families in the county earned less than \$1,000 per year.⁴¹ Given these conditions, it is not surprising that the Democratic Party continued to lose ground in Dawson County. In the 1938 primary elections less than 43 percent of local voters selected Democratic ballots, and in November county voters supported Republicans in five of the six state contests and an anti-New Deal Democrat, Harry B. Coffee, for Congress.⁴²

After the elections the "Roosevelt recession" continued and local criticism of the President intensified. As in the past, criticism focused upon the broad consequences of the New Deal rather than on specific agencies. In fact, the local press normally expressed approval of the agencies it mentioned. The Public Works Administration won strong approval for its contribution to the development of local irrigation, as did the Rural Electrification Administration for its grants which assisted in bringing electric power to the farm. Other New Deal efforts to assist the nation's farmers through the credit programs of the FCA, the emergency relief activities of the FSA, and the direct subsidies of the AAA, also received praise from the local press.⁴³

Even the Works Progress Administration, frequently condemned elsewhere as a classic example of government paternalism, received only limited criticism in Dawson County.⁴⁴ While the *Cozad Local* occasionally referred to the WPA in scornful terms, the other local papers were more likely to offer praise. Much of that praise was directed at the many WPA projects completed in the county. From the standpoint of the *Lexington Clipper*, the construction of 42 miles of county road, 2 miles of street improvements, 2,940 feet of sidewalk, 18 culverts, five new buildings, improvements on eight existing structures, one new park, three new wells, a water pumping station and 27,339 feet of water main, 10,924 feet of new or improved sewer lines, and the cataloguing of 1,200 library volumes constituted a "gigantic face lifting" which deserved the county's applause.⁴⁵

The more liberal *Gothenburg Times* seemed less impressed with WPA construction than with its efforts to ease the burden of the unemployed. Its editor wrote several editorials which praised the agency for making it possible for "needy people to obtain employment and honorably support themselves and their loved ones by constructive labor."⁴⁶



National Recovery Act "Blue Eagle" poster.

While most specific agencies received praise or at least grudging approval from the county press, the assault on the New Deal philosophy continued. Much of the criticism echoed the concerns voiced by the *Cozad Local* during the 1936 campaign—in particular, federal spending. The *Clipper's* editor claimed the nation was moving toward financial ruin “not only because of debts and deficits themselves but because there has been no serious inclination to chart a course that will ultimately bring government spending under control.”⁴⁷ The *Local's* editor directed his ire at New Deal experimentation, citing 39 national emergencies declared by the President since 1933, all of which were used as “springboards for some new fangled experimenting or planning.”⁴⁸

After August, 1939, the war in Europe began to take people's minds off their economic woes. Surprisingly, while all three papers advocated non-intervention, none directed criticism at President Roosevelt. Even after the famous destroyers-for-bases deal, in which Roosevelt took the first step toward aligning the US with the Allied cause and thereby attracted censure from other Midwestern newspapers, the Dawson County press remained silent on the President's actions. Its editors seemed far more concerned with internal problems—with what they saw as an increasing tendency toward internal decay in America. From their perspective that decay was the inevitable product of excessive government paternalism which promoted an increasing “gimme’ influence” among American voters. The *Clipper* editor expressed his growing concern in a series of editorials in August, 1940. He drew a parallel between the collapse of France the preceding spring and conditions in the United States:

France carried “social reform” to the point of national decay. Politically we have been following a parallel path. We too have been chasing rainbows of unreasoned reform surrounded by burgeoning bureaucracy, skyrocketing debt, and crumbling initiative.

He blamed these problems on professional politicians who “talk much of sacrifice, in noble words,” but refused “to sacrifice one thin dime of patronage. . .to support a principle.” He said the result was that

money still goes out for farm relief schemes foredoomed to failure—for unnecessary tax-built and tax-subsidized government electric plants, for government credit schemes of all kinds, and for a thousand and one purposes

which are in no way a true function of government but which are prolific sources of votes and power.⁴⁹

Closely allied to this fear of paternalism and internal decay was a growing sense that the New Deal had lost touch with the Midwest, that it had become an essentially urban and eastern political phenomenon with little concern for rural America. Much of this perception was based upon the emerging alliance between the New Deal and organized labor which was most visible in the increasing political action of the CIO. But it was also based upon the assumption that the New Deal's relief and reform programs were designed to appeal to an urban population perceived to be unthrifty. In that sense the growing urban character of Roosevelt's support revived rural distrust of the city and caused it to be directed at the Democratic Party.⁵⁰

One final concern emerged as the 1940 election approached—Roosevelt's tradition-breaking quest for a third term. While the local press made few direct references to this development, subtle comments, such as the inclusion of the text of Jefferson's refusal to accept a third term, were frequently featured. While never condemned by local editors, Roosevelt's decision to ignore the two-term tradition seemed to heighten local fears that he was aspiring to excessive power. When viewed in conjunction with his effort to pack the Supreme Court in 1937 and his attempt to purge the Democratic party of anti-New Deal congressmen in 1938, Roosevelt's quest for a third term appeared ominous. They reasoned that since 1937 he had seemed bent on destroying the traditional separation of powers which limited executive authority; now he wanted to hold that authority even longer.⁵¹

Given these perceptions, the outcome of the 1940 election in Dawson County was never in doubt. The election returns merely confirmed what was already evident in the county press—that central Nebraskans had rejected Roosevelt and had returned to the Republican Party. Only the scope of Wendell Willkie's victory was surprising. He carried the county by a two-to-one margin, winning 66 percent of the popular vote and carrying every precinct. His margin of victory was thus nearly 7 percent greater than Roosevelt's in 1932, when the county was wallowing in the depths of the depression, and 13 percent higher than Roosevelt could muster after four years of providing relief. Willkie's victory also meant doom for the few remaining Democrats who held state offices. Dawson County voters gave strong majorities to

Republican candidates with the single exception of Representative Harry Coffee, who had openly opposed Roosevelt's third term bid.

The rejection of Roosevelt was consistent throughout the county. Precinct returns showed no appreciable variation between town and rural voting and only slight differences between commodity groups. Precincts with significant numbers of marginal farmers or with a higher percentage of wheat growers did support Willkie less completely than the rest of the county. But even there, where Roosevelt's strength had been greatest in 1932 and 1936, Willkie's margins were close to 60 percent, and in two of these precincts exceeded 75 percent. These two precincts showed by far the most dramatic Democrat to Republican shift in the county, and their behavior suggests one clue toward understanding the Roosevelt to Willkie shift which was not evident in the county press—the German-American vote. The two precincts in question contained high concentrations of ethnic Germans whose dramatic rejection of Roosevelt was a statement of their disapproval of his assistance to Britain in 1940. While the President's actions attracted little criticism in the press, they may well have decreased his popularity among the 10 percent of the county's German-Americans, turning what would have been a substantial Republican victory into a rout.⁵²

In spite of this ethnic variation, the election of 1940 in Dawson County represents the culmination of a conservative reaction to the New Deal which began as early as mid-1934. From that point through the end of the decade, opposition to the Roosevelt Administration grew. At first anti-New Deal sentiment evolved slowly, but in the closing years of the decade it seemed to snowball, culminating in the overwhelming rejection in 1940.

Why did Dawson County reject the New Deal? The answer involves complex factors, but one conclusion can be drawn with some certainty: the voters of Dawson County were never fully comfortable with the New Deal brand of government. Undeniably in the autumn of 1933, under the influence of the NRA campaign, a new farm program, and the obvious vigor of the Administration, the President won broad-based approval in the county. But that approval was built more upon the belief that spirited action would cure economic ills rather than upon any conscious agreement on approach or philosophy. By early 1935, as the effects of the NRA campaign wore off and the worst of the

depression passed, central Nebraskans began to judge the New Deal on its merits. While most approved of the specific New Deal agencies at work in the county, a growing number evidenced concern about the impact of the New Deal, and although Roosevelt carried the county in 1936, his margin was substantially narrowed from 1932. After 1936 in the wake of economic recession, the court-packing scheme, and a series of labor upheavals, those concerns intensified. By 1940 county voters seemed convinced that the New Deal had gone too far—that its experimentation and increased spending had become harmful to the economy, that its magnification of presidential power weakened the constitutional system, and that its attempt to appeal to urban voting blocs through paternalistic programs threatened the America they had known. In that sense the rejection of the New Deal in central Nebraska represents a return to the political ideology which characterized the region in the 1920s. Central Nebraskans, like most Midwesterners, had never really abandoned their philosophy of rugged individualism, limited government and unfettered free enterprise; they had merely been forced by an economic catastrophe to compromise. When the crisis had passed, they returned to those ideals and found the New Deal wanting.

Yet the return to the Republican Party did not mean that central Nebraskans had rejected all aspects of the New Deal. Their disenchantment was selective. Farm subsidies, the expanded system of agricultural credit, federal support for irrigation and rural electrification, and the many other New Deal programs which were improving the quality of rural life, all retained their popularity in central Nebraska well beyond 1940, and any candidate seeking political support in that region dared not threaten those gains of the 1930s. In that sense the traditional ideals to which central Nebraskans returned in 1940 had been profoundly influenced by the New Deal and the depression experience. The conservatism which reemerged in that election and guided their political choice thereafter was more pragmatic and far more tolerant of federal power than it had been in 1930. But it was, nonetheless, a conservatism which fit much more comfortably into the Republican than the Democratic fold. After 1940 the pattern was set. Over the succeeding decades, central Nebraskans consistently provided GOP presidential candidates with landslide majorities. They had returned to the Republican Party to stay.

GLOSSARY OF MAJOR NEW DEAL AGENCIES ACTIVE IN DAWSON COUNTY

Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA): Created under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of May, 1933, this agency was responsible for administering the New Deal farm program. Its county and precinct committees arranged and monitored reduction agreements with local farmers in line with guidelines established by the AAA, and the county agent directed other AAA programs including the emergency purchase of cattle and hogs and the distribution of emergency loans.

Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC): Created under the Civilian Conservation Corps Reforestation Relief Act of March, 1933, the CCC provided work for jobless males between the ages of 18 and 25 in reforestation, road construction, and the prevention of soil erosion. Approximately 220 Dawson County boys were employed in CCC work camps between April, 1933, and April, 1940.

Civil Works Administration (CWA): An emergency relief program created in November, 1933, to provide work for the unemployed during the coming winter. It was terminated in March, 1934.

Commodity Credit Corporation (not to be confused with Civilian Conservation Corps; see above): An agency created under the AAA in October, 1933, to extend crop loans to farmers, thereby allowing them to withhold their products from the market until prices improved.

Farm Credit Administration (FCA): Created by executive order in March, 1933, the FCA was designed to bring all federal farm credit operations under centralized direction. It assumed supervision of the Federal Land Banks, Federal Intermediate Credit Banks, Production Credit Corporations, and Banks for Cooperatives.

Farm Security Administration (FSA): Created under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of July, 1937, the FSA assumed most of the functions of the Resettlement Administration including the administration of low-interest loans to farm tenants and laborers for the purchase of land and equipment and to small farmers for operating expenses or the refinancing of farm mortgages.

National Recovery Administration (NRA): The agency created under the National Industrial Recovery Act of June, 1933, to administer the complex codes of competition designed to

regulate wages, hours, prices, and standards in each industry.

Public Works Administration (PWA): Created under Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act, the PWA was designed to stimulate employment and business activity through grants to local governmental bodies for the construction of roads, public buildings, and other major projects.

Resettlement Administration (RA): Established by an executive order of May, 1935, the RA was created to improve the lot of farmers who had not been aided by the AAA. It was authorized to resettle destitute farm families, grant loans for the purchase of farms and equipment, and establish subsistence homestead communities. Its functions were absorbed by the Farm Security Administration in 1937.

Rural Electrification Administration (REA): Created by an executive order of May, 1935, the REA administered loans for the purpose of generating and distributing electricity to rural areas.

Works Progress Administration (WPA): Established under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of April, 1935, the WPA directed a massive work program to employ the nation's jobless. It was administered through local WPA committees which designed projects and employed the workers.

NOTES

1. Harold Stevens and John Stuart, "Report on the Overall Economic Development Program for the Dawson County Redevelopment Area: Dawson County, Nebraska" (Extension Service, University of Nebraska, 1964), 20-26, 32-49; James C. Adams, "Annual Report of Cooperating Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Dawson County, State of Nebraska, 1940," (Office of the Extension Agent, Dawson County Courthouse, Lexington), 45, 52a. Hereafter cited as Adams, "County Agent's Report." For a more detailed description of the county, see Jerold Simmons, "The New Deal in Dawson County, Nebraska" (unpublished master's thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1967), 1-11.

2. US Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Population*, I, 671.

3. In a comment following the 1936 election, the editor of the *Times* admitted that he had long been a Democrat. The *Clipper's* editor announced his party preference before that election and also served as co-chairman of the Republican county committee through most of the decade. *Gothenburg Times*, November 11, 1936; *Lexington Clipper*, August 27, 1936.

4. W. Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots: 1836-1892* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1955), 607; Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934), 32, 263; Dawson County

Abstract of Votes (Office of the County Clerk, Dawson County Courthouse, Lexington), II, 96, 103. The party percentages in Dawson County through the first three decades of the 20th century were similar to those of most counties in the corn and livestock producing region of the state. See Charles J. Knibbs, "The Political Map of Nebraska, 1900-1934" (unpublished master's thesis, Department of History, University of Nebraska at Lincoln, 1935), 145.

5. *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics: Annual Reports, 1928 and 1932* (Lincoln: State Federal Division of Agricultural Statistics, 1928 and 1932), 118-20, 3. For an excellent description of the impact of the depression on central Nebraska, see Lloyd Glover Jr., "The Economic Effects of Drought and Depression on Custer County" (unpublished master's thesis, Department of Economics, University of Nebraska at Lincoln, 1950).

6. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1930," 52; "1940," 52a. Farm foreclosure sales totaled 12 in 1930, 15 in 1934, and 34 in 1932. Sale Docket of Dawson County, Nebraska (Office of the Clerk of the District Court, Dawson County Courthouse, Lexington), III, 108-201.

7. *Dawson County Pioneer*, October 7, 1932; March 10, 1933; *Cozad Local*, September 30, 1932. The *Pioneer* was a Lexington weekly absorbed by the *Lexington Clipper* in 1934.

8. Minutes of the Directors, Cozad State Bank, July 30, 1932; Glover, "Drouth and Depression in Custer County," 10; *Lexington Clipper*, May 23, 1935.

9. Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), 257.

10. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 300.

11. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 147.

12. *Cozad Local*, March 24, 1933; *Lexington Clipper*, March 16, 1933.

13. *Cozad Local*, July 18, 1933.

14. An excellent description of the New Deal's efforts on behalf of Midwestern agriculture is by Kearney State College Professor Michael W. Schuyler, "The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-1939" (unpublished manuscript loaned to the author).

15. *Dawson County Pioneer*, January 5, 1934.

16. See especially the *Gothenburg Times*, August 9, 1933, or the *Cozad Local*, August 15, 1933.

17. *Dawson County Pioneer*, August 4, 1933; *Lexington Clipper*, September 7, 1933.

18. *Dawson County Pioneer*, June 29, 1934.

19. *Dawson County Abstract of Votes*, II, 156, 160, 169-71. For a detailed discussion of the 1934 election results, see Simmons, "The New Deal in Dawson County," 60-63.

20. *Cozad Local*, July 27, 1934; *Lexington Clipper*, May 23, 1935; Arthur C. Schmieding, "Geographic Patterns of Failure of Wheat and Corn in Nebraska, 1931-1952" (unpublished master's thesis, Department of Geography, University of Nebraska at Lincoln, 1954), 26-27.

21. *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics*, 1934, 3.

22. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1934," 72-74; Sale Docket of Dawson County, Nebraska, III, 248-310.

23. *Lexington Clipper*, April 4, 1935; May 30, 1935.
24. *Cozad Local*, June 7, 1935; *Lexington Clipper*, June 27, 1935; September 26, 1935.
25. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1934," 72; "1935," 21, 28. Interview with James C. Adams, Brady, Nebraska, August 24, 1966.
26. *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics*, 1936, 3.
27. *Cozad Local*, March 10, 1936; *Lexington Clipper*, March 12, 1936. Norris chided local farmers for asking Congress "to keep anybody from planting or producing a crop which will come into competition with anybody else who is now producing similar crops." *Cozad Local*, March 17, 1936; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1936," 22.
28. *Gothenburg Times*, August 19, 1936.
29. Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1936," 46.
30. *Gothenburg Times*, September 23, 1936.
31. Dixon Wecter, *The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 101.
32. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 192.
33. This trade agreement died in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee due in large part to the protests of cattle feeders. John T. Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising in the Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 147.
34. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 192; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1940," 32-33.
35. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 192.
36. See especially the *Lexington Clipper*, March 11, 1937, and the *Cozad Local*, July 23, 1937.
37. *Cozad Local*, August 31, 1937.
38. *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics*, 1937, 3.
39. Local farm foreclosures increased by only seven between 1937 and 1938. Sale Docket of Dawson County, Nebraska, III, 445-642; IV, 1-82; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1937," 8; "1938," 45.
40. *Gothenburg Times*, May 11, 1939.
41. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: Population*, II, part 4, 635; Adams, "County Agent's Report, 1939," 43.
42. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 198, 203, 210.
43. *Gothenburg Times*, September 1, 1938; *Lexington Clipper*, September 22, 1938, and July 13, 1939; *Cozad Local*, December 29, 1939.
44. The *Omaha World Herald* was highly critical of the WPA. See especially its editorial of May 6, 1938.
45. *Lexington Clipper*, February 17, 1938, and April 25, 1940.
46. *Gothenburg Times*, August 31, 1939.
47. *Lexington Clipper*, September 5, 1940.
48. *Cozad Local*, April 7, 1939.
49. *Lexington Clipper*, August 1, 15, 1940.
50. This perception of the New Deal was evident well beyond Dawson County. See James T. Patterson, "The New Deal in the West," *Pacific Historical Review*, 38 (August, 1969), 317-27; or Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflict* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), 109.

51. *Lexington Clipper*, August 8, 1940. In a series of interviews conducted by the author in 1966, the third-term issue and concerns that Roosevelt had become power-hungry were cited more frequently than any other single factor in explaining the local rejection of Roosevelt in 1940. See also James B. Beddlow, "Midwestern Editorial Response to the New Deal," *South Dakota History*, 4 (Winter, 1973), 17.

52. Dawson County Abstract of Votes, II, 230-236; US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: Population*, III, part 2, 75, 98-99. For a detailed evaluation of the 1940 German-American vote in eastern Nebraska, see Robert W. Cherny, "Isolationist Voting in 1940: A Statistical Analysis," *Nebraska History*, 52 (Fall, 1971), 293-310.