



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Grasshoppered: America's Response to the 1874 Rocky Mountain Locust Invasion

Full Citation: Alexandra M Wagner, "Grasshoppered: America's Response to the 1874 Rocky Mountain Locust Invasion," *Nebraska History* 89 (2008): 154-167

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2008Grasshoppered.pdf>

Date: 2/11/2014

Article Summary: It was a plague of biblical proportions, influencing generations of federal agricultural policy . . . and foreshadowing today's expectations about the government's role during natural disasters.

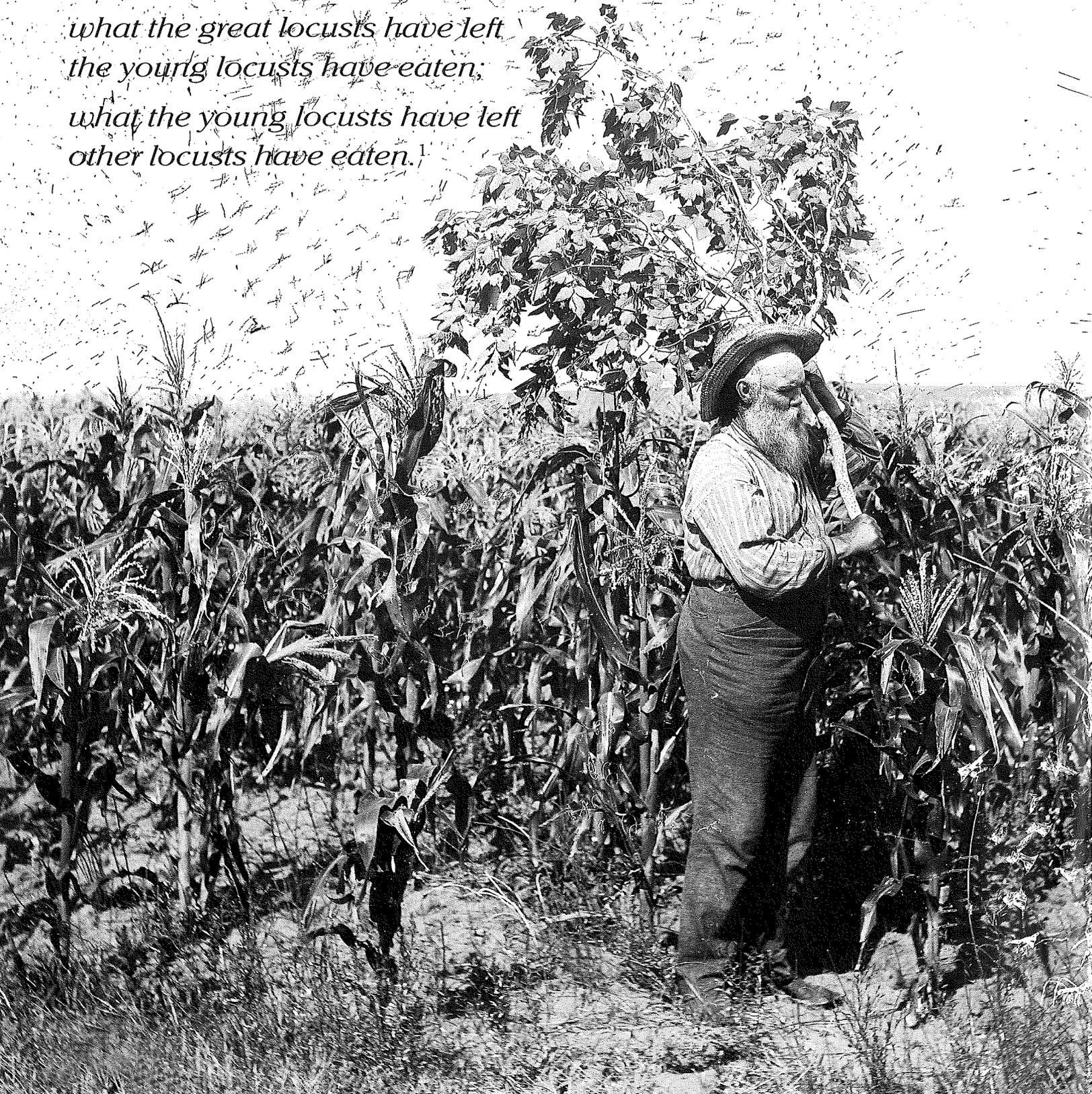
Cataloging Information:

Names: Swain Finch, Solomon Butcher, H Westermann, Robert W Furnas, Thomas A Osborn, E O C Ord, N A M Dudley, Jeffrey Lockwood, John S Pillsbury, John L Pennington

Keywords: Swain Finch, H Westermann, Robert W Furnas, Thomas A Osborn, Rocky Mountain locust (*Melanoplus spretus*), Nebraska Relief and Aid Association, Kansas Central Relief Committee, Chicago Fire, homestead extension, John S Pillsbury, "Grasshopper Act," John L Pennington

Photographs / Images: Swain Finch demonstrating how he tried to kill grasshoppers in 1876 (Solomon Butcher photograph); inset article from the *Niobrara Pioneer*, July 1, 1875; Governor Robert W Furnas; a cornfield destroyed by grasshoppers; General E O C Ord; Major N A M Dudley; Thomas Nast caricature, "Go West Young Man, Go West"; an implement for clearing young grasshoppers from a field; a horse-powered grasshopper catcher

*What the locust swarm has left
The great locusts have eaten,
what the great locusts have left
the young locusts have eaten,
what the young locusts have left
other locusts have eaten.*





America's Response to the 1874 Rocky Mountain Locust Invasion

Grasshoppered

BY ALEXANDRA M. WAGNER

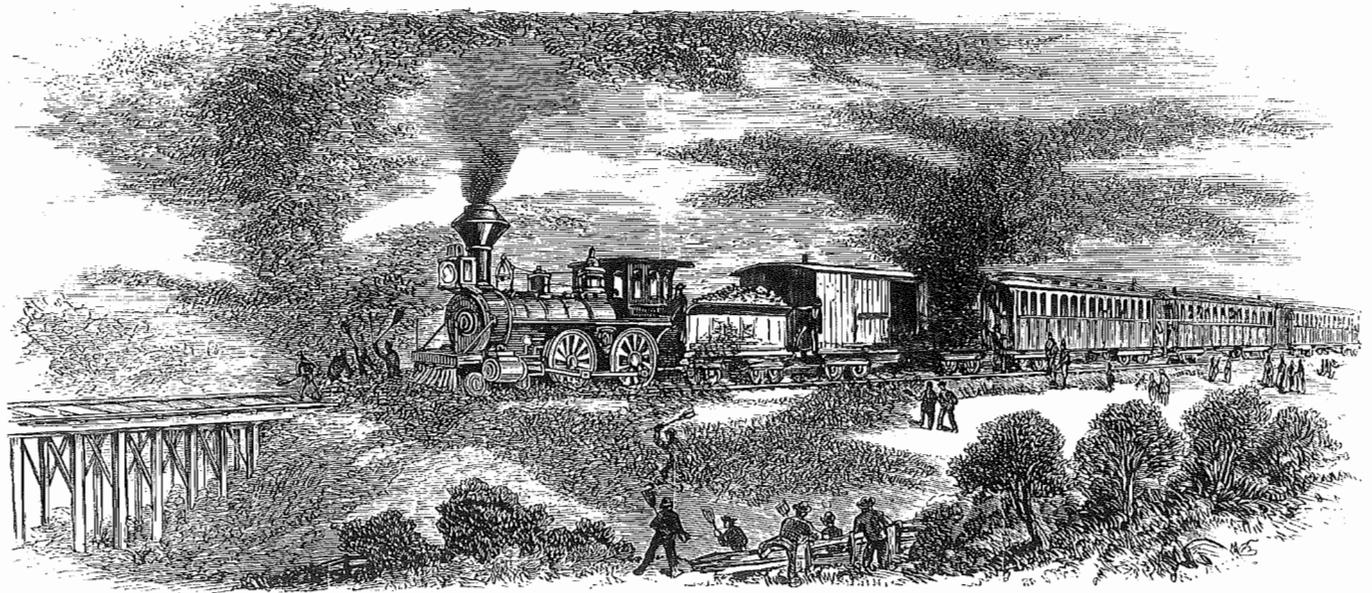


It was a plague of biblical proportions, influencing generations of federal agricultural policy...and foreshadowing today's expectations about the government's role during natural disasters.

DURING A SEVERE DROUGHT in the summer of 1874, a plague of Rocky Mountain locusts (popularly called grasshoppers) denuded the fields and crushed the spirits of thousands of settlers in the Great Plains and Midwest. Reports of the infestation and destruction circulated throughout the nation and produced a widespread relief effort. Despite conflicting accounts of the damage the invasion caused, the event prompted new discussions on the merits of charity and whether states and the federal government should provide disaster assistance to American farmers.

The grasshoppers traveled in a "perfect swarm."² From July 20 to July 30, 1874, an estimated 12.5

trillion insects flew over an area encompassing 198,000 square miles between Minnesota and the Rio Grande and feasted on the crops of unsuspecting farmers.³ In the hardest hit areas, the red-legged creatures devoured entire fields of wheat, corn, potatoes, turnips, tobacco, and fruit. The hoppers also gnawed curtains and clothing hung up to dry or still being worn by farmers, who frantically tried to bat the hungry swarms away from their crops. Attracted to the salt from perspiration, the oversized insects chewed on the wooden handles of rakes, hoes, and pitchforks, and on the leather of saddles and harness. Locusts apparently liked onions; farmers reported smelling a faint odor of the vegetable as the unwelcome visitors neared.⁴



Newspaper stories, along with the letters and diaries of western farmers, reported that the locusts blackened the sky and their jaws crackled like a deadly fire as they ate fields bare.⁵ According to Nebraska historian Addison E. Sheldon, who witnessed the invasion, the insects filled the air in every direction:

In a clear, hot July day a haze came over the sun. The haze deepened into a gray cloud. Suddenly the cloud resolved itself into billions of gray grasshoppers sweeping down upon the earth. The vibration of their wings filled the ear with a roaring sound like a rushing storm. As far as the eye could reach in every direction the air was filled with them. Where they alighted, they covered the ground like a heavy crawling carpet.⁶

There were reports of hordes of grasshoppers so thick they halted a Union Pacific train at Stevenson station, near Kearney, Nebraska. Crushed insect bodies left an oily residue on the tracks that caused the wheels to spin and prevented the locomotive from moving forward.⁷

Locusts not only stopped trains and destroyed vegetation, but they also rendered poultry, an important food source on western farms, inedible. During such raids, chickens and turkeys feasted on grasshoppers. The digested insects tainted the meat and eggs with a reddish-brown oil.⁸ The insect bodies also polluted water supplies. Cattle and horses refused to drink from streams stained brown from the grasshoppers' excrement and putrefied bodies. Farmers in affected regions constantly had to remove locust carcasses from their wells to avoid contaminating their drinking water.

Grasshoppers could literally stop a train. As steel wheels crushed their bodies on the tracks, the rails became so slippery that the steam engines could gain no traction. This portrayal of a train in Nebraska appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. NSHS RG3761-6-1

Eaten directly, however, grasshoppers were not poisonous to humans and, according to some, were quite tasty. Missouri's State Entomologist Charles Riley claimed grasshoppers were as nutritious as oysters and could be used to make a variety of dishes including soup or prepared John the Baptist style: fried with honey. Few farmers, however, were inclined to appreciate the grasshoppers for their putative food value.⁹

The settlers used a variety of unsuccessful methods to kill or drive off the locusts and save their crops. Some tried covering their fields with sheets. Others burned fires to smoke grasshoppers away from their crops and into surrounding ditches filled with water and oil to drown them. Farmers built a variety of grasshopper traps and crushers. Some states enacted legislation to encourage the construction of grasshopper extermination devices by offering tax breaks and subsidies. Other states supported the protection of native grasshopper-eating birds such as quail, prairie chickens, and snipe.¹⁰

These efforts and others failed to protect western farms from the grasshoppers' ravages. Entire crops were destroyed, some families starved, and thousands abandoned their homesteads for safer living in the East.¹¹ Conservative estimates put the grasshopper damage to agriculture in 1874 at \$50 million, approximately 74 percent of the total value of U.S. farm products.¹²

Page 154: In a 1900 Solomon Butcher photograph, Swain Finch demonstrates how he tried to kill grasshoppers in 1876. To help recreate the scene, Butcher added a cloud of 'hoppers by scratching some into the emulsion and drawing others with India ink. NSHS RG2608-2156h

In addition to recreating the scene in a photo, Solomon Butcher also interviewed Mr. Finch for his *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska*—

"In the spring of 1876 the [Finch] boys planted about sixty acres of sod corn, which was just beginning to make fine roasting ears when one afternoon they discovered what appeared to be a prairie fire, a dense cloud of smoke arising in the northwest. They wondered at a prairie fire at that time of the year, when the grass was green. They watched it intently as it came nearer and nearer, until it obscured the sun and darkened the air like an eclipse. When it had come within a hundred yards of them they heard a continuous cracking and snapping sound, which increased to a perfect roar as it approached them, when they discovered to their horror that a cloud of grasshoppers were upon them. They alighted and in a few seconds every green thing in sight was literally covered and hidden with a seething, crawling mass several inches in depth. The beautiful field of corn melted down as if each leaf were a spray of hoar frost in the rays of the noon-

Swain Finch's War Against the 'Hoppers

day sun. Uncle Swain was dumbfounded for a moment, but when he saw that corn fading he came to his senses, cut a large willow bush and went after those grasshoppers with a vengeance. He proceeded down a corn row, threshing to right and left, killing his [sic] thousands with every sweep, and mowing a swath of death in his track. When he had gone about a hundred yards he stopped to get his breath and discovered to his extreme disgust that there were as many grasshoppers behind him as there were ahead. . . . The hoppers ate up everything in the shape of grain and garden stuff on the place, leaving it as brown and bare as if it had been swept with fire. They would settle on a post the thickness of a man's arm, and in a few seconds it would appear to be as big as a log. When the hoppers left it it would look as if it had been scraped with a knife, every vestige of bark and fiber being eaten off."



Western immigration suffered as a result of the invasion. In Dakota Territory, the number of homesteaders who left after the plague represented a significant portion of the total population.¹³ Fed-up farmers fleeing the devastation vented their frustration on wagon covers that proclaimed, "Eaten out by grasshoppers. Going back East to live with wife's folks," and "From Sodom, where it rains grasshoppers, fire and destruction." For some victims there was no escape. Mortgage debt, lack of transportation, or lack of an alternative destination tethered many settlers to their tattered farms. The Pawnee, Omaha, Oto, Ponca, and other Indian tribes who had ceded most of their land to the federal government in exchange for small reservations also suffered without recourse.¹⁴

For centuries, the locust lived, bred, and de-

stroyed vegetation in many countries on several continents. In the Bible, the locust was one of the ten plagues of Egypt that brought famine and distress. The damage to agriculture and threat of famine caused by locust invasions, especially in developing countries, has led the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to create and maintain a website, Locust Watch, "to monitor the world-wide locust situation and keep affected countries and donors informed of expected developments."¹⁵

The bluish-gray Rocky Mountain locust that consumed \$50 million worth of western crops and halted a Union Pacific train in 1874 had red legs and ranged in length from half an inch to four inches.¹⁶ *Melanoplus spretus*, the locust' binomial name, was a type of migratory grasshopper that

Alexandra M. Wagner
is pursuing a Ph.D. in
American History from
Brandeis University.

KIND 'HOPPERS.

What They Did Do and what They Didn't Do Here.

An Interesting and Reliable Account of the Grasshopper Visit.

A Sioux City Journal reporter has been interviewing our townsman H. Westermann on grasshopper news, and the following is the result:

"H. Westermann, a Niobrara merchant, an intelligent and reliable man, who arrived in the city last evening on his way to Lincoln, Neb., furnished us with some very interesting 'hopper news. Last Friday noon, he said, as he was going to dinner, he heard a strange noise behind him, which sounded like an approaching hail storm, and upon looking around he was horrified in seeing a dense cloud of grasshoppers within a few rods of him. The sight completely unnerved him, and even his old desire to be cremated after death forsook him completely, for he was sure he would be buried a mile deep under the swarm of flying locusts. The cloud was only about 10 feet above the ground and so dense that it was utterly impossible for the sun to penetrate it. They were moving north against a strong wind, but before they traveled half a mile past him they rose in the air and were carried back south. They attained a great height, and formed a half circle like an immense shaving circling back from a carpenter's plane. They were about two hours in passing over him. A large number of them fell in that vicinity, but not in quantities sufficient to do any damage. Mr. Westermann says as soon as the cloud had disappeared, he went to work in dissecting those which had been left behind, and it is his opinion that they had had nothing to eat for a week. There was nothing in them. They were as hollow as an empty barrel. But upon further investigation he discovered a maggot lodged just behind the head of every one he examined, which explained the empty condition of their stomachs. Two hours after the hoppers had landed in Niobrara, there were none to be seen, but upon digging into the soft ground a short distance they were found dead. The maggots referred to and the little red parasites are destroying the pests.

Niobrara Pioneer, July 1, 1875

"The sight completely unnerved him, and even his old desire to be cremated after death forsook him completely, for he was sure he would be buried a mile deep under the swarm of flying locusts."

lived and bred in the dry Rocky Mountain plateau and bordering high plains, which included parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Canada. Until 1902, when the Rocky Mountain locust disappeared from North America, grasshopper raids occurred periodically, usually during warm summers and in times of low rainfall. In 1874 increased reproduction and a shortage of food in their breeding grounds forced the locusts to take flight and search for new resources.¹⁷

In addition to the unprecedented size, scope, and duration of the 1874 grasshopper plague, drought and financial panic exacerbated the destruction they caused. The July invasion coincided with one of the driest periods ever recorded in the Midwest and Great Plains. While the locusts thrived in dry weather, farmers fretted as they watched their crops wither in the sun or disappear at the jaws of the ravenous creatures. Losses from the plague and drought were harder to recoup as the nation suffered from financial panic caused by the September 1873 collapse of the banking house of Jay Cooke and Company. Prices for agricultural goods dropped and investment waned. Historian James C. Olson explained that even before the grasshoppers arrived in the summer of 1874, many Nebraska farmers were having trouble finding markets for their wheat and corn.¹⁸

In August 1874, after the hoppers had filled their bellies and laid their eggs, many western newspapers and government officials denied that the locusts had caused anything other than "limited damage." Fearful that negative publicity about the region would deter settlement and suppress investment, editors downplayed the extent of suffering and destruction caused by the grasshoppers:

We hear a great many exaggerated reports of the damages that grasshoppers have done in Polk, Hamilton, York, and Butler counties, which are hardly creditable and it is of no earthly benefit to give them currency. In fact we believe it is damaging to the future prospects of the different localities for the citizens to start such stories; although this plague may not come next year, still the impression will gain credence in the [E]ast that some of these sections of country are doomed to suffer from grasshopper visits continuously, because people will not stop to think that this is but a chance occurrence.¹⁹

Newspapers in the affected region resisted reporting negative details about the invasion

primarily as a result of their dual role as both local media and unofficial immigration agents promoting western settlement. As historian Harold E. Briggs explained, editors received “thousands of letters from different parts of the country asking about land, climate, and general conditions,” sent copies of their papers to eastern states, and also printed “boomer” and immigration editions.²⁰

Initially, governors and local officials also hesitated to admit the extent of the grasshopper damage for fear that negative publicity about the region would impede development and investment. To relieve suffering without attracting national attention, the governors of Kansas and Nebraska set up internal private relief agencies to collect and distribute food and supplies to those worst hit by the plague. On September 15, 1874, Kansas Governor Thomas A. Osborn called a special session of the legislature and established the Central Relief Committee to “chiefly secure aid within our own State” for the victims of the grasshopper plague:

The wishes of the people, so far as I have been informed, are entirely in favor of providing for the present emergency, and for doing it at home. . . . If you adhere to their wishes . . . the people of the whole Nation will point to Kansas with pride as the State . . . that never forgets the cry of the suffering and the destitute, and the State which steadily marches forward, made stronger by every adversity and more powerful by relying solely upon herself.²¹

Nebraska Governor Robert W. Furnas presided over a similar organization, the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association, which was formed on September 18, 1874, to “collect money, provisions, clothing, fuel, seeds and other necessary supplies” from private sources.²²

During the first stages of the relief effort in the fall of 1874, officials and promoters from grasshoppered states insisted that local fundraisers, bond measures, and donations would support plague victims without the need to appeal for assistance from other states or the federal government. They also opposed any effort to tap the state treasuries, which were already depleted due to the effects of drought and the economic slowdown caused by the Panic of 1873. In the inaugural address of the Kansas Central Relief Committee, members expressed confidence that people in “wealthier portions of the state,” from firmly established communities “are both able and willing to render assistance” to grasshopper sufferers.²³ The editor of the *Omaha Bee* stated with equal

certainty that local and private efforts would provide relief for plague victims: “[W]e are confident that Nebraska will be able to take care of all the people who are really in want, without legislative aid.”²⁴ Although preferring locally based relief to state or federal assistance, some doubted the effectiveness and merits of private charity, as this note in the *Omaha Daily Republican* suggested:

There is no fault to find with the committee working for the relief of the grasshopper sufferers; and donations have been liberal. But the history of all such cases shows that the virtuous and proud poor suffer, while the improvident and vicious are demanding and insolent. Some impudent people get more than they ever had, and the worthy starve, as was the case in the Chicago fire. Too much care cannot be observed in distribution. It is due alike to sufferers and contributors.²⁵

As the grasshopper relief efforts increased toward the end of fall and throughout the winter of 1874–75, warnings of abuse and reports of mal-distribution of supplies appeared more frequently in western newspapers.

The history of the grasshopper relief effort illustrates the particular attitudes of local and federal officials, western promoters, and easterners toward charity during the nineteenth century. It is difficult to fully appreciate the responses to such natural disasters without understanding the ideological forces that directed them. Inherent skepticism of unrestricted charity and the belief that, with the exception of natural disaster victims, the poor were mainly to blame for their own situation influenced the grasshopper relief effort in 1874–75. Victims received public and private support because the nation viewed them as deserving poor, meaning that their condition had not resulted from their immorality, idleness, or individual failure.²⁶ That many homesteaders were Union Civil War veterans also appealed to patriotic donors. Moreover, many Americans viewed the settlers as trailblazers who had willingly submitted themselves to the rigors of life on the frontier to advance the country’s moral and material prosperity. As the Worcester, Massachusetts, *Daily Spy* wrote:

While we would remember the charity which begins at home . . . we ought not to forget that the duty presses upon us with paramount claim of doing our utmost to relieve from the horrors of starvation a community made up largely of people of New England



Nebraska Governor Robert W. Furnas presided over the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association, which was formed on September 18, 1874, to “collect money, provisions, clothing, fuel, seeds and other necessary supplies” from private sources. NSHS RG2411-1727



Clouds of grasshoppers left devastation behind them. They could destroy a cornfield in a matter of hours. NSHS RG2570-94-09

extraction, many of whom have fought in our defense . . . who are advancing the material prosperity of our country by voluntarily submitting to the hardships of frontier life.²⁷

The view expressed by the *Daily Spy* and other newspapers of western farmers as deserving of aid served as the central justification of the 1874–75 national grasshopper relief effort.

Despite the willingness of individuals, banks, and businesses from other states to send aid, not everyone welcomed the assistance. Land agents warned that too much relief would make farmers dependent on outside charity. The editor of the *Vermillion Republican* in Dakota Territory believed that pleas for help damaged the reputation of western states:

There is not a county in Dakota but what is able, and amply able, to take care of its own poor. Had the legislature given county commissioners the power and authority to levy a direct tax on their respective counties to aid those in need of assistance within their limits, the whole work would have been done, and well done, and we should have been saved the wretched humiliation of going before the country as beggars and paupers, and the fair name and credit of Dakota from being dragged in the dust.²⁸

The boosters' desire to facilitate economic development and maintain the perception of westerners as rugged, self-sufficient, and independent collided with grasshopper victims' desperate need for assistance. As a result, relief efforts stalled and many families suffered.

The response to the grasshopper plague of 1874–75 was similar to that following the 1871 Chicago Fire, which caused nearly \$200 million in damage. Both disasters, although local or regional in nature, drew national interest and the sympathy of residents living in the East and Northeast. Forty-five percent of the \$4 million of outside aid to Chicago Fire victims came from Philadelphia, New York, and Boston.²⁹ Grasshopper relief organizations also collected a large portion of their aid from eastern states and cited the national response to the Chicago Fire to justify assisting the grasshopper victims.

Similar to western boosters who argued that too much aid might render farmers “soft,” many prosperous Chicagoans had feared unfettered charity and the “potential dark side” of fire relief in 1871. According to historian Karen Sawislak, the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, an organization established by the mayor and composed primarily of wealthy citizens, was “internally at war between a form of humanitarianism and conservative impulses, between a commitment to aid the poor and a desire to preserve what they viewed as the proper social order of their city.” As a result of its “schizophrenia of purpose,” the Chicago relief society required a thorough investigation of every person seeking assistance.³⁰

The Nebraska Relief and Aid Association employed similar “tests” for grasshopper victims to ensure that only “worthy” residents received temporary aid. To receive assistance, Nebraska farmers pledged an oath that they possessed nothing of value that could be sold for food or clothing. In a letter published in the *Worcester Daily Spy*, a Nebraska man described this process:

If a man wants help he must go to one of the officers of the relief society and make a sworn statement that he has got nothing that he can sell to get anything with; he must sell his last cow and team; he must not have any seed wheat nor any money; after which they will take his name for the committee to act upon. . . .

I have got a team yet, but I had to sell one horse the other day, which I received ten dollars for, worth fifty.³¹

Similarly in Minnesota, grasshopper-ravaged families had to prove their destitution and sell their livestock to receive succor. Despite the means test dictating how public and private aid

To receive assistance, Nebraska farmers were required to pledge an oath that they possessed nothing of value that could be sold for food or clothing.

was distributed to grasshopper victims in Nebraska, accusations of corruption and stories of supplies going to undeserving homesteaders flooded the pages of the local press.³²

At times, those on the receiving end of grasshopper relief also questioned the legitimacy of charity and public assistance. Many settlers regretted the need to appeal for outside help and believed charity should remain local. Some farmers refused to accept food, clothing, and other necessities except in the form of a temporary loan. The original articles of incorporation of the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association set up a system of lending money to destitute farmers because, as the *Omaha Daily Republican* explained, “[P]eople in the suffering districts in many instances refused to accept charity as a voluntary gift, alleging that they were not beggars, and that they would receive money only on the basis of an ordinary business transaction.”³³

Although the aid association eventually abandoned the loan idea, some Nebraska counties sought ways to support individual farmers from the local treasury. In Hamilton County, commissioners discussed a special election to authorize issuing \$50, \$100, \$150, and \$200 loans at 10 percent interest to grasshopper sufferers who promised not to leave the county prior to repaying the loan plus interest.³⁴

As winter approached, and state and local relief agencies struggled to supply food and clothing to the thousands of grasshopper victims, the need to appeal for outside aid became more apparent to western officials. The threat of starvation was becoming widespread. Army officers stationed in the Plains region were among the first to recognize the need. Moved by first hand encounters with plague victims, army officials stationed in the West to protect the new settlements from Indians assumed leadership of local relief associations and lobbied federal authorities for approval to distribute blankets, boots, and coats from army stockpiles.

In late October 1874 General E. O. C. Ord, commander of the Department of the Platte and acting head of the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association, asked his superiors in Washington, D.C. for permission to distribute food and clothing to the “famine-stricken families of southern and western Nebraska,” where the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association lacked facilities.³⁵ The War Department initially denied Ord’s request, but acquiesced after President Ulysses S. Grant on November 13, 1874,

issued an executive order authorizing distribution of surplus and condemned army clothing to grasshopper sufferers in Kansas and Nebraska.³⁶

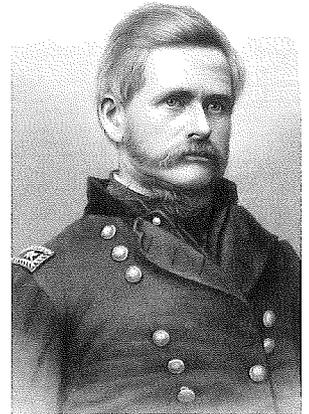
Despite the limitation of Grant’s order to distribute only clothing, Ord and other army officers in grasshoppered regions also supplied food and other necessities to destitute farmers throughout most of the winter. Major N. A. M. Dudley, who had been sent on an inspection tour of southwestern Nebraska, wrote General Ord in November 1874 and urged federal assistance to prevent starvation:

The destitution existing here is much greater than I expected. Relief must be given these people or hundreds will starve before the winter is half over. . . . The government must assist these people. The present aid they are receiving is only a drop in the bucket toward relieving future wants.³⁷

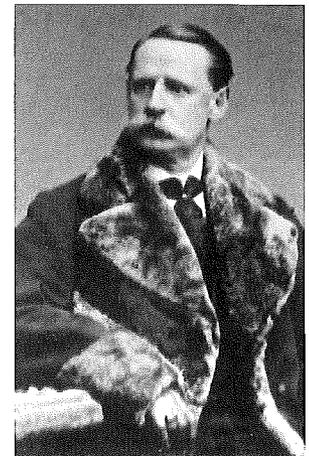
Kansas officials similarly began to realize that they had underestimated the destruction and that local relief agencies could not support all of the victims through the winter. On December 1, 1874, Kansas Agricultural Secretary Alfred Gray reported to Governor Osborn that as much as 70 percent of the population was impoverished in the worst hit counties: “Destitution is greater than has been supposed. Our people are not beggars, and there have been many cases of suffering discovered where delicacy has hidden it from public view as long as possible.”³⁸ The time had come to advertise the need for assistance, even if doing so threatened to tarnish the reputation of western states or reduce the flow of eastern investment.

As winter edged closer, many western newspapers that had downplayed the extent of the suffering now urged officials to appeal for outside assistance and provided greater details on the plight of the grasshopper victims. In late October 1874 the *Omaha Daily Republican* printed a letter from George W. Frost, who described the destitute condition of plague victims and pressed Nebraskans to come to their relief:

The number of people to be helped are, from the best authority, believed to be at least 10,000. They must be helped to keep them from actual starvation, until next [year’s] harvest—a period of nine months. . . . We should appeal to the general public. We must put aside all delicacy and pride and send out through all the land the Macedonian cry for the starving. We may as well talk this matter right out and say that with all that has been done and all that we now have the power to do that three weeks will not elapse without



The War Department at first denied General E. O. C. Ord’s request to distribute food and clothing to famine victims. When President Grant authorized the distribution of surplus and condemned army clothing, Ord exceeded his orders by distributing food and other supplies as well. NSHS RG2411-4181



“The destitution existing here is much greater than I expected,” wrote Major N. A. M. Dudley to General Ord after an inspection tour of southwestern Nebraska. “Relief must be given these people or hundreds will starve before the winter is half over.” NSHS RG2411-1416b

actual freezing and starving of men, women, and children. . . . Many of these families if not helped within two weeks will *die*. I repeat it, there is not a moment to be lost.³⁹

The decision to print Frost's letter indicated that western newspapers feared widespread starvation (and the damage to the reputation of western states were such an event to occur) even more than they dreaded negative publicity.



In the aftermath of the grasshopper plague, caricaturist Thomas Nast summed up American feeling toward the Great Plains in a sketch for *Harper's Weekly*. From Edwin A. Curley, *Nebraska, Its Advantages, Resources, and Drawbacks* (1875), 277.

The newspaper followed up with an excerpt from Major Dudley's report of what he had seen in Nebraska's Republican Valley, an excerpt that reinforced the idea that the grasshopper victims were indeed worthy of aid:

Thrift, enterprise, industry, and economy was exhibited in and around nearly every poor cabin I visited. . . .

While traveling through the valley I often said to myself, how I wish some of our rich friends in the east, who are living so comfortable, surrounded by so many extravagant luxuries could only spend one day in the Republican Valley. . . . I know the picture would touch their hearts and loosen their purse strings, [and] thereby assure these brave people safely through the calamity which they in no way are responsible for.⁴⁰

Eastern newspapers, troubled by conflicting reports of the damage and suffering caused by the plague, asked residents of grasshoppered regions for first hand accounts. After receiving a letter from "C. G." of Fort Hays, Kansas, claiming that recent reports had exaggerated the extent of suffering, the Worcester *Daily Spy* printed a rebuttal by Thomas H. Vail, bishop of Kansas, who claimed the suffering had not been overstated:

There is severe suffering and very extensive want, not only in the newly settled counties, where it is really a question between starvation and charitable relief, but also in the older counties with very few exceptions.

Vail's letter went on to explain that the "strong interest in the value of our real estate" held by wealthy easterners and corporations, "which naturally desire to prevent influences which may retard immigration," accounted for the incomplete reporting of the conditions of plague victims.⁴¹

In soliciting help, grasshoppered counties also sent representatives to eastern states to lecture on the plague, collect donations, and print appeals for aid in the local newspapers. The representatives described sufferers as being worthy of aid and sometimes compared them with the victims of the Chicago Fire. Delegates expressed confidence that they could obtain donations by educating easterners about the destitution hard-working families were suffering as a result of the plague.

Similarly, in a statement to the "Charitable People of the Eastern States," the Clay County Central Relief Committee of Kansas described how the hopes of its industrious residents had been crushed by the grasshoppers:

The forepart of the past year was one of great prospect, everything looked as though our county was on the high road to fortune, and under these delusive prospects our farmers entered into contracts for farm machinery, repairing their houses, and an extra credit at stores, but alas, the plague reached us, and everything was swept away. In twenty-four hours, the labor of the year was nothing.⁴²

Grasshoppers, not idleness, the commissioners explained, were to blame for the misfortunes of Clay County farmers.

The Jewel County Relief Committee of Kansas also sought to paint grasshopper victims as deserving poor. In an appeal to the "American people," the committee issued the following statement, accompanied by a poem from the Committee's chairman, A. Hardy:

Shall we appeal to you in vain in this our day of trial. We believe not, we shall not! You have always responded to the call of humanity. When the ravages of war had filled our country with widows and orphans, in your great heart they had a place. When Chicago smouldered in ruins,

The cities that sat in splendor along
The Atlantic sea,
Replying, called to the dwellers where
The proud magnolias be—
From slumber the nation started, at
the far resounding call—
“Food for the hungry thousands!” they
shouted, “and clothes for them all.”

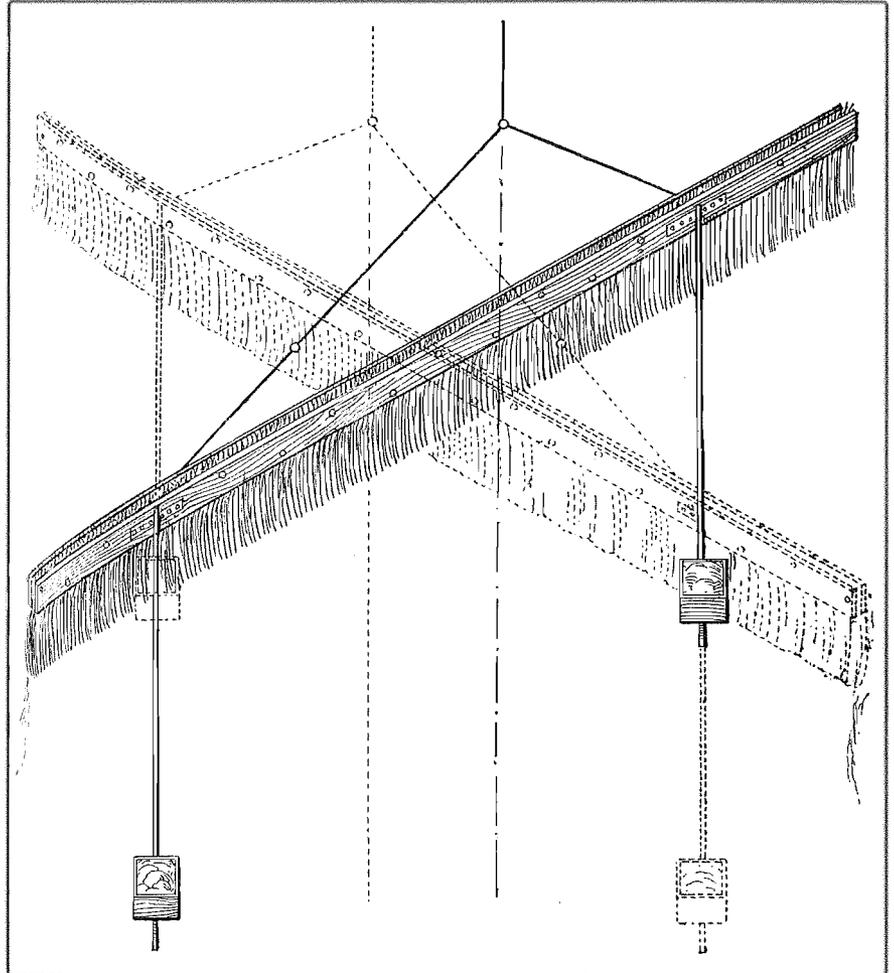
Let the press spread o’er the nation
our wail, and hungry cry;
For we look unto you by thousands;
shall we now hunger and die?
“We famish!” is the call that hungry
throng must give.
Till a million of hearts respond, Ho,
look unto us and live!⁴³

Given the prevailing view that only the worthy poor deserved short-term assistance, Jewel County and other grasshoppered districts stressed the similarities between the victims of the grasshoppers and those of the Chicago Fire.

Individuals, banks, corporations, and cities from several eastern states sent aid throughout the winter of 1874–75. The Nebraska Relief and Aid Association recorded both monetary and material support from several eastern states and at least two foreign countries. In January 1875 Governor Furnas reported a total of \$68,080.46 in cash and in-kind donations to grasshopper relief. A partial list included \$1,000 from the Indiana Grange; 100 tons of coal from Cleveland’s leading coal company; \$500 from H. Garreston, Second National Bank of Cleveland; \$1,200 from the people of Philadelphia; \$50 from I. N. Field of Manchester, England; and \$25 from E. G. Washburn of Paris. Six-year-old Robbie Coliphant of Orange, New Jersey, donated “half of my money to help the poor people of Nebraska.”⁴⁴ Railroads contributed to the relief effort by transporting donations free of charge. Between November 19, 1874, and January 25, 1875, the Kansas Central Relief Committee received 124 carloads of donations including 12,160 boxes, barrels, and other packages of supplies.⁴⁵

In addition to lending material support, some easterners participated directly in the relief effort. After witnessing the destruction in Nebraska during a recent visit, Robert Hollingworth of

Somerville, Massachusetts, enlisted as an agent of the Relief Society of Nuckolls County “for the sole purpose of obtaining relief from the benevolent people of the Eastern States.” Newton, Massachusetts, Mayor Hon. J. F. C. Hyde joined Hollingworth as treasurer of the society.⁴⁶



An implement for clearing young grasshoppers from a field. Two twenty-foot boards were fastened together to hold a large quantity of straw. Counterbalanced with small weighted boxes, the device was dragged through a field by a team of horses. By starting at the windward side and working back and forth, the grasshoppers could be gradually driven from the field—or so the author promised.
From Curley, *Nebraska*, 295.

At the height of the national response, the federal government acted to relieve suffering in the grasshoppered states. On December 28, 1874, Congress passed a homestead extension to allow farmers who could prove that they suffered a crop loss a leave of absence from their claims until July 1, 1875. While homesteaders were absent—ideally

seeking relief outside the state—no contest could be made upon their claims.⁴⁷

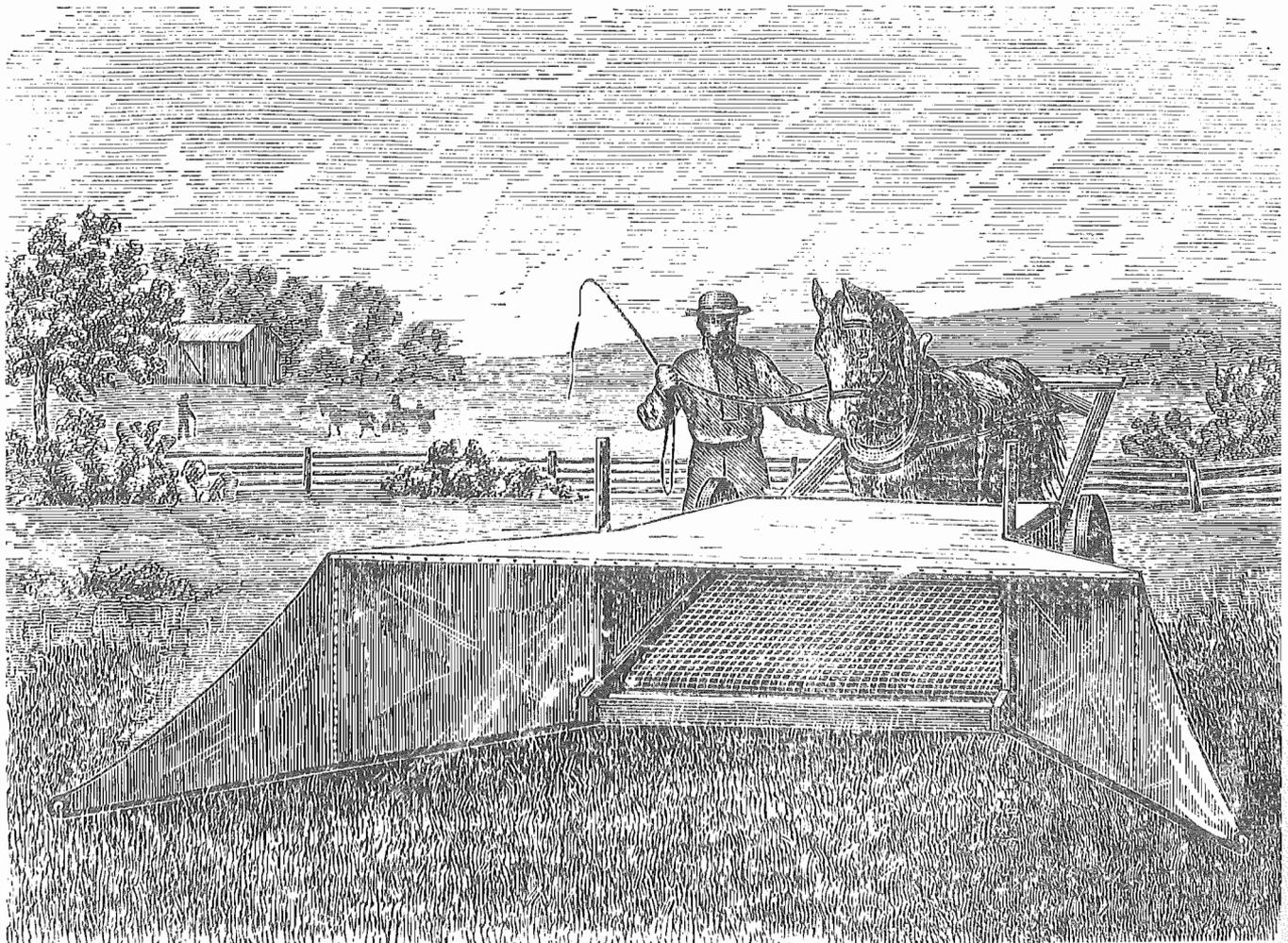
On January 25, 1875, Congress passed legislation directing the Secretary of Agriculture to distribute \$30,000 worth of seeds to the grasshoppered regions. On February 10, 1875, legislation introduced by Representative Stephen A. Cobb of Kansas and Senator Phineas W. Hitchcock of Nebraska was passed by Congress and approved by the President to appropriate \$150,000 “through the proper officers of the army” to distribute surplus army blankets and clothing to “all destitute and helpless persons living on the western frontier.” Together, these acts signified the federal government’s new commitment to the aid and support of western farmers.⁴⁸

At first, grasshoppered states refused or were unable to open their own treasuries to provide assistance to the needy, opting instead to solicit and collect private donations. By the winter of 1874–1875, however, many state and local officials

began calling for public assistance in addition to private aid. Since Nebraska’s treasury was nearly empty, Governor Robert W. Furnas in January 1875 recommended and the state legislature authorized issuing \$50,000 in state bonds to purchase seed for grasshopper victims. According to historian Sam S. Kepfield, “To use funds from the public treasury for disaster relief was almost unheard-of. . . . Public funds were for public uses only, and allowing farmers to carry on at their normal labors did not qualify as a public use.”⁴⁹

The grasshopper relief effort decreased in the spring of 1875 after farmers had planted a new crop with donated seed. The economic and psychological effects of the invasion, however, lingered for several years. According to Steven R. Kinsella, the grasshopper invasions of the

A horse-powered grasshopper catcher recommended in the 1877 *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture*. NSHS RA3358



1870s “started a relationship between agricultural producers and the government that continues to this day.”⁵⁰ Similarly, historian and entomologist Jeffrey Lockwood wrote “the federal programs associated with the Rocky Mountain locust and its victims in the 1870s set the stage for the next 125 years of agricultural practices in the United States.”⁵¹

Although another invasion had not occurred along the magnitude of 1874, locusts visited the Great Plains during the next two years in large enough numbers—an estimated 3.5 trillion in June 1875—to cause fear that a repeat of the 1874 disaster was imminent. Each spring since the 1874 invasion, farmers had turned up millions of grasshopper eggs while plowing their fields. Each tiny ovum served as ominous reminder of the devastation and hardship the locust caused.⁵²

In 1876 Governor John S. Pillsbury of Minnesota organized and chaired a conference in Omaha on October 25–26 for governors and scientists from grasshopper states. Its main goal was to discuss ways to combat the grasshoppers and to enlist the help of the federal government to prepare for and prevent future invasions. In his opening remarks Pillsbury argued that cooperation between grasshopper states and support from the federal government was essential:

Considering the sudden and fitful movements of the locusts, the limitless field of their operations and the mysterious and predatory nature of their inroads, they constitute a formidable enemy with which no single State or community can expect to cope successfully; and it is my profound conviction that an evil which, by threatening our agriculture, threatens the source of productive industry, deserves the prompt and thorough consideration of the general government.⁵³

The conference achieved three important outcomes: the governors unanimously concluded that the locust problem was too sweeping in its scale and complexity for any state to solve and federal assistance was desperately needed. The governors provided funds to publish 10,000 copies of a pamphlet outlining methods for controlling the locusts, and they called on the federal government to form and fund an entomological commission of skilled scientists to address the lack of knowledge about the locust.⁵⁴

In concluding that the Rocky Mountain locust presented a problem too great for any one state to handle, the governors recognized and justified federal assistance to farmers: “If it be within the

legitimate province of the Federal Government to improve our rivers and harbors in order to facilitate the movement of crops,” Pillsbury reasoned, “surely the rescue of those crops from destruction is no less an object of its rightful care.”⁵⁵ In 1874 the protection and support of western farmers and their crops represented an internal issue; by 1876, grasshoppered governors accepted and justified a federal government role.

Despite this newfound acceptance of federal assistance, the grasshopper states did not depend wholly on the government for support in the event of another invasion. In 1877, for example, the Nebraska Legislature passed the “Grasshopper Act,” which labeled the insect a “public enemy” and required all able-bodied citizens to assemble and fight the pest. Calling for a sort of “grasshopper

In 1877 the Nebraska Legislature passed the “Grasshopper Act,” which labeled the insect a “public enemy” and required all able-bodied citizens to assemble and fight the pest.

army,” the law mandated that all male residents between the ages of sixteen and sixty perform two days’ labor eradicating grasshoppers after they hatched. Non-compliance brought a \$10 fine.⁵⁶ Similarly, when a warm spring in 1877 caused thousands of grasshopper eggs to hatch prematurely in Dakota Territory, Governor John L. Pennington proclaimed May 4 a day of “humiliation, fasting and prayer” and ordered fields with eggs to be burned immediately. Banks, businesses, and schools closed to allow Dakota citizens to observe the proclamation and help ward off a possible invasion.⁵⁷

The greatest defense against grasshopper raids did not include conscripted citizen armies, days of fasting, or federal intervention. Settlement moving west proved most effective at preventing future invasions. According to Lockwood, residential, commercial, and agricultural development ultimately caused the extinction of the Rocky Mountain locust in the early 1900s. As settlers

pushed west into the Rocky Mountain plateau, farmers cultivated and irrigated the locusts' breeding grounds. "Western agriculture and the Rocky Mountain locust collided in time and space," Lockwood explained. "Through one of the most spectacular coincidences in agricultural history, early agriculture basically destroyed the permanent breeding ground of the locusts."⁵⁸ The West could not support both locusts and farmers, and the farmers prevailed.

The grasshopper relief effort of 1874–75 reflected nineteenth-century notions of charity, and strengthened government involvement in promoting the settlement of the West by aiding agricultural producers. By the time the army stopped distributing federally issued supplies on September 1, 1875, more than one million food rations had been provided to nearly 30,000 adults and children in the Department of the Platte.⁵⁹ Dakota, Minnesota, Missouri, and Kansas also received generous amounts of federal aid. The initial reactions by western newspaper editors and officials to deny the need for outside assistance reflected the widespread belief that welfare should be local and limited. Later, when soliciting donations from other states, western delegates tried to maintain the public perception of western farmers as brave, patriotic, and resilient. They also described grasshopper victims as worthy of aid and compared them to the victims of the Chicago Fire, which the nation had liberally supported. Skepticism of unfettered charity, a willingness to provide assistance to deserving poor, and the need to exhaust local resources before appealing for outside assistance guided the response to the worst locust invasion in the nation's history. In the end, however, the federal government had to step in, an early example of what is now a typical response to large-scale natural disasters. ■

NOTES

¹ Joel 1:4, *The Bible*, New International Version.

² Jeffrey A. Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Midwest* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 23. Lockwood writes: "Crowded into jittery populations spread across tens of thousands of square miles, the locusts almost certainly arose in separate swarms that were then coalesced by a wind stream that swept them into the perfect swarm."

³ Lisa Levitt Ryckman, "The Great Locust Mystery: Grasshopper that ate the West became extinct," *The Rocky Mountain News*, June 22, 1999. <http://www.denver-rmn.com/millennium/0622mile.shtml> (accessed October 13, 2007), quoting from the Guinness Book of World Records under the heading "greatest concentration of animals."

⁴ In Kansas the hardest hit counties included Norton, Rooks, Ellis, Russell, Osborne, Phillips, Smith, McPherson, Rice, Barton, Reno, Barbour, Edwards, and Pawnee. See Governor Thomas A. Osborn, *Annual Message . . . to the Legislature of Kansas, 1874* (Topeka: State Printing Works, Geo. W. Martin, Public Printer), 2–3. In Nebraska the southwestern counties including Frontier, Buffalo, Red Willow, Furnas, Harlan and Gosper greatly suffered, as did the central and eastern Nebraska counties of Boone, Platte, Antelope and Otoe. See Robert N. Manley, "In the Wake of the Grasshoppers: Public Relief in Nebraska, 1874–1875," *Nebraska History* 44 (December 1963): 270. Everett N. Dick, *Conquering the Great American Desert* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1955), 192–201 and Ryckman provide descriptions of farmers who lost entire crops as a result of the locust invasion. The Seward, *Nebraska Reporter*, Aug. 6, 1874, mentions the insects gnawing on clothing and Dick, *The Sod House Frontier, 1854–1890* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937), 205, mentions the onion odor.

⁵ Robert Taft, "The Grasshopper Year," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* (December 1952): 383.

⁶ Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 1:494.

⁷ "How Grasshoppers Stopped Union Pacific Trains," *Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days* 6 (July–September 1923): 95. Although John Jacobson, who recalled this incident, dated it as 1873, editor Addison E. Sheldon speculated that it likely occurred in 1874, because 1873 was not noted as a grasshopper year.

⁸ Lockwood, *Locust*, 3.

⁹ "Memories of the 'Hoppers': How they Wrought Untold Mischief in 1872, 1873, and 1874," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1896.

¹⁰ Lockwood, *Locust*, 57–58.

¹¹ "Suffering in Kansas," *The Daily Spy* (Worcester, Mass.), Jan. 30, 1875. The article reported that two families were found "starved to death" in Kansas as a result of the plague.

¹² Taft, "The Grasshopper Year," 383; University of Virginia, "Historic Census Browser: Census Data for 1870," University of Virginia Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/state.php> (accessed January 14, 2008). Also see Lockwood, *Locust*, xvii. Between 1874 and 1877 locust raids caused more than \$200 million in damage to agriculture which, Lockwood pointed out, is equivalent to \$116 billion today in an industry that nets \$217 billion annually.

¹³ Harold E. Briggs, "Grasshopper Plagues and Dakota Agriculture, 1864–1876," *Agricultural History* 8 (April 1934): 62.

¹⁴ For the wagon slogans, see Sheldon, *Land and the People*, 1:494 and Dick, *Sod House Frontier*, 206. On the numbers of homesteaders who left as a result of the plague, see Gilbert C. Fite, "Daydreams and Nightmares: The Late Nineteenth-Century Agricultural Frontier," *Agricultural History* 40 (Oct. 1966): 291. According to Fite, citing an 1875 report: "After investigating destitution in north-central Kansas, one official estimated that at least six hundred families had forsaken a six-county area between August 1874 and January 1875."

¹⁵ Locust Watch: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Locust Watch: Locusts and Other Migratory Pests Group," <http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html> (accessed January 6, 2008).

¹⁶ "Locust," *World Encyclopedia*. Philip's, 2005, *Oxford Reference Online*, Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=1142.e6852> (accessed January 8, 2008).

¹⁷ C. V. Riley, "The Rocky Mountain Locust," *The American Naturalist* 11 (Nov. 1877): 665. In an article for the American Society of Naturalists, Riley wrote that the Rocky Mountain

locust "is a denizen of the plains region of the Rocky Mountains to the west and northwest of us." See also Charles R. Bomar, "The Rocky Mountain Locust: Extinction and the American Experience," <http://www.sciencecases.org/locusts/locusts.asp> (accessed July 30, 2008). Bomar includes a map published by the U.S. Entomological Commission in 1880, which indicates that the Rocky Mountain locust breeding grounds extended northwest of the Colorado Rockies into parts of Wyoming, Montana, and Canada.

¹⁸ According to Lockwood, *Locust*, 22, "In 1873, just seven and a half inches of rain fell on Wallace Kansas—the driest year on record. Dodge City experienced its third driest year in history in 1875. Missouri farmers reported that in 1874 'it stopped raining in April and didn't rain again until late October.'" James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 176.

¹⁹ Seward, *Nebraska Reporter*, Aug. 6, 1874.

²⁰ Harold E. Briggs, *Frontiers of the Northwest: A History of the Upper Missouri Valley* (New York: Peter Smith, 1950), 448.

²¹ Osborn, *Annual Message*, 1874, 5.

²² Manley, "In the Wake of the Grasshoppers," 261. See also Nebraska Relief and Aid Association: Historical Note, Nebraska Relief and Aid Association Records 1874–1875, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

²³ Kansas Central Relief Committee, "Report of the Executive Board: Their Transactions from Date of Organization to Disbandment" (Topeka: State Printing Works, Geo. W. Martin, State Printer, 1875), 12.

²⁴ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 19, 1874, cited in Manley, "In the Wake of the Grasshoppers," 260.

²⁵ "The Grasshopper Contributors," *Omaha Daily Republican*, Oct. 25, 1874.

²⁶ See Thomas Halper, "The Poor as Pawns: The New 'Deserving Poor' & the Old," *Polity* 6 (Autumn 1973): 72, who writes: "The 'deserving poor' was largely a negative description, referring to those who were not lazy and shiftless, but rather hard-working or, if unemployed, hopelessly infirm."

²⁷ "Aid for Kansas," *The Daily Spy*, Feb. 8, 1875.

²⁸ "Grasshoppers and the Legislature," *Vermillion Republican*, reprinted in the *Yankton Press and Dakotian*, Feb. 4, 1875.

²⁹ John J. Pauly, "The Great Chicago Fire as a National Event," *American Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1984): 669, 680.

³⁰ Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871–1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 88. Sawislak writes that those deemed "unworthy" of aid either were referred to the county poor commission or turned away.

³¹ "The Western Famine," *The Daily Spy*, Jan. 11, 1875.

³² Lockwood, *Locust*, 70; Sam S. Kepfield, "Grasshoppers, Destitution, and Public Relief in Western Nebraska, 1874–1875," *Journal of the West* 34 (July 1995): 96. "Despite its good works, throughout the fall and into the spring the [Nebraska] Relief and Aid Society incurred the wrath of boomers across the state who charged it with profiteering, incompetence, and inequities in distribution. The relatively well-off made a clamor to take aim at the expense of the truly destitute, who remained silent."

³³ "Aid Society: Its Present and Future. A Sure Way to Kill It," *Omaha Daily Republican*, Nov. 28, 1874.

³⁴ T. W. Manchester, "Letter from Hamilton County," *Daily State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebraska), Jan. 10, 1875.

³⁵ Ord to the Adjutant General, Oct. 27, 1874, cited in Gary D. Olson, ed. "Relief for Nebraska Grasshopper Victims: The Official Journal of Lieutenant Theodore E. True," *Nebraska History* 48 (Summer 1967): 122.

³⁶ Olson, "Relief for Nebraska Grasshopper Victims," 123.

³⁷ Major N. A. M. Dudley to Ord, Nov. 2, 1874, after returning from a tour of Harlan County and other parts of Nebraska, in *Omaha Daily Republican*, Nov. 6, 1874.

³⁸ Alfred Gray, secretary, State Board of Agriculture to Governor Thomas A. Osborn, Dec. 1, 1874, Kansas Central Relief Committee Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka (hereafter Kansas Relief Committee Papers).

³⁹ Geo. W. Frost to editor, *Omaha Daily Republican*, Oct. 28, 1874.

⁴⁰ Dudley to editor, *Omaha Daily Republican*, Nov. 11, 1874.

⁴¹ Thomas H. Vail, Bishop of Kansas, "Kansas and Nebraska: Letter to the Editor," *The Daily Spy*, Feb. 15, 1875.

⁴² Clay County Central Relief Committee, "An Appeal to the Charitable People of the Eastern States," 1874, Kansas Relief Committee Papers.

⁴³ Jewel County Relief Society, "An Appeal: To the American people for Assistance," Kansas Relief Committee Papers.

⁴⁴ John G. W. Lewis, ed., *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1941–43), 1:413; *Omaha Daily Republican*, Nov. 13 and 17, Dec. 27, 1874.

⁴⁵ F. W. Giles, *Thirty Years in Topeka: A Historical Sketch* (Topeka, Kan.: Geo. W. Crane & Co., 1886), 316–17.

⁴⁶ "The Grasshopper Plague," *Boston Daily Globe*, Jan. 21, 1875.

⁴⁷ Dick, *Conquering the Great American Desert*, 207.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 209; Gilbert C. Fite, "The United States Army and Relief to Pioneer Settlers, 1874–1875," *Journal of the West* 6 (1997): 104.

⁴⁹ Kepfield, "Grasshoppers, Destitution, and Public Relief," 96.

⁵⁰ Steven R. Kinsella, *900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Midwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006), 153.

⁵¹ Lockwood, *Locust*, 84–85.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21; Dick, *Conquering the Great American Desert*, 207. To ward off another catastrophe, "The churches in Lincoln set apart June 17, 1875, as a day of fasting and prayer, in which people were invited to repair to their respective houses of worship from ten to twelve and pray to God that he would rebuke the devourer as He had promised His people of old."

⁵³ *The Rocky Mountain Locust or Grasshopper, Being the Report of Proceedings of a Conference of the Governors of Several Western States and Territories . . . to Consider the Locust Problem, Also, A Summary of the Best Means Now Known for Counteracting the Evil* (St. Louis: R. P. Studley Company, 1876), 2.

⁵⁴ Lockwood, *Locust*, 85.

⁵⁵ *Report of the Proceedings*, 2–3.

⁵⁶ *Laws of Nebraska, 1877* (St. Joseph, Mo., Steam Ptg. Co., 1877), 154–55. The 1877 legislature also approved a joint resolution calling on Nebraska's congressional delegation to seek legislation authorizing proceeds from the sale of public land to be used as bounties for the destruction of grasshopper eggs. *Ibid.*, 253–54.

⁵⁷ Briggs, *Frontiers of the Northwest*, 529.

⁵⁸ Lockwood, quoted in Ryckman, "The Great Locust Mystery."

⁵⁹ Olson, "Relief for Nebraska Grasshopper Victims," 140.