"He Was a Man, Worthy of Respect"

Gender, Matrimony, and Moral Entitlement in Fargo, North Dakota, during the Great Depression

By David B. Danbom

The author wishes to thank Carroll Engelhardt, Barbara Handy-Marchello, Tom Isern, Paula Nelson, Larry Peterson, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Claire Strom, Thomas White, the History Department and Women's Studies seminars at NDSU, and several anonymous readers at the Journal of American History *and* North Dakota History *for reading and commenting on part or all of this essay.*

In February of 1931, an angry reader who identified himself as "Forum Follower" wrote the editor of the *Fargo Forum* asserting:

> Right now in Fargo there are women holding positions which ex-servicemen with families might fill but who are now walking the street unemployed. I know of eight places in Fargo employing married women where I would be working now if those same women had remained in their homes. In fact, I would be working now if my employer had not hired a woman to fill my position at a cheaper salary.[1]

During the Great Depression throughout the United States, people seeking employment or relief claimed their superior entitlement on grounds of gender, race, or, as in Forum Follower's case, status as veterans of World War I. Jobseekers urged employers to overlook standard hiring criteria, such as economy and efficiency, and to ignore such traditional American civic values as equality of opportunity and individual rights. In place of these guideposts of capitalism and republicanism, employers were urged to follow more traditional and deeply embedded social customs. To Forum Follower and millions of others who shared his point of view, people meeting certain social criteria were morally entitled to work, regardless of their ability to do a job efficiently. Forum Follower suggested that his status as head of a family and as a veteran who had sacrificed for his country should give him priority over others—in this case, married women—even though those others could do the same work more cheaply.

Forum Follower's particular focus on married women in the job market was shared by many during the Depression. Organized labor launched a campaign against the employment of married women, and the federal government and most state governments—including North Dakota's—actively discouraged wives from working, usually by passing anti-nepotism laws that prevented the spouse of a government worker from also holding a government job.[2]

While it is tempting to view the assault on the employment of married women as a simple illustration of gender privilege, a close examination of the debate over employment and relief in Fargo during the Depression reveals a situation of much greater complexity. When attitudes and actions regarding employment and relief for single women and single men are also considered, it becomes clear that men were not simply privileged over women. Rather, men and women who fulfilled cultural expectations and who lived their lives in conformity to widely held social values were privileged over those who did not.

The nature of the Fargo economy and job market in 1930 makes it an especially fruitful case study for the topic of gender and employment. The city lived

MEN WANTED

MECHANIC—Only experienced model A men need apply. McCulloch Motors.

WOMEN WANTED

RELIABLE girls for general work in sanitorium and training for practical nursing, out of town girls preferred. Give age, schooling, height and weight.
WRITE 88, CARE FORUM

COMPETENT woman wanted as housekeeper in good home. Steady position. Must be good cook and clean. State salary, age and ability. Box L, Sheldon, N. D.
HOUSEKEEPER between 30 and 35 years old; one looking for home more than wages; must be neat, clean and good cook. Write Box 658, Belfield, N. D.
HOUSEKEEPER—Between ages 20 and 30, wanted at once for season; small wages to April 1, then $5.50 per week for season. Write 100, Forum.
EXPERIENCED maid wanted for couple in small apartment; go home nights; only good cook need apply. 506 Edmore Apartment.
MIDDLE AGED lady housekeeper, steady position, good wages, references required. Phone 3576.

MEN WANT WORK

EXPERIENCED young married man wants position as assistant grain buyer or manager of small country elevator; references furnished. Write 90, Forum.
ALL AROUND printer wants work. Linotype, floorwork and presses. Steady, reliable. Box 71, Forum.
RAUGSTAD, 40 yrs ex. cabinet making, upholstering; breakfast sets, etc. Ph. 2470-J.
HOUSE moving and raising, concrete and general repairing. 1529 Seventh st S.
ACCOUNTANT—Tax returns prepared. Books audited and kept. Phone 6224
CARPENTERING, remodeling and painting, reasonable. Phone 4142-J.
Mosher hauls ashes and rubbish. Call 6813.
ASHES and rubbish hauled. Call 4710-W.
CARPENTER work wanted. Phone 5720.
Stenographer-bookkeeper, dependable. 1094.
CHIMNEY sweep. Phone 6896-W.

WOMEN WANT WORK

Work Wanted

By young girl. Write 102, Forum.
Stenographers and bookkeepers, thoroughly experienced, tested, competent, furnished by The Multigraphing Service, 300 First Nat'l Bank. Phone 1004.
YOUNG lady wants part or full time office position; good speed on typewriter; some dictation. Can apply in person. Write 85, Forum.
STENOGRAPHERS and bookkeepers, experienced, furnished by Commercial Bureau, 426 deLendrecie Bldg. Phone 1245-W.
GIRL with clerking and bookkeeping experience wishes position in or out of city. Write 80, Forum.
EXPERIENCED dental assistant wants work. References. Write 101, c-o Forum.
SCHOOL girl wishes to care for children and work. Phone 4938-W.
CARE for children after school and evenings. Phone 4189-W.
WILL BOARD and care for child. 7[illegible] Twelfth st N
DRESSES fussed and pressed, $1. Ph. 62[illegible]
Competent secretary, best ref. Ph. 5212.
HOUR WORK, experienced. Phone 5576.
POSITION as housekeeper. Phone 4694.
HOUR work wanted. Phone 4504.
HOUR WORK. Phone 6871-W
HOUR WORK. Phone 2896-J.

North Broadway, downtown Fargo, North Dakota, circa 1929. Inset: *Fargo Forum* want ads for March 6, 1931. The employment crisis of the Great Depression lead many Fargoans to create a hierarchy under which some groups and individuals were identified as more worthy of working than others.

by retail and wholesale trade and the provision of financial, legal, medical, and personal services to residents and to surrounding rural communities. The thoroughly modern trade and service orientation of the city's economy fueled a vital and expanding female job market. Most single women, both established Fargoans and rural migrants, worked in clerical, retail, and service occupations, as did a relatively high percentage of married women. Indeed, the 1930 census showed that 17.3 percent of married women in Fargo were employed outside the home, substantially higher than the 11.7 percent similarly employed nationally. At the same time, the city offered numerous jobs in construction, railroading, and day labor of the type that were traditionally limited to men. These jobs, as well as the numerous farm labor opportunities in the nearby countryside, made Fargo an attractive home to numerous single men.[3]

Fargo's growth and prosperity was the main source of the city's pride, but it was accompanied by challenges to longstanding customs and traditions. In common with much of the United States, Fargo had experienced inflated material expectations, freer and more independent attitudes among women, and liberalized relationships between men and women during the 1920s. But it was also a city, like Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd's *Middletown*, that held traditional attitudes toward family life and structure, and that valued cultural verities even as it embraced the material standards that undermined those varieties.[4]

The crisis of the Great Depression forced the city to confront the contradictions that had arisen between traditional values and individual needs, realities, and expectations. Fargoans quickly fashioned a moral hierarchy,

determining that some groups and individuals were more worthy than others. In defining who they considered to be morally entitled to work and to desirable relief, Fargoans displayed class bias and civic paternalism, and they appealed to traditional, gendered understandings of the needs and responsibilities of men and women.

The conflict over moral entitlement to employment in Fargo began with men such as Forum Follower complaining that they had lost jobs to married women. In 1931-32 the Fargo Trades and Labor Assembly took the lead in pressing local government and public agencies to dismiss married women from their jobs. The city of Fargo, the school board, Cass County, and the chamber of commerce were generally responsive to this pressure, removing married women from a number of positions, with the exception of those, such as court reporter, for which replacements could not easily be found. The city even went so far as to threaten several firefighters, whose wives held private employment outside the home, with dismissal if their wives did not quit.[5]

Critics of married women who were employed argued that employers preferred them to men on the grounds that they would accept less than a living wage. Because they were presumably supplementing the wages of a male breadwinner, or working for "pin money," they would work cheaply. Forum Follower complained that, while it cost him $125 per month to support a wife and child, his erstwhile employer had been able to replace him with "a married woman . . . for $50 or $60."[6]

A sub-theme of Forum Follower's complaint was that those in the business community who replaced family men with married women bore much of the responsibility for the resultant economic hardship and emotional strain visited on families. Others, such as a "Fargo Resident," were more explicit, concluding that "it is the business man who should be criticized for employing married women," rather than the women themselves.[7]

Though the personnel decisions of businesses sometimes attracted critical comment, it is noteworthy that criticism was not translated into action. There was never an organized effort in Fargo to boycott or otherwise retaliate against employers who hired married women for positions that married men could have presumably held. Organized labor and government took steps against employed wives and sometimes their husbands, but not against the business owners whose decisions placed them in their positions. This reluctance to interfere with private economic decisions, even when those ran counter to widely held social values, underscores the reality that, while the thirties might have been a congenial time for innovative public policies and radical politics, the decade was also marked by a deep cultural conservatism and a reluctance to assert a public interest in private economic decisions.

"The main reason those married women seek employment is because they like to have a new car every year or so."

Fargoans who criticized married women for working frequently accused them of excessive materialism. One argued that "the main reason those married women seek employment is because they like to have a new car every year or so, an oriental rug or cottage at the lake," while another mentioned their desire for "expensive vacations, fur coats, radios, and other things too numerous to mention." Critics also assumed that married women who worked necessarily neglected their families, placing their jobs over what society considered, in author Suzanne LaFollette's 1926 phrase, their "proper and fitting aim of existence." Wives employed outside the home were frequently sensitive to this criticism, admonishing their children, as court reporter Clara Mason did, always to be on time to school and to be well groomed, lest their children's failings be attributed to their mother's employment.[8]

Husbands of working women—"yellow-fingered sheiks," as one critic called them—were commonly charged with laziness and lack of pride, and were implicitly derogated for allowing their wives to be supervised by other men. Not only did their laziness or greed lead them to demand the pin money their wives earned, it also imperiled the efforts of other men to support their families in the traditional and proper way. One critic went so far as to claim that the employment of married women encouraged divorce, in part because it allowed them to "know more about world affairs" than their husbands did. Clearly, the employment of married women battered tender male psyches in a variety of ways.[9]

Defenders of employed married women devised strikingly modern arguments to counter those made by traditionalists. "One Who Is Not Narrow Minded" asked, "should it not be for the married folks themselves to decide if their income is sufficient to allow them to

purchase the things they need to furnish their home and live as they see fit?" And P. H. Redington suggested that "marriage is . . . a partnership and companionship to which each contributes according to his and her capacities and abilities in such occupations or professions as each is trained and skilled." Mrs. M. C. Osman argued that denying wives jobs violated the constitutional guarantee of "free and equal rights to all" and compared it to "bolshevism." Appeals to individualism, merit, and constitutional rights were well within the tradition of a male-dominated American polity and economy, but they ran counter to deep cultural assumptions that home and family were maintained through hierarchy, obligation, sacrifice, and self-restraint. Arguments such as those of Redington and Osman confirmed the suspicions of cultural conservatives who believed women were becoming too much like men and were consequently undermining the home.[10]

Female domesticity and middle-class status were perceived as going hand in hand in Fargo during the 1930s. People I have interviewed from middle-class backgrounds remember that "all of the mothers stayed home" and can recall employment by neighbors only when they were widowed, divorced, or worked in the family jewelry store or grocery. While it was not exactly true, as Anna Stevens remembered, that "there was no such thing as working after you were married—it was a scandal," it was rare and was widely viewed as inappropriate. Middle-class women who did not find caring for husbands and children sufficient to fulfill their ambitions were urged to pour their energies into social clubs, church work, and volunteer service activities in the Community Chest, Red Cross, or Parent-Teacher Association. Stevens herself, an energetic woman with a master's degree in botany, served on the county welfare board—an unpaid position that was particularly demanding during the Depression.[11]

There were a few employed married women in Fargo with advanced conceptions of female individualism and equality. Clara Mason, who had homesteaded on her own before World War I, was a court reporter and later a juvenile magistrate. Mason, who was married to an insurance salesman, expressed her feminism by her activity in Quota International, of which she became district governor in 1935-36 and national president in the early 1940s. A perusal of the city directory indicates that at least some other presumably middle-class wives were also working outside the home by the 1930s. In 1932, for example, Michael and Della Holt were both employed, he as a bookkeeper at Northwestern Bell and she as a stenographer at Northern and Dakota Trust Company. And Marcus Bothne was a salesman for Jewel Tea, while his wife Esther

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

Fargoans expected that middle-class women would embrace home-centered domesticity during the 1930s.

kept the books at Leo Johnson Furniture. The Holts and the Bothnes were apartment dwellers, suggesting that they were perhaps young and childless and that their two-income-earner status was thus temporary, but their employment suggests that at least some people whose occupations placed them in the middle class were ignoring local social conventions.[12]

The employment of wives in paying jobs was much more common and presumably less stigmatized in working-class families. For example, Lillian Ross, the wife of a bakery driver, bound books at Pierce Printing, while pipefitter Oscar Olson's wife worked as a cook. Ruby Lein waited tables at Fargo taverns to augment the income earned by her husband Henry, a baggage handler for the Great Northern Railway. And Lila Graber worked at a lunchroom at a meatpacking plant to supplement her butcher-husband's salary and provide for seven children.[13]

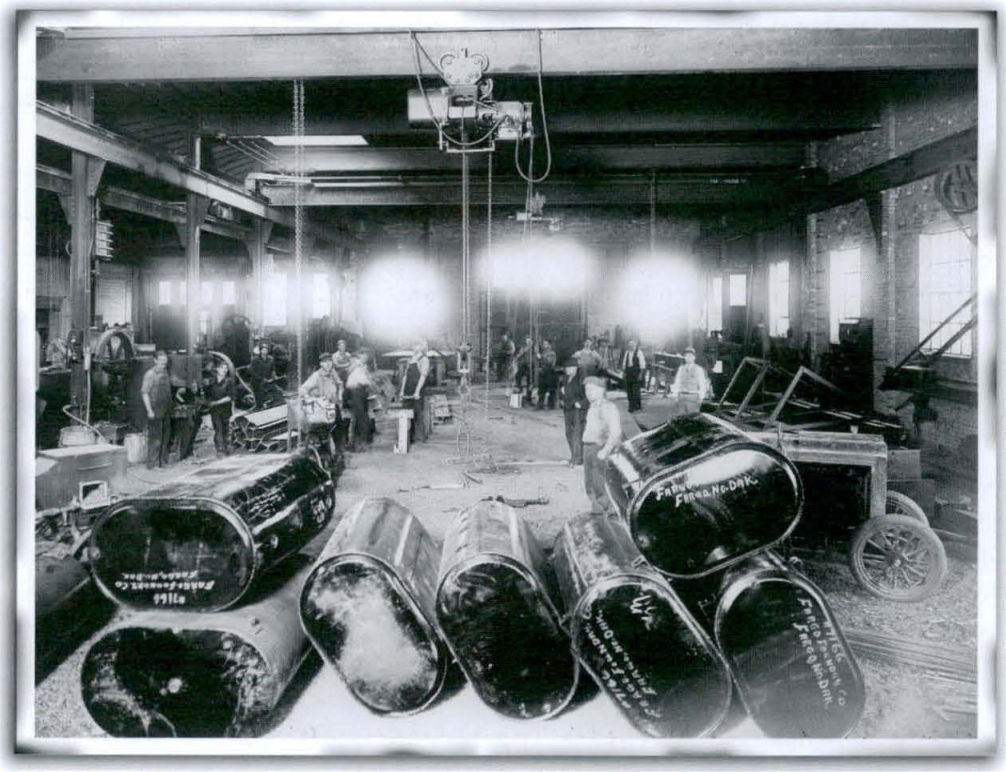
The fact that working-class wives were more likely than those in the middle class to be employed outside the home does not necessarily mean that their employment was compelled by need. In a time of rapidly rising material standards of living, such as the 1920s, even working-class families came to see such luxuries as automobiles, telephones, and radios as necessities. They, too, desired more adequate housing for their families, and aspired to send their children to high school, foregoing their earnings. Moreover, as people came to place a greater value on family privacy, such traditional working-class income-producing devices as taking in boarders and renting rooms might have become less attractive. The earnings of working-class wives contributed to family strategies aimed at income dependability and maintenance of a decent modern standard of living.[14]

Regardless of what motivated working wives in Fargo, it is difficult to attribute the economic hardships suffered by most unemployed married men to those women's labor. As the National Industrial Conference Board and the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs emphasized at the time, in the United States men and women generally competed in different job markets. That was also the case in Fargo. The 1,109 employed "homemakers" the census counted in 1930 were concentrated in clerical positions, personal service, retail sales, nursing, and other occupations in which few, if any, men could be found. Conversely, occupations in which there was high male unemployment, such as construction and day labor, were those in which men lost jobs because of the slowdown in business, not because they were replaced by women.[15]

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

These egg-breakers at the Armour Creamery held some of the few factory jobs open to working-class women in Fargo during the Depression.

However, the complaints of some displaced males may not have been totally groundless. There are indications that some enterprises increased their female workforce at male expense. Vivian Westberg became the first female savings teller at the First National Bank in 1931. By the end of the decade male tellers were increasingly rare, though men continued to hold a virtual monopoly on executive positions in banking. Bookkeeping, billing, data processing, and other clerical positions were also enterprises in which women had been displacing men since the late-nineteenth century and continued to do so, especially as these functions were mechanized. There are also indications that women might have been making inroads in some areas of retail sales. The 1932 city directory showed several women working in furniture sales, a job traditionally dominated by men. Still, while married women may have replaced married men in a few jobs in Fargo and elsewhere, occupational segregation along gender lines generally meant that most male anxieties were misdirected.[16]



Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

The Fargo Foundry was one of the economically sensitive employers whose male work force was reduced by the downturn in business activity during the Depression.

The displacement of married men was not the only concern of Fargoans who bemoaned the employment of married women, however. Critics complained at least as frequently that married women took jobs that should go to single women. By 1930 Fargoans, like most other Americans, anticipated that young, single women would leave their parents' homes for a period of education and/or employment prior to marriage. This was expected of middle-class girls as well as young women from less comfortable circumstances. As Jocelyn Burdick, the daughter of a substantial concrete contractor, noted, "I always expected to work before I was married," but what set her apart from her working-class cohorts was that "it never occurred to me that I would after." Employment helped young women build nest eggs for marriage, provided venues in which they could meet suitable marriage partners, and gave them work experiences they might have to fall back on in the case of divorce or the death of a spouse. Work also provided less tangible benefits, such as helping young women develop self respect and a spirit of independence that they carried into marriage. While most single women probably anticipated that work would provide part of the foundation for married life, for some employment became the basis for an independent existence. The Fargo Business and Professional Women's Club was composed of such women, including realtor Augusta Peterson, attorney Marie Stiening, and stenographers Mary Beattie and Anna Chisholm.[17]

It was the opportunity work provided for young women to get a start in the world, as much or more than the needs and responsibilities of married men, that seemed to be threatened by married women in the job market. One Fargoan asked how young women could "get experience and become competent in work when they are not given a chance," and another complained that working wives did a "grave injustice to the young . . . women." A self-described Fargo "Single Girl" concluded that if "the married women would quit we would have a better country and the single girl would have a better chance in this world than she has today."[18]

Concern about the effect of the employment of married women on opportunities for single women was especially pronounced in Fargo because of the relatively large

number of employed wives and because unmarried women constituted such a significant portion of the city's population and of its workers during the Depression. The 1930 census indicated that 37 percent of the women in the city over the age of fifteen were single, and another 10.4 percent were widowed or divorced. While many of these single women lived at home, or attended a college or a business, beauty, or nursing school, 55 percent, or nearly three thousand women, were employed.[19]

The 1930 census showed young women to be a particularly significant portion of the city's population, with women aged fifteen to twenty-nine outnumbering men in that age group by three to two. This disparity illustrated the fact that Fargo was a magnet for rural girls from its large agricultural hinterland, girls drawn to the city by its employment opportunities, its promise of personal freedom, and its relatively exciting social life. Freida Oster, for example, left the family farm in southeastern North Dakota to attend Interstate Business College and remained in Fargo when she secured employment keeping the books for a local haberdasher. In 1933 Eva Nelson left Christine, a town about twenty miles south of Fargo, to secure work in the city as a live-in maid.[20]

Fargo recognized the importance of single young women to its economy and society, and it provided various paternal protections for them, especially those who were recent migrants from the countryside. Policewoman Alice Duffy regularly met incoming trains in order to provide help and guidance to girls new to the city. The Lutheran Inner Mission Society of North Dakota, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Fargo Women's Boarding Home Association all maintained boarding homes and employment bureaus assisting up to eight hundred female migrants per year, and the Catholic Church offered a placement program that allowed young women to board with Catholic families. Even in private boarding facilities proprietors frequently treated single women in a paternal manner, as Frieda Oster discovered when she was thrown out of her room in a family residence for entertaining a man. Young women coming to Fargo for economic and social independence entered a milieu in which that independence was compromised by people determined to watch over them. The paternalism could be annoying, but it could also be supportive when expressed in opposition to married women competing with single women for jobs.[21]

> ***"Poor working conditions and low wages are, to a great extent, brought about by the married women who can and do work for less than a living wage."***

Married women and single women operated in job markets that did not overlap completely. The Fargo Public Schools hired only single, divorced, or widowed women as teachers and dismissed female teachers who married. Likewise, employers of maids—744 of whom were recorded by the 1930 census—hired single women almost exclusively and demonstrated a clear preference for farm girls, who were presumed to have domestic skills and be more tractable than city girls. Some employers dismissed female employees who married as a matter of course, and others had the policy of laying married women off first in times of economic stringency. The Armour Creamery dismissed Irene Fraser when she married, despite her important position as a field representative, because of the company policy against employing married women in white-collar positions. And Frieda Oster obtained her job because the bookkeeper was marrying and the clothier had a policy of employing single women exclusively. When Vivian Westberg married, First National Bank president Fred Irish told her she'd "be the first to go when they let people go," though that was never necessary. On the other hand, some employers preferred that female employees be married. Hospitals preferred married nurses, because they were considered more stable and less likely to be shocked by the realities of the human body. And other enterprises, such as beauty shops and department stores featuring women's fashions, cherished employees who could develop rapport with married customers and establish long-term relations with them. Still, many clerical, retail, and personal service jobs were open to both married and unmarried women.[22]

In Fargo, as elsewhere, employment in traditional female-dominated occupations held up relatively well during the Depression, and professional qualifications, close relationships with employers, and valuable individual skills sometimes helped buffer female employees from competition from growing numbers of job seekers. But at the lower levels of the employment scale, in such occupations as waitresses, cooks, dry cleaning workers, and cash

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

The numerical dominance of women, married and single, in many retail lines is illustrated by this photograph of the Herbst Store's anniversary celebration in 1936.

register clerks, competition for work was intense, and employers were not averse to taking advantage of the situation.

The consequent depression of wages among female workers in Fargo was first noticed among live-in maids. On March 12, 1931, in the midst of the controversy over employed wives, the Community Welfare Association, composed of agencies participating in the Community Chest campaign, condemned employers of live-in maids in the city for callously exploiting a job market in which "the supply of domestic help has been swelled" by "drastically cutting the wage scale, and in some cases offering no wage at all, but only room and board." The Community Welfare Association claimed that wages for live-ins had dropped in two years from eight to twelve dollars per week, plus room and board, to three to seven dollars.[23]

The Community Welfare Association's charge of exploitation was an especially noteworthy demonstration of civic paternalism, not least because it was directed against some of the very people who sat on the boards of member agencies and who were frequently large contributors to the Community Chest campaign. The association's charges stimulated a number of attacks on the selfish rich as well as a spirited self-defense from the comfortable families of the city. It also fed the ongoing assault on the employment of married women. "A Woman Reader" wrote the *Forum* bemoaning the fact that "fine young girls" were "working for such starvation wages as $3, $5, and $7 per week," and arguing that "these conditions will exist just as long as people will employ married women who have husbands to support them." Another reader shifted the blame for poor wages and working conditions for live-ins from their employers to women who worked outside the home, while posing moral obligations against constitutional rights. "Poor working conditions and low wages . . . are, to a great extend [sic] brought about by the married women who can, and do work for less than a living wage. . . . Everyone has the constitutional right to work, but, no one has the moral right to assist in the exploitation of the women, who must work." Neither of these critics of employed married women argued they were competing for jobs as live-in maids; the demands of domestic posi-

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

Lobby of the Gardner Hotel, Fargo, circa 1930s. Jobs in clerking and cashiering were among those for which men and women competed in Fargo during the Depression. Despite the concerns expressed by the Workmen's Compensation Bureau, there is no indication that men ever competed for positions stereotyped as women's work, such as laundresses, waitresses, or chambermaids.

tions were so onerous that married women would take them only as a last resort. What they were suggesting was that the entry of married women into the job market was choking off more desirable opportunities for single women, forcing some of them into domestic service and other low-level positions, resulting in a sharp decline in wages. As one observer put it, "the wage rate automatically drops . . . because of the lack of employment in other lines."[24]

The depression in wages at the lower end of the female employment spectrum was underscored when the Workmen's Compensation Bureau (WCB) held hearings in Fargo and several other cities. Under a state law passed in 1919, minimum wages were set for female workers such as laundresses, waitresses, chambermaids, manufacturing workers, and retail clerks. In 1932 employers petitioned the WCB to lower the minimum wages in the face of eroding price levels and declining business activity. The bureau responded, in part because it feared that "rather than pay the required minimums they [employers] would discontinue employing women workers entirely and place male help in their stead, no legal wage having been established for the latter." This threat by employers was almost entirely empty because the covered occupations were so rigidly sex-stereotyped that virtually no men would even consider them. Still, by responding to this threat workmen's compensation agencies such as North Dakota's could portray themselves as paternalistic protectors of women's interests even as they approved the erosion of female labor standards.[25]

The WCB hearings revealed that employers had already acted, lowering wages illegally. While workers in Grand Forks, Minot, and Bismarck were reluctant to testify, apparently because they feared repercussions, employed women in Fargo detailed the situation. Fargo workers testified that "employers have cut salaries until at the present time the minimum provided by law is the maximum wage that is being paid," and that some dime-store clerks were receiving twenty cents an hour, far under the legal minimum of thirty-one cents. The few employers who testified displayed a perverse pride in their willingness to take advantage of the intensely competitive female job market. The owner of a lower Front Street restaurant freely admitted that, while the legal minimum was $8.90 per week plus board, he had paid his waitresses only four dollars per week since 1929, and that the "girls he employs have been glad to work for the wages he paid." [26]

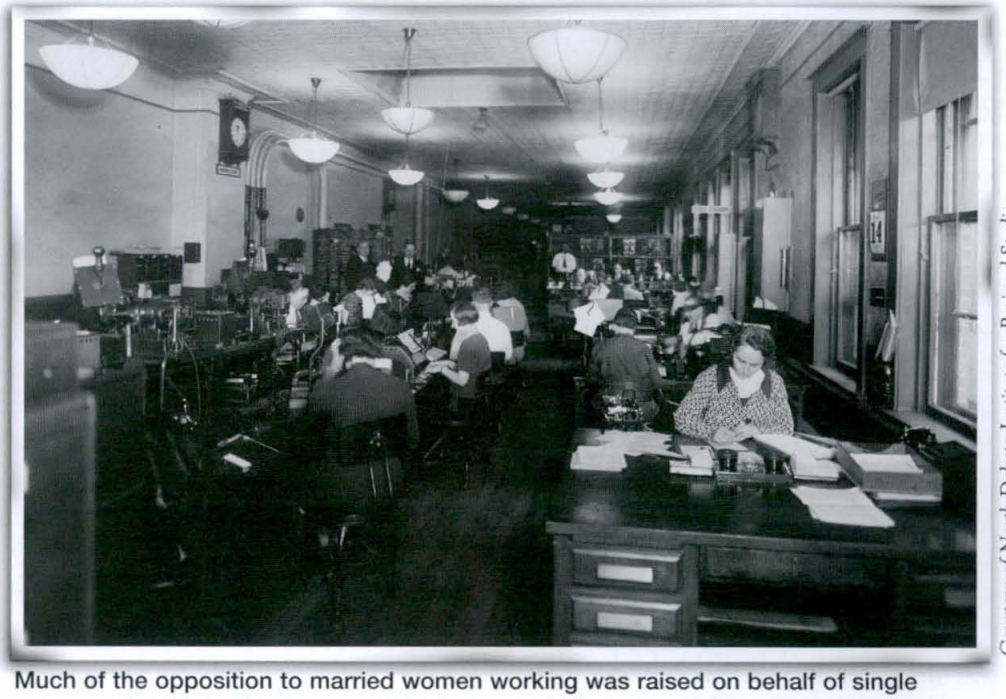
While overall female employment held up reasonably well in Fargo then, wages did not, especially among the less skilled. But the entry of married women into the job market was hardly the only cause of the female job crisis. Hard times drove more rural girls to town to supplement deteriorating family incomes, and increased numbers of high school and college students sought part-time work. In addition, young couples delayed marriage, leaving some young women employed or in the job market longer than they might have been otherwise. Those holding jobs tended to keep them, making it difficult for young and inexperienced people of either gender to find positions commensurate with their education or abilities.

The result was crowded labor markets, little job mobility, and the inability of some women to find employment appropriate to their training or their class. In November 1933 one young woman wrote the *Forum* to complain that "many well-trained teachers and office

workers are forced to work in homes, restaurants, etc., where it is necessary for them to take orders from women much below them in caliber and education," a situation for which she blamed "married women [who] will work for smaller wages than single girls." In normal economic times single women might have embraced notions of gender equality and agreed that married women should enjoy the right to be employed. But they were confronting a reality rather than an abstraction, and in that situation they were willing to appeal both to civic paternalism and to deeply held social values regarding the appropriate roles and responsibilities of single and married women.[27]

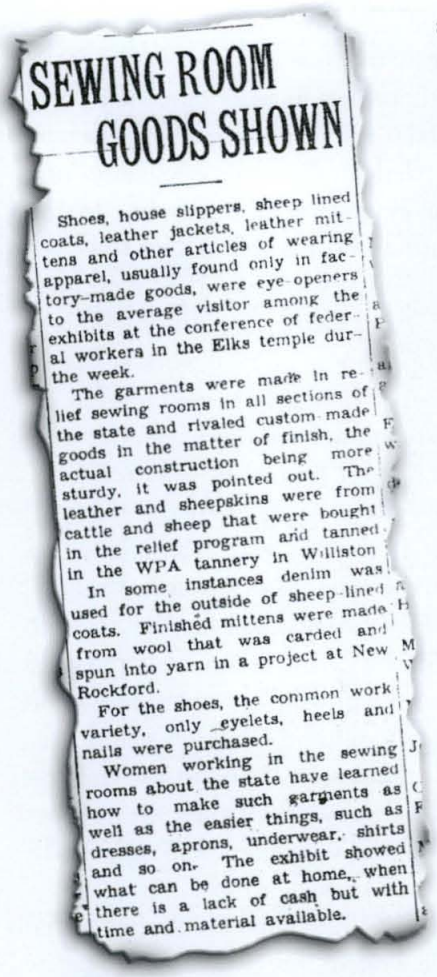
Like those who championed married men, Fargoans who spoke for single women were much more eager to attack married women for being employed than they were to criticize businesses for employing them. In doing so, they ignored the reality that some Fargo employers were hiring wives, in apparent disregard of mainstream community opinion, including for clerical positions such as stenography, which had traditionally been reserved for single women. Perhaps employers found married workers more stable and dependable than single ones. As one letter writer suggested, employers may have preferred married women because they "give more competent service than the young flighty Miss." Or perhaps married women would frequently work cheaply, lowering employers' costs at a time when their margins were narrow. In any event, it is clear that when they were given the choice between running their businesses in accordance with traditional social values or their own economic interest, at least some employers chose the path of self-interest.[28]

Fargoans did not propose to interfere with such private hiring decisions, but policies regarding public employment and relief were a different matter. Just as the city, the state, the school board, and the county had upheld traditional notions regarding gender, matrimony, and moral entitlement during the 1931 controversy over employed wives, public agencies responsible for the provision of work relief attempted to uphold those values. The demand for relief on the part of women, both married and single, made it abundantly clear, however, that many Fargoans did not live their lives in accordance with socially sanctioned gender roles. The number of women with dependents who needed relief compelled authorities to open a sewing room, employing up to one hundred women, and later a quilt and comforter factory that employed seventy-five to eighty. A bookbinding project, a canning project, a mattress factory, housekeeping, home nursing, recreational supervision, clerical work at the relief office, and the Fargo Nursery School employed dozens more. Relief officials at both the local and the federal levels gave the highest priority in work relief to heads of families. These were usually men, but many were mothers and married women who were working to support families and, sometimes, to maintain husbands who could not or would not fulfill their familial role. In June 1935, for example, the Cass County Welfare Board discussed the case of a woman who was trying to support her family, including an invalid husband, on four dollars a week she earned in a candy store. And in December it decided to provide aid for Katherine Parker, whose "good-for-nothing husband," a janitor, had failed to support the family for years while she "washed, scrubbed, and cleaned" to earn a living. While Parker's labor potentially denied a job to a single woman, the welfare board praised rather than criticized her because of her longstanding efforts to support her family. By living her life in



Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

Much of the opposition to married women working was raised on behalf of single women, who by the 1930s were replacing men in clerical work in such venues as this Fargo business office.



SEWING ROOM GOODS SHOWN

Shoes, house slippers, sheep lined coats, leather jackets, leather mittens and other articles of wearing apparel, usually found only in factory-made goods, were eye-openers to the average visitor among the exhibits at the conference of federal workers in the Elks temple during the week.

The garments were made in relief sewing rooms in all sections of the state and rivaled custom-made goods in the matter of finish, the actual construction being more sturdy, it was pointed out. The leather and sheepskins were from cattle and sheep that were bought in the relief program and tanned in the WPA tannery in Williston.

In some instances denim was used for the outside of sheep-lined coats. Finished mittens were made from wool that was carded and spun into yarn in a project at New Rockford.

For the shoes, the common work variety, only eyelets, heels and nails were purchased.

Women working in the sewing rooms about the state have learned how to make such garments as well as the easier things, such as dresses, aprons, underwear, shirts and so on. The exhibit showed what can be done at home, when there is a lack of cash but with time and material available.

Sewing rooms were opened by relief authorities to provide support to women with dependents. *Fargo Forum*, April 26, 1936.

accordance with one social value, Parker was excused for violating another, or, more precisely, her husband was blamed for forcing her to violate it. The relief office and the welfare board further discovered that unemployed single women, whom it perhaps expected to be "absorbed by their families," also needed aid. Recreation supervisors and nursery school teachers in Fargo were usually single, unemployed teachers, and the clerical staff at the relief office was also composed largely of single women. Still, despite broad public sympathy for them, single women frequently fell through the cracks of a relief structure designed mainly to support families. Some of their needs were presumably addressed by non-governmental entities, such as the "Independent Ladies Club" consisting of as many as one hundred women, mostly single, "preferring work rather than relief," which maintained an employment service in Fargo throughout the thirties.[29]

The realities of invalid, absent, inattentive, drunken, and "good-for-nothing" husbands may have forced the welfare board to compromise its ideals, but they did not compel it to abandon its understanding of the way families should be organized and maintained. In October 1934, for example, the relief office sought to dismiss one of its clients, Violet Jeffries, from her clerical job when work relief became available for her husband, Thomas, a plasterer. Mrs. Jeffries protested to the welfare board, noting that she "wanted to keep working" and that "she could not get along staying at home." She suggested that her husband, whom she considered too old at fifty-one for efficient labor, stay at home with their eight-year-old son and three-year-old daughter, a division of familial responsibility with which he was apparently comfortable. The board was aghast at Jeffries' suggestion. It was one thing when the failures of men forced women to behave contrary to social expectations, but that men and women would choose to violate those expectations on grounds of efficiency, preference, or convenience was unacceptable. "The sentiment of the Board is that the one to earn the living is the husband . . ." noted member Hugh Corrigan. "The Board [feels] that the place for [Mrs. Jeffries] is in the home taking care of the children." County relief administrator Thomas A. Hendricks stressed that it was a board rule that the "husband should work and automatically the woman stops work" and added that, when he learned there was a three-year-old in the home, "I did not see how you could leave her." The board was determined to maintain male authority and conventional gender roles in the Jeffries family, even if the Jeffries themselves rejected those roles.[30]

The board's decision in the Jeffries case indicated its fealty to widely held social norms, but it was called upon continually to modify its position, sometimes due to considerations of necessity, as in the Parker case, and sometimes due to considerations of class sympathy, as in the case of Helen Kennedy, the wife of William Kennedy. The Kennedys were prominent contractors in the city, and Helen's father-in-law, James, had built the Cathedral of St. Mary, an impressive and graceful structure that was headquarters for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fargo, North Dakota. When the Depression struck, William was a contractor with a downtown office, and the family lived at one of the city's prestige addresses. By 1932 the city directory listed him as a carpenter, in a city filled with unemployed carpenters, and the family had relocated to a modest bungalow in a lower-middle-class neighborhood.[31]

The historical record is mute regarding the sharp reversal of William Kennedy's fortunes. Perhaps, like many builders, he was caught by the collapse in construction and the evaporation of credit early in the Depression. But for whatever reason he went from being admired as "one of the most influential men in this town, one of the wealthiest, one of the most responsible," to the degradation of being arrested for public drunkenness on lower Front Street. He also became a man who was largely supported by his wife, thereby losing an essential

component of middle-class manhood.[32]

In 1932 Helen Kennedy was hired as a welfare caseworker by the Cass County Commission, which was so deluged with requests for relief that it was obliged to employ gatekeepers. She continued to serve as a caseworker after the county welfare board was created in April 1933, and by mid-1934 she was receiving one hundred dollars per month when other female caseworkers made eighty to ninety dollars. When the issue of the pay disparity was raised at a board meeting, member P. H. Burton, a Fargo physician, made the argument that carried the day. "I tell you if Mrs. Kennedy was single and getting $90 I would say fine and dandy, but some of us fellows have lived here a long time and know the picture. We knew her father-in-law. She is supporting a husband and children."[33]

Helen Kennedy's employment was not simply a matter of pity—she was a trained social worker who had experience in the field prior to her marriage—but she was pitied. Because her husband failed to function as a man should—by supporting his wife and children—she was forced to leave the home to fulfill the role of maintaining her family. While married clients could work in candy stores for four dollars a week, or the wives of working-class men could be employed at "pin money" wages, the Kennedy family was expected to maintain at least a semblance of middle-class respectability. And while the board had no compunction about telling working-class people such as the Jeffries how they should live and who should earn the family living, it treated an established family attempting to maintain the trappings of a middle-class standard of living with discretion and respect. But Kennedy's one hundred dollars a month hardly compensated for her humiliation in having to work to support a failed husband and her children, a humiliation that would have been exceeded only by the humiliation of having to go on relief and suffer the sort of demeaning degradations she now visited on others. By their willingness to employ a married woman and to compensate her at a higher level than her peers, the welfare board demonstrated a sensitivity to the special needs of what had once been a leading Fargo family. But their action in the Jeffries case—on which, ironically, Kennedy was the caseworker—shows that the welfare board was less sensitive to the needs, desires, and pride of women in the working class.

"The sentiment of the Board is that the one to earn the living is the husband. The place for [Mrs. Jeffries] is in the home taking care of the children."

The strong preference of the city and such public agencies as the welfare board for male breadwinners, even when they did not want the role, suggests gender entitlement, and the debates carried on in the pages of the *Forum* further strengthen that impression. However, the attitudes Fargoans held, and acted upon, in regard to single men make it clear that such an impression, while generally correct, is misleading. It was important that one be a male, but more important that he be a man, which meant that he fulfilled the obligations to society—especially the obligations of marriage, fatherhood, and family maintenance—that men were expected to fulfill. Because they failed to fulfill the obligations society placed on men, bachelors did not enjoy the sympathy on which other men could partially depend.[33]

Single men were not as significant numerically in Fargo's population as were single women, but they were a recognizable demographic component of the city. The 1930 census showed 3,407 single men over the age of fifteen in Fargo. Of these, perhaps 1,500 were thirty or older, and disproportionate numbers of the older men were immigrants. It is as difficult to generalize about the conditions of single men in Fargo as it is about those experienced by single women. Fargo had its share of widowers, of course, and at least some confirmed bachelors in comfortable economic circumstances. Many single men were presumably students going to college, or learning auto mechanics, barbering, or some other trade. Some single men continued to live with parents or other family members long after reaching their majority. When Lloyd Burley died at forty-seven in 1938, for example, he was a laborer living with his sister. Ernest Falconer, a single truck driver, was still living at home with his invalid parents in 1935 when he died at forty-two.[34]

The lives of Burley, Falconer, and others like them revolved in part around families, to whom they presumably owed obligations. The single men who drew Fargo's attention—and its contempt—were different. They were unattached men who never had families or who had deserted them or otherwise lost contact with them. Their tendency to cluster together, in the lower Front Street area or in one of the city's several shack colonies,

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

A Works Progress Administration work crew on a river cleanup project in Fargo, about 1936.

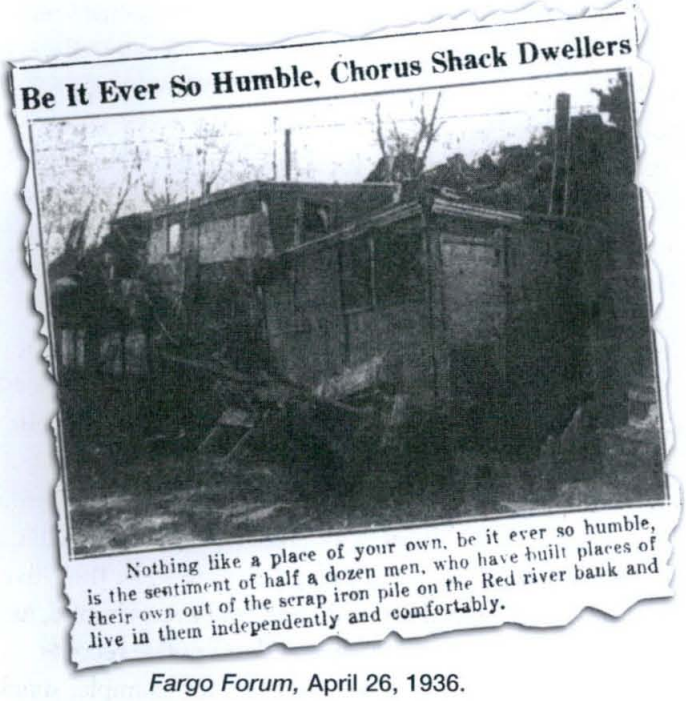
made them a recognizable social group in the city, as did the occupational pattern many shared. During the spring and summer numerous single men worked on farms, often in Cass County, in jobs secured for them by local employment agencies or with farmers with whom they had a longstanding relationship. Others stayed in town, working odd jobs, construction, or other positions requiring unskilled labor. In the fall and winter, those on farms returned to town, where they supplemented their seasonal savings by handling freight, shoveling snow, delivering packages, and undertaking other casual day labor. An April 1936 investigation by the *Forum* of a group of "shack dwellers" in a scrap metal yard near the river sheds some light on the working lives of some single men. Many had already left town for farm employment, but one detailed the pattern of odd jobs that sustained him, "In winter he shovels snow, carries ashes, tends furnaces. In summer he mows lawns and tends gardens. He has had a steady job removing and putting on storm and screen windows for . . . a number of householders." When funds from such work ran short, as was frequently the case, single men depended on help from such private agencies as the Salvation Army and the Union Mission, and if they had established residency they could receive general assistance from Cass County.[35]

When they were in town these men lived in cheap rooms, flophouses, or shacks, mostly in the lower downtown area near the Red River. Shacks that could accommodate one to eight people were especially popular with single men, and in the 1930s, when zoning regulations were extremely lax, they could be thrown up almost anywhere. Single men's shacks were numerous behind businesses on lower Front Street, in partially developed residential subdivisions such as Belmont Park, on Fargo's south side, and on private property where landowners were willing to rent space for a nominal fee. The "shack dwellers" profiled by the *Forum* in 1936 lived free at the Johnson brothers' scrap yard, the proprietors reasoning that their presence kept thieves away.[36]

Prior to the onset of the Depression, single men entered Fargo's consciousness most frequently when they ran afoul of law enforcement. Many single men engaged in behaviors that were at once cause and effect of their single status, such as drinking, fighting, gambling, and patronizing prostitutes. They were often the victims, and sometimes the perpetrators, of property crimes and violent crimes. By the standards of Fargo in the 1930s, their lives were too often disorderly, unhappy, and even chaotic, as articles in the *Forum* and coroner's and police records abundantly indicate. In August 1935, for example, shack

dweller John Bakke was hit by a streetcar while drunk and bled to death. In April of the next year seventy-two-year-old Otto Mohr, a German immigrant, died from drinking denatured alcohol in a Front Street rooming house. In September 1936 Alex Hanson, fifty-one, died in the Front Street shack he shared with three other men as a result of drinking canned heat. In November shack-dweller and Swedish immigrant Ernest Stromberg was found dead of exposure. And in September 1938 laborer Pete Larson burned to death in a barn behind 208 Front Street. The coroner concluded he had been drunk and had fallen asleep while smoking.[37]

Concentrated at the bottom of the occupational scale, in jobs that were frequently highly sensitive to the level of economic activity, single men were among the first to feel the onset of the Depression in Fargo. As early as March 1930 the *Forum* carried complaints that seasonal workers were taking jobs as cooks, waiters, and countermen at cafes, depriving "experienced men in this class of the best advantage and [cutting] down the wage scale," and in August a Fargoan complained that "men who . . . have no one but themselves to support" were taking jobs from "married men with families . . . very badly in need of work." [38]


Be It Ever So Humble, Chorus Shack Dwellers

Nothing like a place of your own, be it ever so humble, is the sentiment of half a dozen men, who have built places of their own out of the scrap iron pile on the Red river bank and live in them independently and comfortably.

Fargo Forum, April 26, 1936.

Criticized for competing with married men for private employment, single men often found themselves shut out of public employment as well. In January 1931 the Fargo City Commission decided to require on city projects that "the contractor agrees that in the performance of the public work . . . other things being equal, he will employ . . . only citizens and residents of the City of Fargo who are the head [sic] of families." In September of that year the Cass County Commission added a similar stipulation to its contracts.[39]

"The contractor agrees that he will employ only citizens and residents of Fargo who are the head of families."

Single men who managed to get on public payrolls were roundly criticized. When he discovered in October 1932 that some single men were employed on a road-paving job west of town, Fargoan E. C. Furcht, a switchman on the Northern Pacific Railroad, complained bitterly to the *Forum* that they earned as much as married men. The twelve-dollar weekly salary was a "princely sum" to a single man, Furcht contended, because "he may buy a quart of alcohol, rent an automobile, [and] patronize night clubs and speakeasies." Meanwhile, his "co-worker with a family must ask the wife and mother to count the pennies to buy a loaf of bread, and there will not be any butter to go with it for the kiddies either." Furcht's objection to placing single men on a plane with married men did not derive solely from the supposed immoral personal behavior of the former, though that was a major consideration and was related to Furcht's main point, which was that the public authorities who hired single men undermined married men who lived their lives in accordance with cherished social values and expectations. Furcht complained that public officials turned society's values on their heads when they hired single men and paid them the same as those who were married:

> Up to a few years ago the man who married, raised a family and worked hard and steadily to support and educate his children was looked up to in his community. He was a man, worthy of respect. Now apparently, that mode of living is not to be tolerated. He who has ordered his living along those lines must be made to suffer, and also his family must suffer, and have held up before their eyes, as a shining example, the man who has not married, the man who has been too selfish to shoulder any responsibility.[40]

Largely dependent on low-wage, economically sensitive muscle jobs and shunned by public employers, single men found it increasingly difficult to maintain even their modest living standards. More needed help from welfare agencies and Cass County, and needed it earlier than was normally the case, creating pressures on available funds. And when they approached private agencies or the county for assistance, they were accused of being debauchees and layabouts. In January 1932 the Community Welfare Association decided to require single men to work for their aid as a means of trimming some from the rolls of private agencies, and the *Forum* carried complaints that single men refused to work on farms for "board and room, but no wages" because, "supported with the necessities of life by charitable" agencies, they "see no reason to work for what they now receive for nothing." A few days later County Commissioner Garfield Hoglund complained that "during January, Cass County paid approximately $1,100 for room and board of single men. These men were given rooms in Fargo and were fed at restaurants or some of the cheaper boarding houses. During the day many did nothing but loaf around pool halls." Hoglund believed that county assistance had been overly generous and was consequently attracting many single men who soaked up funds that should go to families. His solution was to have a barracks constructed at the Cass County Poor Farm, north of the city, for the housing of single men the following winter. Hoglund argued that "by forcing single men to move outside the city, where pleasures they now enjoy would not be available, I believe we can rid ourselves of many of the men who hang around Fargo during the winter and 'sponge' off the county." The County Commission agreed and constructed a barracks for sixty-five to seventy men, who would chop their own wood, eat "salt pork, beans and plenty of vegetable stew" and sleep on "straw mattresses" with "no springs."[41]

The federal relief programs launched by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration, beginning with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in 1933, alleviated the local funding crisis that had brought forth this draconian solution, but they were hardly boons for single men. There was never enough FERA money to meet all local needs, and the welfare board put its emphasis on aiding heads of households, including women, many of whom had been covered previously under North Dakota mothers' pensions. Most single men were thrown on county general assistance, if they were granted any aid at all. This solution was consistent with FERA guidelines that gave priority to heads of families and suggested that both "local homeless persons and wandering transients" be confined to barracks such as that at the Cass County Poor Farm. As the magazine *New Republic* noted at the time, "this recommendation . . . is equivalent to an endorsement of discriminatory standards of relief for local residents on the basis of marital status. It means that solitary . . . men . . . will

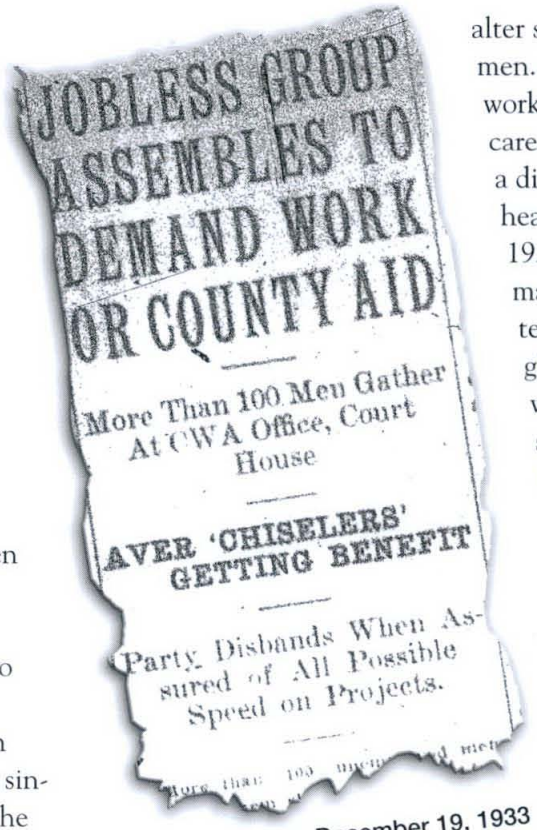
Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

Employment on city public works projects, such as the construction of the Fourth Street Dam in 1939, was usually limited to male heads of families.

continue to receive relief on a level of decency and adequacy far below that allowed to married men."[42]

The Civil Works Administration (CWA), which operated in the winter of 1933-34, should have provided greater opportunities for single men, both because it offered mainly male-oriented work relief and because one was not required to be on the existing relief roles to receive public employment. Once again, however, family heads received priority, prompting single men to protest. On December 19, 1933, more than one hundred single men crowded into the county courthouse to demand that county relief director Hendricks provide them "with jobs on CWA projects or county relief." One single man suggested to the *Forum* that the relief office apparently expected single men "to hibernate through the winter." Another, Torgie Torgerson, cleverly attacked the moral advantage married men had in the struggle for relief funds:

> Allotment of employment by the CWA completely ignores the single man. Aside from the veterans [who were eligible for the Veterans' Civilian Conservation Corps], the married man is [the] great and favored one, whereas the single man is the real worthy hero of this cause. . . . He is doing the nation an extreme favor by remaining single, and not adding a great multiple burden by bringing children into the world. On the other hand, we find the other fellow, a weakling who rushes into marriage and brings children into the world and then starts to whine and plead in agony, having added the groans of his wife to his own, insisting that "I am a married man with a family and should be given all the attention and help in my poverty."[43]


JOBLESS GROUP ASSEMBLES TO DEMAND WORK OR COUNTY AID

More Than 100 Men Gather At CWA Office, Court House

AVER 'CHISELERS' GETTING BENEFIT

Party Disbands When Assured of All Possible Speed on Projects.

Fargo Forum, December 19, 1933

The complaints and protests of Torgerson and other single men in the winter of 1933-34 failed to change a relief policy that placed them firmly at the bottom, or to alter social values that privileged married men. Single men were able to get federal work relief only when families had been cared for, and then they were treated in a discriminatory manner relative to heads of families receiving aid. In June 1934 the welfare board decided to pay married men on FERA work relief fifteen dollars a week, while giving single men nine dollars for the same work. Board member P. H. Burton said "I think married men should have preference over single men. As far as I am concerned, I would not give a single man a pleasant look." Later, single men on Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects who failed to save sufficient funds to carry themselves through the winter were denied any supplementary funds from the county. Discrimination against people on relief was vigorously and systematically protested by the Fargo Trades and Labor Assembly and such radical groups as the Fargo Holiday Association and the Workers Alliance, a WPA union, but defenses of single men by such groups were conspicuous by their rarity. Virtually everyone concerned with relief in Fargo, from the welfare board to most of the clients, seemed to agree that aiding single men was the lowest priority.[44]

"The single man is the real worthy hero of this cause."

Single men denied work relief were thrown on county assistance rolls, inhabited mainly by the aged, people suffering severe mental and physical handicaps, and others deemed "unemployable." While those on CWA and WPA rolls received cash for their work, people on county general assistance were given rent and grocery vouchers and commodities distributed through the county commissary. It was a dismal and demeaning life. County records show that two to three hundred single men received help from the county every winter, beginning in 1933-34, and that they constituted about 15 percent of those receiving some kind of relief. Caseworkers reported that single male clients usually lacked family, had lost touch with their families, or were alienated from them. In the summer they could usually get seasonal

Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies

Loungers—likely single men—relaxing in front of a lower Front Street rooming house, circa 1920. By the 1930s the county boarded single men in cheap, unsanitary rooming houses.

work, but as caseworker James Thompson noted in 1935, "during the summer the wages are so small and they spend what they make; in the winter they have no money saved up." The fact that most of Thompson's 149 clients were "from 55 to 83 years of age" made it unlikely that they would become completely self-supporting in the future.[45]

The county handled the unwanted burden of single men as cheaply as possible. It did not repeat the barracks experiment of 1932-33, apparently because of discontentment and disorder among the inmates. As Hendricks put it in 1934, "we do not like to congregate. Regardless of care they do get to talking." Solutions that were nearly as inexpensive as barracks were devised. In 1933-34 the county boarded most single men in cheap rooming houses for forty cents per man per day, though Hendricks admitted that "the men were forced in many instances to occupy unsanitary rooms and were fed largely on donuts and coffee." The next winter the county doubled single men up in rooms that rented for a maximum of $1.50 per week. Kathryn Tharalson of the county FERA office found the rooms "unsanitary in the extreme, foul with vermin and other filth."[46]

The welfare board was evidently afraid that even these feral conditions would accustom single men to lives as county charges, because it moved quickly to curtail assistance whenever the possibility of private employment appeared. In April 1934, for example, Ivan Steele lost the $4.30 in general assistance he received every week—and for which he was compelled to work forty hours on the county woodpile—when he refused to take a farm job paying fifteen dollars a month plus board and room. Despite Steele's protests that he "was not an experienced farm hand" and that he "had a job coming up in the city with . . . a moving contractor," the welfare board refused to reconsider. In the summer of 1935 all single men still on the rolls were cut off entirely by the welfare board because farmers wanted help and "their being on relief produces no incentive for them to make their own living." While such curtailments of relief were harsh, some county officials wondered aloud why the public should care for single men at all, urging instead that they should be compelled to work year-round for farmers "for room and board, clothing and tobacco money" instead of wages.[47]

The welfare board eventually came up with a solution to what it believed would be the enduring problem of providing relief for single men. Beginning in the winter of 1936-37 the county housed single men on general assistance at the "Men's Bureau" at Longfellow School,

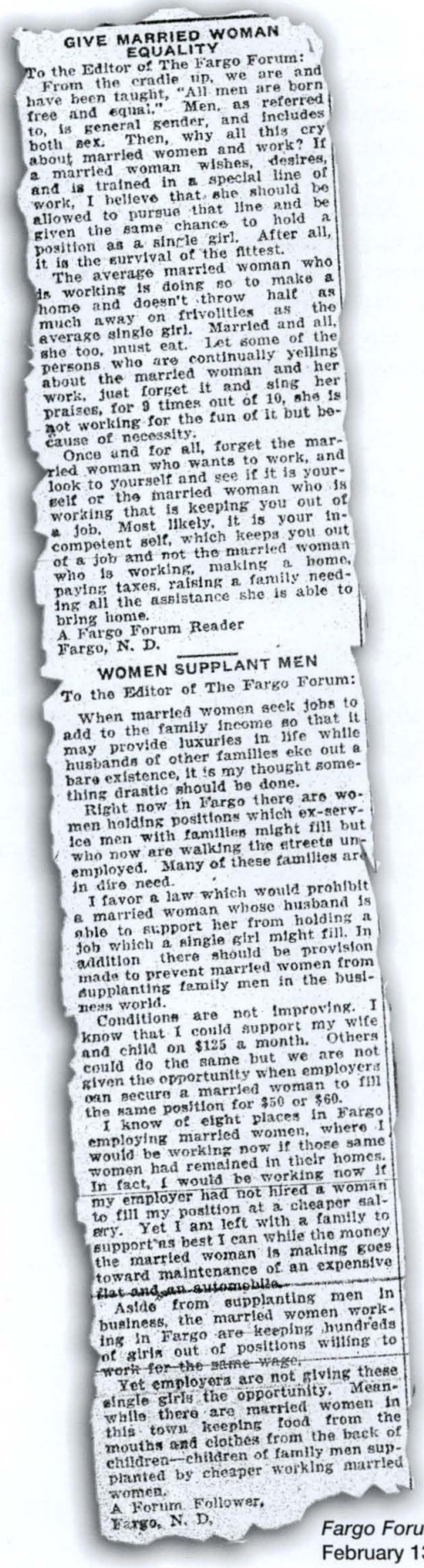
which had been closed by the school board some years before. Located next to the Great Northern tracks on the north side of town, Longfellow School had served in 1933 as the headquarters of the Unemployed Men's Club, which maintained a labor exchange and commissary there. From December 1933 through October 1935 it had been a FERA transient center. It became available to the county when the WPA and Social Security assumed most FERA functions, putting that agency out of business. The federal government had constructed cooking, dining, and sleeping facilities that made Longfellow an especially attractive venue for single men needing assistance.[48]

The county was determined to make life at the Men's Bureau tough. The inmates were compelled to work at such jobs as chopping wood and shoveling snow to earn their keep. They were prevented from having liquor—though they did receive ten cents worth of tobacco or candy bars per week—and they lived in conditions that were spartan by any definition. Indeed, the county boasted in January 1939 that it could keep a man at the bureau for just twenty-five cents per day. Life was so harsh there that many refused to report, giving the relief office an excuse to deny them any aid, while others reported and then left—between seventy-five and one hundred in the fall of 1936 alone. Still, enrollment was high, and as late as January of 1939 the county was housing 178 men at the Men's Bureau.[49]

When Fargoans considered the worthiness of job holders and relief recipients, they thought in terms of an informal and flexible hierarchy open to amendment on the basis of class or admirable personal characteristics, but a hierarchy supported by broad agreement. t the top were married men with dependents, then single women trying to get a start in the world or live an independent life, and then married women, except in cases such as those of Helen Kennedy and Katherine Peters and others whose husbands' failures as providers compelled them to support families. At the bottom, in Fargo as elsewhere, were the single men, whose status just slightly above transients was underscored by their institutionalization in a facility designed to house transients.

The degree to which Fargoans lived in accordance with widely held social values regarding family and gender went a long way toward determining their worthiness in the eyes of their neighbors. In Fargo, married men deserved work and attractive relief not primarily because they were males, but because they were fulfilling an essential social purpose and upholding valued and endangered cultural norms. They had shouldered the burden of marrying, creating families, caring for women and children, and maintaining the foundation of a moral and well-ordered society. They stood against the forces of selfishness, individualism, and materialism that threatened that society, whether expressed by wives who worked outside the home, husbands who urged them to do so, or single men who refused to play the socially sanctioned roles of adult males. As E. C. Furcht had put it so well, the husband and father "was a man, worthy of respect."[50]

David B. Danbom is a professor of history at North Dakota State University at Fargo. A Colorado native, he received his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1974, the year he came to North Dakota. Dr. Danbom has written extensively about agriculture and rural life and on American progressive political history. His most recent book is *"Born in the Country": A History of Rural America*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1995.



GIVE MARRIED WOMAN EQUALITY

To the Editor of The Fargo Forum:

From the cradle up, we are and have been taught, "All men are born free and equal." Men, as referred to, is general gender, and includes both sex. Then, why all this cry about married women and work? If a married woman wishes, desires, and is trained in a special line of work, I believe that she should be allowed to pursue that line and be given the same chance to hold a position as a single girl. After all, it is the survival of the fittest.

The average married woman who is working is doing so to make a home and doesn't throw half as much away on frivolities as the average single girl. Married and all, she too, must eat. Let some of the persons who are continually yelling about the married woman and her work, just forget it and sing her praises, for 9 times out of 10, she is not working for the fun of it but because of necessity.

Once and for all, forget the married woman who wants to work, and look to yourself and see if it is yourself or the married woman who is working that is keeping you out of a job. Most likely, it is your incompetent self, which keeps you out of a job and not the married woman who is working, making a home, paying taxes, raising a family needing all the assistance she is able to bring home.

A Fargo Forum Reader
Fargo, N. D.

WOMEN SUPPLANT MEN

To the Editor of The Fargo Forum:

When married women seek jobs to add to the family income so that it may provide luxuries in life while husbands of other families eke out a bare existence, it is my thought something drastic should be done.

Right now in Fargo there are women holding positions which ex-service men with families might fill but who now are walking the streets unemployed. Many of these families are in dire need.

I favor a law which would prohibit a married woman whose husband is able to support her from holding a job which a single girl might fill. In addition there should be provision made to prevent married women from supplanting family men in the business world.

Conditions are not improving. I know that I could support my wife and child on $125 a month. Others could do the same but we are not given the opportunity when employers can secure a married woman to fill the same position for $50 or $60.

I know of eight places in Fargo employing married women, where I would be working now if those same women had remained in their homes. In fact, I would be working now if my employer had not hired a woman to fill my position at a cheaper salary. Yet I am left with a family to support as best I can while the money the married woman is making goes toward maintenance of an expensive flat and an automobile.

Aside from supplanting men in business, the married women working in Fargo are keeping hundreds of girls out of positions willing to work for the same wage.

Yet employers are not giving these single girls the opportunity. Meanwhile there are married women in this town keeping food from the mouths and clothes from the back of children—children of family men supplanted by cheaper working married women.

A Forum Follower,
Fargo, N. D.

Fargo Forum, February 13, 1931

Notes

1. *Fargo Forum*, February 13, 1931, 15.
2. The Depression-era controversy over the employment of married women has been addressed fruitfully by a number of scholars. See especially, William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Winifred D. Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982).
3. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933): vol. 6, 1007; vol. 5, 272.
4. Robert A. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Wald, 1929) and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1937).
5. "Regular Meeting December 21, 1931," Minutes of the Board of City Commissioners of Fargo (North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies [hereafter NDIRS], Mss. 42, Box 15): N-322; "Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of City Commissioners, February 24, 1932," Minutes of the Board of City Commissioners of Fargo (NDIRS, Mss. 42, Box 15): N-351; *Fargo Forum*, February 24, 1932, 3; and June 9, 1932, 5.
6. *Fargo Forum*, February 13, 1931,15
7. *Fargo Forum*, January 17, 1931, 3.
8. *Fargo Forum*, February 23, 1931, 10; January 13, 1931, 5; Suzanne LaFollette, *Concerning Women* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1926), 93; interview with Jean Mason Guy, Fargo, North Dakota, June 18, 1997.
9. *Fargo Forum*, April 9, 1931,13; June 27, 1932, 5. A "sheik" in the twenties was a rake or a gigolo who lived off of women's earnings. The writer's reference to yellow fingers suggests cigarette smoking.
10. *Fargo Forum*, April 2, 1931, 5; May 19, 1931, 6; and June 21, 1932, 5.
11. Interview with Emily Jackson, Fargo, North Dakota, October 9, 1997; and interview by Mary Jo Vrem-Ydstie with Mrs. O. A. Stevens, Fargo, North Dakota, August 6, 1974 (Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, OGL 259).
12. Guy interview. *Polk's Fargo and Moorhead City Directory, 1932* (St. Paul: R.L. Polk and Company, 1932), 292 and 134.
13. *City Directory, 1932*, 480 and 435; interview with Jerry Lein, Moorhead, Minnesota, September 10, 1998; and interview with Ed Graber, Fargo, North Dakota, October 21, 1997.
14. Divisions among historians regarding the motivations of working wives reflect the complexity and individuality of those motivations. While Scharf, *To Work and To Wed*, Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, and Susan Levine, "Workers' Wives: Gender, Class and Consumerism in the 1920s United States," *Gender and History 3* (Spring 1991), 45-64, emphasize rising material expectations, Chafe, *The American Woman*, Ruth Milkman, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8 (Spring 1976), 73-97, and Lois Rita Helmbold, "Downward Occupational Mobility During the Great Depression: Urban Black and White Working Class Women," *Labor History* 29 (Spring 1988), 135-172, stress the pressures of economic hardship.
15. National Industrial Conference Board, *Women Workers and Labor*

Supply (New York: National Industrial Conference Board, 1936); Ruth Shallcross, *Should Married Women Work?* (New York: Public Affairs Committee of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, 1940); and *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 6, 1007.

16. Interview with Vivian Westberg, Moorhead, Minnesota, June 14, 2000; and *City Directory, 1932*, 342 and 517.
17. Interview with Joclyn Burdick, Fargo, North Dakota, June 11, 1997. For the Business and Professional Women's Club of Fargo see *The Gist of It* 7 (April-June 1929), 2.
18. *Fargo Forum*, March 17, 1931, 8; and April 9, 1931,13.
19. *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 3, part 2, *Montana-Wyoming*, 427. Nationally, 50.5 percent of single women fifteen and older were employed. *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 5, 272.
20. *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 3, part 2, 427; Interview with Frieda Oster, West Fargo, North Dakota, April 8, 1999 (Frieda Oster is the name I have assigned to this interviewee, who wished to remain anonymous); Eva Nelson, "Depressing Years," Eva Nelson's Memoirs, (NDIRS, Mss 218, Box 1).
21. *Fargo Forum*, March 15, 1937, 12; O. E. Clauson, "Luther Hall—A Home for Girls: A Prospectus," United Way Collection (NDIRS, Minutes of Meeting of Budget Committee, 1936-1938); *Fargo Forum*, October 9, 1932, 9; and October 20, 1935, 9; Ernest Norman, *A History of Catholic Family Service: Social Ministry in North Dakota* (Fargo: Catholic Family Service, 1998), 38; and "North Dakota Women's Diary," August 11, 1939, entry (NDIRS, Mss. 214).
22. Interview with Gladys Carney, Fargo, North Dakota, June 15, 2000; *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 3, part 2, 443; Burdick interview; interview with Jean-Cameron Heller Shupienis, Fargo, North Dakota, June 24, 1998; interview with Irene Fraser, Fargo, North Dakota, October 21, 1997; Oster interview; Westberg interview; interview with Dora Snyder, Fargo, North Dakota, August 6, 1998;
23. *Fargo Forum*, March 12, 1931, 6. Several of my interviewees told me that, while their mothers paid good wages to maids, they knew of women who offered board and room only. Ads frequently were placed in the "Women Want Work" column of the *Forum* by women offering domestic service in return for board and room alone.
24. *Fargo Forum*, March 24, 1931, 8; June 3, 1931, 6; and March 14, 1931, 4.
25. Workmen's Compensation Bureau, "Seventh Biennial Report of the Minimum Wage Department to the Governor of North Dakota for the Biennium Ending June 30, 1932," 4.
26. *Fargo Forum*, August 9, 1932, 2; and August 12, 1932, 1. Lower Front Street was Fargo's skid row.
27. Ibid., November 14, 1933, 5.
28. Ibid., March 2, 1931, 10.
29. For work relief for Fargo women see, for example, *Fargo Forum*, March 14, 1937, 13. "Proceedings of Welfare Board, June 26, 1935," (Cass County Social Services, Verbatim Minutes, Apr. 1933-Dec. 1935), 5; and "Welfare Board Meeting, December 4, 1935," (Cass County Social Service, Verbatim Minutes, Apr. 1933-Dec. 1935), 8; *Fargo Forum*, February 17, 1934, 7. By agreement with Cass County Social Services, I do not use the real names of relief clients. Hence, Katherine Parker is the name I have assigned to a client.
30. "Minutes of Meeting of County Welfare Board, Washington School, October 3, 1934" (Cass County Social Service), 5, 6-7.
31. *Polk's Fargo and Moorhead City Directory, 1928* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk and Company, 1928), 318; and *City Directory, 1932*.
32. "Minutes of Meeting County Welfare Board, Court House, April 18, 1934" (Cass County Social Service), 9; "Fargo Police Arrest Records, 1930-1946" (NDIRS, Mss. 133, Book 1), 113.
33. "Minutes of Meeting of County Welfare Board, Court House, July 25, 1934" (Cass County Social Services), 3; *Fargo Forum*, February 24, 1932, 3.
34. In *A Woman's Wage*, Alice Kessler-Harris emphasizes that social expectations regarding the behavior and obligations of men and women are an essential and inseparable component of definitions and understandings of gender. My discussion of single men in Fargo draws on this insight.
35. *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 3, part 2, 427; and Dr. Carl E. Elofson Papers (NDIRS, Mss. 1165): Box 1, Folder 26, and Box 2, Folder 9.
36. In the 1930 census, 187 men were classified as "farm laborers" and another 471 were categorized as "industry not specified." Many of these were probably day laborers. More than 900 more men identified as their occupations such unskilled jobs as metal salvage, freight handling, and domestic service, *Fifteenth Census*, vol. 3, part 2, 418, 427, and 433. Their casual living arrangements and the absence of many farm workers in the spring when the census was conducted make it likely that single men were substantially undercounted. *Fargo Forum*, April 26, 1936, 13. One achieved residency status in a North Dakota county by living there one year.
37. The City Commission sometimes granted permission for the erection of shacks on city property. See, for example, "Minutes of the Adjourned Regular Meeting of the Board of Commissioners, City of Fargo, September 2, 1934" (NDIRS, Mss 42, Box 15): N-748-N-749; and *Fargo Forum*, April 26, 1936, 173.
38. Elofson Papers (NDIRS): Box 1, Folder 14; Box 3, Folder 21; Box 2, Folder 21; Box 4, Folder 15; and Box 3, Folder 14.
39. *Fargo Forum*, March 12, 1930, 6; August 27, 1930, 5.
40. "Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the Board of City Commissioners of Fargo, January 5, 1931," (NDIRS, Mss. 41, Box 15): N-203; and "Proceedings of the Board of County Commissioners of Cass County, North Dakota, September 4, 1931" (Cass County Auditor's Office).
41. *Fargo Forum*, October 7, 1932, 5.
42. *Fargo Forum*, January 31, 1932, 2; February 10, 1932, 1; September 6, 1932, 1.
43. *New Republic* 76 (October 18, 1933), 268.
44. *Fargo Forum*, December 19, 1933, 1; December 19, 1933, 5; January 19, 1934, 5.
45. "Minutes of Meeting, County Welfare Board, June 20, 1934" (Cass County Social Services, Verbatim Minutes, Apr. 1933- Dec. 1935), 4; *Fargo Forum*, January 21, 1937, 1; January 22, 1934, 2.
46. *Fargo Forum*, March 1, 1934, 6; "Minutes of Welfare Board, January 16, 1935," (Cass County Social Services, Verbatim Minutes, Apr. 1933- Dec. 1935), 6.
47. "Minutes of Meeting, County Welfare Board, August 1, 1934" (Cass County Social Services, Verbatim Minutes, Apr. 1933- Dec. 1935), 9; *Fargo Forum*, May 7, 1934, 5; June 18, 1935, 1.
48. "Minutes of Meeting County Welfare Board, Court House, April 4, 1934," 1; "Proceedings of Welfare Board, July 3, 1935," (both Cass County Social Services, Verbatim Minutes, Apr. 1933- Dec. 1935), 8; and "Welfare Board Meeting, November 16, 1938," (Cass County Social Services, Brief Minutes 1936 thru 1941), 5.
49. "Welfare Board Meeting, Cass County, October 7, 1936," 2; and "Welfare Board Meeting, Cass County, October 21, 1936," (both Cass County Social Service, Brief Minutes 1936 thru 1941), 7.
50. "Welfare Board Meeting, Cass County, November 18, 1936," 2; and "Welfare Board Meeting, Cass County, January 4, 1939," (both Cass County Social Service, Brief Minutes 1936 thru 1941), 5.
51. *Fargo Forum*, October 7, 1932, 5.