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Article Summary: Governor Robert Furnas, wary of discouraging development in Nebraska, initially sought to minimize the devastating effects of drought and grasshoppers on the lives of early settlers by calling for private charitable contributions. Eventually the urgent need for relief made it necessary to call upon Federal assistance programs.

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Photographs / Images: grasshoppers stopping a westbound train on the Union Pacific in Nebraska

IN THE WAKE OF THE GRASSHOPPERS: PUBLIC RELIEF IN NEBRASKA, 1874-1875

BY ROBERT N. MANLEY

THE Great American Desert—this was the unflattering appellation by which the vast expanse of treeless plain reaching from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains was known in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Explorers who traversed the area unanimously substantiated the grim assessment, and down to the Civil War few challenged the assertion that agriculture was impossible beyond the Missouri.¹ Following the war, however, the popular image of the Great Plains began to change as newspaper editors, speculators and promoters inundated the country with highly colored reports of the potential wealth of the trans-Missouri West. Untold riches, they asserted, awaited persons bold enough to seize the opportunity that the Homestead Act and the expanding railroad

¹ Ralph G. Morris, "The Notion of a Great American Desert East of the Rockies," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XIII (September, 1926), 190-200. Also James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955), 3-6.

Dr. Robert N. Manley, assistant professor of history at the University of Nebraska, contributes a fine, informative article on grasshopper relief in Nebraska during the 1870's.

network afforded. The time had come, the "boomers" declared, for man to convert the "Great American Desert" into the "Garden of the West."²

The promise of quick wealth, so provocatively sketched by the propagandists, possessed a disarming simplicity; but practical difficulties such as drought, insect infestations and Indian depredations militated against the fulfillment of sanguine expectations. Bad enough in themselves, these disasters, since they retarded settlement, proved traumatic for those who wanted to develop the frontier regions. Confronted by adversity, ambitious promoters demanded outside assistance so that momentary difficulties might be surmounted, yet they also insisted that the problems be minimized so that potential settlers would not be deterred. This ambivalent response, so characteristic of frontier attitudes is strikingly illustrated in Nebraska during the grasshopper years of 1874-1875.

The grasshopper problem first came to the attention of Robert W. Furnas, second governor of Nebraska, late in February, 1874. A letter to the Governor from Dr. O. W. Mallory of Furnas County laconically described the hardships which drought and grasshoppers had brought upon the settlers in the Republican River valley. Unless substantial aid came soon most of the farmers intended to abandon their claims and return to "the wife's folks" back East.³ This information undoubtedly unnerved Furnas who was, above all else, a fervent promoter of Nebraska. At this point, however, the usually optimistic Furnas could offer only his personal consolation and a succinct admonition:

Would to God [he wrote Mallory] I had the power and means to render you the desired aid. You need not be told that I have not a cent of public funds at my command for any purpose, charitable or otherwise. This too is a delicate question to handle. Your destitution dare not be made pub-

² See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, 1951), 201-213.

³ Dr. O. W. Mallory to Governor Furnas, February 27, 1874. All letters cited are in the Executive Manuscripts, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

lic; if it were known it would blast your hopes for immigration. If some one or two of your people would come in here, we could quietly work up something for your aid in the way of subsistence and seed. . . .⁴

Other letters followed. Residents of Harlan County pleaded with Furnas to send them assistance. Violent hail storms and grasshoppers had destroyed their crops. If they were to remain on the land, the state must furnish food, clothing and seed.⁵ From Furnas County came another appeal. Unless given help, most of the settlers planned to return to the East. According to this letter, it would be impossible to conceive of anything more detrimental to the reputation of Nebraska than the tales which these disheartened settlers would spread about conditions in the state.⁶ And always there remained practical obstacles. When another frontiersman requested assistance, Furnas suggested that a reputable citizen in the community be delegated to visit Nebraska City, there to solicit the kindly and generous inhabitants of that town for contributions. The plan was indeed a good one, came the reply; but there was one problem—no one in the county had enough money to make a trip to Nebraska City.⁷

While the "interests" of Nebraska obviously required the suppression of disquieting information about frontier conditions, Governor Furnas realized that suffering could not long be minimized. By the late winter of 1874 detailed and exaggerated descriptions of destitution in the western counties had appeared in every major Nebraska newspaper. And as Furnas had feared, the newspaper accounts became more confused and contradictory with each week. In short

⁴ Furnas to Dr. O. W. Mallory, March 3, 1874.

⁵ Petition of residents of Beaver Creek, Harlan County, to Furnas, March 23, 1874.

⁶ William T. Sharp to Furnas, March 4, 1874.

⁷ H. P. Wood to Furnas, April 12, 1874. Driven to the edge of despair, Wood asked Governor Furnas for a personal loan: "I only ask it as a loan if I can raise a crop I will repay it can you not raise something in your City in Coal, Feed, provisions or material for clothing for my family. This shall be a private affair no one in this valley will ever know from what source I received aid if I get it."

order it became extremely difficult to gauge with any certainty the actual extent of suffering.

Through these days of confusion, a few Nebraska newspapers labored to present a balanced appraisal of the agricultural situation in the state. The *Beatrice Express*, published in Gage County, reported "excellent small grain crops" harvested everywhere in southern Nebraska except in the lands adjacent to the frontier. In this region only small crops of sod-corn had been realized. The recently-arrived emigrant who depended upon this crop of corn admittedly faced hard times, but the situation was far from hopeless. In any event, declared the *Express*, the settlers "cannot afford to have their part of the State misrepresented."⁸ At the same time the *Omaha Bee* reminded its readers that Nebraska homesteaders, although afflicted by drought and grasshoppers, were "much better off than the settlers in western and southern Kansas."⁹

During the summer of 1874 public officials proceeded on the assumption that voluntary contributions of food, clothing and money from eastern Nebraska and neighboring states would meet the needs of the destitute. Furnas approved this approach. He opposed calling the legislature into special session because "the less publicity given the matter the better for us." In an effort to alleviate public apprehension, the Governor issued a special message which calmly placed before the citizens of the state the "actual facts" concerning frontier conditions. "While our crops are shorter than for several years before," he announced, "there is by no means a failure, or even ground for serious alarm." Drought, not grasshoppers, was the cause of distress, and he noted that farmers in every part of the na-

⁸ *Beatrice Express*, August 20, 1874.

⁹ *Omaha Bee*, August 12, 1874. Several "histories" of Nebraska written with the specific intention of promoting the state minimized the grasshopper incursions. See *Johnson's History of Nebraska* (Omaha, 1880), 183-84; and A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), I, 95. Emigrant manuals similarly gave slight attention to the plagues. See Edwin A. Curley, *Nebraska: Its Advantages, Resources and Drawbacks* (London, 1875), 283.

tion were suffering from lack of rain. He concluded that "our people show but little disposition to abandon the country—no more than in all seasons heretofore and in all new countries, but recognize the occasional ills which befall all countries and all industries." Furnas recognized two immediate tasks: to provide temporary relief for the western farmers and their families; and to secure from Congress an extension of time for final homestead proofs.¹⁰

Several weeks later Furnas delivered another reassuring message, but by this time his patience was beginning to wear thin. He repeated that as Governor he possessed no authority to spend state funds for relief supplies. Moreover, he implied that current reports were completely erroneous. A careful examination of dispatches received from prominent men led him to conclude that "notwithstanding the unfavorable agricultural year, the state, as a whole has reaped a fair harvest. There is nothing in the events of the year to retard the progress of the state." He admitted that settlers in the west were in trouble, for the poorest classes gravitated to the most exposed lands. Since it took several years of sustained effort to bring virgin prairie land under cultivation, crop failures unfortunately fell most heavily upon the class least able to bear adversity. The Governor asked eastern Nebraskans to respond to the challenge; they must contribute generously to meet the requirements of their afflicted brethren. Finally, he asked twenty prominent citizens "to act as a general committee for the reception and distribution of all contributions."¹¹

Furnas, of course, could not stem the tide of excited public discussion which, as the crisis deepened, assumed political overtones. Purporting to speak for the leadership of the Republican Party in Nebraska, the *State Journal* expressed considerable doubt as to the efficacy of private relief work. The *State Journal* consistently argued for the

¹⁰ *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1942), I, 436.

¹¹ *House Journal of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska*, 11th session (1875), 644-46.

expenditure of government funds—from county, state and Federal treasuries—to alleviate suffering. In the summer of 1874, for example, it suggested that counties be permitted to issue bonds to finance construction of new railroads.¹² On the other hand, the *Omaha Bee*, another Republican newspaper, but one with considerable editorial independence, endorsed private relief work. "With a thoroughly reliable and active central organization at Omaha, acting for the numerous auxiliary relief societies at various points in the state we are confident that Nebraska will be able to take care of all the people who are really in want, without legislative aid."¹³ For the *Omaha Herald*, the mouthpiece of the conservative leadership of the Nebraska Democratic organization, schemes such as those proposed by the *State Journal* smacked of "paternalism." Although deeply troubled by the plight of the western farmers, George Miller, editor of the *Herald*, insisted that "the public treasury must not be either touched or opened for the relief of these people." Volunteer relief programs could be established much more quickly than government programs. "Other plans for more permanent relief and aid under a law passed for that purpose by the legislature may be good in their way, but they are not what is wanted now," Miller concluded.¹⁴

J. Sterling Morton, another prominent Democrat, concurred. As a proponent of laissez-faire, Morton opposed as a matter of principle all forms of public relief. According to Morton, the annual State Fair afforded an excellent opportunity for responsible citizens to work out a coordinated plan of private relief. He also held that every effort should be made to make the State Fair an overwhelming success. Nothing would more effectively silence the irresponsible attacks upon Nebraska agriculture than elaborate displays of crops raised in this so-called "disaster" year.¹⁵

¹² *Daily State Journal* (Lincoln), August 1, 1874.

¹³ *Omaha Bee*, September 19, 1874.

¹⁴ *Omaha Herald*, August 12, 18, and October 22, 1874.

¹⁵ James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln, 1942), 201.

Out of these demands came the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association. The purposes of the Association were clearly stated: "to collect money, provisions, clothing, fuel, seeds and other necessary supplies and articles and distribute the same among the people who have been reduced to necessitous circumstances by the drought and grasshoppers the past season." Although Furnas was designated chairman of the Association, the burden of leadership fell upon the executive committee which consisted of General E. O. C. Ord, vice-chairman; former Governor Alvin Saunders, treasurer; and E. B. Chandler, secretary. To facilitate the committee's work, Omaha, General Ord's post of duty, was selected as headquarters of the Relief Association.¹⁶

Private relief work to be successful required adequate financial support and efficient administration. Neither could be secured quickly enough to satisfy the westerners. Pressed to the point of desperation and convinced that the Association would not act in time, individual settlers appealed to relatives and friends in the East for assistance. Various state organizations commissioned agents to tour eastern cities and to conduct public campaigns for relief funds. Such activities outraged the "booming" element in the state, who continued to insist that the problem had been distorted out of proportion. An editorial in the *Beatrice Express* typified the concern—the editor excoriated the *Omaha Bee* for sending two reporters to canvass the East. Although the agents had gathered \$20,000, the *Express* argued that the unfavorable publicity which resulted from eastern rallies exceeded, in damage done to Nebraska's reputation, any amount of money which could be harvested from sympathetic easterners.¹⁷ The experience of a Beatrice man who wrote to an eastern bank requesting a loan documented the effect of the current propaganda; for the applicant, instead of the requested loan, received a draft for twenty-five dollars together with the advice to use the

¹⁶ *Omaha Herald*, September 24, 1874.

¹⁷ *Beatrice Express*, June 3, 1875.

money to get himself "out of that God-forsaken country as soon as possible."¹⁸

On the other hand, settlers complained bitterly when efforts were made to minimize their predicament. How could contributions be secured if the cases of suffering were not vividly described? One complaint in this connection came from Gage County farmers who said that business men and bankers boasted that conditions in the county were entirely satisfactory. As a result, agents for the loan companies descended upon the farmers and demanded immediate repayment of all outstanding loans. In this way the loan companies hoped to compensate for anticipated losses in the "devastated" areas. Although originally well established and able to see themselves through the period of drought, farmers who had borrowed money to make improvements on their land now found themselves on the verge of ruin. And since the "prosperity" of Gage County had been established by Beatrice businessmen, the State Relief Association refused to send relief supplies into the county. Shipments of food and clothing passed through, bound for the western communities, while many in Gage County required help.¹⁹

The optimism which characterized the first efforts to set up a private relief organization quickly dissipated under the mounting criticism and dissatisfaction. Even if sufficient funds became available, there remained the consummate problem of equitable distribution. As Everett Dick comments, "The administration of such relief work was indeed difficult. At such times the worst in humanity comes to the surface."²⁰ And in short order criticism of the Aid Association became constant, carping and vicious. The *Omaha Bee*, which counted itself a strong proponent of private relief, repeated the widespread rumor that agents of the Association were selling relief supplies given over to

¹⁸ Smith Brothers to J. B. Wilson, June 3, 1875. Petition to Governor Silas Garber, May 23, 1875.

¹⁹ *Beatrice Express*, January 28, 1875.

²⁰ Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier* (Lincoln, 1954), 208.

them for free distribution.²¹ In December the *State Journal* announced it would no longer publish letters critical of the Association, for it had no desire to encourage a public dispute which damaged the reputation of the state and hampered the distribution of desperately needed supplies. For his part, the editor of the *State Journal* expressed confidence in the officers of the Association. "If these men fail to do their duty," he declared, "we do not hesitate to confess with humiliation and despair, that not only the [relief] society . . . but the attempts to organize aid in any manner for our suffering brethren in the west is hopeless and unavailing."²²

Since they were of the opinion that the Relief Association had failed, officers of the Nebraska Grange suggested that their organization be given responsibility for relief work. This seemed altogether appropriate to the *State Journal*, for the Grange possessed an organization which could be readily utilized for relief work and its leaders would be more conversant with the real requirements of the farmers than men who lived in Omaha.²³ The offer enraged Governor Furnas, however, who declared that the Grangers merely sought to reap political advantage from the situation.²⁴ That the Grange should make the request did not surprise the *Beatrice Express*; it merely demonstrated how persistent and wide-spread the criticism of the Relief Association had become.

Nevertheless, the *Express* maintained that much of the criticism was unjustified. In the first place the Relief Association had undertaken a "thankless task, and [its officers] have been subjected to any amount of abuse from cormorants of all degrees who have sought to prey upon them." One reader observed that the principal critics of the Relief Association were "renegades and men that have

²¹ *Omaha Bee*, October 26, 1874.

²² *Daily State Journal*, December 20, 1874; January 16, 1875.

²³ *Ibid.*, August 12, 1874; January 1, 1875.

²⁴ Governor Furnas to Senator P. H. Hitchcock, December 25, 1874.

been expelled from the churches for bad character and have deserted their families and gone into the frontier societies for seclusion." The "malicious attacks" must cease, argued the *Express*, for as distrust mounted contributions fell off and distribution of desperately needed supplies lagged.²⁵ The *Omaha Herald* represented a contrary view. It accepted charges that much of the money and the bulk of the supplies collected by the Association never reached the intended recipients. Obviously the executive committee charged with the supervision of the relief endeavors had been "imposed upon in a systematic way."²⁶

By this time the relief situation had become a tremendous burden to the Governor, who proceeded to pour out his inner feelings in a letter to C. E. Perkins, an executive of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad. "This grasshopper matter is proving 'an elephant on our hands' in more respects than one," he began. "If it were to go again I would oppose any organized publically announced effort. Every played out hack sits with arms folded and expects help." Moreover, the problem "of who should distribute the alms" had proved almost insuperable. In nine out of ten cases, relief supplies ended up where they were not actually needed. Yet those who complained the loudest were not any worse off than the early pioneers in Nebraska "who worked through and made successes without public charity—in fact would have been offended had it been extended. I myself have been ten years on the border without seeing an ounce of tea, coffee, or sugar." While Furnas did not "think the State should do anything in a *state capacity*," he realized that the people demanded some kind of legislative action. He confessed that he "was perplexed as to just what to place before the legislature."²⁷

Although they hoped that private aid, supplemented perhaps by county funds, would suffice to meet the exigencies of the moment, Governor Furnas and other state

²⁵ *Beatrice Express*, December 3, 17, 1874; January 7, 1875.

²⁶ *Omaha Herald*, January 1, 1875.

²⁷ Furnas to C. E. Perkins, December 8, 1874.

leaders eventually realized that the stricken areas required more assistance than private agencies and the counties could extend.²⁸ The *State Journal* estimated that ten thousand persons were destitute in the state and that \$1,500,000 would be required to keep the settlers on their claims for another year. According to this newspaper, "The west must ask for some very necessary legislation this fall. Some of the extreme western counties must have some aid in the way of loans to the homesteaders, to enable them to buy seed and necessary provisions for another harvest."²⁹ But the conservative *Omaha Herald* found slight merit in a plan proposed by the *State Journal* which would have allowed counties to sell bonds, the money realized to be used for rehabilitation work among the farmers. Bond issues would prove "a source of fraud and injury. A generous people are liberally providing for our distressed citizens. . . . All the injury that can be done the state by appeals has been done"—the *Herald* believed that the appropriate course was to leave well enough alone.³⁰

Reflecting the urgent demands for an expanded relief program, the Legislature of 1875 spent considerable time examining a number of relief proposals. It appointed a special committee to investigate conditions in the western part of the state and to recommend legislative action.³¹ But even before the committee could report, legislators hotly discussed various measures. A bill placing financial responsibility for relief work upon the counties could not secure support, and it was increasingly evident that most of the law-makers favored a bill which offered state funds to the counties for distribution. The proposed law displeased the *State Journal* which predicated that the counties would wage an all-out campaign to grab a disproportionate share of the state appropriation. "Heaven help the

²⁸ See his speech in *House Journal*, 11th session (1875), 643-44.

²⁹ *Daily State Journal*, October 7, 1874.

³⁰ *Omaha Herald*, January 31, 1875.

³¹ *House Journal*, 11th session (1875), 79.

man made responsible for the distribution of funds under this set-up," commented the *State Journal*.³²

But it was quickly perceived by astute observers that the legislature would never agree to any measure, for one obstacle blocked the promulgation of appropriate laws—the state did not possess the financial resources to underwrite an effective relief program. This realization brought a distinct turning point in Nebraska's relief policies. Private contributions distributed by voluntary agencies had proved inadequate; county governments were helpless; and the state treasury did not contain sufficient funds to subsidize county labors. The next step could be predicted—Nebraska's leaders appealed to the Federal government for aid.

The decision to enlist the support of the Federal government, however, did not come suddenly. For some months Nebraska's representatives in Washington, in both the House and the Senate, had been working for laws designed to ease the burdens of the western farmers. Information that Nebraska's delegation was diligently laboring to secure appropriate national legislation pleased the *State Journal*. Senator P. W. Hitchcock and Representative Lorenzo Crouse, for example, had introduced bills to authorize the distribution of Army rations and clothing to needy settlers and to permit homesteaders to leave their claims temporarily without relinquishing their rights to the land.³³ Not content with these proposals, the Nebraska legislature memorialized Congress to appropriate funds for the purchase of food. This would be "but an act of justice to those of our citizens for whose relief it is intended." Realizing that Congress might refuse to assume responsibility for the plight of the frontier agrarian, the Legislature pointed out that without aid "the settlers on the lands of the United States within the State of Nebraska will be compelled to abandon said lands and thus retard the settlement of the

³² *Daily State Journal*, February 14, 1875.

³³ *Ibid.*, December 17, 1874.

public domain." Since the Federal government traditionally followed a policy of encouraging the occupation of government lands, an irrefutable corollary reached by the Nebraska law-makers was that the Federal government assumed responsibility for insuring successful settlement.³⁴

Dreadful conditions along the frontier influenced the legislature to demand Federal participation in the relief programs. Even the *Omaha Herald*, formerly the bulwark of private relief ventures, was forced to modify its editorial outlook. "Relief—the Duty of the Government," proclaimed one editorial in the fall of 1874, and in early 1875 the *Herald* asked Congress to appropriate at least \$400,000 to meet the emergency—this from a newspaper which for years had denounced such schemes as "paternalistic" and "nefarious."³⁵ Conceding that voluntary relief had proved abortive, the *Herald* observed, "What the State Aid Association will do remains to be seen but we haven't as much confidence in its success as we had when we recommended it as a necessary measure."³⁶ And in his outgoing message to the legislature, Governor Furnas in January, 1875, argued that the Federal government, as well as the state, must assume responsibility for relief work among the settlers.³⁷

It was with considerable elation, then, that Nebraskans received word that Congress had appropriated \$150,000 for the purchase of seed. A grateful legislature extended a resolution of thanks to Congress for "the very liberal donation."³⁸ Meanwhile the efforts of Representative Crouse to secure a moratorium on final homestead proofs had also borne fruit. Congress approved a law permitting the homesteader to absent himself from his claim until July 1, 1875, without penalty. In this way, the settler could go east and earn enough money to reestablish him-

³⁴ *Laws of Nebraska*, 11th session (1875), 339.

³⁵ *Omaha Herald*, September 22, 1874; February 3, 1875.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, September 22, 1874.

³⁷ *Messages and Proclamations*, I, 413.

³⁸ *Laws of Nebraska*, 11th session (1875), 334; *Beatrice Express*, February 11, 1875.

self on his prairie claim. Here was another law, announced the *Beatrice Express*, which would aid the settler immeasurably in his fight for survival.³⁹

While it too rejoiced that the Federal government had seen fit to assist the settlers, the *State Journal* warned its readers not to depend entirely upon Federal funds. "It must not be forgotten that there is something for the Legislature to do," it noted. Supplies and food should not be given as a gift to the settler, for this was a pernicious practice which undermined individualism. Instead, the farmers should be given satisfying and useful tasks for which they would receive compensation. In this connection, the *State Journal* believed it to be

the duty of the legislature to provide for the prosecution of public works in the west, anticipating, perhaps, the actual demands of the country from one to five years. A million of dollars expended next spring and summer in grading railroad lines would be the most effectual aid that can be rendered in this emergency.

The railroads would "encourage a tide of immigration and capital that would hereafter stand as a barrier between . . . [the farmer] and another visitation of this kind."⁴⁰ It was an attractive plan quite consistent with the aspirations and values of the day—but it stood slight chance of realization because the state was practically bankrupt.

For this reason the Federal contribution assumed great importance. Aid from Washington included seed appropriations and homestead relief laws; but the most important action involved the distribution of supplies to the destitute by Army officers. The supplies did not come solely from private sources; frequently General Ord authorized the distribution of rations and clothing drawn from Army supplies at Fort Omaha. Although he lacked authorization

³⁹ *Beatrice Express*, December 24, 1874. In regard to these two proposals, Governor Furnas remarked, "Surely Congress cannot fail to do us so small a favor." Furnas to T. C. Buddington, August 5, 1874. For a discussion of the homestead moratorium bill see B. A. Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (New York, 1924), 403.

⁴⁰ *Daily State Journal*, November 3, 1874.

from his superiors in Washington for this action, Ord was not deterred.⁴¹ Reports handed him by officers recently returned from duty along the frontier were used by the General to justify his course. Quite clearly drastic steps must be taken to save the settlers. The *Omaha Herald* arrived at a similar conclusion. After reproducing one of the officer's reports in its columns, the *Herald* urged "an immediate appeal to the Secretary of War to authorize General Ord to issue for [sic] hundred thousand rations, more or less, according to their actual necessities, to these distressed people."⁴²

Several months elapsed before the War Department and Congress responded to the emergency. In the meantime, General Ord moved vigorously to aid the settlers. To trace his actions, one must return to October, 1873, when Ord informed the Adjutant-General in Washington that prominent Nebraskans had urged him to distribute Army rations and surplus clothing among the destitute. Ord requested permission to send food, under the supervision of "reliable officers," to four of the most seriously affected counties. The supplies would be issued "only on orders of organized county committees to those in danger of starvation." He also requested permission to use Army transportation for shipment of the relief supplies to the frontier.⁴³

The reply from Washington was not encouraging. The Army appropriation, wrote the Commissary-General of Subsistence, was insufficient to provide rations for civilians.⁴⁴ But in direct contravention of this communication, Ord continued to dispatch supplies to needy settlers. In the meantime he wrote again to Washington urging immediate action. He attached to his letter the reports of Major James S. Brisbin and Major N. A. M. Dudley, both

⁴¹ Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 183.

⁴² *Omaha Herald*, September 22, 1874.

⁴³ E. O. C. Ord to Adjutant-General, October 27, 1874, "Report of Ravages of Grasshoppers," *Senate Executive Document*, No. 5, 43rd Congress, 2nd session, 4.

⁴⁴ *Omaha Herald*, November 12, 1874.

of whom had recently traveled through the distressed regions. The reports, according to Ord, proved that "unless relieved soon many poor frontier people will certainly starve to death, while the Army storehouses within 100 miles are filled with provisions." He requested temporary permission to issue supplies "until Congress can be applied to to provide for the settlers' wants." In conclusion he hurriedly sketched the situation along the Nebraska frontier:

The State Aid Society is relieving a great many of the sufferers, but its means will be soon exhausted by the heavy and pressing demands made upon them, and it cannot reach the most remote. The issue I ask for will be used with great caution. I also ask that the small amounts which Major Dudley reports that he gave to families without food, and in danger of starvation unless relieved, be approved, as also such issues as may have been made under verbal authority of the Secretary of War to department commanders, not to let our people starve near military stations, be approved.⁴⁵

Major Dudley's report, to which General Ord referred, had indeed painted a grim picture of life in southwestern Nebraska. Striking south from Fort McPherson on the Platte River, Dudley crossed Frontier, Red Willow, Furnas, Harlan, and Gosper counties in the course of his inspection. In every community he heard the same plea—without aid many people would starve. Eastern relief supplies had proved inadequate, and upon his own initiative Dudley gave to the settlers what help he could. At Red Willow he detached twenty men from his command to join the settlers in an organized hunt. On numerous occasions he gave flour and pork to destitute families. It was clear, Major Dudley concluded, that private relief had proved too little and too late. Food and clothing must be gotten to the frontier people immediately. Once snow covered the ground, hundreds of isolated families faced death from starvation and exposure.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Report on Ravages of Grasshoppers," 4-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-8. See also John F. Cordeal, "Historical Sketch of Southwestern Nebraska," *Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* (1913), XVII, 39-42.

Ord's second request had as little effect upon the authorities in Washington as the first, and his superiors refused permission to engage in systematic relief operations. General P. H. Sheridan told Ord to distribute supplies on the basis of individual cases. While he acknowledged that many settlers in Nebraska required help, Sheridan believed that if the government provided free supplies "suffering will be magnified a hundred times more than it really is." He acquiesced in what had already been done in the way of relief work, but he urged that "a great deal of caution be exercised in any issues that may be made in the future."⁴⁷ Shortly after Sheridan's message had been received at Ord's headquarters, the General sent another request to Washington—this time he asked permission to distribute worn-out and unserviceable clothing stored at Fort Omaha to the settlers.⁴⁸

In December, while Congress debated a frontier relief bill introduced by Senator Hitchcock, Ord sent to Secretary of War Belknap a long letter outlining the need for the proposed legislation. As chairman of the Nebraska Aid Association Ord said he could readily testify to the need for Federal assistance. Although volunteer agencies presently issued nine thousand rations of bread daily, Ord expected these private groups soon to reach the limit of their resources. The problem of clothing had only been partially resolved, and he asked that large quantities of blankets, great-coats and socks be made available for the settlers. It was his understanding that many of those who were now enduring hardships along the frontier had originally intended to leave Nebraska but had been induced to stay by "parties interested, perhaps, in their staying." As a result at least nine thousand persons would require help until next year's crops were harvested.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ P. H. Sheridan to Adjutant-General, November 14, 1874, "Report on Ravages of Grasshoppers," 5.

⁴⁸ Ord to Sheridan, November 21, 1874, *ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴⁹ Ord to Secretary of War Belknap, December 19, 1874, *ibid.*, 9.

Congress approved Hitchcock's relief bill in February. Under it the President received authority to distribute food and clothing to grasshopper sufferers in the plains states. To finance the distribution and to purchase emergency supplies, Congress appropriated \$150,000. Well in advance of the enactment of the Hitchcock bill, however, General Ord had assigned officers to relief duty. In January, for example, Lieutenant Theodore E. True of the Fourth Infantry received orders to proceed to Fort Omaha, there to be briefed on conditions in Dawson County, Nebraska. For the next several months True undertook the hazardous task of delivering relief supplies, through snow and intense cold, to isolated settlements in that county.⁵⁰

Since the President delegated the authority granted him by Congress to the War Department, efforts were immediately made by officials in Washington to systematize relief work. Orders issued by the War Department in February, 1875, required officers assigned to relief work to secure the "enrollment" of all prospective recipients of government supplies. As part of the enrollment procedure, the settlers were to list all their possessions which might be sold or mortgaged. Supplies would not be issued to a person until all his property, convertible to cash, had been disposed of. While many viewed this stipulation as entirely reasonable, in application the rule aroused considerable animosity.⁵¹ One settler complained that the Army officer assigned to enroll citizens in his neighborhood had not given advance notice of his arrival. As a result settlers in outlying districts had been unable to enroll. Property-owners, who were denied assistance, complained bitterly that they suffered as acutely as the completely destitute, for they could not sell or mortgage what property they held. As one man declared, "If the [war] department would only forward some money lenders . . . they would be

⁵⁰ *Beatrice Express*, December 17, 1874. Also, "Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers," *House Executive Document*, No. 28, 44th Congress, 1st session, 4.

⁵¹ *Omaha Herald*, March 2, 1875. See also "Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers," 3-4.

more heartily welcomed than the officers with their gratuitous distributions. . . . There is no chance to borrow money, neither is there any prospect of selling for cash." He concluded his indictment with these words:

Those who by their industry have accumulated some property are told to stand aside; only the shiftless, worthless portion of the community are proper subjects of government aid. Such a course is offering a premium for idleness, and tends to breed a race of paupers.⁵²

Despite the validity of many complaints, it must be recognized that the Federal government, through the operations of the Army, contributed immensely to the grasshopper relief program. According to the Commissary-General, supplies were given to 107,535 persons in the Departments of the Platte, Missouri and Dakota. In Nebraska during March, 1875, rations were issued in forty-three counties to 13,421 adults and 9,142 children; during May in seventeen counties to 7,257 adults and 4,771 children.⁵³ According to statistics compiled by the secretary of the State Relief Association, 8,878 families in Nebraska were on the relief rolls by March.⁵⁴ But the government's contribution went beyond the distribution of food and clothing. The final report of the State Association noted that the War Department had issued instructions in regard to the construction of Fort Hartsuff in the Loup River valley, that as much as possible of the work involved in erecting the post "be given into the hands of the settlers." Hence, this frontier station, of limited importance as a bulwark against the Indians, served the people of the Loup Valley as a public relief project.⁵⁵

With the help of the Federal government and thousands of individual citizens who generally contributed to the various private relief programs, Nebraska weathered the

⁵² *Beatrice Express*, February 25, 1875. A further discussion of the problem is contained in P. L. Erickson, "Destitution and Relief in Nebraska, 1874-1875," (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1937), 70-71.

⁵³ "Relief of Grasshopper Sufferers," 12-13.

⁵⁴ *Beatrice Express*, March 18, 1875.

⁵⁵ *House Journal*, 11th session (1875), 647.

crisis of 1874-1875. When the grasshoppers returned in the summer of 1875, the settlers did not hesitate—they immediately raised the cry for Federal assistance. A resident of York County insisted that

it is high time that the United States government took this matter into their own hands, and put a stop to this fearful havoc. The general government ought to superintend the work of destruction [of the grasshoppers], for, however successful a state or territory might be, they would be subject to invasion from another state. . . .⁵⁶

Congress refused to accept this responsibility, and in 1876 a call went out from leaders in the West for a conference of plains states governors to consider a grasshopper control program. The conference, held in Omaha, memorialized Congress to establish a commission of experts to study the grasshopper situation. As one participant in the conference told Nebraska's Governor Silas Garber, "It is better for the general government to make such an appropriation [for a control commission] than to have several of these beautiful western states and territories either partially depopulated or the inhabitants annoyed and discouraged."⁵⁷

The *Omaha Herald* endorsed the plan to establish a Federal agency to deal with the grasshopper menace. "The national government should. . . take an interest in this subject and thorough information should also be gathered upon which intelligent and effective action can be based."⁵⁸ In 1877 the Nebraska legislature joined the campaign to secure a Federal anti-grasshopper program. It memorialized Congress to set aside a portion of the revenue from the sale of public lands for grasshopper bounties. It also supported the concept of a national commission to investigate "the locality, origin, habits and natural history of the grasshopper." The legislature thought it "clearly the duty of the general government to assist in all efforts to prevent the destruction of those great crops of grain upon which

⁵⁶ *Omaha Bee*, July 29, 1875.

⁵⁷ J. S. Pillsbury, governor of Minnesota, to Garber, August 1, 1876. Garber's report to the legislature concerning the convention is in *Messages and Proclamations*, I, 464.

⁵⁸ *Omaha Herald*, August 24, 1876.

largely rest the prosperity of the west and the revenue of the nation."⁵⁹

Thus, in meeting the grasshopper invasions, Nebraska opinion traversed the full cycle from private relief measures to Federal assistance programs. In the end necessity had resolved the quandry in which the optimistic frontiersman found himself. The "booming" facet of the frontier personality was momentarily subverted by a realization of the dreadful impact of the insects. Relief became more important than the "interests" of the state. The whole episode, in fact, provides an interesting commentary upon the "individualism" of the frontier farmer and his alleged antipathy toward government assistance.

With the passing years, an understanding of this period in Nebraska's history derived increasingly from myths and traditions rather than from historical facts. A speech delivered before the State Historical Society in 1894 by an early settler, John A. MacMurphy, indicates that twenty years had blurred the recollection of one who had witnessed the grasshopper invasions. He said in part:

These sturdy, earlier settlers that have succeeded and made this broad prairie blossom as a rose, who solved the problem of whether Nebraska would grow wheat and corn and fruit, did not 'holler' for the government to help make the grass grow, abolish snakes, or even rid them of the bugs and grasshoppers. They did not ask to have wheat made a dollar a bushel by statute, and yet they are here, many of them, 'sassy' and fat and hearty. . . . It is a later or newer edition who seem disposed to turn, like wards of the nation, to the Great White Father at Washington for everything.⁶⁰

Like many of his fellow Nebraskans, MacMurphy entertained an image of the frontiersman which does not square with history. He forgot, or chose to ignore, the grasshopper years when these "sturdy, earlier settlers" demanded that the "Great White Father" assist them in conquering the insect hordes which threatened to bring disaster to the frontier farmers of Nebraska.

⁵⁹ *Laws of Nebraska*, 14th session (1876), 253-54.

⁶⁰ John A. MacMurphy, "Part of the Making of a Great State," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, second series (1894), I, 3-24.