



Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation

Peter Fearon

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No part of the United States escaped the ravages of the Great Depression, but some coped with it better than others. This book examines New Deal relief programs in Kansas throughout the Depression, focusing on the relationship between the state and the federal government to show how their successful operation depended on the effectiveness of that partnership.

Ranging widely over all of Kansas's 105 counties, Peter Fearon provides a detailed analysis of the key relief programs for both urban and rural areas and shows that the state's Republican administration—led by FDR's later presidential opponent Governor Alf Landon—effectively ran New Deal welfare policies. As early as 1933, federal officials reported the Kansas central relief administration to be one of the most efficient in the country, and funding for farm policies was generous enough to keep many Kansas farm families off the relief rolls. Indeed, historically high levels of social spending ensured that New Deal initiatives were radical for their day, but Fearon shows that, especially in Kansas, fears of the debilitating effects of the dole and the insistence on means testing and work relief served as conservative balances to the threat of a dependency culture.

Drawing on extensive research at the county level, Fearon examines relief problems from the perspective of recipients, social workers, and poor commissioners, all of whom had to cope with inadequate and fluctuating funding. He plumbs the sometimes volatile relationships between social workers and their clients to illustrate the formidable difficulties faced by the former and explain reasons for—and effects of—strikes and riots by the latter. He also investigates the operation of work relief, considers the treatment of women and blacks in the distribution of welfare resources, and assesses the effects of the WPA on employment—showing that the majority of those eligible were unable to secure positions and were forced to fall back on county relief.

Kansas in the Great Depression is an insightful look at how federal, state, and local authorities worked together to deal with a national emergency, revealing the complexities of policy initiatives not generally brought to light in studies at the national level while establishing important links between pre-Roosevelt policies and the New Deal. It reaffirms the virtues of government programs run by dedicated public officials as it opens a new window on Americans helping Americans in their darkest hours.



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