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WHAT A RELIEF:
GREEN BAY FAMILIES DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1929-1940

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“Confidence and courage are the essentials of success in carrying out our plan. . . .
You people must have faith.”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 12, 1933

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Abstract

On October 24, 1929 the New York stock market crashed. Many people view the crash of the stock market as the beginning of the Great Depression. Families all over the country needed to adjust their lifestyles in order to cope with growing unemployment. White, working class families in Green Bay, Wisconsin, experienced the effects of the deteriorating economy, and turned to relatives and the Green Bay Welfare Department for assistance. The welfare department provided thousands of families assistance with rent, food, and fuel. Family roles changed as women and children entered the work force due to monetary and health reasons. The families turned to innovative techniques, such as creating overalls for children from the backs of overalls for men.

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Chapter 1: An Introduction to Green Bay and the Great Depression

In January of 1931 things looked dismal for the Birch family of five in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The male head of household did not have a job, held no property, and owed a large sum of money to various establishments. His wife made \$1.50 a week to support him and her three children from a previous marriage. The family carried no insurance and owed \$13 each month to the landlord. Overwhelmed, Mr. Birch went to the Green Bay Welfare Department seeking government assistance.¹ Other working class families felt similar hardships around Green Bay. After looking at the history of Green Bay and of the Great Depression, this paper will examine the Green Bay Welfare Department and the effects of the Depression on white, working class families in Green Bay who relied on government assistance.

I primarily worked with five boxes of welfare files stored at the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay. The welfare files documented assistance provided to families in Green Bay by the Green Bay Welfare Department. Although it is unclear exactly how many families received assistance by looking at the files, it appears that between 5,000-7,000 families received assistance. The boxes contained one file out of every twenty files of the original collection. During my research I looked at 15 files, the majority found in the first box. I started looking at every fifth file. However, due to time constraints I ended up randomly selecting files that appeared to contain more information based on their thickness in order to examine files from different boxes.

I chose to look at white, working-class families for a couple of reasons. Originally I wanted to look at white, property-less families, but after researching I discovered that some of

¹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, “Green Bay Welfare Department Case Files.” 1932-1986, Case 200, Special Collections, Cofrin Library, University of Wisconsin Green Bay, Green Bay. Names have been changed: Due to the nature of the source and a confidentiality agreement, I am unable to disclose the names of the family members.

the families receiving aid owned their own houses and had vehicles. Secondly, based on the files I was able to look at and the marginal minority population size in Green Bay at the time, I determined that the study of white families was adequate because there was no documentation of minority families receiving aid. I intend to examine the effects of the Depression on Green Bay families after looking at the history of Green Bay and the Great Depression.

In 1634 Jean Nicolet, a French explorer, arrived on the shores of Green Bay, Wisconsin. By 1717 the French built Fort St. Francis to protect themselves against Native American attacks.² Foreign explorers and troops did not end up settling the city though. Americans migrated to Green Bay following the conclusion of the War of 1812 and kick-started the economy by building Fort Howard.³ The city existed primarily to support farmers in the surrounding areas, and the fort served as the central location of supplies.⁴

The city population gradually grew. At the time of the Civil War only 6,000 people lived in Green Bay. By 1905, 22,854 people occupied the city, thanks in part to the development into a self-sustaining city driven by the lumber industry.⁵ Paper mills soon took control of the economic activity, and Green Bay became a leading producer of toilet paper. In addition, paper mills like Northern Paper Mill and Fort Howard Paper Mill used state-of-the-art manufacturing methods to maximize production.⁶ The industry employed 1,400 people.⁷

Multiple transportation methods stimulated the economy and tourism in Green Bay. Sitting on the mouth of the Fox River, ships easily entered and exited Green Bay with goods

² Andrew E. Kersten, "Untold Significance: A Commemorative History of Green Bay," *Voyager: A Historical Review of Brown County and Northeast Wisconsin* 21, no. 2 (2005), 20.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ The Wisconsin Legislative Reference Library, *The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1909* (Madison: Democrat Printing Company: 1909).

⁶ Kersten, 23.

⁷ Jack Rudolph, *Birthplace of a Commonwealth: A Short History of Brown County, Wisconsin* (Brown County Historical Society: 1976), 60.

such as paper products, coal, cement, lumber, fish, and wheat.⁸ Between 1886 and 1912 an average of two ships delivered products to Green Bay daily and two ships transported Green Bay goods to cities around the country. Multiple railroads zigzagged across the city into parts of the United States, and they employed even more workers than the paper industry.⁹ Streetcar lines carried residents and tourists around Green Bay. Bay Beach Amusement Park served as a popular leisure destination, and it included a roller coaster, amusement rides, and swimming areas on the Fox River. By 1920, Green Bay was “the center of industrial growth” and “the center for cultural life in Northeastern Wisconsin,” and the economy was in an upswing¹⁰

During the late 1920s farm prices began to dwindle. Farmers also began mass-producing products. The American economy continued to do well despite this, and investments in stocks and bonds continued to grow. Americans elected Herbert Hoover, a Republican, president in 1928 in hopes that he would continue to help the United States grow in economic prosperity.¹¹

In of 1929, the economy started to decline. Hoover remained optimistic, and spoke about a “kinder, gentler” capitalism he desired in his inaugural speech on March 4, 1929: ““We want to see a nation built of homeowners and farm owners. We want to see more and more of them insured against death and accident, unemployment and old age. We want them all secure.””¹² Keeping to his word, Hoover sought to create more national parks, to assist farmers with farm prices by creating the Federal Farm Board, and to design a pension plan that would give citizens 65 years and older fifty dollars a month.

⁸ Kersten, 33.

⁹ Rudolph, 60.

¹⁰ Kersten, 33.

¹¹ Richard Norton Smith and Timothy Walch, “The Ordeal of Herbert Hoover,” *Prologue Magazine* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2004), The National Archives. Accessed at <<<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/hoover-1.html>>> on March 25, 2008.

¹² Ibid.

Hoover's proposal for the senior pension plan never passed Congress because Congress became preoccupied when the stock market crashed on October 24, 1929. Cities all over the United States felt the effects of the dwindling economic prosperity. In an effort to remedy the economic downfall, Hoover worked with industry leaders to maintain wages in November of 1929.¹³ He started expanding public works projects and construction. Not only did Hoover want to implement a \$160 million tax cut, but he also strived to double the resources for public buildings, dams, highways, and harbors.¹⁴ He spent more during the first half of 1930 than he did during all of 1929.

Despite his efforts, the American economy never recovered during Hoover's presidency. Unemployment rose. Hoovervilles appeared all over the country as thousands of workers lost their homes. People needed to resort to different means to survive, as one to two million people searched for work.¹⁵ Many families felt the need to maintain their standard of living as long as possible and to try to hide the decline.¹⁶ As work became more difficult to find, average family incomes dropped. The average family income in America in 1929 was \$2,300. By 1933 the average income was only \$1,500.¹⁷ In 1932, Hoover lost the presidential election to Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt. At this time, a dozen eggs cost 20 cents in 1930. A loaf of bread cost 9 cents. Rent cost \$10 to \$15 for a small house in Green Bay.¹⁸

During Roosevelt's presidency, the United States government responded to the Great Depression with New Deal programs including the introduction of the Social Security Act to assist individuals and families. Local and state governments funded their own relief programs

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jerome D. Tweton, *The New Deal at the Grass Roots: Programs for the People in Otter Tail County, Minnesota* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 20-21.

¹⁶ Glen H. Elder, Jr., *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 53.

¹⁷ Elder, *Children*, 20.

¹⁸ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department.

prior to 1933. In 1933 Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), where the federal government provided five hundred million dollars in relief, with assistance from state governments.

Initially, states received one dollar for every three dollars they spent prior to FERA. However, because many states could not match the necessary amount, the federal government ended up providing most of the financial relief to create employment opportunities.¹⁹ The program continued until 1935, at which time the state and local governments resumed responsibility for direct relief measures. Roosevelt created the Civil Works Administration (CWA), a program similar to FERA created to relieve the unemployment crisis by helping families with unemployed heads of household get by during the winter of 1933 to 1934.²⁰ However, Roosevelt felt dissatisfied with the objective to provide direct relief. He felt that it was ““a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.””²¹

A third program called the Public Works Administration (PWA) started in June 1933. Harold Ickes served as the Secretary of Interior, which oversaw the PWA. The program aimed for recovery rather than relief.²² It strived to stimulate the economy by providing jobs for construction projects. Private contractors designed most of the projects, and while they did not need to hire relief-role workers, they did need to hire unemployed people for common labor.²³ The main objective of PWA was to stimulate the economy and the construction industry by restoring purchasing power, and its secondary objective was unemployment relief.²⁴ States only

¹⁹ Tweton, 46.

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

²¹ Ibid., 70.

²² Ibid., 63.

²³ Ibid., 63 and 68.

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

Public Works Administration, *America Builds: The Record of PWA*, prepared in the Division of Information, United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 1939, 7.

needed to provide building materials; the federal government funded the remainder of the projects. The PWA provided employment opportunities for men and women.

The stock market crash reflected the grave state of the economy, but economic conditions only slowly changed in Green Bay after the crash.²⁵ Few people in Green Bay were involved with the stock market, and while unemployment hurt many families, Green Bay saw few soup kitchens or breadlines.²⁶ Although the United States was in a grave economic depression, Americans still needed toilet paper. Paper mills slowed production, but many factory workers still had jobs.²⁷ However, white working class families eventually came to feel the pinch and changed as a result of the Great Depression. Families turned to local agencies for assistance, and the local agencies turned to national programs to assist them in providing relief for families.

²⁵ Rudolph, 65.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kersten, 24.

Chapter 2: The Green Bay Welfare Department

Many white, working class families realized, sometimes later than sooner, that they could no longer support themselves. At the time, general attitudes implied that “something [was] wrong with a man who [could not] support his family,” and turned to public assistance.²⁸ Therefore, the Green Bay Welfare Department tried to provide relief to families in need of assistance as long as they followed certain guidelines and regulations.

The Green Bay Welfare Department was in place prior to the economic crisis during the Great Depression. Case records examined by the author indicate that families applied for aid as early as 1922. The department seemed to help families needing chronic assistance, such as the Birch and Beech families, and those who only relied on assistance for brief periods of time, like the Ironwood and Fir families.

Other relief organizations also tried to help families. Local churches often assisted congregational members and families in the community. The Green Bay Diocese Apostolate, the central bureau of catholic charities, assisted families with food and clothing. It referred families to the welfare department when it could not provide enough assistance.²⁹ Additionally, different towns and cities had their own relief organizations. The Green Bay Welfare Department was reluctant to provide assistance to families living outside the Green Bay city boundaries, a trend in other relief organizations across the country. Because many more families needed assistance during the years of the Great Depression and because initially local relief organizations provided all financial support without the help of national funds, they were reluctant to help families outside their central area.

²⁸ Elder, *Children*, 51.

²⁹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 120.

The Green Bay Welfare Department, also known as the Green Bay Department of Outdoor Relief, provided monetary support as long as the families met all of the requirements. In order to receive aid, all able-bodied men needed to register with the Employment Agency at least once every month.³⁰ The welfare department prohibited family members from carrying health or life insurance, although sometimes it made exceptions. If a family owned a car, the family needed to bring the license plates to City Hall and could not drive the vehicle. If any family member was caught driving the vehicle, the family was immediately cut off from aid.³¹ Additionally, caseworkers recorded all possessions that the families owned, such as radios, furniture, and houses. The head of household applying for aid needed to prove that he or she sought assistance from all other resources first. This included looking for new employment, contacting family members, relocating, and applying for credit.³²

Once the agency determined that a family was eligible to receive aid, the social workers forced the families to establish a monthly budget, including rent and groceries. For example, the welfare department determined that a family of four could adequately survive on \$54.70 a month. This included \$15 for rent, \$15 for fuel and utilities, \$20 for groceries, and \$5 for additional spending.³³ Together, the head of the family and the social worker determined the deficit between this budget and what the family could produce, and then established the level of assistance that would be provided by the city. The majority of the time the city helped families with groceries and rent. In addition they helped with coal (used for heat) and occasionally clothing and household items.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 1820.

³² Ibid., all cases.

³³ Ibid., Case 420.

³⁴ Ibid., all cases.

Chapter 3: Reliance on Family Members

Before they could receive assistance from the welfare department, relief policies around the country forced families to seek assistance from relatives or forced relatives to supplement the relief budget.³⁵ Included in the detailed information form filled out by the head of household applying for aid in Green Bay, he or she needed to provide personal information for all living relatives. This included information regarding property ownership, debt, employment history, and previous and current addresses.

While the Birch family had some area relatives, they still received assistance. However, one month later the family moved in with the husband's mother for a brief amount of time.³⁶ During the family's stay with Mr. Birch's mother, the family received reduced relief since they did not need to pay rent.

Prior to applying to the welfare department, Mr. Spruce turned to relatives for assistance.³⁷ Mr. and Mrs. Spruce married in March, 1916, divorced in August, 1929, and remarried in February, 1934. They had 6 children between October 1921 and March 1938.³⁸ Their son Anthony was born on September 4, 1934, indicating that Mr. and Mrs. Spruce maintained a sexual relationship together after their divorce. Mrs. Spruce initially divorced Mr. Spruce because he abused alcohol and her. Mr. Spruce occasionally received assistance from a

³⁵ Samuel A. Stouffer and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Research Memorandum on the Family in the Depression* (reprint New York: Arno Press, 1972), 99.

³⁶ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 200.

³⁷ Ibid. Mrs. Spruce applied for assistance when Mr. Spruce she were divorced. Mr. Spruce struggled financially at this time as well, but he turned to relatives for assistance. Eventually, Mr. Spruce applied for assistance. Once Mr. and Mrs. Spruce remarried, Mr. Spruce's case file was included with the case file of Mrs. Spruce.

³⁸ Ibid. It is unclear whether the first son, William, was an adopted or biological son. At one point the case worker alluded that William was adopted but she made no other mention of it in the file. No birth date is available for William in the file and census records only provide the year of birth of William. The birth dates of all the other children and spouses are available in the case file indicating that William possibly could be adopted.

sister in Beaver Dam. In addition, his aunt, a Green Bay resident, gave Mr. Spruce food and clothing.

In the case of the Oak family, a white family of four, Mr. Oak's mother paid insurance costs for the family for the second half of 1931.³⁹ However, as Mr. Oak failed to find employment and Mrs. Oak cared for their two infant children, the family needed further assistance. Again, Mr. Oak's mother tried to help her son and his family out by providing a quart of milk every day for the baby, but by December of 1932 it was simply too much. The family requested a grocery and milk order from the city because it had been eating the leftovers from both Mr. and Mrs. Oaks' parents.⁴⁰ The toll taken on every family member was evident: the head of the household could no longer provide for his family, the children did not receive the necessary amount of food, and extended family members felt inadequate in supporting their loved ones.

At times families doubled up in houses.⁴¹ This placed added stress on extended families. In the Beech family, some of the grown children and their spouses lived at home with their mother. Mrs. Beech first applied for relief in January of 1922. She divorced her husband in November of 1921, and she needed assistance because Mr. Beech failed to pay her 25 dollars each month as directed in the divorce settlement.⁴² She did not receive any assistance from the city at that time. Once Mr. Beech passed away and Mrs. Beech no longer received any alimony to help her, the city began assisting her with rent, groceries, and fuel in 1931. To assist in living

³⁹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 540.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Dennis Bryson, "Impact of the Great Depression on Family and Home" in *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, Vol. 1: A-K, Robert S. McElvaine, ed., (MacMillan Reference USA, 2004), 311.

⁴² Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 20.

costs, Mrs. Beech's oldest grown son, Robert, lived at home along with his wife, Rose.⁴³ By 1934, Robert, Rose, and their child moved out and Mrs. Beech's other son, Ray, moved back home.⁴⁴

Adult children also continued living at home in the Elm family. Mr. Elm, a native of Belgium, came to the United States in 1886 at the age of 10. He married a Wisconsin native, and Mr. and Mrs. Elm had eight children between 1903 and 1922. When the family applied to the welfare department on January 5, 1932, the youngest son, Jacob, was the only child living at home. The family owned their own fully furnished five bedroom home, as well as a Pontiac. Many of the relatives of the Elm family lived in the Green Bay area, but all relatives either received some form of aid themselves or owned farms and struggled as well. As the Elm children struggled to pay rent, a couple moved in with their parents.⁴⁵

In 1933, the oldest son, Edward Elm, moved home with his wife after he built a small addition onto the house a year earlier. In 1934, Fred Elm, another son, and his wife moved back in with his parents. Mr. and Mrs. Elm did not charge their married children rent for living at home. Even though case workers and the welfare department insisted that the sons needed to pay rent, Mr. and Mrs. Elm felt obligated to assist their children. They did not feel it was just to charge their children rent when their children had their own debts to pay.⁴⁶ However, the Elms did rent two rooms of their house to other individuals, which assisted in making mortgage payments.

⁴³ Ibid. Robert married his wife in October of 1932. He told the case worker he married "because he [had] to." His wife, a graduate from the Fond du Lac business college, reported being four months pregnant to the caseworker on December 12, 1932.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Case 80.

⁴⁶ Ibid. The case worker notes that both sons were able to afford rent and that the rent money would "enable him [Mr. Elm] to provide for his immediate family."

Many family members wanted to help others out but the economic conditions made it difficult for family members to support their own families, much less their extended family. Furthermore, most families failed to acknowledge that they would need to make adjustments to their lifestyle in order to make ends meet.⁴⁷ For example, the Birch family of five incurred over \$200 in debt before applying for aid. In 1933, the wife of the Maple family was upset that she would not be able to go to a cooking school.⁴⁸

It is evident that families relied on each other as the first line of assistance. Families all around the country turned to extended family members and their immediate family in order to cope with the effects of the Depression, and families in Green Bay did the same. However, by 1933 the majority of the families could no longer rely on each other: each family member struggled to make ends meet, and they could no longer support others. The families then turned to the welfare department to seek help. It is also clear that, despite financial need, family ties superseded financial gains. Parents did not think it was necessary to charge their grown children rent if they returned home even though the relief department insisted that they do so.

⁴⁷ Elder, *Children*, 26.

⁴⁸ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 180. Ultimately the Maple family had nine children total.

Chapter 4: Men, Women, and Children in the Work Force

Family love did not pay the bills, however. Since many heads of households lost full-time, permanent employment, families needed to adjust the traditional family structure in order to make enough money to pay bills and other expenses. Traditionally, the breadwinner in the family was the male head of household and the female stayed home to take care of the house and the children, a job with no pay that influenced how people viewed the family based on woman's ability to manage the house.⁴⁹ With the dismal economic conditions of the Great Depression, traditional family roles did not always apply and more people sought work. Multiple family members working part time jobs helped soften the blow when one person lost his or her job. At times, the partial income made the family ineligible to receive city assistance. On the other hand, sometimes the partial income was so low that families still received assistance.⁵⁰

Men continued to be the primary workers, but during the late 1920s through the 1930s, white working class men found it difficult to maintain full time work in Green Bay. In some instances, the decreased demand for products and services contributed to the loss of wages and jobs. The Northland Hotel reduced Mr. Fir's wages, and on July 1, 1932 it laid off Mr. Fir.⁵¹ Mr. Ironwood worked as a brakeman and conductor on the railroads.⁵² Mr. and Mrs. Ironwood first applied to the welfare department 1933, and they rented a house for themselves and their four children, born between 1925 and 1933. While receiving assistance from the welfare department, Mr. Ironwood was on probation because he tried breaking into a car.⁵³

⁴⁹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 120.

⁵⁰ Don D. Humphrey, *Family Unemployment: An Analysis of Unemployment in Terms of Family Units*, The Works Project Administration (Washington D.C.: The United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1940), 60.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Case 1820.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Case 520.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

In other instances, jobs became unavailable due legal reasons. Mr. Elm worked as a brew master at different breweries around the city. Due to Prohibition, Mr. Elm's income drastically decreased.⁵⁴ From 1906 to 1909, Mr. Elm worked at the Hochgreve Brewing Company making thirteen dollars and fifty cents. For the next ten years he worked at Hagemeister Brewing Company, making an unknown sum of money. From 1919 to 1931, during key years of Prohibition, Mr. Elm worked at the Rahr Brewery and made twenty-seven dollars a week.⁵⁵ In 1931 the Rahr Brewery closed, and Mr. Elm did not secure any other permanent work.

All male heads of household needed to register with the unemployment office at least once each month while receiving aid from the city if they did not secure private employment. Projects funded through FERA, CWA, and WPA provided employment to many men. WPA projects in Green Bay included the creation of the Wildlife Sanctuary out of a swamp and the building of Washington Middle School.⁵⁶ Mr. Elm bounced around different CWA projects in early 1934.⁵⁷ In the Hazelnut family, Mr. Hazelnut worked for the Park Board for 144 hours during the summer of 1933.⁵⁸ Mr. Hazelnut also did multiple WPA projects, working as a foreman.⁵⁹

Mr. Walnut completed odd jobs to make a small income to assist his family. Mr. and Mrs. Walnut married in 1921 and had two daughters. Mr. Walnut served in World War I for fourteen months. Upon his return to the Green Bay, he discovered that someone else took his pay from his military service, making him very upset. As a result, Mr. Walnut felt that the

⁵⁴ Ibid., Case 80.

⁵⁵ Ibid. It is unclear how Mr. Elm worked at the Rahr Brewery from 1919 to 1931, during key years of Prohibition. However, the Rahr Brewery closed in 1931. Mr. Elm seemed hopeful that he could return at the Rahr Brewery following Prohibition.

⁵⁶ Kersten, 24.

⁵⁷ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 80.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Case 100.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

government needed to support him financially.⁶⁰ He completed odd jobs, such as cleaning houses, beating rugs, and washing woodwork for families in the city. When the men failed to make enough money to support their families, additional family members sought jobs and employment to earn money.

Women increasingly entered the work force, and although the percentage of working women modestly increased from 21 percent in 1900 to 25 percent in 1930, the percentage of married women working doubled from 6 to 12 percent.⁶¹ The women of working class families generally stayed in the home unless it was an emergency and the families extended all credit beyond acceptable limits and depleted their savings.⁶²

Many of the working class families in Green Bay followed the national average. Since all families receiving aid through the Green Bay Welfare Department no longer had credit or savings, many found that the women needed to enter the work force. The agency required the women to work if the children did not need to be cared for at home during the day. Other times, it required that the women work if the male head of household could not work due to disability. The family lost assistance if they did not meet these requirements.⁶³

In the Birch family, Mrs. Birch worked in houses, completing domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. At times, she made as much as two to three dollars a week, which amounted to as much or more than her husband made.⁶⁴ Being the head of household with grown children, Mrs. Beech also sought work. On January 13, 1933 Mrs. Beech expressed frustration with the job market in Green Bay: all of the jobs she applied for were filled

⁶⁰ Ibid., Case 420. It is unclear what disability Mr. Walnut claimed to have.

⁶¹ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Eric Foner, American Century Series (New York: The Noonday Press, 1992).

⁶² Elder, *Children*, 28.

⁶³ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Case 200.

or were seeking younger people to fill them.⁶⁵ In 1935 the case worker noted that Mrs. Beech occasionally found day work and housekeeping to earn some money to support her family; the case worker also commented that “she [Mrs. Beech] is industrious and very willing to work,” indicating that others viewed women as valuable contributors to the work force.⁶⁶ Edward Elm’s wife also began working to help support her husband and her. She worked at the Kraft Cheese Company and made thirteen dollars each week.⁶⁷

Mrs. Fir found work doing sewing projects made available through the CWA.⁶⁸ Mr. and Mrs. Fir rented a house, owned a car, and had no investments. Both of their sons no longer lived at home. From 1926 to 1932, Mr. Fir worked at the Northland Hotel as a second cook; he started out making \$160 per month but his wages fell to \$100 per month as business slowed. The Northland Hotel laid off Mr. Fir on July 1, 1932, and he was unable to find any further work. The family applied to the relief department on March 6, 1933.⁶⁹ Mrs. Fir took pride in her ability to work, especially sew. When the case worker, Mrs. Hollenback, went to the Fir house in June, 1934, she found a note from Mrs. Fir: “Mrs. Hollenback. I got a little job fixing a dress [today]. [S]orry I can[not] be home. Mr. [Fir] got work this week, but will not get a check until the first. I would be grateful if you would favor us with one more order of groceries.”⁷⁰

Children were also expected to work and contribute to the family at an earlier age, which led to an acceleration of the passage to the adult years.⁷¹ Often, young children did odd jobs,

⁶⁵ Ibid., Case 20.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Case 80.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Case 1820.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Mr. Fir received medical and hospital care in the Town of Holland, in Brown County. The Town of Holland sent a bill to Harold J. Neville, the director of the Green Bay Welfare Department, asking the city to pay for the charges since Mr. Fir was not the responsibility of the Town of Holland.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Glen H. Elder, Jr., “Family Transitions, Cycles, and Social Change,” in *Family Transitions*, eds. Phillip A. Cowan and Mavis Hetherington (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1991), 49.

which indicated that family members counted on the young children.⁷² Social workers too expected teenage children to help the family. Boys tended to fill work roles in industries and joined military divisions which lessened the parental control grip.⁷³

Some of the boys participated in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a program and key interest of Roosevelt aimed at conservation.⁷⁴ This program started in March, 1933 and aimed to assist single men between the ages of 18 and 25. In addition, it required the cooperation of many different government agencies, such as the Department of War, the Department of Labor, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of the Interior.⁷⁵ The boys moved to the camps and sent the majority of their earnings home to their families. Mrs. Birch's 21-year-old son, Bill, was sent out of the home and into the work force as a member of the U.S. Reforestation Company in April, 1933.⁷⁶ He made 25 dollars each month. During Billy's short participation with the U.S. Reforestation Company, the Birch family no longer received relief from the city.

The oldest son, William, of the Spruce family also participated in the CCC. William decided to participate in the CCC in 1940 for two reasons: he was considering joining the military and he thought the CCC would help him decide, and he wanted to help his mother support his siblings, especially after his father's death.⁷⁷

Prior to joining the CCC, William found employment through WPA and the National Youth Administration (NYA).⁷⁸ Roosevelt created the NYA in June 1935. As part of the WPA,

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Tweton, 101.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 200.

⁷⁷ Ibid., Case 220.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

the NYA sought to give high school, college, and graduate students part-time work, job training, counseling, and placement assistance.⁷⁹

Girls also entered the work force at an increasing rate and filled household responsibilities, “a social adaptation that reinforced family ties and dependency while orienting them to domestic interests and roles in the adult world.”⁸⁰ The social worker approached Mrs. Birch and her daughter when the daughter was 15 and told the family that the daughter would need to work with a sewing company. In the case of the Hazelnut family, the oldest daughter, Barbara, was the sole provider for the family at the age of 23 in 1933.⁸¹ She started working at the Western Bell Telephone Company in 1929. Her husband and she lived at home with her parents and two younger siblings. Mr. and Mrs. Hazelnut owned their own house.

Families used the multiple contributions to the family income not only to support the family but to also maintain a front occasionally. They painted houses, bought shutters, and heated all of the rooms when friends were expected.⁸² However, this failure to adopt a rational budget caused internal friction and great unhappiness.⁸³ Ultimately, many Green Bay, white, working class families did not earn enough income to support themselves entirely. Other times, poor health conditions prevented family members from working as much as they wanted to work.

⁷⁹ Tweton., 110-111.

⁸⁰ Elder, “Family Transitions,” 49.

⁸¹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 100.

⁸² Elder, “Family Transitions,” 26.

⁸³ Samuel A. Stouffer and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Research Memorandum on the Family in the Depression*, ed. Alex Baskin (The Newark Public Library, 1937; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1972), 97 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

Chapter 5: Poor Health

Poor health conditions weakened family member morale and increased their reliance on city relief. Many of the families first applied for relief with a couple hundred dollars of debt from medical costs. The Elm family owed \$30 to St. Mary's Hospital, \$42 to Bellin Hospital, and \$79 to the doctor when they applied for assistance in March, 1932.⁸⁴ Because families receiving relief could not carry insurance, family members did not seek medical help until it was seen as absolutely necessary. This further hindered family members from finding or maintaining part or full time work because after they were never completely healthy. Other times, case workers noted the declining health conditions of family members in their case files and directly referred families to area doctors. If the families could not see a doctor, the case workers offered ideas to lessen the discomfort of the people.⁸⁵

The Beech family contacted the agency on Friday, March 24, 1933 to inform it that Rose Beech, the daughter-in-law, suddenly became very ill on Monday and went to the hospital, as directed by Dr. Burdon. The doctors determined that it was best to deliver the baby two months before its due date, and the baby stayed at the hospital in an incubator.⁸⁶

Other families also needed medical attention. In the Cedar family, the daughter, Dorothy, was always ill. Mr. and Mrs. Cedar rented a house and their two school-aged children, Dorothy and Aaron, lived at home along with Mr. Cedar's mother-in-law, Helen. The school nurse told Mrs. Cedar that Dorothy needed glasses. After going to the doctor, he determined that Dorothy had extremely poor vision that was almost impossible to fix. In August, 1931 Dorothy visited the welfare department seeking a prescription to cure an itch. While the case workers could not

⁸⁴ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 540.

⁸⁵ Ibid., all cases.

⁸⁶ Ibid., Case 20. The caseworker's notes do not indicate why Rose became ill or what she had.

write a prescription, they advised her “to go home and bathe thoroughly.”⁸⁷ Two months later, Dorothy again sought medical help due to sores on her head. The secretary of the welfare department looked at Dorothy’s head and discovered that it was “absolutely caked with dirt and sores.” Since Dorothy was not able to make an appointment with the city doctor, the welfare department gave Dorothy two bars of physicians-surgeons soap and told her to wash with the soap and hot water.⁸⁸

The children in the Spruce family frequently needed to visit the doctor as well. Case worker notes indicate that at least one child was sick during each home visit. Between the time Mr. and Mrs. Spruce divorced and remarried, at least two children suffered significant illnesses and underwent surgery. Doctors removed William’s tonsils and adenoids and Christopher’s tonsils. Additionally, Christopher needed treatments and a possible operation on an abscess on his ear.⁸⁹ While Mrs. Spruce was pregnant with her fifth child, health officials quarantined all four of her children in April of 1934 because they had the German measles. Mr. Spruce suffered massive burns to his back and hands in a kitchen explosion at the house of a friend in October, 1933. Not only did Mr. Spruce lose work for several months, but he also spent several weeks at St. Vincent’s Hospital, adding to the growing debt the family accumulated.⁹⁰

The Hazelnut family experienced similar conditions; undernourishment plagued the children, which constantly wore on the children’s ability to fight off illnesses.⁹¹ Furthermore, Mrs. Hazelnut constantly juggled her attention between her children and her ailing mother who

⁸⁷ Ibid., Case 40.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Case 200. Christopher was the third-oldest child.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., Case 100.

lived in Michigan. Frequently, Mrs. Hazelnut left for Michigan with the youngest child, leaving the remainder of the children at home with Mr. Hazelnut.⁹²

Some of the male heads of household suffered from various illnesses and accidents that hindered their ability to work. Mr. Walnut suffered some sort of disability that prevented him from doing most types of manual labor.⁹³ Mr. Fir fell and broke his ribs in 1934, putting him out of work for several weeks.⁹⁴ Mr. Spruce suffered from kidney problem which prevented him from securing most jobs.⁹⁵ Mr. Ironwood suffered from troubles with his head. After meeting with the city doctor in February, 1932, the city doctor recommended that Mr. Ironwood see a specialist. The specialist determined that Mr. Ironwood needed surgery to fix the problem; the specialist offered to donate his services if the welfare department set up arrangements with the hospital to pay for the rest of the costs.⁹⁶

Furthermore, the mental health of some heads of household also deteriorated. Unemployed heads of household crept around the house as if they were not there.⁹⁷ Mrs. Walnut noted that her husband started acting very strange in September, 1934.⁹⁸ Mr. Walnut joined “some political party” that was not in agreement with the current party in office, noted the case worker. He became irrational and angry.

Mr. Spruce became seriously depressed. Because he could not work a great deal due to lack of control over his kidneys, he felt guilty and useless that he could not provide for his

⁹² Ibid. The case worker noted that the house was always in an “unsanitary” condition, which may have contributed to the continual suffering health conditions of Spruce family members. The case worker said, “It [the home] is not a fit home for human beings but Visitor [case worker] knows, of course, that some human beings would make a wreck of a palace if they were in it.”

⁹³ Ibid., Case 420.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Case 1820.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Case 220.

⁹⁶ Ibid., Case 520.

⁹⁷ Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 50.

⁹⁸ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 420.

family.⁹⁹ He struggled to deal with his situation, and started drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. In June, 1936, Mr. Frank Planert, from the Welfare Committee, noted that Mr. Spruce's mental health seemed to be declining: he saw Mr. Spruce in the store "in a very much dejected and insolent manner complaining regarding his eviction."¹⁰⁰

On February 19, 1937, Mr. Spruce determined that he could no longer handle the pressures of providing for his family. He went to St. Vincent's Hospital early in the day because he hurt his foot. However, Mr. Spruce left the hospital before he was officially released and returned home. Mrs. Spruce noticed that Mr. Spruce was acting very strangely. She stated that Mr. Spruce "had a wild look on his face, and spoke very shortly and curtly. Upon entering the home, he made the remark that there was too much noise at the hospital, and there were always men in his room also making a great deal of noise."¹⁰¹ Mr. Spruce went to bed.

The next morning, Mr. Spruce woke up and asked Mrs. Spruce to prepare him a cup of coffee. As Mrs. Spruce prepared the coffee, Mr. Spruce went to the pantry and took out a razor. "[Mrs. Spruce] turned around just in time to see him do this, and [she] tried to prevent him from cutting his throat. [H]e warned her to stay away from him and not come near him. He then slashed his throat," cutting the vocal cords.¹⁰² An ambulance took Mr. Spruce to the hospital, but he did not survive. Mrs. Spruce determined that

she believe[d] he became temporarily insane, due to the fact that his stomach had been bothering him a great deal more lately than it ha[d] been for some time, and that he ha[d] been quite worked up about the fact that he ha[d] not been able to find work.¹⁰³

Mrs. Spruce now needed to raise her six children on her own after Mr. Spruce took his life.

⁹⁹ Ibid., Case 220.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Deteriorating physical and mental health conditions greatly affected white working class families in Green Bay. Despite some of the families' best intentions to try to live without assistance from the welfare department, the families could not do it because of constant needs to see the doctor. This is the single-greatest uncontrollable factor that prevented white working class families in Green Bay from supporting themselves. The welfare department continually reopened files shortly after closing them because all economic progress vanished with a new medical condition. Some of those with chronic disabilities could not cope with their inability to provide for their families, and which contributed to mental health problems.

Chapter 6: Materialism and Greed

All heads of households did not creep around the house and suffer from deteriorating mental health. In some families, the adults disregarded their budgets set up by the welfare department and acted in an irresponsible or happy-go-lucky manner.¹⁰⁴ Both Mr. and Mrs. Birch continually asked the social workers for additional grocery and coal orders. The husband also failed to find any work, and the wife even lied about her salary at times to try to receive extra assistance from the city.¹⁰⁵

Parents did things with a lack of responsibility and concern, such as spending money on leisure instead of necessities like rent, food, and heat. Sometimes, unemployed heads of household were superfluous in spending.¹⁰⁶ Mr. Birch was extremely irresponsible when he test-drove a new car in 1936 even though he was unemployed. He told the dealer that he was most likely going to buy it but ended up crashing and being sentenced to 30 days in a workhouse.¹⁰⁷

Some heads of households continued to act in an individualistic manner. The concept of individualism rang true in the 1920s, as best-selling books urged one to pursue his or her own desires.¹⁰⁸ Ernest Dimnet, the author of a best-seller about individualism in 1929, suggested that “to be free to express [oneself one] must abandon society.”¹⁰⁹ However, critics of individualism believed that people did not use self-control because they were on a quest for happiness, and asked why people could not have happiness without “courage, self-control, or self-sacrifice?”¹¹⁰ While these irresponsible adults of the Great Depression went against society, they did not

¹⁰⁴ Stouffer, 16-18.

¹⁰⁵ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 200.

¹⁰⁶ Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 50.

¹⁰⁷ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 200.

¹⁰⁸ Irene Taviss Thomson, “The Transformation of the Social Bond: Images of Individualism in the 1920s versus the 1970s,” *Social Forces* 67, no. 4 (1989), 853.

Bird, 50.

¹⁰⁹ Thomson, 862.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 859.

pursue their desires; instead some stayed home and lost motivation like Mr. Oak, or others spent money on extraneous things like alcohol and extramarital affairs like Mr. Birch.¹¹¹

As a result of irresponsibility and happy-go-luckiness, families became very materialistic and greedy. Although seeking relief was viewed negatively, families receiving relief continually asked for more or hid earnings. The Birch family felt that the aid from the city was not sufficient in November 1932 and requested more grocery orders. When social workers claimed the family could provide for themselves, the Birch family requested more assistance: more money for rent, additional grocery orders, new clothes and shoes, and increased amounts of coal to heat the house.¹¹² The families did not acknowledge that they needed to make adjustments to their lifestyles during the Depression years and expected more from the welfare department in order to support their old lifestyles.

The Oak family tried to hide earnings from the social workers. They sought assistance to pay rent, groceries, and other “necessities” in 1933. However, the family failed to report that Mr. Oak made three to four dollars each week working for the Spokane Steamship Line because they knew that the city would readjust the amount of relief according to the family income. Once the social worker discovered the hidden salary in June 1933, he or she determined that the family’s earnings were sufficient to pay their own rent.¹¹³

Besides being more materialistic, the irresponsible parent or parents failed to demonstrate any bit of emotion that indicated that the parent or parents truly cared about trying to get back on their feet and off of relief. Throughout the case file of the Birch family, the social workers noted that Mr. Birch demonstrated irresponsibility. He did not seek steady employment or insurance. The city forced Mr. Birch and other men to fill out work slips in hopes of finding at least odd

¹¹¹ Green Bay, Wisconsin, Welfare Department, Cases 540 and 200.

¹¹² Ibid., Case 200.

¹¹³ Ibid.

jobs for them to complete.¹¹⁴ In 1935, Mr. Birch failed to contribute his two to three dollar weekly paycheck to the family; instead he kept the money to himself and drank. In April of 1936 the social worker noted that Mr. Birch's history with the relief system indicated that he was "a tale of laziness, indifference, and lassitude."¹¹⁵

Even though family members tried to help each other out by offering each other food, shelter, and clothing and they asked the welfare department for relief, the families still felt a tremendous amount of pride. They wanted to be able to prove to their neighbors that the Depression depleted their bank accounts and regular employment but it did not deplete their spirit. In order to account for this, families hoarded everything they could get their hands on. Unfortunately, this often times resulted in materialism and greed.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 7: Innovation

Materialism and greed did not plague every family, and even those who became materialistic modified what they had and what they could do in order to enjoy a higher quality of living. Families used innovative methods in order to adapt to the economic conditions. They became more labor-intensive and provided more goods and services; they grew and canned food and made clothing.¹¹⁶ On cold winter days some children took turns going to school if the family had an inadequate number of coats, while families papered thin walls with newspaper to try to keep warm.¹¹⁷ Across the country women bought day-old bread, warmed several dishes in the oven at once to save coal and gas, and relined coats with old blankets.¹¹⁸ Mrs. Pine started washing her laundry with a neighbor to help save on costs.¹¹⁹

Many families started to grow gardens during the summer months in Green Bay. The welfare department often provided the family with seeds. The Maple family started growing a garden. Not only did they can nine quarts of tomato soup, ten quarts of beans, and cucumbers from their garden, but the Maple family also sold potatoes to neighbors.¹²⁰ Mrs. Spruce started growing a garden with her children after her husband committed suicide.¹²¹ Not only did the garden provide a wealth of food to be eaten throughout the year, but it also gave the children a project that they could take pride in. Mrs. Spruce said that, “the children [took] very much pride in working it [the garden], as it really [had] been the first garden that they [had].”¹²²

¹¹⁶ Elder, *Children*, 26.

¹¹⁷ David Tyack, Robert Low, and Elisabeth Hansot, *Public Schools in Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 10.

¹¹⁸ Susan Ware, *Holding their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, American Women in the Twentieth Century, ed. Barbara Haber (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 2.

¹¹⁹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare department, Case 120.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Case 180.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Case 220.

¹²² *Ibid.*

In addition, families turned other people's trash into treasures and profits. Mr. Pine routinely went around the neighborhoods "junking" to see if he found anything salvageable for use by his family. He occasionally turned a profit on various assortments of items he found by selling them to whoever was willing to purchase it.¹²³

Other families worked out deals with business owners in order to purchase goods on credit or to pay for the goods with labor. Edward Elm purchased the lumber to build the addition on his father's house by agreeing to work at the lumber yard for free.¹²⁴ Mr. Elm did a similar thing when the condition of his roof deteriorated: he worked for the Bell Lumber Company and he was paid in supplies.¹²⁵ Mr. Hazelnut worked with grocery store owners to purchase groceries on credit. He sought extra work, without telling the welfare department, in order to build up credit. At this time, he received grocery orders from the welfare department. He planned to use the extra money to pay for things when the family struggled again.¹²⁶ The families that carried insurance, either prior to applying for aid or during the time they received aid, took out as much credit as possible.

The ability to adapt and try new things in a time of need proved that families loved each other and wanted to try to make the best of what they had. If family members simply gave up during the years of the Depression, thousands of children would have lost out on the key years of their childhood. Asking for assistance from the welfare department took a lot of courage to do because society perceived men seeking assistance for their families as weak and unable to provide for them. However, families took pride in thinking of new and creative ways to get by

¹²³ Ibid., Case 120.

¹²⁴ Ibid., Case 80.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., Case 100.

with what they had. Innovation allowed families to take pride and ownership in something and to prove that grave economic conditions could not break the spirit of the family.

Chapter 8: Change in Family Structures

Innovation alone could not save the family financially. In addition to relying on relief and changing family roles and practices, families limited birth rates as a result of the Great Depression.¹²⁷ Although crude birth rates were decreasing gradually during the 1920s, they further decreased during the 1930s.¹²⁸ Rates dipped into the high teens during the 1930s. In 1933, exclusive of stillbirths, a mere 16.7 births per 1000 people occurred in Wisconsin, while 22.7 births occurred per 1000 people in 1921.¹²⁹

The Maple family had five children, one each year from 1925 to 1929, before Black Thursday and the aftermath affected the family.¹³⁰ During the Great Depression, the birthrate slowed in the Maple family and, although the family had four more children during the depression, the children were spaced further apart. Mrs. Maple delivered child number six in 1932, another in 1935, another in 1937, and the ninth child in 1939.¹³¹ The Spruce family went from having a child every two years to once every four years. The family's second to last child was conceived out of wedlock when the family was divorced in 1934. Mr. and Mrs. Spruce remarried and had one more child in 1938.¹³²

Divorce rates also decreased across the country.¹³³ However, the decline in divorce rates did not mean that families were content; the inability to afford a divorce and contributed to the

¹²⁷ Bird, 51.

¹²⁸ Forrest E. Linder and Robert D. Grove, *Vital Statistics Rates in the United States, 1900-1940*, prepared under supervision of Halbert L. Dunn, M.D., Referenced *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, compiled by U.S. Department of Commerce and U.S. Bureau of the Census (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 666-667.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Green Bay, Wisconsin, Welfare Department., Case 540.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., Case 220.

¹³³ Stouffer, 72.

decline in divorce rates.¹³⁴ This did not mean that more husbands and wives were happily married. Both Mr. and Mrs. Birch displayed feelings of discontent with their marriage during the depression. Mrs. Birch worked and tried to contribute to the family while her husband had affairs, drank, and sulked around the home. The two separated for some time in August 1935, but never divorced.¹³⁵

The white, working class families in Green Bay seemed to teeter with divorce. Mr. and Mrs. Oak reached their breaking point though, and Mr. and Mrs. Oak divorced in June 1934.¹³⁶ Mr. and Mrs. Spruce divorced for a brief period before remarrying.¹³⁷

Families needed to adjust to the economic conditions by altering family growth rates. The welfare department did not seem to provide birth control or fertility counseling to families receiving assistance. However, families receiving assistance followed state and national trends and slowed birth rates slightly. Families must have realized the incredible financial burden an additional family member would cost and decided to try to lower the rate they had children. Unlike the national averages, families in Green Bay did not seem afraid to get divorced if they were truly unhappy. Additional pension funds for single mothers helped women determine if they would be able to financially support themselves if they separated from their spouses. Additional jobs available to women through federally funded projects also gave women the option of seeking a divorce and have some financial security.

¹³⁴ Bryson, 311.

¹³⁵ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 200.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The Great Depression impacted families all over the country. Families felt overwhelmed and powerless as full time positions vanished and they racked up debt. White, working class families in Green Bay shared similar hardships.

The Green Bay Welfare Department greatly helped thousands of white, working class families. The majority of the families owned no property and made no substantial amount of money to sustain themselves. Not only did the welfare department spend large sums of money helping out the families, but it also looked after the emotional well-being of family members. Typically, families received supplemental rent money around \$10-12 per month, grocery orders as much as once a week, a quart of milk each day, and medical assistance.

The introduction of federally funded programs significantly impacted the ability of the welfare department of Green Bay to provide services to local families. Without programs such as FERA, the CWA, and the WPA, the Green Bay Welfare Department would not have had sufficient funds to help all of the families in need.

Before handing out money, the welfare department forced families to turn to extended family members first for assistance. This increased family bonds, but at the same time, it created tensions among family members. Family members felt guilty for not being able to provide for their families.

The Great Depression tested the adaptability of the family because local monetary relief could not pay for everything. The families relied on savings, loans, and earnings from other family members to survive.¹³⁸ Families relied on women and children to help support the family by seeking employment. The contribution of women and children in the work force

¹³⁸ Ibid., 25-26.

helped families earn additionally income to help soften the blow when one family member lost his or her job.

Poor health conditions plagued many of the families applying for aid. Even normal illnesses, like tonsillitis requiring the removal of tonsils, were too expensive to receive care. Countless individuals, adults and children, needed their tonsils removed during the Great Depression in Green Bay. Family member morale decreased as breadwinners became ill and could not work. A paycheck was often the difference between putting food on the table and seeking assistance from others to do it.

Unable to fully accept the situation and to make adjustments, some families, such as the Birch family, became greedy. Families hoarded food, hid incomes, and lied about personal needs to case workers in order to receive additional benefits. People like Mr. Spruce felt that the government needed to provide entirely for the family, and they made unjustifiable demands for goods.¹³⁹ Other times, the families used innovative methods to adapt to conditions, such as growing their own food and reusing blankets to line coats. Also, birth and divorce rates decreased. Without the relief system set up in place in Green Bay, thousands of families would have been unable to cope with the changing economic situation on their own.

Future researchers might find interest in comparing the experience of Green Bay white working class families to those of families in a similar community around the country. Did the Green Bay families face unique hardships or did they share similar experiences with their peers around the country? Also, did social workers influence the amount of relief received by Green Bay families? Certain social workers appeared to be biased towards some families. The tone in the case worker notes drastically differed from case worker to case worker. Did certain families receive special treatment, and if so, did these families cope better with the economic hardships

¹³⁹ Green Bay, Wisconsin Welfare Department, Case 220.

they faced? Future researchers can find many avenues to take from the research presented in this paper.

Glossary of Families

Beech Family (Case 20)

Mrs. Beech first applied for relief in January of 1922. She divorced her husband in November of 1921, and she needed assistance because Mr. Beech failed to pay her \$25 each month as directed in the divorce settlement. She did not receive any assistance from the city at this time. Once Mr. Beech passed away and Mrs. Beech no longer received any alimony to help her, the city began assisting her with rent, groceries, and fuel in 1931. Mrs. Beech had two grown children, Robert and Ray. Robert married Rose in October of 1932 “because he [had] to.” Rose reported being four months pregnant to the case worker on December 12, 1932 and delivered a baby in March of 1933. Robert, Rose, and their child moved out of Mrs. Beech’s rented house in 1934, and Ray moved back home. Mrs. Beech actively looked for work and occasionally did day work and housekeeping. Robert did not hold regular work, but he put in applications at the paper mills and did odd jobs. Ray previously worked as a brewer. The family needed assistance with medical bills.

Birch Family (Case 200)

The Birch family consisted of Mr. Birch, his wife, and Mrs. Birch’s two children from a previous marriage, Evelyn and Bill. Mr. and Mrs. Birch married on December 10, 1931. The family rented homes and moved around often. Mr. Birch first applied for assistance in January of 1931. At the time of application, Mr. Birch did not have a job, held no property, and owed a large sum of money to various establishments. The family moved in with Mr. Birch’s mother for a brief period in 1932. Mrs. Birch worked in houses, completing domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. At times, she made as much as \$2-3 per week. Bill was a member of the U.S. Reforestation Company in April, 1933, and he made \$25 per month. However, Bill only participated in U.S. Reforestation Company for a short period of time. Evelyn started working with a sewing company when she was 15, due to requirements by the Green Bay welfare department.

Cedar Family (Case 40)

The Cedar family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Cedar, and their two school-aged children, Dorothy and Aaron. Mrs. Cedar’s Mother, Helen, also lived with the family. The family rented a house. Dorothy suffered from numerous health problems, including poor vision that was nearly impossible to correct, poor hygiene, and head sores. The family owed over \$200 at the time of application in 1930.

Elm Family (Case 80)

The Elm family consisted of Mr. Elm, Mrs. Elm, and their eight children, all except for Jacob were grown and living outside of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Elm married on October 1, 1902. Mr. Elm was born in Belgium and came to the United States when he was 10 in 1886. Mrs. Elm was born in Wisconsin. Mr. Elm worked as a brewer, and he first applied for assistance

on January 5, 1932. The family owned their own fully furnished five bedroom house, as well as a 1934 Pontiac. The oldest son, Edward Elm, built an addition onto his parent's house and moved in with his wife in 1933. In 1934, Fred Elm, another son, and his wife moved back in with his parents. Mr. and Mrs. Elm did not feel it was right to charge their children rent for living at home even though the children could afford it. The Elm family also rented two rooms of their house to other individuals, which assisted in making mortgage payments. Edward's wife worked at the Kraft Cheese Company and made \$13 a week to support her husband and herself. Mr. Elm bounced around different CWA projects in early 1934.

Fir Family (Case 1820)

The Fir family consisted of Mr. Fir, Mrs. Fir, and their two sons, Walter and Jack. Mr. Fir worked as a cook until he was laid off on July 1, 1932. Mr. and Mrs. Fir rented a house, owned a car, and had no investments. Both of their sons no longer lived at home. Mr. Fir's salary prior to be laid off fluctuated between \$100-160 per month. The family applied to the relief department on March 6, 1933. Mrs. Fir found work doing sewing projects made available through the CWA. Mr. Fir fell and broke his ribs in 1934, putting him out of work for several weeks.

Hazelnut Family (Case 100)

The Hazelnut family consisted of Mr. Hazelnut, Mrs. Hazelnut, and their three children, Joshua, Margaret, and Barbara. Mr. and Mrs. Hazelnut married on December 22, 1900. The family owned their house and a car, and they first applied for aid on May 22, 1933. Barbara lived at home with her husband and was the sole provider for the family at the age of 23. Barbara started working at the Western Bell Telephone Company in 1929. Mr. Hazelnut was a carpenter who was able to read and write. He was laid off in November, 1930, and did odd jobs, such as carpentry work, to try to make ends meet. The family carried insurance, even though it was contrary to the rules of the department to receive aid while insured. Mr. Hazelnut worked for the Park Board during the summer of 1933 and worked as a foreman for multiple WPA projects. Undernourishment plagued the children, which constantly wore on their ability to fight off illnesses.

Ironwood Family (Case 520)

The Ironwood family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Ironwood and their four children, Virginia, Raymond, Paul, and Harold. Mr. and Mrs. Ironwood married in 1922. The children were born between September, 1925, and June, 1933. The family rented their house. The family suffered from different health conditions. For example, Mr. Ironwood suffered from troubles with his head that required surgery. Mr. Ironwood worked as a brakeman and conductor on the railroads prior to being laid off. While receiving relief, Mr. Ironwood was put on probation because he tried to break into a car.

Maple Family (Case 180)

The Maple family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Maple, and their nine children, born between July, 1925, and December, 1939. Mr. Maple worked as a candy maker, but he was out of work since October, 1931. Mr. Maple first applied for aid on 1933.

Oak Family (Case 540)

The Oak family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Oak, and their two children, Kenneth and Lois. Mr. and Mrs. Oak married on June 16, 1928 and divorced in July of 1934. Mr. Oak held no regular employment since 1930. Mr. Oak's mother paid insurance costs for the family for the second half of 1931. His mother also provided a quart of milk every day for the baby, Lois, but the family still struggled. Mr. Oak turned to the Green Bay welfare department for aid in March of 1932. At the time of application, Mr. Oak owed almost \$300 to hospitals, doctors, and a financial company. The Oak family tried to hide earnings from social workers so their aid would not be reduced or cut off.

Pine Family (Case 120)

The Pine family included Mr. and Mrs. Pine and their four children, Ethan, Patricia, Matthew, and Joan. The children were born between September, 1928, and November, 1934. Mr. and Mrs. Pine married on December 1, 1927. Mr. Pine first applied for relief on April 2, 1932. Mr. Pine worked at the Fort Howard Paper Company before he was laid off in 1931.

Spruce Family (Case 220)

The Spruce family consisted of Mr. Spruce, Mrs. Spruce, and their six children, William, Richard, Christopher, Andrew, Anthony, and Doris. Mr. and Mrs. Spruce married on March 29, 1916, divorced on August 16, 1929, and remarried on February 12, 1934. The couple possibly adopted the oldest son, William. The six children were born between October 1921 and March 1938. Anthony was born on September 4, 1934, indicating that Mr. and Mrs. Spruce maintained a sexual relationship together after their divorce. During their divorce, Mr. Spruce occasionally received assistance from a sister in Beaver Dam. In addition, his aunt, a Green Bay resident, gave Mr. Spruce food and clothing. Mrs. Spruce first applied for assistance in May of 1929. Mr. Spruce first applied for assistance in November of 1933 when he was admitted to St. Vincent's Hospital for severe burns. Mr. Spruce had a history of drinking and abusing his wife, and he had a partial disability due to troubles with his kidneys that made it difficult for him to find employment. All of the children suffered from health problems and frequently needed medical attention. Mr. Spruce committed suicide in front of his wife on February 20, 1937. William joined the CCC in 1940 because he was considering joining the military and he thought the CC would help him decide, and he wanted to help his mother support his siblings, especially after his father's death. He also found employment through the WPA and the National Youth Administration.

Walnut Family (Case 420)

The Walnut family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Walnut and their two daughters, Ruth and Shirley. Mr. and Mrs. Walnut married on November 22, 1921. Mr. Walnut served in World

War I for fourteen months and discovered upon his return that someone else took his pay from his military service. Mr. Walnut claimed to be disabled but did not receive a disability pension. Mr. Walnut applied for aid in November, 1932. Mr. Walnut completed odd jobs such as “housecleaning, beating rugs, [and] washing woodwork.”

Timeline of Events

1921

- November – Mrs. Beech first applies for aid; does not receive assistance

1929

- May – Mrs. Spruce applies for aid
- June – US economy starts to decline
- October 24 – Stock Market Crash

1930

- Hoover spends more on public projects during the first half of 1930 than he did all of 1929
- Cedar family applies for assistance

1931

- Mrs. Beech applies for aid and receives assistance

1932

- January – Elm family applies for aid
- March – Oak family applies for aid
- April – Pine family applies for aid
- November – Walnut family applies for aid
- Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt wins presidential election

1933

- Creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA)
- March – Fir family applies for aid
- May – Hazelnut family applies for aid
- June – Public Works Administration (PWA) implemented
- November – Mr. Spruce applies for aid
- Winter – the Civil Works Administration (CWA) is implemented
- Maple family applies for aid

1934

- Early 1934 – CWA ends

1935

- FERA ends

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The five boxes of welfare records served as my greatest primary source. The collection includes all personal information regarding families applying for aid, including the birthdates for all family members, names and addresses of extended family members, and job histories. It also included newspaper clippings regarding family members and all of the case worker notes.

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