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# The Persistence of the Past: Memphis in the Great Depression

By ROGER BILES

IN *COTTON FIELDS AND SKYSCRAPERS*, AN INTERPRETATION OF southern urban history, David R. Goldfield questioned the traditional concept of a resurgent New South rising from the ashes of Reconstruction. Change has come to the South, he allowed, but the transformation occurred most markedly in this century; the watershed was the Great Depression. Goldfield concluded that "the federal government paid for the capital facilities in southern cities that northern cities had paid for themselves in earlier decades and on which they were still paying off the debt. The almost-free modernization received by southern cities would prove to be an important economic advantage in subsequent decades." During the Second World War the federal government continued to influence the region by bringing additional industry and military bases to its cities. Southern cities retained much of their pre-Civil War identities in the aftermath of World War II, Goldfield argued, but change was well underway. The onset of the New Deal began the process that significantly altered the personality and characteristics of the South.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly the Great Depression and the New Deal left a long-lasting imprint on American cities, North and South. As Paul V. Betters, executive director of the U. S. Conference of Mayors, stated, "the year 1932 marked the beginning of a new era in federal-city relationships." Mark I. Gelfand noted in *A Nation of Cities* that while it was revolutionizing life in the countryside, the New Deal also brought the federal government into urban areas in a meaningful way for the first time. Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies not only made vast sums of money available to cities, thus providing relief and tempo-

<sup>1</sup> Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge and London, 1982), 181-82 (quotation). See also David R. Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," *American Historical Review*, LXXXVI (December 1981), 1009-34.

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rary employment for thousands of jobless men and women, but they also paved the way for subsequent innovations in housing, transportation, and public welfare. Most significant, noted David R. Goldfield and Blaine A. Brownell in their survey of American urban history, "The New Deal also signalled the advent of new American values that were much more appropriate to the collective, urban realities of the modern era than to the individualistic and largely rural ethic of the past."<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere was this "largely rural ethic" more firmly implanted than in southern cities—and nowhere should the impact of the New Deal have been more shattering. By nudging city halls throughout the South into a closer relationship with the federal government, the New Deal presumably punctured the isolation of these communities and forcibly brought them into the twentieth century. Historian George B. Tindall outlined the changes resulting from this clash:

The programs of the New Deal, designed to meet the problems of depression, almost inadvertently jeopardized the traditional power structure which rested on the control of property, labor, credit, and local government. Relief projects reduced dependency; labor standards raised wages; farm programs upset landlord-tenant relationships; government credit bypassed bankers; new federal programs skirted county commissioners and sometimes even state agencies. The trends became more ominous in 1935, when the 'Second New Deal' swung from recovery to reform with such measures as WPA, social security, the Wagner Labor Relations Act, the 'soak-the-rich' tax, and later, the Farm Tenant and Housing Acts of 1937 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.<sup>3</sup>

This essay attempts to test Tindall's observations in one southern city, Memphis, Tennessee. It seeks to discern the modernizing impact of the New Deal on the city, to discover to what degree the surfeit of federal programs in the 1930s contributed to the conquest of the Old South. Was the price of federal funds the surrender of local autonomy? Did local leaders want or accept social change along with federal money? Did the New Deal transform Memphis's political system or its social structure? What accommodations were made by fed-

<sup>2</sup> Betterers quoted in Blake McKelvey, *The Emergence of Metropolitan America, 1915-1966* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1968), 85; Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York, 1975), 384; David R. Goldfield and Blaine A. Brownell, *Urban America: From Downtown to No Town* (Boston and other cities, 1979), 371. For a sampling of urban historians commenting on the Depression and New Deal see Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1975); and Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, Toronto, and London, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Tindall, *The Persistent Tradition in New South Politics* (Baton Rouge, 1975), 71. See also Douglas Lloyd Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South: The Advancement of a Southern Urban Consciousness During the Depression Decade" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1978).

eral agencies to local conditions and mores? If Memphis, a thoroughly southern city, proved largely immune to the powerful forces unleashed in the thirties, then a victory needs to be recorded for continuity over change in the South, for the cotton field over the skyscraper.

Prior to the 1870s Memphis sported a heterogeneous population in which Germans and Irish figured prominently in the city's economic and political affairs. After the disastrous yellow fever epidemics of that decade, which resulted in financial ruin and the surrender of the city charter to a state-administered taxing district, the foreign-born avoided the location. Whereas first-generation immigrants constituted over 30 percent of the population in 1860, the figure declined to 12 percent in 1880, 8 percent in 1890, and 5 percent in 1900. By the turn of the century Memphis had become a city, roughly half-white, half-black, virtually devoid of the foreign-born, whose growth had been fueled largely by rural migrants. Historian Gerald M. Capers, Jr., observed that by 1900, "Memphis presented a strange paradox—a city modern in physical aspect but rural in background, rural in prejudice, and rural in habit." These recent arrivals from the countryside who were responsible for giving the city a decidedly provincial air included in their cultural baggage such items as a nostalgic devotion to the southern Lost Cause, a propensity for violence, and belief in stringent codes of honor, fundamentalist religion, and white supremacy. The influence of this steady infusion of farm folk led H. L. Mencken to comment in the 1920s that Memphis was the "most rural-minded city in the South."<sup>4</sup>

During the prosperous decade of the twenties, Memphis enjoyed considerable population growth. Thanks largely to the city's annexation of 20.3 miles of suburban land in 1929, its population grew from 162,351 in 1920 to 253,143 in 1930, an increase of 56 percent. The demographic trends of earlier years continued apace: the 1930 census revealed that 61.8 percent of the city's population was white, 38.1 percent black—a racial composition virtually unchanged from the preceding decennial report of 62.2 percent white and 37.6 percent black. If anything, Memphis, long a homogeneous city, was becoming even more so; only 2.1 percent of the population was foreign-born, down from 3.6 percent a decade before. The historical pattern of immigration from nearby rural areas continued with the vast majority of newcomers hailing from Tennessee, Mississippi, and

<sup>4</sup> Capers, *The Biography of a River Town. Memphis: Its Heroic Age* (Chapel Hill, 1939), 206 (first quotation); *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 10, 1901; Gerald M. Capers, "The Rural Lag on Southern Cities," *Mississippi Quarterly*, XXI (Fall 1968), 260 (second quotation).

Arkansas.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally dependent upon the Mississippi River for its existence, Memphis continued its economic role as a commercial entrepôt. According to the U. S. Bureau of the Census, 27.7 percent of the workforce toiled in "manufacturing and mechanical" pursuits, as opposed to 40.2 percent in Philadelphia and 36.2 percent in Chicago. One-fourth worked as domestics, the majority of them black (22,860 of 27,514). Like other southern cities that had experienced some growth in the postbellum years, Memphis maintained a predominantly mercantile cast. Still the nation's largest inland cotton market, Memphis remained a one-crop town; not surprisingly, the city's bankers, merchants, and factors sustained a keen interest in the fluctuations of the commodity's price levels. And yet, underlining the degree to which industry had not taken hold in the city, almost no textile concerns had situated there. Fourteen percent of the total U. S. cotton crop passed through the Bluff City in 1929-1930, but only 104 people worked in cotton mills. The fluffy white plant was transported to the city, was hauled about by sweating, straining, black stevedores, and was classified, sold, and shipped out again—much the way it had been done for generations.<sup>6</sup>

The city's preoccupation with cotton prices, which fell alarmingly from 20.2 cents per pound in 1927 to 5.7 cents in 1931, explains why most Memphians evinced so little reaction to the cataclysmic events of October 1929. The stock-market crash generated considerable panic among the denizens of the city's downtown financial district but seemingly little reaction elsewhere. No epidemic of suicides punctuated the news of financial ruin. The two daily newspapers reported the events in New York City but perfunctorily so; moreover, they declined to award them the glaring headlines prevalent elsewhere. The health of the stock market was, quite simply, irrelevant to all but a few speculators. The Memphis *Commercial Appeal* called talk of a major national disaster "unbelievably silly" and generously quoted President Hoover on the nation's health. It editorialized:

That the prices of securities will find their proper level is inescapable wherever that may be. There is not a flaw in the soundness of the country. Agriculture in the last few years may not have fared as well as industry, but it is

<sup>5</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Population*, Vol. II (Washington, 1933), 69, 213-15; Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 3; Richard K. Thomas, "The Residential Distribution of Immigrants in Memphis, Tennessee" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1970), 7, 36-37.

<sup>6</sup> U. S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1932* (Washington, 1932), 758, 790, 796; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Population*, Vol. IV: *Occupations by States* (Washington, 1933), 423, 1384, 1516, 1536-38.

not menaced. Financially, commercially, industrially and in all other ways the nation is as rock ribbed as Gibraltar. It refuses to be shaken by flurries one way or the other among speculators in stocks.<sup>7</sup>

In the months following the stock-market crash, the dailies continued to downplay bad economic news. Quoting the optimistic pronouncements of local businessmen, they predicted a short duration for hard times and reassuringly referred to the "sunshine syndrome." That is, they told readers that temporary winter layoffs in 1929-1930 would melt away with the coming of warmer weather. In fact, hard times were not all that hard in Memphis for the first year of the Depression. Few businesses failed and unemployment remained low—only 2.8 percent for whites and 3.5 percent for blacks. Since Memphis had less heavy industry than many northern and midwestern cities and relied heavily upon service and trade enterprises, the ravages of the Depression appeared very slowly. Far removed from the nation's banking and manufacturing centers, many southern cities experienced a time lag between the stock-market crash and the onset of economic dislocations.<sup>8</sup>

By late 1930, however, the darkening clouds over Memphis gave way to genuinely stormy weather. River trade decreased as hard-hit industrial cities dispatched fewer and fewer barges down the Mississippi. The number of unemployed in the Bluff City rose rapidly, totaling about seven thousand in November and ten thousand in December. The number of families helped by the sole existing public community relief organization, the Family Welfare Agency, rose so dramatically that many supplicants had to be turned away for lack of resources. The problems of feeding and housing transients grew as well; Salvation Army records show that in December 1929 the army gave 1,700 meals to wayfarers and 8,200 one year later. In March 1931 the number had risen to 10,250. By the winter of 1930-1931 breadlines had formed outside hospital kitchens as thousands of unfortunates queued up hoping that such institutions would share their surplus food. The increasing frequency of suicides served as a grim barometer of the worsening situation. Suddenly so many people were jumping off Harahan Bridge into the Mississippi that the newspapers printed the names and telephone numbers of clergymen and urged the dispirited to seek counseling. "Soon a Memphis preacher jumped off."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> U. S. Department of Agriculture, "Some Facts About the Cotton Outlook For 1932," Miscellaneous Publication No. 139, January 1932 (Washington, D. C.), 1-5; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 26, 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 27-28; Robert A. Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis* (Memphis, 1979), 166-67.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas H. Baker, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal: The History of a Southern Newspaper*

With each succeeding year the situation worsened. Unemployment continued to rise, reaching 17,000 in mid-1932 (about 14 percent of the workforce). Employers responded by cutting to a thirty-hour work week and pledging not to hire women. Between 1929 and 1932 employers handed over to men approximately 6,000 jobs previously held by women. The Fisher Body Company, which produced wooden parts for automobile bodies, closed its Memphis plant, throwing about 1,200 men out of work. The Ford Motor Company suspended operations in its assembly works for several months that year. In all, the number of manufacturing establishments fell 35.8 percent from 1929 to 1933, and as a result the total wages paid to Memphians fell 55 percent. Public school teachers kept their jobs but had their salaries pared and finally received payment from the city in scrip.<sup>10</sup>

Insolvency and foreclosure threatened businesses, and many modest enterprises went bankrupt. Even some of the oldest and most respected establishments failed to meet their financial obligations. The swank Parkview Hotel, adjacent to Overton Park, closed its doors, and the city's two daily newspapers went into receivership. Between 1929 and 1933 the number of retail establishments fell by 22.3 percent; consequently, retail sales decreased 54.3 percent. The decline in bank debits (the volume of checks drawn from local banks), usually a reliable economic indicator, clearly demonstrated the city's ill health—Memphis's rate fell 55 percent from 1929 to 1933 compared to a national average of 53 percent for 140 cities excepting New York.<sup>11</sup>

For embattled Memphians an influx of transients further exacerbated the situation. As the transportation hub of the Middle South, Memphis had always attracted a steady stream of rootless sojourners, usually men and women of little means. The dislocations of the Depression, especially severe among landless sharecroppers and tenant farmers, accelerated this trickle of humanity into a torrent. Arriving by the thousands in railroad boxcars and beat-up jalopies, these desperate unfortunates found an atmosphere uncongenial to their arrival. Unhappy city officials tried to discourage transients

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per (Baton Rouge, 1971), 282; Memphis Community Fund, "Annual Report, 1931" (Memphis Public Library, Memphis, Tenn., hereinafter cited as MPL); *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 9, 1931; Shields McIlwaine, *Memphis Down in Dixie* (New York, 1948), 178 (quotation).

<sup>10</sup> Sigafoos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street*, 167; Stanley J. Folmsbee, Robert E. Corlew, and Enoch L. Mitchell, *History of Tennessee* (4 vols., New York, 1960), II, 300; Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 36–44.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph C. Hon, *Memphis, Its Economic Position* (Memphis, 1935), 19–22; Videotape interview, "Conversations with Prominence: Null Adams of the *Press-Scimitar*," 1979 (MPL).

from disembarking and spoke to those who did in sobering tones about moving on.

Panic enveloped the city in the spring of 1932 when word spread that thousands of veterans would be descending upon Memphis en route to Washington, D. C. These were the men of the Bonus Army, preparing to demand early payment of their World War I gratuities. Rumors circulated that the penniless veterans had stayed on in the towns along the line where the railroads booted them off the trains. In early June some two hundred members of the Texas Bonus Army arrived on a special train provided by the mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas. They pitched camp at the Mid-South Fairgrounds and waited for the wherewithal to continue on the next leg of their eastward journey. Noting that the city could not care for the veterans, Police Commissioner Clifford Davis beseeched the railroads to provide transportation, but to no avail. When an additional 225 bonus soldiers arrived from Oklahoma, the Southern Railroad posted guards around their trains and refused to transport anyone unable to pay. The Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion fed the expanding settlement as the impasse dragged on. Exasperated by the railroad's intransigence, Davis hinted that his men would not try to stop veterans from stealing a train. Finally, the city trucked the veterans to Nashville where the buck passed to another city's government.<sup>12</sup>

With local and state governments pleading insufficient resources, shocked and weary citizens turned hopeful eyes to Washington, D. C. The inaction of the Hoover administration left Memphians feeling bitter and disillusioned. No longer minimizing the severity of conditions, the *Commercial Appeal* criticized the president for his incessant attempts to gloss over a worrisome situation and called his administration's economic policies "disappointing." It remained vague on what the federal government legitimately could do and always cautioned limited involvement, but nonetheless the paper haltingly advocated federally funded public works projects, noting in particular the need for flood control improvements on the Mississippi River. Not surprisingly, the local Democrats took advantage of the administration's slackening popularity to gain partisan advantage. Both Boss Edward H. Crump, autocratic ruler of Memphis and the most powerful politician in Tennessee, and Senator Kenneth D. McKellar lambasted Hoover for his insensitivity to the suffering of the masses and for his chummy relations with the plutocrats of the Northeast. The haughty Hoover, who had made much of "Republican

<sup>12</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, June 4-8, 1932.



prosperity" in 1928, became an inviting target, and Memphis Democrats went after him with a vengeance.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, they attacked him as much for his attempts to expand the role of the federal government in combating the Depression as they did for the failure of his earlier "do-nothing" policies. Ed Crump, who had been elected to the House of Representatives in 1930, voted for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, but he scored Hoover for his inattention to the need for reduced spending and emphasized the importance of continuing to balance the federal budget. McKellar was even more critical, calling the RFC the "greatest pork barrel that was ever established in the history of time." While favoring some form of relief and a token veterans' bonus, McKellar became the chief spokesman in the Senate for trimming all House-approved appropriations by 10 percent. In discussing governmental strategy for combating the Depression the senator emphasized the need for fiscal orthodoxy, saying:

The real remedy and the only remedy is to live within our income. We have no moral right to expend more money than we have collected or to expend money that we have not collected in order to carry on the ordinary operations of the Government.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, this hidebound commitment to conservative economics characterized the Memphis municipal government's response as well. Like most other southern cities, it had traditionally denied its citizens substantial welfare services. The business aristocracy, infused with the interrelated ideals of physical growth and economic expansion, considered aid to the city's unfortunates a low priority. The creation of community welfare organizations lagged behind population growth, an error compounded in Memphis by the previous annexation of a large section of contiguous land. Alarming few avenues for philanthropy existed. In 1929 only the Memphis Community Fund, organized six years earlier through the efforts of the Chamber of Commerce and the Council of Social Agencies, functioned as a welfare agency. This privately funded charitable organization would bear the brunt of the relief burden.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, March 2, August 19, 1930; Robert D. Pope, "Senatorial Baron: The Long Political Career of Kenneth D. McKellar" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976), 205-12; *New York Times*, October 7, 1932; William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* (Baton Rouge, 1964), 171-73.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 171, 173; Pope, "Senatorial Baron," 205-206 (first quotation); *Congressional Record*, 72 Cong., 2 Sess., 2592-93 (January 26, 1933) (second quotation).

<sup>15</sup> Memphis Community Fund, "Annual Report, 1940" (MPL). See also Charles L. Meyers, "Evolution of the Jewish Service Agency in Memphis, Tennessee: 1847 to 1963" (unpublished

As its officers readily admitted, the Community Fund fell far short of being equal to the task. In its inaugural year the agency raised \$477,000 in pledges; in 1929 it mustered \$551,000. Thus while the city population grew by 35 percent in the intervening six years, the amount of money pledged rose only 16 percent. In depression-torn 1930 the amount amassed actually decreased by \$23,000 from the previous year. Noting that the per capita gift in Memphis for 1931 was a miserly \$1.83, the fund took the city's wealthy to task for their indifferent response. It concluded:

Comparisons with cities both north and south show that the per capita giving in Memphis is low. . . . Our difficulties of financing will continue until the men and women of wealth within our city give more generously of their means to the causes of social welfare than they have been in the habit of doing in the past.<sup>16</sup>

In its plea for more money, the fund's spokesmen attributed the stinginess of the well-to-do to their assumption that the vast majority targeted for assistance were black. Granting that this was so, welfare workers argued for contributions on the basis of "selfishness," contending that the "economic situation and the health condition of the colored affects the entire community." Further, they chastised city government for its failure to shoulder any part of the load and cited for credibility a study by the Children's Bureau of Washington, D. C., that detailed the proportion of family relief borne by public and private sources in twenty-four cities. Ranging from 100 percent private funds in New Orleans to 98 percent public funds in Detroit, the average allotment for relief was 85 percent public and 15 percent private. (The only regular appropriation made for family relief from tax funds in Memphis was a \$40,000 annual allotment by the county for mothers' aid.) The study's conclusion was that "Communities can carry their immensely greater loads only as public resources assume responsibility for a larger part of them."<sup>17</sup>

The city government responded to the charges of apathy, but not in a substantial way. In December 1930 Mayor Watkins Overton, Boss Crump's surrogate in city hall, met with Community Fund officials to create the Mayor's Commission on Unemployment and Relief. Not intended as a comprehensive relief program, the Mayor's Commission attempted only modest involvement on an extremely limited scale. (In its two years of operation, the commission spent only \$50,000.) It underwrote the "Buy an Apple" campaign, for example,

M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1965). On the pattern of a few social welfare organizations in southern cities see Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers*, 39-44.

<sup>16</sup> Memphis Community Fund, "Annual Report, 1931," 2-5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 12.

by supplying eighty men with produce for sale on downtown street corners. It also paid a handful of men each day to chop kindling at a city-owned wood yard. But mostly the commission served as an employment agency, bringing together unemployed workers and potential employers. It arranged for area cotton planters to use unemployed Memphians to pick the crop, albeit at the rock-bottom wage of forty cents per one hundred pounds. The city sold work tickets that provided the buyer ten hours of unskilled labor for each one dollar work ticket purchased (the worker received in turn relief commodities from the commission) and served as a clearinghouse for donations of food and clothing from concerned citizens. Even this limited activity strained the community's meager resources and, refusing to extend a plea for emergency operating revenues, the Mayor's Commission closed in 1932.<sup>18</sup>

During these years Mayor Overton constantly complained about the unrealistic demands placed upon city government. First, Overton lashed out at the Community Fund, which, he claimed, "is refusing to help us and are spending their money paying salaries and the like." More frequently, he lamented, "The entire burden of taking care of the unemployed is being put on the cities . . ." Why, he repeatedly asked Congressman Crump, could not the federal government assume a larger role? In one of many letters he sent to Crump regarding the worsening situation in 1931-1932, he wrote: "I wonder if it would be possible to try to get the Federal Government to try to employ some of these unemployed on river work. I know there is a lot they could do if they would."<sup>19</sup>

The city government could have done more but not without incurring a much greater deficit. In 1929 the city's net debt was \$25,553; by 1933 it had increased only to \$27,386. Municipal expenditures necessarily remained low, because tax revenues trickled in at a snail's pace. Assessed property valuations, always comfortably low for premium commercial establishments, remained so. Owners of more expensive homes and friends of the Crump machine faced lower actual levies than did less affluent homeowners who typically suffered more in the Depression. The inability or unwillingness of taxpayers to meet their obligations further diminished the resources available to city officials. Mayor Overton reported to Crump in late 1931 that \$1.5 million in delinquent taxes remained unpaid; by 1933

<sup>18</sup> "Public Works Program, Memphis, Tennessee," September 1938 (MPL); *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 2, 1933.

<sup>19</sup> Watkins Overton to E. H. Crump, December 21, 1931, Folder 33, Box 3, Watkins Overton Papers, Mississippi Valley Collection (Memphis State University Library, Memphis, Tenn.). See also Overton to Kenneth D. McKellar, telegram, January 28, 1932, Folder 34, Box 3, *ibid.*

that figure exceeded \$4.6 million. Only then did the city launch a massive, though ultimately unsuccessful, drive to collect back taxes.<sup>20</sup>

To generate the payment of delinquent taxes the city employed several tactics: Mayor Overton asked the Real Estate Board to urge its clients to pay back levies; the city announced a special dispensation waiving costs, commissions, or penalties for any taxpayers owing unpaid levies from 1921 to 1931; and City Attorney Walter Chandler produced a brochure, "Progress Promoted By Taxes," in which he listed all of the municipally funded improvements—improvements, of course, dependent upon taxes—enjoyed by the citizens of Memphis. By imploring, cajoling, threatening, and reasoning, the administration conducted an extensive campaign to collect back taxes; they were met, however, with unified and concerted opposition. Far from a haphazard effort by scattered individuals, resistance to payment crystallized into a formal organization—the Property Owners Association. This group employed newspaper ads, radio appeals, and telephone campaigns to advance its cause. Members even staged demonstrations in the city commission chambers, totally disrupting official government functions on several occasions. As a result of such spirited opposition, tax delinquency remained a severe problem throughout the decade.<sup>21</sup>

The city, lacking full revenue, failed to contribute more than a token amount for relief and was forced to cut other expenditures to keep from going heavily in the red. This resulted in paltry appropriations for vital city services. Memphis, the thirty-sixth largest city in the nation, spent overall only \$18.21 per capita in 1933, ranking sixty-fifth out of the sixty-eight cities with over 120,000 population and leading only Chattanooga, Birmingham, and San Antonio. For health and sanitation, Memphis ranked fortieth with a per capita expenditure of \$1.84. For charities, hospitals, and corrections it ranked fifty-third, spending \$1.45. And most disgraceful, for education its annual per capita outlay of \$7.06 ranked sixty-sixth nationally. In 1937 a U. S. Office of Education study listed Memphis dead last in that category. The city's school system went broke for several months in 1932, and schools remained open in 1933 only because teachers, who actually went unpaid for months at a time, accepted a

<sup>20</sup> U. S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1932*, p. 217; U. S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1934* (Washington, 1934), 213; Overton to Crump, December 7, 1931, Folder 33, Box 3, Overton Papers; Walter Chandler, "Progress Promoted By Taxes," December 1933, Folder 7, Box 12, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street*, 199; Chandler, "Progress Promoted By Taxes," Overton Papers; Overton to Crump, April 27, 1932, Folder 37, Box 3, Overton Papers; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1944.

17 percent salary cut.<sup>22</sup>

With municipal government scrupulously playing a limited role, it fell to the community's citizens to organize whatever ad hoc organizations they could to meet the crisis. Soon after the demise of the Mayor's Commission in 1932, a group of prominent residents formed the Committee of One Hundred to deal with unemployment. The committee, short-lived and lacking a clear mandate, sought only to duplicate the earlier limited efforts of the Mayor's Commission. Another voluntary organization, Community Kitchens, Incorporated, dispensed hot meals to indigents. Dependent upon gifts from merchants, it could afford to serve only one meal a day before closing abruptly in 1933 for lack of donations. A more unorthodox experiment, the Unemployed Citizens' League of Memphis, yielded only slightly better results; members of this cooperative bartered their labor for food, secondhand clothing, and furniture. Articles of payment went into the co-op's inventory where they could be purchased by other members. In February 1933 all work commissioned by the cooperative yielded wages or barter totaling \$23.85; the March profit amounted to \$6.50. Ultimately, this flirtation with communalism failed simply for lack of money.<sup>23</sup>

Fully engaged at last in the battle against the Depression, the *Commercial Appeal* joined with other civic groups to sponsor fundraising enterprises. It also made its classified advertisement columns free to all prospective employers, and while the paper carried approximately seventy-five free "help wanted" ads daily, only a few hundred persons secured work during the several months' life of the experiment. Jobs were in such short supply that the paper's editors looked elsewhere to promote recovery. Noting that the economic health of Memphis and the entire Mid-South region depended heavily on cotton, the paper surmised that an assault on the one-crop economy would compel farmers to grow food crops and thus lead to a more enviable diversification. That the idea of reducing the amount of cotton planted interested Memphians, and not just those farmers living in the surrounding countryside, was demonstrated by the involvement of the city's chamber of commerce in the paper's scheme. Dubbing the campaign "Plant to Prosper," *Commercial Appeal* editor Frank Ahlgren launched it as a contest in 1934.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> U. S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1935* (Washington, 1935), 220-21; Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street*, 170; Overton to Crump, February 19, 1932, Folder 35, Box 3, Overton Papers. On the plight of the schools see David M. Hilliard, "The Development of Public Education in Memphis, 1848-1945" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1946).

<sup>23</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, March 25, 26, 1932, July 27, 1933; "The Barter Movement in Memphis," *Monthly Labor Review*, XXXVI (April 1933), 769.

<sup>24</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, November-December 1930; Everett R. Cook, *Memphis*,

The creators of the contest sought to encourage compliance with the Bankhead Cotton Control Act, which provided for compulsory reduction of cotton by limiting the amount of land in production. The goal was the cultivation of less cotton and more food, thus creating greater self-sufficiency. Under the rules of the contest, the winning farmers in several categories ("best use of land removed from cotton in the reduction program, soil conservation, home improvement, and preservation of food and seed") were awarded cash, emblems, and certificates of merit. In its first year 1,780 farmers, cultivating 469,000 acres of land, entered the contest. In subsequent years, participation and prize money increased. Officials in 1936 divided the entrants into two categories: landowners, and sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In 1938 they added yet another category for blacks who owned no land. By 1940 more than 50,000 families had entered, and its founders could boast that the overwhelmingly successful program, the subject of several magazine articles, had been copied in other parts of the country and abroad.<sup>25</sup>

The community's concern with low cotton prices led to another Depression-era innovation, Cotton Carnival. Based upon the Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola, and the Veiled Prophets' Carnival in St. Louis, it could not claim, as the others did, to have any particular religious significance. From the outset Cotton Carnival was a business venture that sought to stimulate interest in the product at a time when market prices had dramatically fallen. As a stimulus to economic recovery, it failed; as a symbolic event, however, Cotton Carnival assumed a significant role. Conceived by wealthy businessmen, it became the best-known and certainly the most generously endowed community response to the Depression. Its genesis and subsequent development shed considerable light on local priorities.<sup>26</sup>

Members of the Chamber of Commerce thought of resurrecting the Reconstruction-era Memphis Mardi Gras with a cotton motif. They turned the project over to Everett R. Cook, president of the Memphis Cotton Exchange, who sold the idea to the city's prominent businessmen. (Cook also had the good sense to enlist the support of Crump, thus ensuring the success of the venture.) Cook served as president of the first carnival in 1931, which chose the "Old South" as its theme. This seemed an appropriate title since blacks as well as horses and

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*Cotton's Market Place* (Memphis, 1942), 13; interview with Frank Ahlgren, Memphis State University Oral History Project, Mississippi Valley Collection.

<sup>25</sup> Cook, *Memphis, Cotton's Market Place*, 13; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 1, 1934, February 10, 11, 12, 1935, April 10, 1938, January 1, 1940.

<sup>26</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 2, 1931.

mules pulled the floats. Almost immediately the elitism and exclusivity of participation resulted in the founding of secret societies open only to the wealthy and well born.<sup>27</sup>

Barred from equal participation in Cotton Carnival festivities, blacks formed their own annual celebration, "The Beale Street Cotton Makers' Fiesta." Despite opposition from whites who refused to permit advertising for the gala on Main Street and from many resentful blacks who found no reason to celebrate the role of cotton in Afro-American history, the festival survived, in large part because of the generous support of the local black American Legion post. Later renamed the Cotton Makers' Jubilee, it lasted as a segregated institution into the 1980s.<sup>28</sup>

The Memphis Cotton Carnival, a lavish spectacle closed to all but a relatively few insiders, struck many citizens as an insensitive display of wealth at a time of widespread misery. Moreover, its goal to elevate cotton prices defined recovery in terms that advanced the city's wealthy cotton interests. While it could be argued that the carnival's "trickle-down" effect would benefit all the people, the inattention of wealthy merchants to persistent unemployment seemed to indicate a consistent self-interest and lack of altruism. Those in a position to contribute significantly to relief did so sparingly. Indeed, the philosophy behind Cotton Carnival was in harmony with the approach to Depression-induced hard times espoused by Memphis decision makers. City hall closely adhered to a policy of low taxes and limited expenditures, while striving for a balanced budget. The Chamber of Commerce averred that the road out of destitution led to "more business in government, less government in business," a view echoed by the ledger-minded *Commercial Appeal*. It intoned:

The *Commercial Appeal* long ago took the position that two objectives were necessary to put business back on its feet in this country: 1. Reduce the cost of government. 2. Get the government out of business . . . . This government cannot exist with one-half of the people paying taxes to keep up the other half.<sup>29</sup>

Reacting to the prospect of increasing participation by the federal government in recovery, the paper warned that "political nostrums never solved an economic problem." As the presidential election of 1932 approached, the *Commercial Appeal* noted sadly that "nothing short of a miracle" could prevent the defeat of the incumbent. Yet it

<sup>27</sup> Ed Weathers, "Carnival Knowledge," *City of Memphis*, II (April 1977), 34-35; Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 164.

<sup>28</sup> Weathers, "Carnival Knowledge," 34.

<sup>29</sup> Memphis Chamber of Commerce, "Annual Report, 1931," p. 32 (MPL); *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1933.

took comfort in the fact that the Democratic front-runner, Governor Roosevelt of New York, seemed to understand the importance of fiscal orthodoxy. Others were not as sanguine. The Memphis Cotton Exchange and the Memphis Merchants' Exchange sent telegrams to Senator McKellar urging the nomination of the more conservative Albert C. Ritchie of Maryland. They suspected that Roosevelt might be too "socialistic" in his outlook toward business. Clearly, in the last days of the Hoover presidency, Memphis community leaders continued to cling to a most conservative economic and political view — one opposed to any sort of "new deal."<sup>30</sup>

During the "Hundred Days" of feverish legislative activity stimulated by the new president, the uncertainty with which his vague campaign promises had been greeted gave way to genuine enthusiasm. By moving first to safeguard the country's banks and credit system, Roosevelt assured conservatives that the major thrust of his "new deal" would be preservative, not destructive. His continued obedience to the sacrosanct balanced budget, as demonstrated in the Economy Act, further assuaged the fears of the business community. Admittedly, some of the administration's bolder initiatives gave the *Commercial Appeal's* editors pause, but they continued to support the president. Maintaining that "natural laws" must ultimately decide the fate of farmers, the editors conceded that the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) would not do any harm. Ignoring one of the pillars of fiscal orthodoxy, they endorsed the abandonment of the gold standard and embraced the revolutionary National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) as the "most comprehensive plan for . . . rehabilitation anyone has yet offered." When the "Hundred Days" ended, the paper called the Seventy-third Congress's achievements "momentous" and the president's leadership "courageous."<sup>31</sup>

The Chamber of Commerce also expressed faith in the president's initiatives in the spring of 1933, and Memphis representatives in the U. S. Congress did likewise. Congressman Crump voted for each and every administration bill, in two cases at least drawing the ire of many of his constituents. Remembering that the liquor issue had been used to oust him from the mayoralty seventeen years before, Crump gleefully endorsed the repeal of prohibition, arousing temperance advocates in western Tennessee. And his support of the AAA elicited protest from many of the city's powerful cotton interests who rued the entry of government into their domain. Crump explained his vote to

<sup>30</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, September 6, 1931 (first quotation), October 29, 1932 (second quotation), June 29, 1932.

<sup>31</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, March 24, 1933 (first and second quoted phrases), April 30, 1933, May 1, 1933 (third quotation), June 17, 1933 (fourth and fifth quoted words).



### Memphis Cotton Exchange president Henry Haizlip:

The Farm Bill may or may not afford the remedy. If it does, well and good—if it fails, I have no doubt the President will very quickly chart a new course and tackle the problem from some other angle . . . . I voted for the Farm Bill, hoping and believing that the President would exercise the practically unlimited power which it vests in him, cautiously and wisely.<sup>32</sup>

Because of the indispensability of cotton to the Memphis economy, no New Deal measure commanded more attention than the AAA. Despite initial misgivings on the part of local factors and merchants, the early success of the cotton acreage reduction program allayed many doubts. Certainly the situation had reached desperate straits by 1933; thirteen million bales, three years' supply, had accumulated and, as a result, prices fell to five cents per pound, approximately half of parity. In the initial year of AAA operation, the government plowed under 10,487,991 acres of cotton, prices rose to an average of 9.7 cents per pound, and Department of Agriculture economists estimated that a quarter of a billion dollars in income went to cotton growers. Crop receipts plus benefit payments gave planters more than double the income of the previous year. In 1934 the AAA retired nearly 40 percent of the cotton land normally under cultivation, and prices rose again.<sup>33</sup>

Threats by the U. S. Supreme Court to abrogate the AAA led the *Commercial Appeal* to argue that its dissolution would be "disastrous." When the Court fulfilled its threat in the 1936 Butler decision, the paper called for a speedy replacement, "some sort of regulation, some method of control, some aid to fair price returns." Subsequent bumper crops in cotton, with attendant price drops, renewed demands for federal intervention. The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936, the replacement for AAA, was initially seen as a "fairly good makeshift," but ultimately it proved unsatisfactory because of its voluntary nature. The Second AAA, passed in 1938 as a compulsory measure, received a warm welcome from the newspaper.<sup>34</sup>

Planters and cautious newspaper editors came to embrace the fed-

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 179; Crump to Henry H. Haizlip, March 23, 1933, Folder 44, Box 3, Overton Papers (quotation). See also Thomas H. Coode, "Tennessee Congressmen and the New Deal, 1933-1938," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, XXXI (1977), 132-58.

<sup>33</sup> David Eugene Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana, 1965), 43-49; Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and W. W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (Chapel Hill, 1935), 47-49; Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York, 1936), 29.

<sup>34</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, July 21, 1935 (first quotation), January 7, 1936 (second quotation), August 8, 1937 (third quotation), July 14, 1938.

erally sponsored cotton reduction program not only because prices rose, but also because agency officials administered it in a conservative manner. New Deal incursions into cotton plantations could have disrupted traditional work patterns and, more importantly, economic and class distinctions. The AAA did not. As one agricultural specialist observed in 1935, "the whole action of the AAA to the present time appears to have the effect of not only maintaining the status quo in landlord-tenant relations, but of actually strengthening the foundations upon which they are built." Planters continued to prosper, and tenants eked out a marginal existence—a condition assured by the act's provisions. The government awarded all subsidy payments to landlords who in turn distributed an unspecified portion to their tenants. The landless workers had no voice in the contract between the AAA and landowner and relied totally on the planter to pass along to them a just portion of the government subsidy. AAA representatives even advised planters how to circumvent the few provisions safeguarding the rights of tenants. In a December 1933 visit to Memphis, AAA administrator Oscar G. Johnston counseled landlords that if they signed an AAA contract before reaching an agreement with their tenants, they would not have to share profits. If, however, they already had agreements with tenants, profits would have to be shared. In short, Johnston advised landlords to sign the 1934–1935 contracts before negotiating with their tenants.<sup>35</sup>

The withdrawal of thousands of acres from use made sharecroppers expendable, and the AAA's reluctance to invade the landlord's domain freed them suddenly to release idle workers. Ironically, the federal government's policies laid the foundation for wholesale evictions. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace sent a telegram to the Memphis Chamber of Commerce in which he acknowledged that AAA contracts did not bind landowners to employ the same tenants. As a result some dispossessed sharecroppers were forced to accept "day labor" and remained in the countryside in an increasingly destitute state. Many others picked up and moved into the nearest sizable city; their exodus from the bootheel of Missouri, eastern Arkansas, western Tennessee, and the delta of Mississippi ended in the ramshackle slums of Memphis. New York *Times* reporter Raymond F. Daniell found scores of rural migrants on the city's relief roles, a situation that proved most unsavory to Memphis officials.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Harold Hoffsommer, "The AAA and the Cropper," *Social Forces*, XIII (May 1935), 501 (quotation); Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers*, 52; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, December 12, 1933.

<sup>36</sup> Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From The Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmer's Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill, 1971), 58; Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, 30–31; Wilson Gee, "Acreage Reduction and the Displacement of Farm Labor," *Journal of Farm Economics*,

Lorena A. Hickok, a roving observer for New Deal administrator Harry L. Hopkins, reported the resentment among Memphis businessmen toward these new arrivals. Among the malcontents were "the conservative editor of the conservative Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, who thinks we've got a big rural relief load that will stay on our hands forever, if we don't drop 'em pretty soon" and a wealthy cotton magnate who suggested that "all tenants are lazy beggars and should be treated as serfs and would rather see the price of cotton stay down at five cents a pound forever than be boosted with Government control and Government insistence on any sort of fair play for sharecroppers and laborers." Local leaders encouraged newcomers to return to the countryside, even providing free transportation for those willing to resettle. But for most Memphians involved with cotton, a few unwanted sharecroppers descending on the city constituted a small price to pay for rebounding prices, especially since the care of these indigents fell to the federal government. As Memphis *Press-Scimitar* editor and staunch New Dealer Edward J. Meeman summarized to Hickok: "Take our cotton planters and our merchants here in Memphis. They are a lot better off than they were a year ago. So, aside from kicking a little about Government expense, they're perfectly contented as long as they aren't interfered with."<sup>37</sup>

The business community's accommodation to the New Deal agricultural program after initial misgivings contrasted with its growing disenchantment with the NIRA. At first Memphis greeted the NRA with enthusiasm. The *Commercial Appeal* cited the marching of hundreds behind the blue-eagle banner in an NRA parade as "visible evidence of a community solidly behind the president and committed to the program of the administration." Within a few weeks of the program's launching, 75 percent of the city's manufacturers and retailers displayed blue-eagle emblems as evidence of their participation. The Chamber of Commerce took the lead in urging all businessmen to comply with NRA codes; its president called loyalty to the program "a very definite responsibility." A local businessman, cotton oil magnate Hugh Humphreys, became the NRA's code-compliance director for Tennessee with the state office located in Memphis. For

XVII (August 1935), 522; Clayton R. Robinson, "The Impact of the City on Rural Immigrants to Memphis, 1880-1940" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1967), 80-94; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York and London, 1944), 253-58. Throughout the South farm tenancy declined, so that there were 150,000 fewer blacks so employed in 1940 than in 1930. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 253.

<sup>37</sup> Lorena A. Hickok to Harry L. Hopkins, June 11, 1934, Folder "Reports, May Through August 1934," Box 11, Lorena A. Hickok Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N. Y., hereinafter cited as FDR Library). See also Robinson, "The Impact of the City on Rural Immigrants," 92-93.

the first few months, at least, all signs indicated a hale and hospitable welcome for the NRA in the Bluff City.<sup>38</sup>

By late 1933, however, problems began to surface. In September the NRA's Memphis district office reported wavering loyalty "pending the effective work of the compliance boards." It chronicled the growing disenchantment among those who adhered to the codes while violators, largely ignored by the compliance boards, grew increasingly brazen in their peculations. In February 1934 the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a public meeting to air grievances. Merchants complained about the faculty enforcement provisions, the seemingly endless red tape, and the recurring bureaucratic snafus. Many of their problems, they felt, had to do with overcentralization and an insensitivity to the concerns of southern cities. Specifically they referred to the need for different wage scales for the North and the South, the absence of sufficient representation on the national code authorities by southern industry, and the need for more local code authorities for purely local industries. By mid-1934 the dissatisfaction boiled over into virtual noncompliance, so that when the Supreme Court struck down the NIRA in the 1935 Schechter decision, it merely confirmed existing views in Memphis.<sup>39</sup>

Of most immediate concern to the city, of course, was unemployment and the relief crisis. Given the Overton administration's miserly bent, the provision of millions of federal dollars for local use must have seemed fortuitous. In July 1932 President Hoover authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to provide relief loans to cities, but a political war between Congressman Crump and Tennessee governor Henry Horton delayed the arrival of federal funds until January 1933. In the early months of that year the RFC employed several thousand men to work a maximum of four days per week for \$1.25 to \$2.40 a day on highway construction sites and on creek beds within the city. The RFC-sponsored projects employed fewer than one-third of the idle men registered for work relief; the rest looked to the new, vastly more extensive New Deal programs created in the spring of 1933.<sup>40</sup>

In May 1933 Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief

<sup>38</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 25, 1933 (first quotation), January 13, 1934; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, September 1, 1933 (second quotation); John Dean Minton, *The New Deal in Tennessee, 1932-1938* (New York and London, 1979), 91-92.

<sup>39</sup> "Report from Memphis District Office to Leighton H. Peebles," September 23, 1933, Compliance Records, Records of the NRA, Record Group 9 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.) (quotation); "Report from Hugh Humphreys to John Swope," March 2, 1934, Public Attitude Reports, Records of the NRA, Record Group 9; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 11, 1935.

<sup>40</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 23, 1933; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 6, October 5, 1933; Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street*, 178.

Administration (FERA) and authorized it to distribute 500 million dollars through state and local agencies. Immediately Governor Hill McAlister named the Tennessee State Relief Administration (later renamed the Tennessee Emergency Relief Administration [TERA]) to preside over the dispensing of both direct and work relief. For the former, it distributed salt pork, eggs, clothing, shoes, and coal to the needy of Memphis; for the latter, it employed jobless men to clean streets and drain ditches. Despite these efforts great numbers of Memphians remained outside of the federal government's relief net. By late 1933, with winter approaching, it became evident that FERA's resources would be inadequate and additional federal assistance necessary.<sup>41</sup>

The Civil Works Administration (CWA) assumed control of work relief in November 1933. Unlike the FERA, the CWA did not operate through state and local intermediaries but paid wages directly to workers. Created as a stopgap measure to help the unemployed through the winter, it disbanded promptly in the spring of 1934. During its brief existence, the CWA funneled over \$2 million into Memphis and at its height employed some 8,000 men. Even so, fewer than one-third of the city's idle received jobs from the CWA which, like the FERA before it, lacked the funds commensurate with the gravity of the conditions. As late as April 1934 the FERA remained the only federal agency dispensing relief to cities and in quantities far below that of the previous months.<sup>42</sup>

In May 1934 the Public Works Administration (PWA) office opened in Memphis. Unlike other New Deal agencies that concentrated on short-term, low-cost projects for the unemployed, the PWA made grants to cities for large-scale construction projects. (The cities had to augment these grants with sizable contributions of their own.) In PWA projects, about 70 percent of funds went for materials and the remaining 30 percent for wages. Since "make work" was never a goal, the agency directly employed relatively few men; moreover, the PWA hired indiscriminately, not just from the relief roles, so that it had only an incidental impact on gross unemployment figures. Nevertheless, the amount of money spent and the construction projects completed constitute a formidable list; all told, the PWA lavished \$8,494,048 on Memphis. (The city spent over \$14 million, mostly obtained from loans.) Buildings erected included John Gaston

<sup>41</sup> Minton, *The New Deal in Tennessee*, 64-65; Virginia Ashcraft, "History of Public Welfare Legislation in Tennessee" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1947), 160-62.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 151-54. For a comprehensive list of CWA projects in Memphis, see Memphis Municipal Reference Library, "Public Works Program," n.p., 1938 (MPL).

Hospital, a new grain elevator, the juvenile court, dormitories at the University of Tennessee Medical School, and several public schools. Improvements for streets, parks, bridges, sewers, and drainage ditches accompanied construction. In conjunction with the Army Corps of Engineers, PWA workers built Riverside Drive along the Mississippi River, providing the city a safe thoroughfare at the base of the bluffs.<sup>43</sup>

PWA largess also made possible the construction of the first public housing projects in Memphis. Mayor Overton in 1934 created a municipal housing commission to investigate the need for slum clearance and to select sites for construction. On the basis of its recommendation, the PWA authorized the building of two projects on cleared bayou slum areas adjacent to downtown at a cost of \$6.5 million: Lauderdale Courts with 449 units for whites and Dixie Homes containing 663 units for blacks. Both complexes, which limited tenant selection to families whose income totaled less than \$1,000 a year and charged rent of \$15–\$16 per month, opened in 1938. By that time the U. S. Housing Authority had assumed the functions of the PWA's Housing Division and promised aid for three additional public housing projects: Lamar Terrace (478 units for whites) opened on May 1, 1940, William H. Foote Homes (900 units for blacks) on August 10, 1940, and LeMoyné Gardens (500 units for blacks) on December 4, 1941.<sup>44</sup>

President Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 to employ men at higher wages than the relief rate. Recognizing that “make work” had little intrinsic value, he nonetheless favored it over the dole. Organized in July, the Tennessee WPA absorbed the work-relief program of the TERA. By late summer the WPA was employing 7,000 Memphians, most of whom performed manual labor. WPA administrators set them to work repairing streets, digging ditches, painting buildings, and resurfacing sidewalks—all low-cost maintenance assignments. A few major construction projects were undertaken, most notably the erection of Crump Stadium and additions to the municipal airport.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston and Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 266–67; City of Memphis, “Public Works Program, January 1, 1928–August 31, 1938,” n.p., n.d., Folder 12, Box 8, Overton Papers; Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, May 6, 1937; Department of Streets, Bridges, and Sewers, “Annual Report, 1935,” Drawer 1, Mayors’ Office Files (Memphis-Shelby County Archives, Memphis, Tenn., hereinafter cited as MSCA); Memphis Municipal Reference Library, “Public Works Program.”

<sup>44</sup> “Memphis in the Heart of the Mid-South: A Story of Progress Made Possible By Taxes,” n.p., 1936, Drawer 1, Mayors’ Office Files; Minton, *The New Deal in Tennessee*, 112–13; William F. Larsen, *New Homes for Old: Publicly Owned Housing in Tennessee* (Knoxville, 1948), 21–22; Memphis Housing Authority, “More Than Housing,” Annual Report of the MHA, 1939 (MPL).

<sup>45</sup> Minton, *The New Deal in Tennessee*, 70–72; City of Memphis, “Public Works Program,

By 1938, when Congress mandated draconian cuts in relief appropriations, the WPA had spent \$5.2 million on work relief in Memphis, a substantial contribution but considerably less than the PWA spent in Memphis over a comparable period. The disparity can be accounted for, at least in part, by the incompetence of the local WPA office. In 1936, for instance, a greater number of certified persons awaited placement than actually held make-work jobs. Local director Tate Pease went about his work so slowly and haphazardly that the city's job quota went unfilled for months at a time. Mayor Overton, recognizing Pease's shortcomings, spoke of him as likeable but "a little old to keep up with details." City engineer Will Fowler was less charitable, calling Pease "a senile old man." Despite these criticisms, Pease, a loyal Crump supporter of long standing, kept his patronage job.<sup>46</sup>

This seemingly cavalier attitude toward relief surfaced in several other ways. Memphis had the distinction, for example, of being the last major southern city to establish a permanent welfare department. In 1935 the city's board of commissioners created the Memphis Welfare Commission, composed of volunteers serving without pay to "study, investigate, and cooperate with all agencies now operating in the city." As the language of its charter made clear, the commission existed to coordinate efforts among existing federal, state, and philanthropic agencies and not to spend municipal money. Mayor Overton assured his constituents that it "is not an organization for using tax money to buy groceries." Concerned about the number of recipients receiving aid to which they might not be entitled and skeptical of the thoroughness of the WPA's screening process, the Welfare Commission devoted much of its time to investigating all relief applications for WPA certification. Those families fortunate enough to be found needy received the "princely" sum of \$18.51 per month.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, members of the Chamber of Commerce registered their indignation when WPA employees refused to relinquish their "make work" to pick cotton in the surrounding fields. The chairman of the chamber's agriculture committee, owner of an Arkansas cotton plantation, called upon the local WPA office to suspend all work until the cotton harvest ended. The federal government intervened to keep the

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January 1, 1928–August 31, 1938," Overton Papers.

<sup>46</sup> City of Memphis, "Public Works Program, January 1, 1928–August 31, 1938," Overton Papers; Overton to Crump, July 19, 1937, Drawer 7, Mayors' Office Files (first quotation); Will Fowler to Harry S. Berry, n.d., Drawer 7, *ibid.* (second quotation).

<sup>47</sup> Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 265–66; Memphis Board of Commissioners, "Resolution," December 3, 1935, Folder 9, Box 10, Overton Papers (first quotation); Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, July 9, December 14, 1935 (second quotation); Memphis Welfare Commission, "Annual Report, 1936," Drawer 1, Mayors' Office Files.

WPA in operation, but the city forced many relief recipients off the welfare rolls because they were able to pick cotton. Such a policy had the dual benefits of aiding the planters and paring down the relief rolls. In the end it was federal agencies that picked up most of the relief tab, costing the city very little, but Memphis still took pride in the fact that 56 percent of its families had never received any assistance.<sup>48</sup>

The advent of New Deal relief and employment agencies simply reinforced the city government's aversion to spending its own money. From January 1933 until September 1934 Shelby County depended entirely on federal and state funds for its \$2 million expenditure for emergency relief. In 1937 the county allocated one-tenth of one percent of its budget for welfare payments, while authorizing more money for maintenance of public golf courses. WPA chief Harry Hopkins found Memphis guilty of shirking its duty, a charge that Mayor Overton denied by arguing that Memphis had done more than its share in 1931-1932 before the federal government had become involved. Since that time, the mayor asserted, "it was definitely understood that the city of Memphis needed its funds to care for increased burdens on its institutions which provide for this entire section." That Hopkins did not share this view apparently bothered Overton not at all. As one historian noted, Crump and Overton "applauded the involvement of Washington in welfare while organizing a local relief apparatus only marginally sympathetic to the jobless and indigent." Elmer Scott, a WPA administrator, observed, "Memphis gave the distinct feeling that a warm welcome was extended to government concerning itself in the plight of the unemployed, and paying the bills—as long as it is the *Federal* government. The local city and county government thus also welcomes absolution from responsibility—moral or financial."<sup>49</sup>

Referring to the feelings of the community as a whole, not just to the leadership, the same observer concluded: "Thus the local conscience is atrophical and that is in itself the greatest tragedy." Another WPA visitor, Lorena Hickok, also commented on the apathy of the populace. She wrote to Hopkins:

One thing I've noticed particularly. That is that people outside the relief

<sup>48</sup> Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, September 9, 1936, March 22, 1937.

<sup>49</sup> Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, February 18, 1935; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Financial Statistics of Cities Over 100,000 Population, 1937* (Washington, 1940), 186-87; Overton to Hill McAlister, August 30, 1933, Folder 7, Box 47, Hill McAlister Papers (State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.) (first quotation); Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 264-65 (second quotation); Elmer Scott to Harry Hopkins, April 15, 1934, Folder "Tennessee Field Reports, 1933-1936," Container 60, Group 24, Harry L. Hopkins Papers (FDR Library).



business aren't thinking much about it. They are more like they used to be last summer, when things were booming and, if they were conscious of relief at all, they were bored by it—not critical, just bored. . . . The comment you usually hear is, 'You've got a lot of people on relief who are there to stay as long as you'll let them.' And that's all they have to say. No criticism. No condemnation. They're just indifferent.<sup>50</sup>

Memphis gave only cursory attention to the relief crisis during the Depression, a response in keeping with its traditional refusal to allocate funds for indigent care. These unfortunates, always a small minority, multiplied during the Great Depression and assumed greater visibility, but they still fell far short of a majority of the population. Moreover, many were considered "undesirable" groups—blacks, recent rural migrants, and members of the lower classes. Any New Deal enterprise serving such a constituency naturally met with ambivalence, if not with outright hostility. Despite some reservations about specific federal initiatives, the Democratic leadership of Memphis remained firmly in the Roosevelt fold. As a Democrat in a solidly one-party region, Boss Crump could be expected to hew the party line, but his loyalty was such that he could rightfully claim to be a consistent New Dealer.

First as a congressman and later as a private citizen, the Memphis boss fell in line behind all New Deal measures. While serving in the House, Crump voted for every Roosevelt-endorsed law, remained unstinting in his praise of the New Deal, and argued that "Roosevelt . . . has done more for the South than any President—aid to the farmers, public works, TVA . . . ." Noting in 1940 that "there is tremendous sentiment against Roosevelt," Crump rejoined: "There wouldn't be any, however, if every one was fair enough to compare conditions when he went in and now." Crump's cohort, Senator McKellar, evinced the same loyalty, not only voting "right" but also championing some of the more controversial administration measures in the South. When speculation surfaced that the Crump machine would desert Roosevelt in his 1944 reelection bid, McKellar wrote reassuringly to the president: "Enclosed please find an interview given out by Mr. Edward H. Crump to the *Commercial Appeal*. . . . He is one of your tried and true friends from 1931-32 to date, who has always upheld and supported you. You have never had to bother about Tennessee and you will not have to do so this time." Roosevelt responded, "Ed's interview was typical and I got quite a chuckle out of it. He is in a class by himself."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Scott to Hopkins, April 15, 1934, Folder "Tennessee Field Reports, 1933-1936," Container 60, Group 24, Hopkins Papers; Lorena Hickok to Hopkins, June 11, 1934, Folder "Reports, May Through August 1934," Box 11, Hickok Papers.

<sup>51</sup> McIlwaine, *Memphis Down in Dixie*, 379-80 (first quotation); Crump to McKellar, Sep-

The president's reply seems to indicate that he, like many other distant observers of the Memphis political landscape, found Crump to be a colorful character. According to his biographer, Boss Crump "liked the President's energy, flair, and forcefulness; he was especially impressed with the way in which Roosevelt had risen above his physical handicap." Also, "both were of the aristocracy of their particular regions, yet both came to be thought of as the benefactor of the 'little' man." Although there may have existed a mutual admiration between the two politicians, the strongest bond between them was one of self-interest. As the most powerful figure in Tennessee politics in the thirties, Crump, along with his ally McKellar, held the balance of power in the state. But as head of the Democratic party and godfather of patronage, Roosevelt had much to offer local politicians.<sup>52</sup>

Liberal backers of Roosevelt and the New Deal had some difficulty accepting support for the president from big city bosses. Liberals failed to recognize that the president, a cold-blooded realist, saw in these urban chiefs a source of votes that he could not spurn for reasons of ideological purity. As several recent studies have shown, Roosevelt dealt with these uneasy allies on an ad hoc basis; as long as they delivered the votes and kept their defalcations to an acceptable limit, they were tolerated. If they asserted too much independence or greed, as in the cases of Kansas City's Thomas J. Pendergast or Jersey City's Frank Hague, the administration moved against them. Ed Crump, fortunate enough to maintain his power and sufficiently loyal to the New Deal, remained in the president's good graces.<sup>53</sup>

Even though the Memphis Democratic machine never strayed from the New Deal line, Crump did not always feel at ease with decisions made in Washington. Nor did the boss approve of his fellow New Dealers. Asked what he and other Memphians thought about Roosevelt's "Brains Trust" advisors, Crump responded, "Oh, just a necessary evil, I guess." Particularly galling to the thoroughly southern boss was the New Deal's concern over the issue of race. Admittedly, Roosevelt initiated few efforts designed specifically to aid

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tember 15, 1940, Folder 1940 Sept.-Dec., Box 4, McKellar-Crump Correspondence, Kenneth D. McKellar Papers (MSCA), (second quotation); Jeanne Graham, "Kenneth McKellar's 1934 Campaign: Issues and Events," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, XVIII (1964), 118; Pope, "Senatorial Baron," 240-41; McKellar to Roosevelt, August 30, 1943, President's Personal File 3715, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers (FDR Library) (third quotation); Roosevelt to McKellar, September 14, 1943, *ibid.* (fourth quotation).

<sup>52</sup> Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 179-80.

<sup>53</sup> On Roosevelt and the city bosses see Lyle W. Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses* (Port Washington, N. Y., and London, 1977); Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal* (New York, 1977); Bruce M. Stave, *The New Deal and the Last Hurrah: Pittsburgh Machine Politics* (Pittsburgh, 1970); and Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, Ill., 1984).

blacks; his administration's reputation as pro-civil rights can best be attributed to the unofficial efforts of a few liberals such as Harold L. Ickes, Aubrey Williams, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Nevertheless, these meager efforts, symbolic though they might have been, aroused Crump's ire. By 1944 he found the situation serious enough to write McKellar:

The negro question is looming big in this part of the country—in fact, all over the South. . . . The Roosevelts dug up the negro question. . . . There was a big dinner, social equality—negroes and whites—at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York last Thursday, honoring Walter White, a negro leader. Mrs. Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie spoke, as well as two or three negroes. If they load down the Chicago platform with repeal of Poll Tax, Anti-Lynching and endeavoring to erase the Jim Crowe [*sic*]*—that will certainly be something for us to think about. . . . We may have to be for Roosevelt whether we like it or not, but I would hate to think it wise to be placed in that position.*<sup>54</sup>

Crump need not have worried, for the New Deal made no attempt to interfere with local race relations. The federal government exercised no control over the administration of the city's relief program and its effect on blacks. Long before the U. S. Supreme Court struck down the NIRA, many Memphis employers simply disregarded the codes mandating color-blind wage scales. Local CWA personnel assigned black women to the homes of personal friends for domestic work as a prerequisite for their receiving aid. The National Youth Administration office limited its job training programs for blacks to domestic work in response to the cry that "good help" was becoming increasingly hard to find. The agency's regional director established a policy of not recommending blacks for positions if whites needed work. Segregation proved to be unassailable even in New Deal agencies; Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps that opened throughout the South relied upon strict separation of the races. Boss Crump refused to countenance a mixed CCC facility for Memphis and then raged when the War Department opened only a small camp for blacks in nearby Collierville. Despite the protestations of area whites, the black camp remained in operation. CCC officials, however, did not challenge the local proscription of integration.<sup>55</sup>

Publicly Crump never criticized Roosevelt or the New Deal; pri-

<sup>54</sup> Lorena Hickok to Harry Hopkins, June 11, 1934, Folder "Reports, May Through August 1934," Box 11, Hickok Papers (first quotation); Crump to McKellar, May 29, 1944, Folder May 1944, Box 5, McKellar-Crump Correspondence, McKellar Papers (second quotation).

<sup>55</sup> Gloria Brown Melton, "Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, 1920-1955: A Historical Study" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Washington State University, 1982), 148-49; Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, March 22, 1937; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, July 7, 1935; Minton, *The New Deal in Tennessee*, 60.

vately he occasionally exhibited an independent streak. Crump's hard line against the Congress of Industrial Organizations proved embarrassing to the Democratic party outside the South, and in 1940 Roosevelt attempted in vain to moderate Crump's position. Later the president decided to oppose Senator McKellar's 1946 reelection due to the aged solon's increasing conservatism and implacability. Roosevelt wanted Crump to abandon his longtime ally and throw in with the insurgency, a request that the Memphian refused to honor. Whether Crump demurred out of loyalty to an old crony or out of an informed conviction that McKellar had the power in his native state to withstand the coup, he had the resolve to say no to the president.<sup>56</sup>

Crump clashed with Roosevelt on occasion and balked at the more liberal New Deal experiments, but he remained loyal because of the largess afforded the machine and the autonomy the boss enjoyed in presiding over its distribution. City government appropriated very little money, but Crump was empowered to name local relief agents who took charge of dispensing federal funds. As Douglas L. Smith has noted, "Washington never federalized the TERA." Indeed, no one in the Roosevelt administration protested when Senator McKellar fired TERA director Walter L. Simpson for ordering agency officials to stay out of politics. Moreover, New Dealers in Washington awarded Memphis a number of plums eagerly sought by competing localities, among them the Collierville CCC camp and the regional offices for the NYA and the Home Owners Loan Corporation.<sup>57</sup>

The bulk of federal money came to Memphis under the auspices of federal relief, and with it came patronage. Shelby County, with roughly one-ninth of the state's population, received one-seventh of the WPA jobs. As Tennessee's senior senator, McKellar monopolized almost all of it, much to the chagrin of junior Senator George L. Berry, who protested the inequity. Harry Hopkins backed McKellar as did Postmaster General James A. Farley, who said, "McKellar was my friend, and I certainly tried to prove that I was his." Over the years the combined enrollments of the FERA, CWA, PWA, and WPA brought thousands of jobs to Memphis—jobs which, though created and funded through the federal government, passed into the hands of needy Memphians through the good offices of the Crump organization.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses*, 40; Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 305–306.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, "The New Deal and the Urban South," 145 (quotation); Crump to Hill McAlister, November 6, 1933, Folder 4, Box 20, McAlister Papers; McAlister to Crump, October 10, 1933, *ibid.*; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 20, 1934, November 26, 1940.

<sup>58</sup> Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses*, 46; Pope, "Senatorial Baron," 238 (quotation).

Crump undoubtedly used the WPA for political purposes. Memphis Democrats probably coerced the recently unemployed into repaying their benefactors because laborers not only voted for the machine candidates but also contributed to their campaign chest. The WPA, which had been taken over by the Crump machine, was turned into a veritable army for the purpose of administering collections. Crump opponents complained about such practices with a steady stream of lamentations that turned into a torrent during the 1938 elections. And a few members of the WPA workforce responded to the machine's heavy-handedness with angry letters charging electoral irregularities. A U. S. Senate investigating committee corroborated these allegations but took no action. Even Hopkins tried to foil the Memphis machine. But Crump had become so accustomed to using the WPA as an arm of his political machine that he resented any interference by public works administrators in the local organization. In the heat of the 1938 campaign the miffed boss wrote McKellar: "Harry Hopkins is certainly putting it on thick—these letters for the WPA workers to read (accompanying their paychecks)—telling them they must vote their own choice—no politics—no interference. Is this being done all over the United States or has Senator Berry been getting in some work in Tennessee?"<sup>59</sup>

The New Deal proved to be a boon not just to the Crump machine but to the community as well. By 1938 the various work-relief agencies had spent \$15.6 million on relief and \$6.4 million on housing construction in Memphis. Evidence of the federal government's presence was everywhere—in street and bridge improvements, landscaping in parks, new viaducts and drainage culverts, and countless other improvements to the physical appearance of Memphis. The city could also boast a new and modern airport, hospital, grain elevator, juvenile court facility, and football stadium. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) brought electricity to thousands of homes at a much cheaper rate, and the money spent on improved sanitary facilities, especially in low-lying areas on the periphery of the city, all but eradicated the traditional scourge of the city, malaria.<sup>60</sup>

Despite these highly visible improvements, the Roosevelt administration's popularity had dwindled by the late 1930s in the Bluff City. The president's 1936 reelection bid received the endorsement of the progressive *Press-Scimitar*, but from the *Commercial Appeal*, always more reflective of the community's attitudes, came only

<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, July 26, 1938; Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses*, 46–47; Crump to McKellar, May 10, 1938, Folder May 1938, Box 3, McKellar-Crump Correspondence, McKellar Papers.

<sup>60</sup> City of Memphis, "Public Works Program, January 1, 1928–August 31, 1938," Overton Papers.

ambivalence. The editors raised no objections to Roosevelt, but hoped that he would become less liberal and would give business a "breathing spell." Ambivalence gave way to outright opposition when in 1940 the conservative organ called for the selection of Tennessee Cordell Hull as the Democratic party's presidential candidate. After Roosevelt's nomination, both papers deserted him, and only the strenuous efforts of a worried Boss Crump kept Memphis safely in the president's corner that autumn.<sup>61</sup>

Why had Memphis grown disenchanted with the New Deal? In large part because the New Deal had taken on a decidedly liberal cast over the years. Measures like the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act, linchpins of the Second New Deal, aroused considerable opposition. The federal wage and hour provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act cut deeply into the low-cost incentives Memphis offered northern businessmen who were considering relocation (local businessmen argued that low wages compensated for their higher freight rates.) Southerners were further displeased by the administration's mild endorsement, if not sponsorship of, a federal antilynching law. According to the *Commercial Appeal*, the New Deal had fallen prey to "professional agitators and adventurers" who were taking aim at "southern customs, southern traditions, southern institutions." By 1940 the paper sadly alluded to the "pinkish rind of sociology which surrounds the core of administrative policy" and the "steady and heavy pressure toward the centralization of government."<sup>62</sup>

Although fearful of an expanding federal government dominated by northern liberals, Memphians actually had little cause for concern. While the New Deal had altered the face of the city, in fact, the addition of new buildings, roads, sewers, and parks was essentially a cosmetic change. No clash of titanic forces, one demanding change and the other girded to preserve an older way of life, occurred. Ed Crump and his minions had no intention of altering their city's character, and the federal government made no effort to dislodge the conservative defender of local customs. Roosevelt stopped short of demanding the surrender of local autonomy as the price of federal aid; instead, he worked hand-in-glove with the local Democratic organization—an organization that had an unsavory reputation but produced a rich bounty of Democratic votes. New Deal agencies, controlled by local politicians, dispensed aid to indigents and the

<sup>61</sup> Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, November 1, 1936; Baker, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 301-302, 312-13; Crump to McKellar, September 15, 1940, Folder 1940 Sept.-Dec., Box 4, McKellar-Crump Correspondence, McKellar Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, April 15, 1937, May 3, 1937 (first and second quoted phrases), May 20, 1938; Baker, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 312 (third and fourth quoted phrases).

unemployed but exerted little impact on the majority of the residents. Memphians continued to look to city hall, not to Washington, D. C., for leadership. Inadvertently, federal policy reinforced the essentially rural character of the city, as New Deal farm programs drove thousands of Mid-South sharecroppers and tenant farmers off the land and into the region's major city. Once in Memphis, they continued to infuse the city with rural mores, ideas, and values. Spared encroachments by the federal government, the social structure survived unchanged. Memphis remained a magnet for rural transplants, a haven for conservative cotton interests, the domain of an omnipotent political machine, and the guardian of a rigid racial caste system.