

This editor did more than deliver the news

Seeing poor conditions, man distributed clothes donated from others

The first 100 days of Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term saw numerous bills passed by Congress to provide relief for a suffering nation during the Great Depression. On May 12, 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Act authorized \$500 million to be spent with one-half on direct relief to the states and the other half as matching money. \$1 of federal aid for every \$3 of state and local aid.

It took awhile for the money to actually end up in the pockets of the unemployed (the unemployment rate was 25 percent when there was most likely only one wage earner per household).

In the case of Rock Hill, it took about 15 months for its projects to start. The first project was laying sewage pipes; 250 men were hired for that. Fifty men were sent from Rock Hill to work on the Sugar Creek Bridge, originally called the Bailey's Bridge for James Bailes, who built the first bridge to con-

nect York and Lancaster counties.

A number of Rock Hill projects quickly followed, including a "municipal playground" with a swimming pool, nine-hole golf course, tennis courts and picnic grounds. Re-

pairs were also scheduled for Rock Hill schools. An amphitheater was built at Winthrop University.

Harry Hopkins, the federal administrator, indicated that he thought Southern wages were too low, and a wage scale was published, which listed 30 cents an hour as minimum wage for common labor.

Local businesses fought that furiously. FERA then announced that wages would be scaled down to 15 cents per hour. This meant that re-employed workers would get only half as much as they did formerly. Many of the local cotton mills reduced their work staff considerably, and since more cotton mill workers were women than men, the result was that work had to be found that women

could handle.

Since married people with children got first chance at employment in these new projects, it was a blow to a couple having to work as many hours as one formerly could do.

On Nov. 30, 1934, A.M. Grist, editor of the Yorkville Enquirer, ran a headline in the paper that read "Ragged Hungry Folks ... Old Clothes and Shoes Needed: Cases Reported where Children are Almost Naked."

Grist liked to gather his news by riding around in his green Chevrolet and interviewing people all over the county. He reported that he had found "boys and girls whose feet are bare here at the end of November."

Grist reported that tenant farmers weren't getting relief "because of the peculiar ruling of the FERA." It seems that the administrators thought that people who lived on farms had the means to feed and clothe themselves. There was no consideration of family size.

Grist asked people with old clothes to donate them, and he promised they would be distributed by volunteers like him. The next week he had a carload to dis-

tribute and headed for the Kings Mountain area with a friend. Most of the clothing was "women's wear: dresses and underwear, wraps, coats, hosiery and shoes and a couple of hats."

He had been told of a destitute family whose children couldn't go to school because they had no clothes fit to wear or shoes. When he got there, he found that the house had burned to the ground and the family was scattered. At the next house, he found one of the children, a 14-year-old boy.

"How many were there in your family?" Grist asked.

The boy replied, "I don't know; there was a whole mess of them."

Grist noted that the people sheltering the boy were also "hard up."

He gave the man a suit, the boy a jacket and the girls got high-heeled shoes.

Grist next stopped at a black tenant farmer's home that he described as one where the winds of winter would go straight through the roof like a sieve. There were 12 in the family with the oldest child at 15 years of age. He left all the shoes after the mother told him that her boys could wear the women's shoes.

"Things were just as bad at the next house and the house after that one. Grist emptied his car and returned to Yorkville a very depressed man.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

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