

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 64
Number 3 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Volume
64, Number 3*

Article 5

1985

Ready Cash on Easy Terms: Local Responses to the Depression in Lee County

R. Lyn Rainard



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Rainard, R. Lyn (1985) "Ready Cash on Easy Terms: Local Responses to the Depression in Lee County," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 64: No. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol64/iss3/5>

READY CASH ON EASY TERMS: LOCAL RESPONSES TO THE DEPRESSION IN LEE COUNTY

by R. LYN RAINARD

WHEN the Great Depression spread to southwest Florida, it caught an unprepared population by surprise. In response, the people of Lee County united in an effort to use local public and private resources to alleviate want. Although moderately successful at first, community efforts alone could not surmount the hardship brought by the Depression. Only massive federal aid would accomplish that goal, bringing in its wake, however, other unforeseen results. New Deal programs did reduce economic trauma, but they also fundamentally altered attitudes about the causes of poverty and about the purpose of federal assistance. Ultimately, New Deal grants were used for unnecessary and extravagant, though prestigious, community improvements. Assisting the poor became a purely incidental goal.

As late as the spring of 1930 it appeared that the economic maelstrom shaking the rest of the nation would leave Lee County and its county seat of Fort Myers relatively untouched. Local newspapers reported a booming economy— with hotels full of visitors, new construction, both planned and underway, and projections of population growth to 75,000 within a decade. Such harbingers of disaster as a decline in county building permits and the arrival of bands of ragged transients were ignored. The leader of the Fort Myers American Legion scorned the northern refugees of the Depression, explaining that “very few such beggars are worthy of any help whatsoever.” Their plight came from an unwillingness to work, not from a vast and impersonal economic catastrophe.¹

When the Depression struck, it introduced Lee County to

R. Lyn Rainard is assistant professor of history, Tidewater Community College, Chesapeake, Virginia.

1. *Fort Myers Press*, December 4, 1929, January 1, March 12, 13, July 2, 1930; *Fort Myers Tropical News*, September 24, 1930.

the twin tragedies of record unemployment and widespread hunger. Although the two forms of hardship were obviously linked, neither public nor private agencies in the county were prepared to attack both simultaneously. The magnitude of the Depression prompted relief efforts that focused either on feeding the hungry or employing those in need of work. From the start re-employment claimed the most attention, but it was efforts to ameliorate hunger that first introduced the county to the advantages of federal money.

At the onset, Fort Myers Mayor Josiah H. Fitch announced that "it is the duty of the city administration to endeavor to relieve as far as possible the unfortunate condition existing at present in Fort Myers due to lack of employment of the laboring class." He then established a city employment bureau and directed it to locate work in the private sector. Within the week positions had been found for the forty-eight white job seekers, and twelve of the fifty-four unemployed black men and women had been placed in the sugar mills of Clewiston, fifty miles away.²

Unrelated financial difficulties dating back to 1923 had already forced cuts in city and county services. The city government had curtailed public works programs by forty-one per cent and cut funds to Lee Memorial, the local hospital, by fifty per cent. As a result, early attempts to alleviate want were dependent on private sector employment and voluntary financial support. Mayor Fitch's city employment bureau simply could not meet the needs created by persistent unemployment.³

To fill the void left by inadequate city and county programs, the Kiwanis Club set up a committee to stimulate employment in private enterprise and also temporarily to employ the remaining jobless at dollar-a-day public works projects until more lucrative jobs could be found. They intended to keep every unemployed worker laboring at a task, no matter how insignificant, and earning wages, no matter how small, until permanent place-

2. *Fort Myers Tropical News*, January 27, 28, 1931; Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 398.

3. Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers* (Fort Myers, 1949), 228-32; *Fort Myers Press*, July 10, 1930; *Fort Myers Tropical News*, September 20, May 3, 1930; Fort Myers City Council, *Minute Book*, Vol. VII, March 10, 1933, addendum, p. 4 (hereinafter cited as *Minute Book*, with appropriate volume, date, and page number. *Minute Books* are located at the Fort Myers City Hall).

ment could be achieved. The club asked local citizens making more than day labor wages to contribute not less than twenty-five cents weekly to help finance the program. The needy, they concluded, could be supported through local donations and individual exertions.⁴

Club members immediately recognized that the emergency demanded resources beyond their limited means. In response, they called together seventeen other county civic associations to organize the Fort Myers Employment Council and to implement fund raising and employment assistance plans on a grander scale with beneficence restricted to the "worthy." J. G. Holst, Ronald Halgrim, and Walter Edelblut, three leaders of the council, collected data to determine genuine need prior to granting assistance. Each applicant had to complete a questionnaire providing detailed information on varied subjects including residency, personal property, and health. Within a week thirty men had been hired by the Employment Council and sent to supplement the city maintenance corps. The council supplied the funds to hire the unemployed while the city provided supervision and public works projects. Public and private sectors cooperated to alleviate hardship.⁵

By the third week of September council members congratulated themselves that all white families would be off welfare rolls within sixty days. Work had been located and wages paid for 115 men who willingly accepted dollar-a-day jobs. Moreover, their efforts had attracted favorable national attention. Allan Johnston, a representative of President Hoover, charged with investigating conditions in the southeastern states, inspected the local program and confirmed that "the manner in which this city has cared for its unemployed has attracted considerable at-

4. *Fort Myers News-Press*, August 20, 27, 1931.

5. Participating groups included the Kiwanis, Ministerial Association, Merchants Association, American Legion, Rotary Club, Elks Club, Realty Board, Knights of Columbus, Woman's Community Club, Fellowcraft Club, Junior Business Women's Club, East End Citizens League, Tropical Lodge of Masons, Business and Professional Women's Club, Chamber of Commerce, and Plant, Flower, and Fruit Guild. See *Fort Myers News-Press*, August 28, September 4, 1931; Fred Loudermilk, "History and Events of Rabe O. Wilkinson, Post 38, The American Legion, 1930-1931," in Art Tolp, "A History of Rabe O. Wilkinson Post 38, The American Legion; Fort Myers, Florida," unpublished typescript at the Fort Myers Historical Museum.

tention." He went on to warn the city, however, that while the Depression might ease with the winter harvest, it would intensify as seasonal low employment returned with warmer weather and thus relief efforts could not be short-lived. Current success, though, captured more attention than jeremiads.⁶

As the opening of the citrus- and truck-farming activities relieved the council of the burden of furnishing employment, the number of men employed in public works dwindled to ten daily by mid-November. In its two months of operation the Employment Council aided 180 men. In that period of time \$1,226.46, most of which had been raised on the twenty-five-cents-a-week basis, had been expended. Every week the council had fielded two crews— one black, one white— assigned to such tasks as cleaning the city cemetery, improving the local golf course, maintaining McGregor Boulevard, and clearing Edison Park, East End, and various other parkways. Still, the efforts of the council had never equaled the task. Never had the employment fund been adequate to hire the entire number of men in need of work, and the relief system was overburdened by transients in search of food and employment who traveled to Florida to escape the cold northern winters.⁷

As the summer of 1932 approached local organizations again settled on a scheme to stimulate private building and to return to the "income-tax," or weekly subscription assessment, on all employed persons as the means of financing work relief. Mayor Fitch urged the Employment Council to establish a two-dollar-a-day pay schedule, but the council feared they would lure cheap labor away from the citrus groves and thus refused. Thirty solicitors then began canvassing the entire county in search of funds. Weekly contributions of twenty-five cents, fifty cents, or one dollar were sought from individual workers, whereas businessmen were asked to contribute one per cent of their payroll. Within a few days \$1,000 had been pledged. The initial flurry of donations, though, subsided as the constant plea for charity left people insensitive to the needs of the poor and unwilling to meet the seemingly endless demand for support. The desperately needed \$6,000 dollars proved an unattainable goal. The council announced on May 1 that receipts were forty per

6. *Fort Myers News-Press*, September 23, 26, 29, 1931.

7. *Ibid.*, November 8, 18, 1931.

cent below those of 1931, and that anticipated large donations had never materialized. Only 260 persons had agreed to make regular contributions, leaving the council less than \$100 weekly to employ and assist over 100 families. Furthermore, the council predicted that the number of people seeking employment would grow beyond the 300 families already receiving federal surplus food distributed by the Red Cross.⁸

From the beginning needy citizens had depended on charity for sustenance as well as employment. The earliest efforts to help the poor had centered on providing food and clothing rather than employment through the area's principal welfare agency, the Lee County Welfare Federation. When local government funds became inadequate the agency sought public donations. These never matched the need, and when the Welfare Federation failed to meet local requirements civic associations provided support.⁹

As early as February 1930, the Elizabeth Benevolent Society, one of the oldest charitable organizations in the county, raised funds and made clothing for the Welfare Federation. Other benevolent orders and individuals also assisted. The Elks Club's annual Christmas drive provided for the destitute during the holidays, bakeries donated day-old bread, and the director of the Barron Collier Bridge dedication festivities in Punta Gorda contributed three barrels of fish. Another 225 pounds of fish supplied 150 families with two fish each. Still, early community efforts were sporadic and without organization.¹⁰

More substantial and better organized relief efforts were pioneered in 1931 by the Fellowcraft Club, a branch of the local Masonic Lodge. A Follies benefit held at the city's "Pleasure Pier" for an admission donation brought in sixteen barrels of food, scores of garments and shoes, and an unreported amount

8. *Ibid.*, March 30, April 7, 8, 24, May 1, 1932. The charge that government jobs unfairly competed with private ones was eventually voiced in Fort Myers. See William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, 1963), 92.

9. *Fort Myers Press*, February 17, September 24, 1930.

10. *Fort Myers Tropical News*, December 24, 1930; *Fort Myers Press and Tropical News*, July 7, 1931; *Fort Myers News-Press*, August 29, 1931. In June 1985, the author sent an eighteen-item questionnaire to Depression-era Lee County residents. Seven of the twenty questionnaires were returned, and those are on file in the Fort Myers Historical Museum. See W. Stanley Hanson, Jr., to author's questionnaire, July 12, 1985; Mary W. Sheppard to author's questionnaire, July 1985.

of money, all intended for local distribution. Under the direction of Mrs. Robert R. Gresham, 102 families received immediate help. Blacks of the "Safety Hill" district of the city, objected to having been ignored. About 125 strong, "ragged, unkempt and claiming to be hungry, they stormed the office of County Judge L. Y. Redwine . . . begging for food," but were easily dispersed by the police. The Fellowcrafts responded to the criticism and demonstration by opening a downtown distribution center to serve blacks and whites alike.¹¹

While civic associations and charitable-minded individuals continued their efforts to provide food and clothing to the needy, Walter Edelblut, in charge of directing the societies' welfare program, collected data to determine each family's true condition and the causes of discomfort. People deemed able but unwilling to work were cast beyond the pale. Of the ninety-three families applying to the Edelblut committee, twenty-one were turned away.¹²

As with unemployment statistics, the numbers of needy continued high throughout the winter. Twice as many families required help from the Christmas fund in 1931 as the previous year, and yet the campaign to raise money to support the annual program fell thirty per cent short of its goal. Mrs. J. T. Chapman, head of the 1931 drive, complained that the response to her call for help had been discouragingly slow. Nevertheless, 300 families, one third of them black, received assistance. Thirty thousand pounds of provisions, ranging from lard to nuts to toys, were distributed to families living in Bonita Springs, Estero Island, Pine Island, Alva, and Fort Myers. Because of the demands of anxious creditors local government could allot no more than \$500 monthly to the Lee County Welfare Board. Responding to the growing burdens, the board, under the leadership of newly-elected president David W. Ireland, tried to reduce its caseload by restricting assistance to county residents. Allowing transients to go hungry, though, proved to be an unrealistic policy.¹³

11. *Fort Myers News-Press*, August 26, 27, 1931.

12. *Ibid.*, September 4, 9, 1931. These figures from September 1931 represent only local white families; a separate committee had been set up by the "Negro churches" to aid the black community.

13. *Ibid.*, December 9, 19, 1931, January 7, April 28, 1932.

The evidence that the hardships of the Depression could not be ameliorated at the local level forced even the most hesitant to turn to the federal government for help. The shift from local aid to national aid actually came about gradually during the last year of the Hoover administration. The Red Cross, itself unable to raise sufficient funds to match local needs, supervised the earliest distribution of federal largess in 1932 when it meted out the first of several carloads of flour to 300 families. The families received a three-month supply of flour, varying from twenty-four and one-half to forty-nine pounds, depending on family size. White families picked up flour daily between 9:00 A.M. and noon. Once all needy whites had been served, blacks could claim their supplies.¹⁴

After the summer of 1932 local efforts were restricted to Christmas drives, occasional donations of food, and the establishment of public vegetable gardens. But the continuing effort and success of the Red Cross to wrest surplus supplies from the federal agencies relieved hunger far more effectively. In September the organizations managed to acquire 350 pounds of government cloth, thus demonstrating the advantage of petitioning for federal aid.¹⁵

The Christmas fund-raising drive of 1932, under the leadership of Al Williams, marked the last effort to resolve the crisis by relying primarily on efforts at the local level. As Christmas drew near, the *Fort Myers News-Press* announced that all needy families would receive aid and that the children of poor families would receive a "New Deal from Santa Claus" at Richmond Dean's annual Christmas street party. The fund helped provide baskets of food packed with hams, potatoes, coffee, and flour to 588 families. But collections of \$852.38 amounted to substantially less than those of previous years.¹⁶

Two explanations help account for the collapse of locally financed relief programs in the winter of 1932-1933. The people of Lee County discovered that they could not afford to make charitable contributions when their own families were counted among the needy. Concomitantly, citizens appear to have concluded that the arrival of federal funds relieved them

14. *Ibid.*, May 1, 22, 1932.

15. *Ibid.*, September 3, 1932.

16. *Ibid.*, November 27, December 24, 28, 1932; Robert Halgrim to author's questionnaire, July 1, 1985.

of any obligation to aid their less fortunate neighbors. Federal aid completed the obliteration of private benevolence in the county.

The idea of seeking federal assistance in relieving hardship had been advocated in mid-1932 when Mayor Fitch requested state aid in procuring federal funds for a fresh-drinking-water system, a new hospital, a public market, and bridges connecting the barrier islands on the Gulf edge of the county. Fitch anticipated that it could take up to a year to receive the grants, but he thought the final results would be worthwhile. Within a month of the original announcement of the funding search the *News-Press* proclaimed the city's eligibility for three per cent loans from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for a public market and a soft-water plant. When Florida received a one-half million-dollar RFC loan guarantee, the city began to orchestrate plans to spend its share.¹⁷

Federal largess, then, had an impact upon Lee County prior to the election of 1932. The county had requested substantially more money than Washington granted, but the monthly grant of \$3,000, via the state government, put 200 men to work three days each week. The federally financed program followed the same system as that of the Fort Myers Employment Council, with the workers receiving one dollar a day. The new program, like the former one, sought to rehabilitate needy families through self-help in an effort to preserve and perhaps even enhance their self-image.¹⁸

The project, organized as the Lee County Council for Federal Emergency Relief and headed by F. Irving Homes, president of Lee County Bank and a representative of the Barron G. Collier interests, placed Mrs. Travis A. Gresham and George Fox in charge of the women's and men's employment programs respectively. Canning, clothes-making, golf-course maintenance, city clean-up, city-park construction, the removal of abandoned pilings on the riverfront, airport work, road clean-up, and stadium repairs at Terry Park, winter home of the Philadelphia A's, received federal aid.¹⁹

17. *Fort Myers News-Press*, July 28, September 2, 1932.

18. *Ibid.*, October 10, 12, 1932; *Minute Book*, VII, September 30, 1932, 160.

19. *Fort Myers News-Press*, January 28, 1933; Herman J. Hastings to author's questionnaire, July 1985; Grismer, *Story of Fort Myers*, 328.

The workers, though pleased with the opportunity to be employed, complained about the poor wages. One worker suggested individuals "are being tortured by slow starvation." Reportedly, poor work resulted because of the continual weakness from hunger under which men functioned. An investigation of the charges resulted in an upward revision of the hourly minimum wage to thirty cents an hour. However, the policy of allowing men to work only sufficient hours to meet their families' most basic needs remained in force and was a cause of frequent complaint. New funds inevitably resulted in increased numbers of employees rather than improved salaries.²⁰

From the outset, federal programs were labor intensive. Their goal was reemployment, and any improvement of physical conditions in the community was simply a by-product of the labor. The projects consisted largely of road building and improvement and clearing drainage ditches. During the winter of 1933-1934 the Civil Works Administration was widely praised for hiring all the idle men in the county. The *News-Press* hailed the program for eliminating direct relief and allowing everyone with the exception of the ill and the infirm to be self-supporting. No longer would there be anyone in need of such necessities as "shoes, clothing, school lunches, medicines or . . . medical, dental or nursing service." The editor of the *News-Press* announced that the higher wages would allow people to free themselves of the dreaded dole and that the work would be restricted to useful tasks of lasting benefit. He added that "every man who wants work can have it at a living wage." The destitute of the county responded with enthusiasm. Over 700 workers labored for the CWA, nearly one-third of the county population of employable adults, collecting a weekly payroll of \$8,000.²¹

Even though Lee County benefited from a Hoover administration post office and frequent allotments of cash, the New Deal won more public acclaim than any previous program or combination of programs. There was good reason for this. CWA

20. *Fort Myers News-Press*, August 3, September 9, 1933. See also Lee County, County Commissioners Record, Vol. VII, December 18, 1933, 235 (hereinafter cited as County Commissioners Record, with appropriate volume, date, and page number. Commissioners Record available at the County Courthouse, Fort Myers).

21. *Fort Myers News-Press*, November 26, 27, December 3, 1933; Minute Book, VIII, November 24, 1933, 28.

funds provided employment for every relief case and removed a tremendous burden from local government and charitable organizations, and at the same time those funds provided “a payroll which is giving an income to people who haven’t had any for a long, long time.” People were working, and soon they would be spending money. It appeared that the answer to the Depression had been found.²²

The celebration lasted only until February, when word arrived that drastic cuts in CWA projects had been ordered by federal relief administrator Harry Hopkins. “We must create a consciousness among the people that they must help themselves,” lectured Florida CWA chief C. B. Treadway, “and not lean altogether on federal relief.” Seen from Floridians’ viewpoint, the irony in both Treadway’s statement and Hopkins’s plan was striking. Once the hardship of the winter had passed, workers were expected to return to private employment. But in Florida, and especially in Lee County, winter was the high-employment season and summer was the season of greatest hardship. Hopkins abandoned Lee County during the season of its greatest need. By the end of February the county’s allotment of CWA jobs had dropped from a high of 736 down to 272, and Lee was again gripped by massive unemployment.²³

After the cancellation the Federal Emergency Relief Administration took over most of the work of the CWA employing personnel at reduced pay to build the Bayshore and Pine Island roads just north of the Caloosahatchee River, continue repairs on Terry Park, and begin construction on a fishing pier at Fort Myers Beach. Under the guidance of Farmer J. Bowen, director of FERA operations in Lee County, a geodetic survey and mosquito and tick eradication projects were launched. The two programs—FERA and CWA—differed only in the number of simultaneous operations undertaken and the level of wages paid.²⁴

22. *Fort Myers News-Press*, December 11, 1933, January 1, 1934.

23. *Ibid.*, February 20, 28, 1934. Late in the decade David Shapard commented on the area’s unusual cycle of seasonal employment. See Shapard to J. Hardin Peterson, January 21, 1939, Box 102, J. Hardin Peterson Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

24. *Fort Myers News-Press*, March 16, 27, 1934; J. Willard Oliver, ed., *Narrative Report, Florida Work Progress Administration, December 15th, 1935 to January 15th, 1936* (n.p., n.d.), 37. See also George Mann, Sr., to author’s questionnaire, July 1985.

Gradually, the amount of federal money entering Lee County increased. Home Owners Loan Corporation monies had become available in December 1933, some CWA money continued to trickle into the county, the Federal Energy Relief Administration poured in large amounts of funds, and the Works Progress Administration initiated a massive flood-control and channel-deepening project of the Caloosahatchee. The number employed by the FERA reached its peak in the fall of 1934, when 1,200 people labored at jobs as diverse as recreational park supervision, golf course beautification, mosquito control, and clearing vacant property. Then, in November, salaries suffered budget cuts in that reduced family income from \$9.00 to \$7.50 weekly. In an area where 100 per cent support ranged from \$25 to \$30 weekly, this sum still prevented thousands from going hungry in Lee County.²⁵

A change in local attitudes about federal aid occurred when the Works Progress Administration replaced the FERA. Under the CWA and the FERA both the Fort Myers and Lee County governments had diligently worked to create construction projects specifically aimed at employing all available workers needing jobs. The goal was to provide relief to the unfortunate. Under the WPA local governments sought approval for construction projects intended primarily to enhance the physical appeal of the community rather than combat unemployment. When unemployment began to decline and existing federal projects assured full employment of those without jobs in the private sector, local government continued seeking additional funds. Henceforth, the purpose of project requests was community development, not employment.

The watershed was the successful application for a water-softening plant. Applications for the coveted project began with Mayor Fitch's first request for federal funds in mid-1932. By 1935 Fort Myers had its third Depression-era mayor, but the softwater plant had yet to be approved. In an effort to overcome agency opposition, Mayor David G. Shapard traveled to Washington to make a personal appeal. Shapard, a Fort Myers hotel owner and Vanderbilt University graduate, found several allies to assist him in his campaign in the nation's capital. Morton

25. *Fort Myers News-Press*, June 3, 16, July 14, August 1, 1934; *Minute Book*, VIII, June 15, 1934, 55; *ibid.*, January 4, 1935, 99.

Milford, one-time Washington correspondent and former owner and editor of the old *Fort Myers Press*, now serving as a public-relations director, for the WPA, agreed to help as did J. Hardin Peterson, congressman from central Florida. Shapard returned to Fort Myers with a promise of \$370,000 in funds.²⁶

Shapard's success at capturing the plum sought by two previous mayors whetted his appetite for federal projects to the extent that he pledged previously committed funds to projects requiring matching local money. At the same time, the school board struggled to meet day-to-day operations. The aggressive drive for new grants' and loans came even at a time of steadily improving employment statistics. Frank Ingram, WPA district administrator, contended that even with a reduction of \$500,000 in county requests, local unemployment did not warrant the remaining \$750,000 in new projects. WPA district engineer W. E. Robertson added that "Lee County already has more projects than available labor." Directors of the Caloosahatchee River dredging project doubted "whether the 249 jobs starting at 7 o'clock Monday morning, Dec. 2, could be filled by accredited WPA workers in Lee County." The *News-Press* added that the twelve WPA projects employing 161 men and 100 women in the county were substantially undermanned. "Lee county is fortunate," the paper explained, "in having more projects than there are unemployed persons to work, while other counties have more unemployed men than available jobs."²⁷

Labor shortage notwithstanding, Mayor Shapard called for federal funds for a farmers' market, insisting that "Lee county has a real claim for such a project." The rhetoric is revealing. Stress on the needs of the unemployed had been replaced by stress on the area's right to federal projects. Federal funds, it was hoped, could turn Lee County into a community able to attract investment and settlers.²⁸

26. *Fort Myers News-Press*, September 16, October 1, 1935; R. A. Henderson, Jr., to Peterson, September 24, 1935, Peterson to Grover E. Gerald, September 21, 1935, N. F. Lavigne to B. M. Wade, September 15, 1935, in Box 72, Peterson Papers.

27. *Fort Myers News-Press*; October 29, November 1, 23, 28, December 11, 1935; Minute Book, VIII, October 24, 1935, 179. For 1936, see Oliver, *Narrative Report*, 20.

28. *Fort Myers News-Press*, December 15, 1935.

The city council meeting of September 10, 1936, adopted a six-year plan for WPA and PWA applications. The twenty-nine projects on the list included a library, a hospital, new roads, road improvements, a clubhouse for the golf course, an open-air amphitheater, a city airport, and a single building that would serve as city hall, fire station, and police station. The availability of federal money drove local government into a spending frenzy.²⁹

The race to win approval for projects aimed at building a more impressive community is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the project to create a city yacht basin. The Harvie E. Heitman estate offered \$12,940 and a 700-by-435-foot parcel of Caloosahatchee River waterfront property in settlement of \$29,000 in delinquent taxes. Mayor Shapard recommended the settlement with the idea of requesting \$150,000 to \$200,000 in WPA money for property improvements. The city council accepted the Heitman offer with the intention of building a yacht basin and waterfront park. A 700-by-300-foot basin could provide slips for sixty-eight boats from thirty-three feet to eighty feet in length. Reportedly, the \$147,000 request was for "a \$250,000 job . . . designed in such a way that it can be built by the WPA for less." With the help of Senator Claude Pepper the project made its way through the WPA system with only \$60,000 trimmed from the budget. By this time the eight projects under operation in the county needed substantially more than the 226 current employees. The stage had been reached where the local allotment of WPA workers exceeded the number available for work. The inconvenient labor shortage during the economic upswing of 1935-1936 sparked a controversy that continued into the economic slump of 1938. As Mayor Shapard continued his drive for larger projects, including a \$300,000 airport on the north shore of the Caloosahatchee, the numbers of unemployed workers steadily dwindled. By November 1937 the number had fallen to between 250 and 300, although the mayor and others disparaged the accuracy of the figures complaining that some workers lost their certification even when they took temporary jobs and others simply failed to renew certification.³⁰

29. Minute Book, VIII, September 10, 1936, 275.

30. *Ibid.*, July 1, 1936, 249; *Fort Myers News-Press*, April 21, July 2, November 29, December 18, 1936.

The constant effort to increase the number of certified WPA workers in the county eventually led to charges that a city official threatened blacks with arrest if they failed to register for WPA certification. Local officials denied the charges, which went no further than a newspaper story. The welfare director from District II, Martha Parrish, had visited Lee County and later used Lee County policy as an example of a mistake to be avoided by other communities. She told Winter Haven residents, "Don't consider the number of projects you want first, but make a survey of your unemployment situation and then design your projects to absorb the unemployed." Lee County, Parrish declared, had determined first what they wanted to build and then hastily tried to establish the need to qualify for federal funds. The WPA did not consider the charges against the county sufficiently serious to warrant corrective action. Within a week of the story's publication, the county allotment of WPA workers increased by 175 men, and by midyear, as the Depression again intensified, the allotment reached the 1938 high of over 500 men and women.³¹

After 1935, with the transfer in funding from FERA to WPA, local authorities had to assume the burden of supporting the elderly, the infirm, and the chronically unemployed. The change severely tried local government, which had proven unable to collect taxes, had fallen behind in bond payments, and still energetically searched for new public works programs. Rapidly mounting debts caused county projects to grind to a halt, leaving county government unable to pay commissioner's salaries or buy the gasoline needed to transport WPA workers to the field. The county blamed the required sponsor fees for their financial woes. Commissioner Harry Stringfellow defended the county's public-works policy, stating, "We've spent a pile of money but we haven't spent a cent that shouldn't have been spent." The commissioner recognized that federal support would not be permanent, so he advocated cashing in on the program and postponing other obligations.³²

Debt slowed the quest for new construction projects. County officials declared a three-month moratorium on new projects,

31. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 16, 1938; *Fort Myers News-Press*, July 23, 1938; County Commissioners Record, VIII, July 7, 1938, 301.

32. *Fort Myers News-Press*, July 7, 1938; County commissioners Record, VIII, September 13, 1938, 332.

while the city launched a crackdown on tax delinquents. Mayor Shapard fumed that Fort Myers would remain a backward little community because the twenty-five to thirty people who owned most of the property refused to pay their taxes. City and county joined forces in an effort to force the payment of back taxes, offering to cancel delinquent taxes in exchange for full payment of those due for 1937. By 1937 the city had been demanding tax payments from Gilmer Heitman for sixteen years. Within the year Heitman agreed to a compromise, paying \$9,383.14 of the \$15,088.64 due. At the same time, Alice Tonnelier paid \$11,000 in back taxes. The decision by Heitman, Tonnelier, and others may have been a response to city threats to cut off water, sewer, and gas service from the property of tax delinquents or to the newly-established practice of printing the names of tax delinquents in the local newspaper.³³

The failure of citizens to pay taxes in a regular or timely manner exacerbated city and county financial troubles, leaving the school board to search for new methods of financing its operations. The school superintendent proposed charging a five-dollar tuition fee to keep school doors open for nine months, but instead asked parents to pledge financial support to the educational system, a request that resulted in \$1,739 in contributions. Finally, as the school year drew to the end of its already shortened term, the superintendent announced that teachers would receive only two thirds of their final month's salary.³⁴

The city also struggled with rising operating expenses. The Welfare Board began floundering in the fall of 1938 and continued to do so into the next year. A predicted cut in Welfare Board services threatened to leave over 400 crippled individuals, elderly persons, and children without support. The city, which had long been in arrears on its monthly contribution to the Welfare Board, looked for ways to raise money and end the crisis. The five-cent welfare tax on theater tickets instituted in the spring brought an outcry and a petition with 1,200 signa-

33. *Fort Myers News-Press*, March 2, August 3, October 10, 1938; Grismer, *Story of Fort Myers*, 240; *New York Times*, March 9, 1938.

34. *Fort Myers News-Press*, January 11, 15, 25, April 11, 1939; County Commissioners Record. Vol. VIII, April 5, 1939, 400. Additionally, the city was five months in arrears on its contributions to the Welfare Board. See *Minute Book*, VIII, May 23, 1939, 178.

tures demanding immediate repeal— a demand to which the council acquiesced. Finally, voluntary public contributions and a special monthly movie benefit at the new Arcade Theater helped forestall the curtailment of welfare support.³⁵

The city launched a program selling tax certificates to raise revenues. By offering a refunding plan extending debt repayment until 1969, raising the tax to fifty-five or fifty-seven mills, and cutting salaries of city employees by ten to fifteen per cent, the city council circumvented a court order requiring that the tax rate be raised to 100 mills in order to make payments to holders of city bonds. Local governments struggled to survive during the last two years of the decade.³⁶

Salaries had been cut and taxes raised to keep the government operating, the school board teetered on the brink of closing down, the Welfare Board desperately looked for additional support, and unemployment slowly improved. Each operated to reduce the need or the ability of local government to rely on WPA or PWA projects. And yet the drive for additional federal funding continued unabated. The county sought funding for a \$100,000 hospital, which would require skilled laborers unavailable in the county, and new roads costing \$70,000, while the city called for \$150,000 in funds to surface and drain city streets, a joint venture with the county for an \$100,000 armory, and an \$100,000 airport.³⁷

The purpose of federal construction projects had become distorted. When the money first became available, it served as the salvation of Lee County and those people who had suffered from the impact of the Depression. Neither local governmental nor private funds sufficed in ameliorating the effects of economic disaster. Only the vast resources of the federal government managed to blunt the hardships resulting from the De-

35. *Fort Myers News-Press*, May 27, 31, June 14, 1939; Minute Book, IX, May 25, 1939, 180.

36. *Fort Myers News-Press*, September 8, October 7, 14, November 30, 1938, June 25, 27, 1939.

37. *Ibid.*, October 6, 27, November 16, 1938, June 22, 1939; County Commissioners Record, VIII, September 13, 1938, 332; *ibid.*, March 22, 1939, 418; Sheppard questionnaire. See also federally-funded projects and allocations in Campaign Files, Box 33, Claude Pepper Papers, The Mildred and Claude Pepper Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee; "Allocation of Funds," Box 22, Charles O. Andrews Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

pression. But the availability of ready cash on easy terms, and an age-old desire to see the area rapidly develop into a thriving metropolis, led local officials into an unprecedented and unwarranted spending orgy. Before the New Deal had come to a close, the cost of federal projects in Lee County surpassed the 1925 assessed valuation of county property.³⁸

The future looked brighter as the final year of the decade began. Not even the announcement of WPA employment cut-backs dampened local spirits. Eager to attract attention to WPA-financed improvements, the city council approved a \$250 contribution to help finance the Edison Pageant of Light. But government extravagance, so appealing during the Florida boom of the twenties and the building heyday of the thirties, eventually haunted the city. During the 1940s as a result of debts incurred during the Depression that had been piled atop earlier debts, Fort Myers announced plans to declare bankruptcy.³⁹

-
38. Florida Works Progress Administration, *Analysis By Counties in Congressional District, No. 1 of WPA Projects in Operation as of April 30th 1939* (n.p., n.d.), 1; Charles Donald Fox. *The Truth About Florida* (New York, 1925), 232.
 39. *Fort Myers News-Press*, August 7, 1939, March 27, 1940, 312; Minute Book, IX, March 27, 1940, 312.