Harry Hopkins, head of the new Federal Emergency Relief Administration, had hardly acclimated himself to the scorching Washington, D. C., summer when in July 1933 he launched a grassroots inquiry into the mood of the depression-wracked nation and into the yawning dimensions of its poverty. For the task he called on, among others, Lorena A. Hickok, one of the country’s leading newspaper women. Hickok was the most active of several correspondents Hopkins would dispatch on reporting junkets between 1933 and 1937. Born in Wisconsin in 1893, she began a career in journalism while still in her teens. After covering politics and football for dailies in Battle Creek and Milwaukee, she joined the Minneapolis Tribune and in 1920 covered Franklin D. Roosevelt’s unsuccessful vice-presidential campaign.

Twelve years later, working for the Associated Press, she reported the presidential race from the Roosevelt campaign train and soon became a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. When summoned in 1933, she willingly joined Hopkins’ staff. “Hick,” as her friends called her, was “hardboiled and soft hearted” at the same time, traits which are often revealed in her lengthy reports. Described by an admiring contemporary as a “big girl in a casual raincoat with a wide tailored hat, with translucent blue eyes and a mouth vivid with lipstick,” Hickok ultimately traveled the entire country for Hopkins, sending back exhaustive reports written from endless hotel rooms and coffee shops in hamlets and cities all over the nation. Candid, determined, and resourceful, Hickok saw the scope and dimensions of the Great Depression as few others did.1

1 Ishbel Ross, Ladies of the Press (New York, 1936), 203–209; “Introductory Chapter” Folder, Lorena A. Hickok Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N. Y. Apparently Miss Hickok intended to write a book describing her travels during these years, but she never wrote more than this introduction.
In August 1933, Miss Hickok toured a nation believed by businessmen and New Deal bureaucrats alike to be teetering on the edge of chaos. Her reports, including the following, were forwarded to Hopkins and filed among the Federal Emergency Relief Administration regional reports now at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park. Clearly, their value as raw American social history is impressive.

In the Philadelphia area, the scene for part of this first report, the enormity of the Great Depression had recently forced the collapse of the city’s Committee on Unemployment Relief (CUR). Only a year earlier, President Hoover’s Organization on Unemployment Relief had saluted CUR as an epitome of American voluntarism. Shadowed by a pall of gloom, 400,000 Philadelphians, many stooped and bedraggled, wandered through the city streets vainly searching for work. Once a proud “City of Homes,” more than 19,000 Philadelphia houses were auctioned on the sheriff’s block in 1932. Local physicians estimated that 71,000 people suffered from malnutrition. At a congressional hearing where prominent social workers implored the federal government to shoulder the excruciating burden of the mass unemployed, Philadelphia’s Karl de Schweinitz bitterly described hungry and wretched men and women scavenging like hogs for scraps of fruit and vegetables littering the city’s waterfront. Little wonder that a frightened Mayor Harry Mackey feared a “passage from Civilization to Barbarism,” and that in late 1931 the incoming Mayor, J. Hampton Moore, sought assurance that the state’s National Guard could combat mob rule.

Despite the creation of a State Emergency Relief Board in August 1932, and despite the founding in May 1933 of the Federal

---


3 Dr. J. Norman Henry, Jan. 19, 1933, to J. Hampton Moore, the J. Hampton Moore Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.


Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the spectre of a national cataclysm, involving either widespread disaffection or mass psychological breakdown, haunted conservatives and liberals alike, especially New Dealers like Harry Hopkins. Therefore, in her reports Hickok informed Hopkins about more than the militant Unemployed Council (the "thunder on the left"), or about the obstinacy of unrepentent "old guard" politicians. She also described the sagging morale and the seething despair of the long unemployed worker, and she evaluated the success or failure of local experiments with relief, particularly work relief. In truth, many professional social workers educated in scientific-efficiency-based casework prayed that FERA would usher in a new era. They hoped that it would not only purge the states of their notoriously inefficient eighteenth-century poor boards and replace political hacks with trained caseworkers, but that it also would substitute cash grants for the doles of flour and potatoes still common in the early 1930s.6

However, other social workers like Hopkins remained convinced that any form of direct relief psychologically impaired the recipient. "Relief," stressed Hopkins, "reinforced a man's sense of failure." Men forced to accept charity, "no matter how unwillingly are first pitied, and then," bemoaned Hopkins, "disdained by society in general." The antidote for joblessness was not charity, but work. "Give a man a job," argued Hopkins, "and pay him an assured wage and you save both the body and the spirit."

His fear of the dole situated Hopkins in the mainstream of Calvinistic America, where the banner of the work ethic fluttered alongside "Old Glory." As a social worker, Hopkins spurned the punitive nineteenth-century makework characterized by workhouses and woodyards. Instead, he demanded that the jobless be employed on useful projects; in other words, the unemployed should be given work and not relief. Unfortunately, the New Deal never solved the dilemma of separating work from relief in a private enterprise economy. Nevertheless, Hickok's lengthy observations of August 6, 1933, reproduced here exactly as she wrote them, afford a

---

penetrating insight into the mind of one New Deal participant who personally grappled with the trauma of mass joblessness during one of America's darkest moments.

John F. Bauman  
Thomas H. Coode

FEDERAL EMERGENCY RELIEF ADMINISTRATION  
Hurley Wright Building  
1800 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington,  
August 6, 1933.

Dear Mr. Hopkins:

Since we have not discussed as yet the form my reports to you are to take, I'm going to give you the first one in the form of a letter, telling you where I've been and what I've heard this last week.7

Part of last Tuesday, I spent in Harrisburg, laying out my itinerary, listening to the kickers as they came into the offices of the State Emergency Relief Board, and interviewing Dave Fernsler, chief correspondent of the Associated Press for Pennsylvania, and a couple of representatives of the American Friends' Service Committee. I was in Philadelphia, Wednesday, Thursday, and part of Friday, making a trip out into Delaware County Thursday afternoon. Friday night and Saturday morning I was in Northampton county, motoring with the county director, M. M. Daine, over to Bethlehem and about the county Saturday morning. I arrived in Scranton last night, and today I saw Governor and Mrs. Pinchot, at Milford.

In the last week I have visited a couple of dozen families on relief in the various places where I've been. Yesterday I saw one family that has been off for six weeks and will have to go back on. I've interviewed a Morgan partner (Edw. Hopkinson, Drexel &

7 Hopkins must have enjoyed Hickok's format because it stuck. In the short cover letter accompanying the report she apologized for its length: "I can't imagine what he'll do with it... But I had to get some of it off my chest." Lorena Hickok to Mrs. Godwin, Aug. 6, 1933, Loren A. Hickok Papers.
Co, Philadelphia) a left wing Socialist editor, a real estate man, the burgess, or mayor, of a little factory town, the managing editor of the Philadelphia Record, some social workers, the Republican party chairman of Northampton county, (who indicated a tendency to turn Socialist) and the secretary and president of the unemployed league, in Northampton county. Also, of course, Governor and Mrs. Pinchot today. I've had some casual talks, too. For instance, the taxi driver who took me to Milford today.

On the whole, I have encountered little dissatisfaction with the way the relief is administered or with its adequacy—which is rather surprising considering the fact that in some cases it is pitifully small. In Philadelphia I heard nothing but praise. Even David Schick, the left-wing Socialist, whose chief complaint was that it wasn't uniform—that in some counties it was good and in some counties not so good—said he thought it was being handled excellently in Philadelphia, and that Philadelphia ought to be taken as a model for the rest of the state. Dave Fernsler, the Associated Press man in Harrisburg, said there has been a good deal of politics mixed up in it a few months ago and some scandals, but he thought that situation had now cleared up pretty much. The Philadelphia Record has gone out and investigated complaints that they received and has usually found that there was little justification. The Northampton county Republican chairman thinks there ought to be more "made work", but blames the lack of it on local politicians "who haven't any imaginations." Governor Pinchot and Miss Mary Wright, Eric Biddle's secretary, who sees the people who come into state headquarters with kicks, think that there is too much of a tendency on the part of those actually in contact with the unemployed to treat them as they would the indigent—"problem cases"—they encounter while with private agencies in normal

---

8 The reference is to the New York banking firm of J. P. Morgan. In Philadelphia the Morgan branch, Drexel and Company, was headed by Horatio Gates Lloyd, the head of the Committee on Unemployment Relief, also called the Lloyd Committee.

9 When in 1932 and 1933 private relief agencies succumbed under the avalanche of jobless cases, and when public agencies took over, the personnel hired by FERA and the county boards of assistance were the caseworkers from the private agencies. In many cases the transition was merely on paper, and the caseworkers kept their old clients. There were even "cooperative cases" where the public agency provided the aid and the private agency supplied the service.
times. Miss Wright cited the case of a woman in Harrisburg whose relief, she said, was cut off on grounds of moral turpitude because she happened to be living rent free—and those on relief get no rent allowance in Pennsylvania—with an unmarried couple. She said she interceded, and that they finally agreed to pay the woman half the relief to which she was entitled. I have not myself encountered that attitude. The case workers and supervisors I’ve seen would be more inclined to lean over backwards in the opposite direction. And anyway they’re too busy to stop and make “problems” out of their cases. In Media I met a supervisor who, with one assistant, has had as many as 800 families to look after at one time, and who has spent days and nights trying to figure out how to get relief to people who need it and won’t ask for it. She is giving cash, out of a fund from a private agency, to some of her exceptionally high class people—a lawyer and his family, for instance, and a husband and wife, both of whom are university graduates—to spare them the humiliation of presenting food orders at the grocery, and she has gone to the greatest amount of trouble imaginable to keep secret the fact that they are getting relief.

The chief dissatisfaction seems to be with the kind of relief, rather than with its adequacy or the way in which the recipients are treated. Food orders are not popular. Among the recipients I’ve heard complaints ranging all the way from the common one that the grocers “short-weight” them and that they themselves could do better if they had the cash and could “shop around” to that of members of the Unemployed League\(^\text{10}\) that receiving food orders make them feel like “charity cases.” Most of the people I’ve interviewed outside the Relief Administration are opposed to them, and so are many of those in the Administration. The feeling seems to be that every American should have the right to earn the money he gets for relief, receive it in cash and spend it as he sees fit. “These people aren’t children”, you hear over and over again. “They’re honest, self-respecting citizens who, through no fault of their own, are temporarily on relief. The vast majority of them have always

\(^{10}\) An organization of the jobless founded in northeast Philadelphia in early 1932 under the auspices of A. J. Muste’s Conference for Progressive Labor Action. The organization existed side by side with the Unemployed Councils founded at the same time by the Trade Union Unity League, an arm of the Communist Party.
managed their own affairs, can be trusted with cash—however, little they're going to get to live on—and should be.” You've no doubt heard the arguments on the other side many times—that they wouldn't spend it for food, and that food is more necessary than shelter, etc. One old Negro in Philadelphia did volunteer the statement that, while he and his wife could undoubtedly get along better if they had cash instead of food orders, many of his race were so irresponsible that it was better for them to have food orders, and that, therefore, he and his wife didn't feel like complaining.

The rent situation is bad, of course, as it apparently is everywhere. Everybody worries about it—the people on relief, the people administering relief, and the poor landlords. In the hope of getting some ideas, I went to see Oscar I. Stern, President of the Realty Board in South Philadelphia, where a great majority of those on relief live. It's a sad tale—thousands of landlords have lost their property for non-payment of interest and taxes. They've been having sheriff's sales at the rate of 1,300 a month in Philadelphia, but that, of course, includes home owners who have lost their homes. His only suggestion was that landlords whose tenants on relief cannot pay rent be exempt from taxes, on the ground that they are already being heavily taxed for relief, but he observed that this would be almost impossible to accomplish. He sent me over to the Philadelphia Real Estate board, where, one afternoon each week, landlords come in and tell their troubles. Unfortunately, it was a very hot afternoon, and the place closed up early, so there was no one there when I arrived. There is a good deal of “squatting”, in smaller communities as well as in Philadelphia, in abandoned houses, so bad that no one who could raise a cent to pay rent would ever live in them. The condition of some of these places is frightful. On the other hand, in Delaware county, some of the unemployed have moved out into the houses on abandoned farms, have fixed them up, and are raising gardens and chickens, and getting along quite well. One woman told me that, even if—or when—her husband did get employment, they were going to stay right there until they got “a little ahead”. In Philadelphia I ran into an Italian landlord

11 The relief garden theme was strong in the early 1930s. Many county relief boards, like Philadelphia's, had garden projects which supplied plots of land and seed to the jobless. The city even had a canning center. FERA also promoted relief gardens, and the theme motivated the New Deal's Subsistence Homestead, and Greenbelt Town experiments.
who owned two houses in which were living five families beside his own, all of whom were on relief and none of whom had paid any rent for many months. Since his rents were his sole income, and that was wiped out, he had applied for relief, but had been turned down. The case worker told me she suspected his tenants of sharing their food orders with him—and that she was certainly not going to make any investigation. Up in Northampton county I ran into cases where unemployed tenants went out voluntarily and worked out the landlord’s taxes on county roads, thereby keeping him from losing his property and earning a little of their rent.

There is developing in Pennsylvania a sort of union of the unemployed—the Unemployed Council, apparently entirely under Communist influence, and the Unemployed League, for the most part more moderate. I’ve heard all sorts of reports on them. At Allentown, for instance, they went out and picketed relief recipients engaged on “made work”. Dr. Charles R. Fox, burgess of the little factory town of Northampton, where they’ve been having strikes, said the secretary of the League there told him the Unions were paying members of the League to act as pickets. They are making membership drives, holding ice cream festivals to get money for their organizations, and drawing up demands. One of them, the Bethlehem local, was actually represented at the hearing on the Steel code,12 by a preacher, who presented their code, including a provision that no steel company executive should be paid more than $50,000 a year. I had a long talk yesterday with John C. Ramsaye, secretary of the Unemployed League for Northampton County, and I am enclosing a copy of the relief program his organization is about to present to the County Emergency Relief Board. I found him to be a rather moderate, sane sort of person, whose ideas on relief were not so different at that from those of many of the people who are administering it. One of the League’s chief complaints, he said, is against food orders—“which make us feel like charity cases”. He suggested the possibility of trying everybody out on cash and then putting those back on food orders who demonstrated they were unable to handle cash. When I asked

Governor Pinchot today what he thought of the idea, he said it would increase the burden of investigation too much, and I suppose it would make that load a lot heavier. "All of us, whether we're radical, or whether, like us, we don't go along with the Reds," Ramsaye said, "have pretty much the same ideas about relief." He said the chief trouble in the more radical groups was over food orders—that the men who refused to do the "made work" would be perfectly willing to do it if they could get cash for it. "We'd like to feel that we were earning our way instead of working for food orders that are handed out to us as though we were charity cases", he said. Ramsaye was willing to concede that the relief budget present in their program (see copy) might be a bit high, but he implied they were willing to compromise if only they could get a hearing.

It seems to me that these organizations of the unemployed can cause plenty of trouble if they are not handled properly. Ramsaye, for instance, is right on the fence just now, ready to jump either way. He and his crowd might go completely "red" or they might go the other way and perhaps be of some help in running the show. People like Ramsaye wouldn't ordinarily be "reds" at all. Ramsaye himself is a steel worker, likes his work when he has any, and earnestly believes in President Roosevelt's program. His only resentment seems to be against "fellows like Eugene Grace, who gets a bonus of $163,000 while the Community chest has one Hell of a time raising $163,000 for unemployment relief". Ramsaye believes there should be more "Made work"—for cash relief. "There are lots of things we could do around here," he said. "We could fix up the river fronts. We could plant trees. We could repair buildings. There's plenty to do, and I'd like to know why they don't have us do some of those things, and give us a little cash for it, instead of those food orders. We'd all be better off and feel more like human beings".

Curiously enough, the Republican county chairman says exactly the same thing. From him I got the impression that the unemployed in that part of the country are in perhaps even a worse frame of mind than Ramsaye would indicate. "If they're not in a fighting mood, they're getting hopeless", he said. "Some of them are getting so they just accept relief and never look forward to living any other
way. They started off by fighting it—they'd nearly starve before they'd accept it. Gradually they're getting used to it. They'll never be any good any more, many of them”. He added: “If I were broke and starving, I don't believe there's a case worker in the country who could make me accept one of those damned food orders”.

In my own visits, I've seen the other side of the picture, too. In Philadelphia, for instance, I ran across two negresses, mother and daughter, who walked eight miles every day to earn, by doing cleaning and washing, a little money to pay toward their rent. They get 10 cents an hour for their work, when they get any.

You said you were interested in finding out how long this thing is going to last. Nobody I've talked to can see any let-up. In the first place, it's generally conceded that the amount of relief per family has got to be increased. Food prices have gone up something like 30 per cent. While I was in the office in Harrisburg, Tuesday, a little grocer came in to see if something couldn't be done to make it possible for families on relief who were trading with him to get an extra allowance for coal oil, which they use for cooking. In his neighborhood the food orders amount to 75 cents per person. He and I sat down and tried to figure out how much food you could buy per week for—say $1.50. We didn't get very far.

Another problem now presenting itself is what to do about the debts of these people as they go back to work. Some of those families owe as much as $1,000 in unpaid grocery bills, back rent, doctor bills, and so on. In some cases they owe money to their employers—rent for company houses, for instance—and some employers grabbing it right out of the first pay checks. Ramsaye, for instance, got back on part time at the Bethlehem steel plant recently. He and his case worker figured out that he should get along on his earnings, and he was taken right off relief. But out of his first check, the company held back $8.00 he owed for fuel. He had to go back on relief. He said that he and the men in his organization felt that some adjustment must be made so that employers couldn't do that sort of thing. I actually saw yesterday one pay check for 8 cents. The man had $2.08 coming to him, but the company held back $2.00. Ramsaye's idea is that people on relief should not be held responsible for debts such as rent, they have incurred while on relief, but that debts they have incurred before they went on relief
should be paid. "Only they'll have to give us time," he said. While there is a good deal of re-employment, with the result that large numbers of cases are being dropped, I believe many of them will have to come back. Yesterday I went to see some people who voluntarily had themselves taken off the rolls six weeks ago. The man had got a job working on the roads. The job lasted five weeks. He managed to pay up $32.00 in personal taxes—last year and this year—paid a month's rent, the first rent he had paid since the beginning of 1932, and, of course, bought food. Now the job is finished, and, said his wife, "We hate it, but I'm afraid we're going to have to go back on relief". These people don't want to be on relief. They loathe it. The percentage of those who call up and announce that they have jobs and don't want any more food orders is truly impressive. But if their jobs don't last, or if they are expected to pay off their bills right away, what are they going to do? The Republican county chairman puts it this way: "What's the use of going back to work if you're worse off than you were before."

I doubt if you'll ever find time to read all this. Perhaps it isn't what you want at all. Well, the only way to find out is to try one out on you. I've probably gone too much into detail. That, I suppose, is because it's all new to me and therefore, to me, terribly important and extremely interesting. When I get back to Washington, perhaps we can talk it over, and you can tell me what I should have left out. Only don't tell me to leave it all out, please, because I like this job. Believe me, it's absorbing.

Unless I get orders to the contrary, I'll be back in Washington next Saturday night.

Yours very truly (and apologetically)

Lorena A. Hickok.  

---

13 Miss Hickok resigned from government service in late 1936 and moved to Long Island where she continued to write. In 1940, she became executive director of the Woman's Division of the Democratic National Committee, and for a period of time lived in Washington at the White House. After President Roosevelt's death in 1945, Miss Hickok assisted Eleanor Roosevelt in her writing, and, about ten years later, moved to Hyde Park, where for a brief period she lived at Val-Kill, Mrs. Roosevelt's cottage. She continued to live in or near Hyde Park until her death in 1968. Miss Hickok willed her papers to the Roosevelt Library, where, by agreement, the papers were closed until May, 1978, ten years after her death.
PROGRAM FOR RELIEF.

We, the Unemployed Citizens' League of Northampton County realizing the dire necessity for more adequate relief for those who are in need (through no fault of their own but due to the present economic conditions in our country) present to the Northampton County Emergency Relief Board the following program of Relief:

I Food.

1. $3.00 per week for single persons above 18 years of age who must be self supporting.

2. $4.00 per week for couples, $1.00 per week additional for each child 18 years and under. 1 quart of milk per day for each child 16 years or under in addition to the above. Additional milk to be supplied for those over 16 years upon a doctor's recommendation.

II Clothing.

The state is to purchase standard quality shoes and clothing at factory prices and distribute to those in need upon application and after proof. Consideration to be given to physical comfort and self esteem.

III Shelter*

Must be provided for those who are unemployed. For those who are partially employed they shall be allowed to pay rent from their income before anything else. Such rent not to be over $10.00. The relief organization to have an understanding with the landlords that they shall not receive more rent while a person is receiving state relief. No extra charge for later payment.

Fuel: 1 ton of coal per month for each family. Cooking and light $2.00 per month minimum. The relief board should have an understanding with the utilities corporation as with the landlords.

IV Remarks.

The above amounts of relief are the minimum amounts for unemployed persons.

Part time employment is to be taken care of by a minimum budget. The budget less the family income to be the amount of relief from the relief board.
Persons who work under orders of the relief board are to receive cash at not less than 40¢ per hour and to be considered partially employed.

Medical care will not be included in the budget and should be provided for if the family income is not sufficient over the budget to provide this. There shall not be charges made for later payment.

V. A budget fixing the minimum amount a family of five can live off is provided in this program and all cases are to be settled according to the budget.

Smaller or larger families to have necessary reductions or additions to fix their budget.

If the price of food, shelter, coal, etc, rise or fall the budget must be changed to conform.

**BUDGET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>10.00 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel</td>
<td>10.00 &quot; &quot; (winter)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Clothing           | Not included—  
|                    | Must have sufficient income over budget or receive aid. Same applies to Medical Aid. |
| Cooking and Light  | 2.00 per month |
| Food               | 30.00 per month |
| Milk               | 8.00 per month |
| Miscellaneous      | 2.00 per month |
| Insurance          | 1.50 per month |
| **Total**          | **63.50 Winter**  
|                    | **53.50 Summer** |

VI. Children who are employed are to receive a weekly allowance of $2.00 for their personal use and this is not to be counted as family income.

VII. We demand that the relief board of our county secure authority from the state that food orders shall be paid by check so that no discrimination shall be made between the small grocer,
butchers, stores, farmers or the large stores. Relief families are self respecting citizens and not habitual charity care, so are able to handle funds efficiently. If any fail to do so according to this budget and program they shall be considered as charity dependents and are to be cared for accordingly with food order and should be required when possible to work for same.

This program was officially adopted at the county central board meeting of the U.C.L. on Friday, July 28, 1933, and is on the minutes of the organization.