

"Whenever my sister Kate and I went out to play, Mama used to say to us, 'Now, if a neighbor asks, "Would you like a cookie?" you may take it. But if she asks, "Are you hungry?" *you refuse that cookie no matter how hungry you are.*' We were dirt-poor, but we were raised with pride: we knew we may take a cookie that's offered as a gift, but not one that's offered as charity." - Arabella J. Newton Bell (1909-2002), born and raised in Danville, Ohio; her mother Alice Beum Russell Newton was born in 1869.

Aid and Ambivalence:
Victims' Refusals of Disaster Relief
After the Easter 1913 Great Plains Tornadoes and the Ohio Valley Flood
by Trudy E. Bell

After natural disaster had destroyed one's home, killed or maimed breadwinner or children, and swept away one's means of livelihood, why would individual men and women *refuse disaster relief*, to the point of hiding from aid workers and resisting their ministrations when found? And if contaminated floodwaters had inundated three-quarters of a city's businesses and homes up to eight feet deep for more than a week, why would a mayor and other city leaders not only *refuse all outside aid*, but also *publicly boast* that they had refused it, and *be publicly praised* for refusing it?

In late March and early April 1913, after 19 violent tornadoes and widespread record flooding devastated parts of 15 states, Federal, State, and private disaster relief was rushed to afflicted areas. Yet, a significant number of individuals and public officials adamantly turned away food, clothing, tents, money, and medical aid - because cultural norms against being seen as accepting charity were more powerful than the physical imperatives of health, welfare, and recovery.

The forgotten worst U.S. natural disaster

On Easter weekend 1913, the eastern half of the United States was afflicted with the most widespread natural disaster it had ever suffered, delivered as a rapid one-two punch.

The wreckage began on Good Friday, March 21, the first day of spring, when a fierce wind and ice storm swept states east of the Mississippi. Hurricane-force winds across Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and New York reached record-breaking maximum sustained wind velocities of 84, 86, and 90 miles per hour in Toledo, Detroit, and Buffalo, respectively, with winds at Toledo gusting above 100 miles per hour.¹

¹ "District No. 4, The Lake Region." "Storms," U.S. Department of Agriculture Weather Bureau, *Monthly Weather Review*, 41 (March 1913): 372.

Although isolated individuals in the southern Great Lakes area were killed by flying debris, at least 49 people died from the ravages of nine tornadoes in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, Alabama - including 27 killed by a single twister that laid waste to the town of Lower Peach Tree, Alabama.²

Crucial to what happened next, the widespread wind storm splintered or blew down hundreds of telephone and telegraph poles across the Midwest. Then came sleet that encased poles and wires in thick ice, whose weight pulled down hundreds more poles and hundreds of miles of telephone and telegraph wires. Those downed poles stilled much long-distance communication across the Midwest, preventing the U.S. Weather Bureau from either gathering information - or sending out warnings - about what was to happen next.

Two days later, just before 6 PM on the evening of Easter Sunday, March 23, no fewer than ten³ - and perhaps more - tornadoes swept across Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Indiana. At least six of them are today rated on the Fujita scale with a force of F4—among the most violent possible. One roared through downtown Omaha,⁴ while across the Missouri River, another devastated parts of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Three others cut swaths through smaller towns and farmland. Later that same evening, another F4 tornado targeted Terre Haute, Indiana, killing 21. By the end of Easter night, the ten tornadoes had killed at least 196 people, injured at least 850, and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses.

Those Easter tornadoes were part of a mammoth and unusually powerful winter storm system that over the next four days (March 23–27, 1913) dropped the equivalent of *a quarter of a year's* annual rainfall across the Midwest. Beginning on Sunday, rains of tropical force but frigid temperatures deluged Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky with rainfall totals topping more than 11 inches in some areas. For nearly 1,000 miles between Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Cairo, Illinois, the Ohio River and every tributary blasted through older record high-water marks by up to 15 feet, submerging as much as *three-quarters* of the property of riverside cities in southern Ohio and middle Indiana. Indeed, the Ohio was so swollen with runoff that in places it was more than 50

² Thomas P. Grazulis, *Significant Tornadoes*, Vol. II, *A Chronology of Events* (St. Johnsbury, Vermont: Environmental Films, November 1990), 131; "District No. 2, South Atlantic and East Gulf States," "Severe Local Storms," U.S. Department of Agriculture Weather Bureau, *Monthly Weather Review*, 41 (March 1913): 341–342.

³ Trudy E. Bell, "The Devastating Nebraska–Iowa–Missouri Tornadoes of 1913: Harbingers of the U.S.'s Now-Forgotten Most Widespread Natural Disaster" (paper presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference, March 1–3, 2007).

⁴ Today—nearly a century later the Easter 1913 Omaha tornado still holds the record as the single deadliest twister ever to have struck Nebraska, and the twelfth deadliest of *all* known tornadoes in the United States. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Storm Prediction Center, "The 25 Deadliest U.S. Tornadoes," <http://www.spc.noaa.gov/faq/tornado/killers.html> (accessed March 23, 2009).

miles wide;⁵ and when it crested in Cairo in early April, it remained above flood stage for *more than three weeks*. In late April and early May, the flood crests surging down the Mississippi burst levees in Kentucky, Illinois, Tennessee, and Arkansas, and set new record heights all the way down to New Orleans.

Although nearly forgotten today, at the time the catastrophe was momentous. The 1913 flood disrupted the center of the nation's manufacturing, because as late as 1919, nearly 70 percent of the country's manufactured goods were produced in the area bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the east, the Mississippi River to the west, and the Ohio River and the Mason-Dixon line to the south.⁶ It hit major Northern cities as well as farming areas, affluent whites as well as poor immigrants or blacks. Downed poles in the middle of the country severed communications between New York City and Chicago for a day and a half. Washed-out tracks and bridges disrupted freight and passenger rail service (as well as the mails) for several weeks - damage not fully repaired until August.⁷

Together the death toll from the Easter 1913 tornadoes and floods topped 1,000,⁸ exceeding that of the 1871 Chicago fire. At the time, the calamity was repeatedly compared to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, only deemed even worse because the devastation afflicted more than 100,000 square miles. According to the

⁵ Many sources document that the Wabash, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers swelled to extraordinary width. For example, C.M. Hubbard, in charge of Red Cross flood relief on sections of all three rivers, marveled at the "novel experience of going across country in a river steamboat" because the Wabash was "a swiftly running current ranging from twenty to sixty miles in width, with ... huge waves ... very like a sea." C. M. Hubbard, "Bringing Relief to Scattered Communities," *The Survey* 32 (May 2, 1914): 142.

⁶ Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), xiii-xiv, citing U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Fourteenth Census, 1920* (Washington, D.C. 1923): 998-999.

⁷ Although the Pennsylvania Lines West of Pittsburgh had all tracks running again by May 12 (C. W. Garrett, compiler, *Pennsylvania Lines West of Pittsburgh: A History of the Flood of March, 1913* [Pennsylvania Company, 1913], 81), some of the lines were running over temporary trestles that were not replaced with permanent structures for another three months. Other railroads with lines crossing flood districts (notably the Baltimore & Ohio, the Big Four, and the New York Central) were less thorough in their public documentation, and are still a subject of my research.

⁸ Ohio was the state worst hit. The number of Ohio fatalities usually cited - of the order of 462 (citations conflict) - was tallied so early [DATE] that it could not include later deaths directly attributable to the disaster (e.g., delayed death from injuries, exposure, or typhoid). Moreover, that Ohio number is often erroneously cited as the total death toll from the 1913 flood. In the October 1913 issue of *The American Red Cross Magazine*, the Red Cross revised its number to "about 600" drowned in the Ohio floods. Another 200 [SOURCE?] were estimated to have died in Indiana from the Terre Haute tornado and flooding. Another 175 were killed by the Easter tornadoes in Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri. Unknown as yet are the death tolls in Kentucky, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere (one of my long-term research projects is tallying as accurate a death toll as possible), in part because the Red Cross did not enter areas that refused its aid. Even absent those numbers, however, the Good Friday wind storm and tornadoes drive the death toll above 1,000.

American Red Cross, at least 256,000 people were rendered homeless at least temporarily, and another 300,000 were compelled to depend upon relief supplies for food. In the state of Ohio alone, nearly 2,700 homes were completely swept away and destroyed, while another 10,000 had to be shifted back onto their foundations.⁹ Moreover, uncounted tens of thousands of people were rendered suddenly destitute, because then - as now - most homes and businesses did not carry tornado or flood insurance, and the damages were not covered by regular homeowners' or business insurance.

First aid

As soon as crippled communications allowed word to get out of the stricken region, front-page banner headlines exploded with the news worldwide. The disaster was the subject of a number of what today would be called instant books—compilations of sensational front-page newspaper articles and photographs collated and published within weeks.¹⁰

Newly inaugurated President Woodrow Wilson issued a nationwide appeal for money and supplies to be sent to the Red Cross, which was widely printed on the front pages of newspapers across the land. Many individual newspapers set up relief funds for the purpose of collecting the moneys to be forwarded to the Red Cross, each day prominently publishing the names of donors as well as the amounts donated. By April 1, eight days after the Easter tornadoes, the Red Cross had received \$800,000 in cash (equivalent to about \$16 million today) and for the next four or five days its relief fund continued to grow at about \$100,000 per day.¹¹

Meantime, Wilson sent Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison to Columbus and Dayton - the two Ohio cities hardest hit - in charge of sanitation and medical relief. Under Garrison, Major James E. Normoyle of the U.S. Army's quartermaster corps, first opened an office in Columbus that gathered thousands of rations, tents, cots, stoves, blankets, and sanitary supplies (especially disinfectants for cleaning up flood deposits

⁹ Ernest P. Bicknell, "Flood of 1913—Losses and Expenditures," *The American Red Cross Magazine* 8 (October 1913), 22–23.

¹⁰ "Instant books" that collated newspaper articles about the 1913 tornadoes, floods, and associated disasters include Frederick E. Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire* ([no city given]: George W. Bertron, 1913); Marshall Everett, *Tragic Story of America's Greatest Disaster* (Chicago: J. S. Ziegler Co., 1913); Logan Marshall, *Our National Calamity of Fire, Flood, and Tornado* ([no city given]: L. T. Myers, 1913); and Thomas H. Russell, *America's Greatest Calamity* ([no city given]: Thomas H. Morrison, 1913).

¹¹ Lewis E. Stein, "Administering a Relief Fund at the Top," *The Survey* 32 (May 2, 1914): 139. According to the website "Measuring Worth," founded by economics professors Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, \$1.00 in 1913 had the same purchasing power as \$22.43 in 2008. In round numbers, I am using a 20-to-1 conversion (<http://www.measuringworth.com/ppowerus/>, accessed March 24, 2009).

after waters receded, and immunizations for vaccinating against smallpox and typhoid). The governors of Ohio and Indiana mobilized the state National Guard, declared martial law as needed in the hardest-hit areas, and took temporary charge of the railroads and telephone lines so as to direct the deployment of relief supplies. Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy sent several steamships down the Ohio River, including a complete hospital ship, to minister to the injured. At the end of March, Normoyle - assisted by the Navy and the Marine Corps - began proceeding down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers ahead of the flood crests to set up supply bases at various points in advance of coming disaster downstream.¹² Temporary military headquarters were set up at Louisville and Paducah, Kentucky, both cities being strategic ports and railroad crossroads. Separately, to relieve tornado victims, the Army sent personnel and supplies to Lower Peach Tree and Omaha.¹³

At the private level, the 1913 tornadoes and flooding represented the first widespread major disaster offered assistance by two fledgling service organizations. Rotary, founded in 1905, had almost 60 clubs in the U.S. and Canada that collectively raised and donated nearly \$25,000 in 1913 dollars (equivalent to half a million dollars today) for relief to Dayton, Omaha, Columbus, and the Red Cross in equal portions.¹⁴ Hundreds of members of the Boy Scouts of America, officially incorporated in the United States just three years earlier in 1910, raised money or collected food and clothing that was sent to flood sufferers; those in areas devastated by tornado or flood assisted in rescue, clean-up, sanitation, and relief operations.¹⁵ Meanwhile, expressions of sympathy and offers of aid poured in to Dayton, Omaha, and elsewhere from mayors of other cities, governors of other states, and even leaders of other nations.

Refusals of aid

To twenty-first century ears, some responses to this outpouring of spontaneous generosity sound distinctly odd. The governor of Indiana proudly stated that "The citizens of Indianapolis, with a proper pride, at once decided to take care of their own flood sufferers."¹⁶ Similarly, the State of Illinois indicated that through its Adjutant General of the National Guard, it was providing emergency relief in an ample way, and

¹² Lewis E. Stein, "Administering a Relief Fund at the Top," *The Survey* 32 (May 2, 1914): 140.

¹³ Gaines M. Foster, *The Demands of Humanity: Army Medical Disaster Relief* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1983), 71-73, book online at <http://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/misc/disaster/default.htm> (accessed March 23, 2009).

¹⁴ "The Rotary General Relief Fund Report," *The Rotarian* 3 (August 1913): 59.

¹⁵ "Scouts Respond to Needs of Flood Sufferers," *Scouting* 1 (April 15, 1913): 8. See also Owen Brown, "What Boy Scouts Did for Flood Sufferers," *Boys' Life*, September 1913, 8-10.

¹⁶ Hon. Samuel M. Ralston, "How the Governor of Indiana Met the Flood Demand," *The American Red Cross Magazine* 8 (July 1913): 31.

that nothing would be needed from the Red Cross.¹⁷ When the steamer *J. R. Ware*, laden with Federal officials and supplies, handed at Ashland, Kentucky and offered assistance, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* reported that "Mayor A.H. Moore declined the offer and told them that Ashland was able to take care of her people with ease."¹⁸ Even before aid made it west to Paducah, Kentucky, a front-page headline of the city's *News-Democrat* preemptively announced: "Paducah Will Finance and Control Its Own Measures of Relief; No Necessity for Outside Aid is Felt."¹⁹ Similar refusals were expressed by the Kentucky towns of Brookport,²⁰ Carrollton,²¹ and Sturgis,²² even though water was standing several feet deep in houses, driving families from their homes, some of whom sought temporary refuge on or under bridges.

Refusals were not limited to cities that escaped severe damage and thus did not want to take supplies more urgently needed elsewhere. On the contrary, refusals were expressed by some cities hardest hit by flooding, including Cincinnati, Ohio, and Fort Wayne, Indiana.²³ Even at ground zero in Omaha, the *Evening World-Herald* reported that the Omaha Commercial Club - which was alarmed by exaggerated newspaper reports around the country that claimed the city had been destroyed - issued a formal statement to the Associated Press that said in part that Omaha "is able to care for all immediate relief work." The article noted that at that meeting, "Praise of the independence and heroism of residents of the stricken district was frequent and the oft expressed opinion was that charity was not needed, save in few cases. The great need, it was said, was for an immediately [sic] although probably temporary credit."²⁴

Even when aid was accepted, some cities made a point of returning at least part of the money to the donor, although doubtless some of their citizens were still in need. For example, in Dayton, Ohio - the city that in 1913 came to symbolize the flood as New Orleans did in 2005 for hurricanes Katrina and Rita - the Dayton Rotary Club received \$4,403.50 from Rotary Clubs spanning the nation from California to New York; but in March 1914, the Dayton club returned \$478.50 of undisbursed funds (a modern

¹⁷ S. P. Morris, "Roughing It for the Red Cross," *The American Red Cross Magazine* 8 (July 1913): 46, 48.

¹⁸ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 3, 1913, p. 4.

¹⁹ *The News-Democrat*, April 1, 1913, 1.

²⁰ "Not Affected Much Across the River: Brookport is Worse Off Than Metropolis; Former Place Menaced With Shortage of Food," *The News-Democrat*, April 2, 1913, 2. "Ordered to Shawneetown. Capt. Bolger, of the Illinois National Guards is Here," *The News-Democrat*, April 4, 1913, 4.

²¹ "Carrollton Amply Able to Care for Itself," *The Courier-Journal*, April 6, 1913, 6.

²² "Outside Help Not Needed: Sturgis Denies Report From Morganfield," *The Courier-Journal*, April 5, 1913, 2.

²³ Ernest P. Bicknell, "Flood of 1913--Losses and Expenditures," *The American Red Cross Magazine* 8 (October 1913): 23.

²⁴ "Says Omaha Needs No Outside Assistance. Commercial Club Decides City Can Take Care of Its Sufferers. Organized Effort to be Made to Rebuild All Wrecked Homes," *The Evening World-Herald*, March 25, 1913, 17.

equivalent of about \$10,000) to the Rotary General Fund.²⁵ Similarly, by mid-April Paducah sold the government rations left in the city and remitted the proceeds back to the Federal government,²⁶ even though as late as May 4 many Paducans could not yet return to their ruined homes.²⁷

Nor was aid refused just by mayors and governors on behalf of cities and states. Aid was also refused - or at least not sought - by individuals. One chilling story reported by the *Evening World-Herald* recounted the discovery by relief workers checking ruined houses in Omaha's West Center Street district several days after the tornado. They found a sick mother shivering in a rain-soaked bed, cradling her infant daughter who was ill with tonsillitis, while the husband - clad in only an undershirt - had sought refuge in the basement. Despite the family's acute need, the relief workers reported that they "had to actually pull the mother into a carriage and bring her to [the relief center] in the Auditorium."²⁸ Such cases were sufficiently common that newspapers across the stricken region ran articles encouraging tornado or flood sufferers to make their need known.

Moreover, just as towns returned part of aid they had accepted, so did individuals. One Red Cross account reported how a Roxbury, Ohio, housewife who was drying flood-soaked mattresses "declined a new mattress with the explanation that so much had been done for them that she did not want to request anything further."²⁹ Another reported how an elderly mechanic spent only half the rehabilitation payment to which he was entitled to replace tools swept away by the flood, and returned the other half to the Red Cross.³⁰

Attitudes toward charity

What was that "proper pride" that deterred both communities and individual disaster victims - even those seriously ill from exposure - from accepting disaster relief? It appears to have been due to prevailing Northern cultural norms regarding pauperism, and a widespread suspicion that accepting disaster relief was tantamount to accepting alms.

In *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920*, Daniel T. Rogers demonstrates that the Protestant work ethic was unique to the American North because its roots

²⁵"Dayton Rotary Returns Flood Relief Funds," *The Rotarian* 4 (May 1914): 74.

²⁶ [REF??]

²⁷ "Many Paducans Have Not Gone Back to Homes," *The News-Democrat*, May 4, 1913, 1.

²⁸ "Had to Force Aid on Them," *The Evening World-Herald*, March 28, 1913, 8.

²⁹ Lewis E. Stein, "Reconstruction Along the Muskingum," *The American Red Cross Magazine* 8 (July 1913): 64.

³⁰ Edith Grant, "Applying Business Methods to Tornado Relief," *The Survey* 32 (May 2, 1914): 124.

originated in the Puritan tradition that "work was the core of the moral life."³¹ Indeed, according to the Calvinist teaching of unconditional election, "prosperity could indicate God's favor and the blessed state of an individual's soul."³²

Throughout the nineteenth century, the work ethic became freighted with the conviction that individuals also controlled their future and destiny. That view was captured by an 1886 *Atlantic Monthly* writer: "In this free country no man endowed with average abilities need remain all his life poor. ... If he has thrift, self-restraint, and perseverance, he will pass from the ranks of labor to the ranks of capital."³³ Through popular literature and sermons throughout the nineteenth century, the U.S. North became imbued with a "certainty that hard work would bring economic success"³⁴ - a cultural conviction of determinism that prevailed well into the twentieth century.

This conviction, however, had an insidious aspect: its converse was also widely accepted as certain. Abraham Lincoln himself wrote: "If any continue through life in the condition of a hired laborer; it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, or folly, or singular misfortune."³⁵ Yet, as noted by Annette Atkins in her eloquent book *Harvest of Grief* examining the grasshopper plagues and public assistance in Minnesota in the 1870s, farming and other professions "did not bring unparalleled rewards. ...Any American could identify dozens of people who worked hard but went unrewarded."

Instead of accepting the evidence that work did not guarantee success, Americans looked at those without money and decided that since they lacked money they must not have been successful. And if they were not successful they must not have worked hard enough. ... As Americans came to measure worth by money, they measured lack of worth by lack of money... Because a slim wallet indicated a short supply of American virtues, the poor, whether immigrant or native born, stood accused of possessing a weakened moral fiber.³⁶

³¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 14

³² Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873–78* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 9, 12. For a primer, see also Wikipedia, "Unconditional election," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconditional_election .

³³ quoted in Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 35.

³⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 28.

³⁵ quoted in Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 35.

³⁶ Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873–78* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 11-12.

In short, nineteenth-century attitudes held the needy responsible for their condition.³⁷

Moreover, the late nineteenth century was the era of the "scientific charity" movement, which during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era strongly influenced how Americans regarded and responded to poverty. One view, widely espoused by Oscar C. McCulloch, minister of the Plymouth Congregational Church in the Indianapolis who gained national prominence in the 1870s, held that the chronically poor - it was they who were branded by the term "paupers" - were "degraded forms of life" - "social parasites" in whom "the instinct of self-help has disappeared."³⁸ Because paupers were regarded as biological degenerates beyond hope of reformation, McCulloch held that charitable relief to them should be restricted rather than increased, because public aid only made them even more dependent by rewarding them for their biologically determined laziness. Paupers were the "unworthy poor" who supposedly preferred to live off charitable relief that they obtained through deception. According to recent analysis by historian Brent Ruswick, through McCulloch's writings, "the term 'pauper' went from being defined as a nuisance to a menace."³⁹ In more than 100 American cities between 1877 and the 1890s, scientific charity reformers established Charity Organization Societies to act as administrative clearinghouses for screening applicants for aid, specifically to separate the morally worthy poor from the unworthy pauper.⁴⁰

Although before the close of the nineteenth century McCulloch reversed his convictions, and after 1900 the scientific charity movement turned away from punishing paupers to providing adequate relief for all poor,⁴¹ earlier perceptions about paupers lingered in popular culture for decades to come.

Moreover, as revealed in newspaper and magazine articles about the victims of the 1913 tornadoes and floods, views toward pauperism influenced perceptions of disaster relief - even though sufferers were rendered destitute by forces completely outside their control. The suspicion with which aid was sometimes offered, as well as whether it was accepted, reveals that both donors and recipients alike were ambivalent

³⁷ Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-78* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 41.

³⁸ McCulloch, quoted in Brent Ruswick, "The Measure of Worthiness: The Rev. Oscar McCulloch and the Pauper Problem, 1877-1891," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 2008): 3.

³⁹ Brent Ruswick, "The Measure of Worthiness: The Rev. Oscar McCulloch and the Pauper Problem, 1877-1891," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 2008): 6.

⁴⁰ Brent Ruswick, "The Measure of Worthiness: The Rev. Oscar McCulloch and the Pauper Problem, 1877-1891," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 2008): 15

⁴¹ Brent Ruswick, "The Measure of Worthiness: The Rev. Oscar McCulloch and the Pauper Problem, 1877-1891," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 2008): 20.

as to whether disaster relief was charity,⁴² and therefore whether its recipients were paupers. In the words of a contemporary business professor,

A high-spirited man, though in distress, would rather suffer long than receive gifts. Free food and raiment dull the sense of independent thrift. Your relief measures are, therefore, an evil... When the clamor for help was greatest in one of our floods, a man whose spirit of charity was large, exclaimed that we should have a million dollars to "do for these people what they need." "Yes," said one of better judgment, "if you had resources enough you would change that population of industrious farmers into a race of professional beggars."⁴³

Nowhere was the equating of disaster relief with charity and its recipients with paupers stronger than in Paducah, Kentucky. Before the flood crest of the Ohio reached the city, the editor of *The News-Democrat* wrote in an editorial titled "Men and Mice,"

"...we must show the stuff in us. We must be men and not mice. ...Talk of outside aid is foolish. We need no militia tents. We need no government rations. In no portion of the residence section [of] the city will the water be over four feet deep..."⁴⁴

Even after the Ohio River swelled much higher than expected and inundated seven-eighths of Paducah with water up to eight feet deep,⁴⁵ even cutting off access to the refugee camp built on higher ground,⁴⁶ the *News-Democrat* downplayed the severity of the disaster by characterizing the flood as a "water carnival," scoffing that the city "has lost nothing save some wallpaper and the money paid for a few john-boats."⁴⁷ Paducah's sympathy for the suddenly destitute was expressed by Sheriff George W. Houser, who let it be known that

...no idle men would be kept in the relief quarters. "They must work or get out of Paducah and McCracken county," said Sheriff Houser. "Those whose homes are washed away and whose resources have been exhausted should not expect to idle away their time while being housed and fed by the city."⁴⁸

Three days later, under a subhead "Need Not be Ashamed," a front page article in *The News-Democrat* reported: "The relief and commissary committees will be glad to

⁴² Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-78* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 59

⁴³ R. L. Himes, "Why Not Emergency Relief Drills," *The Survey* 32 (May 2, 1914): 125.

⁴⁴ "Men and Mice," *The News-Democrat*, April 1, 1913, p. 4.

⁴⁵ "Men and an Emergency," *The News-Democrat*, April 16, 1913, 4. An earlier article noted that three-fourths to four-fifths of Mechanicsburg, a low-lying suburb where many laborers and blacks lived, was under at least 3 feet of water, with half of that being 5 to 15 feet under water. "Mechanicsburg Is Now Almost Inaccessible," *The News-Democrat*, April 4, 1913, p. 3.

⁴⁶ [GET REF]

⁴⁷ "Some Team, This," *The News-Democrat*, April 16, 1913, 4.

⁴⁸ "Five Hundred Are Housed at Camp," *The News-Democrat*, April 3, 1913, 4.

help all who are worthy. Those who are not need not apply. Every case is being investigated."⁴⁹ In short, Paducah's flood sufferers were made to realize how others suddenly might view them differently as a result of their instant destitution.

That Paducah's actions in refusing aid were regarded as mainstream rather than uncompassionate is revealed by praise the city received. "Red Cross Scout Applauds the Way Paducah Handled Her Problem Without Aid," declared a front page headline on April 16, with the subtitle "Captain Morris, Who Officiated At Frisco Earthquake and Cherry Mine Explosion, Says the Whole World Should Know How Real Men Meet An Emergency."⁵⁰ Four days later, after receiving itemized bills for the construction of the refugee camp and its feeding of up to 1,000 flood sufferers for about a week, the newspaper ran another front-page story whose headline announced, "Three Thousand Dollars for the City, Same for County is Flood Cost."⁵¹ In an accompanying editorial, the editor concluded,

We can laugh at the pessimists, now. Their predicted fifty thousand dollars has dwindled some. But while we laugh at them, we are throwing our hats in the air and shouting our applause for the accomplishment.⁵²

Paducah's view on refusing outside aid may have been mainstream, but it was not universal. On March 27, the *Evening World-Herald* wrote an editorial bluntly criticizing the Omaha Commercial Club and its motives for refusing outside aid as "a sad mistake:"

But more important than local pride, dearer event than our credit ratings, are our suffering people. When their cries for help pierce the skies every other consideration becomes secondary to the duty of relief that shall be as prompt as it is generous. ... To allow false pride or dwarfed imaginations or stunted sympathies to stand in the way of that relief, whether it come from outside the city or inside, would be little short of criminal folly. The World-Herald is not ashamed to sound the cry for help. It is thankful that it has the power to make that cry heard over wide spaces...⁵³

Beginning the day after the Easter tornado, invoking a verbal image for communicating the true spirit of pitching in for the benefit of all, the *Evening World-Herald* began running daily articles appealing for donations to its relief fund (seeding it

⁴⁹ "Thousand Refugees at the West End Camp," *The News-Democrat*, April 6, 1913, 1.

⁵⁰ *The News-Democrat*, April 16, 1913, 1.

⁵¹ *The News-Democrat*, April 20, 1913, 1.

⁵² "It is to Laugh; and Applaud," *The News-Democrat*, April 20, 1913, 4.

⁵³ "Let All Else Stand Aside," *The Evening World-Herald*, March 27, 1913, 8.

with a donation of its own of \$1,000) with the rallying cry: "The tow-line is out! Won't you grab hold and pull to help Omaha?"⁵⁴

Why such fear of charity?

To return to the questions at the outset: how could a cultural norm against accepting charity be so powerful that a mother would lie in a ruined house on a rain-soaked bed and endanger the life of her baby, to the point of spurning rescuing aid workers? My research is still a work in progress. But laying accounts next to one another suggests that such refusals were no mere token resistance or hyperbole.

Businesses and cities refused aid - or partially reimbursed accepted aid as though returning a loan - because they wanted to look strong rather than weak. Accounts reveal that local boards of trade, commercial clubs, and other civic leaders feared that sensationalized newspaper stories - or even just-the-facts-ma'am accurate accounts - about disaster damage to a city might scare away orders for manufactured products, dry up credit, give competitors an edge, and drive away economic development.

Individuals were clearly terrified that disaster relief meant charity - and charity symbolized a permanent social stigma far worse than mere physical suffering. The *very act of seeking aid* put a family at risk of being perceived as paupers - "biological degenerates" of "weakened moral fiber" who were "beyond redemption," to use phrases of the day. Newspaper entreaties with titles such as "Need Not be Ashamed," quoting social workers as saying "It is no disgrace to be in need at such a time,"⁵⁵ suggest that disaster victims felt *profoundly* ashamed and disgraced at their instant pennilessness and nakedness - *regardless of cause*. Worse, after the first urgent days of emergency relief when all comers were fed and sheltered, applying for longer-term disaster rehabilitation meant families needed to appear before judgment exactly as they would for alms: the Red Cross and other charitable organizations were explicitly screening for "worthy" character - and according to aid reports and newspaper accounts alike, up to a quarter of applicants were being turned away as "undeserving" of aid. That label alone would brand applicants as paupers.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ By the next day, the Commercial Club had realized how badly it had miscalculated the severity of the damage and the human suffering, and reversed itself in a subsequent public statement: "In order that there may be no misunderstanding of the attitude of Omaha towards outside assistance in tornado relief work, we wish it to be understood that while Omaha is undertaking to handle the situation locally, a great many outside cash contributions have come in voluntarily. In every case these have been accepted and acknowledged with gratitude. There is no intention to decline money received. COMMERCIAL CLUB OF OMAHA." "Want Outside Help," *The Evening World-Herald*, March 28, 1913, 11.

⁵⁵ "Had to Force Aid on Them," *The Evening World-Herald*, March 28, 1913, 8.

⁵⁶ The conflation of disaster relief with charity and the stigma of "pauperization" may have been primarily a Northern phenomenon, as suggested by Rodgers. Because of proximity to sources, my research so far

Trudy E. Bell (M.A. in history of science/American intellectual history, New York University, 1978) has been researching the 1913 Easter disaster and its consequences since July 2003. Articles of hers on the catastrophe have been published by the Indiana Historical Society and the Ohio Historical Society; her picture book *The Great Dayton Flood of 1913* was published by Arcadia Press in 2008. She is the author of *Weather* (Smithsonian/HarperCollins, 2007), the recipient of the David N. Schramm Award of the American Astronomical Society for science journalism (2006), and a two-time recipient of the Herbert C. Pollock Award of the Dudley Observatory to support research in the history of astronomy (2004, 2007). She is a former editor for *Scientific American* magazine and a former senior editor for *IEEE Spectrum* magazine.

[UNUSED PARAGRAPH PARKED HERE] To counteract sensationalized stories, civic leaders in Louisville, Omaha, and other cities did what commercial and political interests have always done: put spin on a bad situation to create enduring myth. "Paducah was not injured any more than a smoothly-running machine is injured when it slows down for oiling," asserted an editorial in *The News-Democrat*.⁵⁷ Over following weeks and months, booster articles with such titles as "The Valley That Found Itself"⁵⁸ were published in national magazines, explicitly asserting that the flood was actually good for business because it encouraged new, modern construction. Dayton Rotary Club members, determined to project a business-as-usual image, took out a 19-page special advertising section for Dayton businesses in the June 1913 issue of *The Rotarian* that urged Rotarians nationwide, "If what you want is not advertised, send your order anyway, because if anything is worth while making, it is MADE IN DAYTON."⁵⁹ And in Omaha, the *World-Herald* published a "Tornado Anniversary Section" on Sunday, March 22, 1914, that sought to equate triumph over disaster with patriotic grit. Titled "The Spirit of the Pioneer," it began "As the pioneers of the old days... battling... a hostile wilderness, built this city, so have Omaha men and women, crushed by an awful calamity, risen hopeful, undaunted out of the wreck and built anew their shops, their churches and their homes."⁶⁰

has focused primarily on the Ohio Valley, but articles I possess from southern newspapers about the Lower Peach Tree tornado contain no trace of agonizing over the offering or acceptance of disaster relief.

⁵⁷ "Some Team, This," *The News-Democrat*, April 16, 1913, 4. The truthfulness of the claim that all in Paducah was back to normal is open to question given the fact that a Red Cross report noted that in Dayton "four months after the catastrophe...many houses [were] not yet...sufficiently dry to make it safe to repaper." Johanne Bojesen, "A Red Cross Agent's Personal Experience," *The Survey* 32 (May 2, 1914): 146.

⁵⁸ The Outlook? [REF?]

⁵⁹ "We Have Nothing to Sell," *The Rotarian*, June 1913, 110. Special advertising section ran pages 110–128.

⁶⁰ "The Spirit of the Pioneer," *Sunday World-Herald*, March 22, 1914, Tornado Anniversary Section, 1.