Charlotte Whitton, the famed director of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, wrote to Saskatoon’s city clerk in early January 1931 asking about that city’s relief policies for the unemployed. City Clerk Mordaunt Tomlinson replied quickly and decisively: “We distribute nothing without work, as otherwise we should be creating paupers and there is no doubt in my mind that this is the greatest danger at this time.” Whitton was undoubtedly pleased with the clerk’s reply, but his response was not entirely truthful. Saskatoon’s city relief administration, like those operating in Edmonton and Winnipeg, struggled to provide its resident jobless with relief work and often came up short. At the same time that the city clerk was claiming that his city distributed “nothing without work,” all of the city’s public works projects combined were employing no more than five hundred men, yet well over
one thousand men were unemployed and on relief in the city. ³ And these numbers did not account for any of the unemployed women on direct relief in the city. The situation was the same in Edmonton. “Last year,” the city’s chief engineer wrote on New Year’s Eve, 1931, “there remained a large number of married men who could not get regular work. As far as possible, these men were handled by giving them direct relief.” ⁴ Similar conditions faced Edmonton a year later, when the city relief officer admitted, “We have not anywhere near sufficient work to keep the relief cases occupied, and it is our opinion that they are much better occupied than they are idle.” ⁵ Put simply, there was never enough work to keep all of the urban unemployed occupied all of the time, forcing relief officials to, in fact, distribute something without work. ⁶

The creation of paupers, as Saskatoon’s city clerk pointed out, was considered by relief officials in all three cities as a serious and negative repercussion of unemployment, especially among able-bodied men. Pauperism threatened the work ethic and contributed to demoralization among the unemployed. Work relief in its broadest sense was designed to counteract these effects. Compelling able-bodied unemployed men to work for their relief reinforced the work ethic and guarded against both welfare dependence and demoralization, as it gave them something useful to do with their time. ⁷ But city officials by no means applied their work relief policies to all able-bodied men equally. Rather, they reserved employment on their major work relief schemes explicitly (and nearly exclusively) for unemployed married men, primarily in an effort to prevent the withering of the main breadwinner role. They justified this practice on the basis that, theoretically at least, married men’s work relief wages would help support whole families. Meanwhile, they denied employment to the increasing number of what they viewed as potentially dangerous single men congregating in their cities in the hopes that doing so would encourage those men to accept work on farms or in work camps well outside of the city’s borders. ⁸ Work relief policy, both as a concept and as a practice, therefore, represented one tool in relief officials’ toolkit that could simultaneously accomplish these two city policy goals: maintaining the ideal of the breadwinner role and moving single unemployed men out of the cities.
The degree of success in these efforts, however, was in many ways contingent on a broader policy narrative written by the provincial and federal governments. As detailed in the previous chapter, from 1930 to 1932, all three levels of government together funded and financed major urban work relief schemes designed primarily to keep unemployed married men working. These years saw the regular and mostly willing participation of such men in the relief projects. In fact, there were typically far more men clamouring to secure a job than there were jobs available. This was not surprising since the work took place within the city and offered workers a real hourly wage, mimicking conditions in the normal capitalist labour market. By the fall of 1932, however, the senior governments had abandoned the policy of financing urban work relief schemes in favour of cheaper contributions to cities in the form of direct relief. Thereafter, cities administered smaller, less expensive work projects, using as labour mostly unemployed married men on direct relief. Aside from their smaller size, the main difference between these projects and their pre-1932 counterparts was that workers were not paid in cash. Instead, the men had an account at the relief department, and the work they did was credited to that account, as a form of payment against their relief “debt.” Not surprisingly, unemployed married men’s participation in whatever small relief programs the cities could cobble together on their own fell off considerably. According to the associate editor of the Winnipeg Tribune, Ronald Hooper, the men were “galled by general conditions,” and “it irritates these men to find themselves and their wives without a nickle [sic] in their pockets after some days of rather humiliating work on the public streets.”

Urban work relief policy related to single men was likewise dictated in large measure by policy-making at the provincial and federal levels. From 1929 to 1932, both the provinces and the federal government insisted that cities were responsible for all unemployment relief–related cases inside their borders, including unemployed single men. This forced relief officials to deal with what was fast becoming the problem of masses of unemployed single men congregating in their cities. For city officials, unemployed single men were “pests,” “agitators of the worst type,” and “potentially dangerous.” Winnipeg’s Alderman Ralph Maybank warned
in the spring of 1930 that single unemployed men congregating in the city “have no place to sleep and nothing to eat; the danger lies in the fact that they may take the law into their hands.”

City administrators, together with the provincial governments, encouraged single unemployed men to leave town and take farm jobs or work at camps operated by the provincial and federal governments through the winters. During spring and summer, authorities found various ways to minimize the threats posed by single unemployed men, including simply cutting them from the relief rolls altogether and hoping they might leave of their own accord. After the fall of 1932, the federal government effectively took responsibility for single transient unemployed men, making arrangements to house them in relief camps administered by the Department of National Defence. This essentially freed cities from taking any further responsibility for single homeless men and reduced the potential for disorder that they represented.

BUILDING MEN: FROM THE NEW POOR LAW TO DEPRESSION-ERA WORK RELIEF

Western societies have long believed in the idea of insisting that the very poor offer up some form of work in exchange for alms, charity, or relief. Even the “great monuments of antiquity,” as historian John Garraty suggests, could be seen as (very) early public works relief projects. But it was the emergence of the workhouse in the late sixteenth century that marked nation-states’ first efforts at institutionalizing in an organized way the exchange of work for charity. Thereafter, thousands of the idle poor entered, mostly involuntarily, Europe’s workhouses—the hôpital général in France, the tuchtuis or rasphuis in the Netherlands, the casas de misericordia in Spain. However, historians are quick to note that many more people received “out-door” relief—that is, benefits or cash outside of the workhouse. Whether the aid came inside the workhouse or not, the idea that the poor must work for their relief became well established and would remain so through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.
The administration and delivery of poor relief has long been about more than mere economic considerations. In fact, gendered assumptions and constructions have infused ideas about welfare provision at least as far back as the Poor Law Amendment Act (also called the New Poor Law) of 1834. Historian Sonya Rose argues that the act itself “proclaimed that men were solely responsible for the economic welfare of families” because it offered relief to families through men only.\(^{17}\) The New Poor Law, then, adopted the ideal of the family wage and emphasized the relationship between men and the role of breadwinner. The corollary to this, of course, was that women and children came to be viewed as dependents of men. Historian Marjorie Levine-Clark recently linked the aims of the New Poor Law with Victorian medical discourses that cast women as frail and naturally dependent on men. These medical discourses shared an easy alliance not only with the New Poor Law’s ideological assumptions about the male breadwinner role but also with working-class male activists’ fear that women’s lower wages would undercut their own, as well as with middle-class moralists who insisted that women should “limit or cease their work both for their own health and that of the families they were presumably neglecting at home.”\(^{18}\) Considering women far too frail and delicate for waged work thus served several ends. It is this idea—that women did not share the “ablebodiedness” of men, to use Levine-Clark’s term to describe their husbands, brothers, or fathers—that correspondingly reveals how British society at that time linked men’s independence, manhood, and breadwinner status with work as a means of providing for their families. In the end, much like the work relief systems set up in the urban Prairie centres a century later, the New Poor Law emphasized (and in fact was preoccupied with) protecting the male breadwinner role. These ideas informed the approaches to dealing with unemployment that city councils on the Canadian Prairies would use in the twentieth century. Work relief—that is, compelling relief recipients to offer their labour in return for food, clothing, and shelter—was one of several stones upon which both the New Poor Law of 1834 and Prairie cities’ unemployment relief policies of the 1930s rested. Another was the breadwinner role itself.
While the Depression may have threatened the male breadwinner ideal, it simultaneously bolstered it. As we have seen in previous chapters, city relief policy-makers focused much of their attention on families, particularly on the unemployed married man. In good, or at least stable, economic times, the male breadwinner ideal maintained a quiet insistence of its simple truths: that a man’s rightful and natural role was at the head of his household and that his responsibilities to his dependents were to be fulfilled through hard work and the wages that it produced. In unstable economic times, that quiet insistence grew louder, anxiously reinforcing what many considered a man’s natural provider role in the face of unprecedented social and economic threats. Historian George Chauncey, writing in the US context, argues that times of economic difficulty have affected men’s sense of their masculinity, creating hyper-heterosexual environments: “The reaction against the challenges posed to manhood by Depression conditions was widely evident in the culture, from the celebration of powerful male physiques in the public art of the New Deal to the attacks on married women for ‘stealing’ men’s jobs.”

Emphasizing the protection of men’s breadwinner status was not uncommon on the urban Prairie. “Why should working girls give up their jobs for men?” one Saskatoon woman, who identified herself only as “A Working Girl,” asked the editor of the *Star-Phoenix* in May 1932. “Because men are the breadwinners. How many girls are working to support their families? Nine out of ten are working to satisfy their own desires.” Here, women’s work is dismissed as supporting frivolous pleasure rather than affirmed as contributing to the family economy. It was only the family man’s work that supported his wife and children. And, at least according to this “Working Girl,” women should leave their jobs during periods of widespread economic distress and give them over to the breadwinners.

Similar thinking pervaded the administration of work relief programs. Any women who disputed this attitude typically met with
resistance. One of Edmonton’s female relief officers advocated for offering relief work to qualified women: “As representing women and girls in this City, I fail to see why they should be discriminated against, as we women feel they are entitled to the same consideration as men.” Noting that women “cannot take up employment in tunnelling and such like work,” she nevertheless believed that women could certainly work on lighter jobs. But despite her efforts, no women joined men on work relief projects, although some tried. In July 1931, Saskatonian Lily Whaley wrote Mayor Hair seeking employment through the city’s work relief program: “My circumstances place me on the same level as a man, and I will be glad if it could be possible for the city to provide manual labour as far as these unemployed men for myself at the same low salary rather than be compelled to ask for relief.” The mayor was sympathetic to Whaley’s request, suggesting that unemployed women might do a little light gardening for the city (as she might for her own kitchen garden at home), but Chief Engineer George Archibald warned against such a measure, writing to the mayor two days after Whaley’s letter was written: “It is probably quite true that there are many unemployed women in the city that could perform manual labour, just as well as many of the men who are at present time engaged on this sort of work. However I do not think the city should take any step in this direction as I am quite sure there would be a very serious revulsion of feeling on the part of the public if women were to be engaged on even lighter forms of labouring work.” Letters to local newspapers generally confirmed Archibald’s warning. “The great majority of [employed] married women are working just so they can get away from their husbands and have a good time,” one concerned citizen wrote in a letter to the city council in October 1931. Another asked the editor of the Star-Phoenix, “Supposing we all practiced the selfish economy of married couples working, what would be the result? The world would sink into oblivion.” In the end, much like women in other Prairie cities, no Saskatoon women were employed on relief projects. Relief work was for breadwinners, and breadwinners were married men. Even single men with dependent parents or other kin did not qualify as providers.
The deepening depressed conditions through the early 1930s exacerbated anxieties about the inability of married men to sustain their prescribed main breadwinner role. This should not, however, be taken to mean that the Depression ushered in any kind of “crisis of masculinity.” Rather, relief policy-makers, although they would not have used these terms, were anxious that a particular masculine construction at a particular moment in time was under threat. Recent writing on the constructions of masculinities through time suggests that the very definition of “manhood” is historically contingent, continuously contested, and subject to the contexts of place and circumstance. Influential masculinities theorist R. W. Connell, for example, argues that there is no single masculinity, but many. This is not to suggest, however, that masculinity is so diverse that it lacks the specificity to be useful as a category of analysis. While individual men might develop distinct senses of their own masculinity, their engagement with shared cultural references, similar situations, and common struggles with other men tends to have a unifying effect, crystallizing an otherwise amorphous form. Neither are all masculinities equal in their effects or potential effects on society. Instead, societies tend to feature competing masculinities, some of which are held in higher esteem than others. The most admired, what Connell calls the “hegemonic” masculinity, need not be totally dominant or even held to by the majority, but it does serve as the cultural leader or authority. During the Depression years, a bourgeois, or middle-class, ideology represented this cultural authority, this hegemonic masculinity. Its hallmark was the male breadwinner role.

During the interwar years, and specifically the Depression, anxieties over the threat to the male breadwinner role manifested as an undermining of the jobless family man’s morale, his self-respect, and his “manhood.” “It is infinitely better in the interests of the morale of the [married male] citizens,” declared Edmonton’s mayor in August 1931, “that an opportunity be afforded to earn by means of relief work rather than to perpetuate direct relief which virtually resolves itself into the
The city commissioner further pointed out that work relief would “eliminate or at least restrict the necessity for continuing direct relief and thereby correspondingly enable many of our citizens to maintain their self-respect in supporting themselves by their own productive labor.”

As a result of these concerns, relief officials reserved participation on city work relief projects almost exclusively for married men, and especially for married men with children. In most cases, especially as the Depression wore on, urban relief administrators tried to give more work relief to men with more dependents. In September 1931, for example, Saskatoon’s mayor reasoned, “It is quite apparent that the married man with no children does not require as much as the married man with a family of five or six.” According to Saskatoon’s labour distribution system, this meant that married men with six or more children qualified for twenty-two days of work on the Broadway Bridge project within every four-week period. On the other end of the scale, married men with no children qualified for no more than sixteen days of work each month.

The privileging of married men over single men on work relief jobs emerged early. In December 1929, for example, City Commissioner David Mitchell emphasized that Edmonton’s “emergency relief plan is for the benefit of unemployed married men who are bona fide residents of the city. The city is not in a position to consider others. No single men will be employed under this plan and each married man will be carefully investigated by relief officer Magee before being placed at work.” The same conditions applied several weeks later when Edmonton began a new relief project on the Garneau sewers: city officials stated that “as far as possible this work will be confined exclusively to bona fide married residents of the city.” In doling out work on a new nurses’ residence being added to Saskatoon’s City Hospital in the summer of 1930, Mayor John Hair assured citizens that “a rigid checkup is being maintained to insure that the people who were given jobs are bona fide citizens, married men with dependents receiving first consideration.” That same summer, large placards posted at the entrance to Edmonton’s city hall announced that only married men supporting families needed apply at
the relief office for work on the city’s latest waterworks construction project, and the city commissioners issued an “iron clad ruling that no single men . . . can take advantage of the work offered.”

Any ruling, however “iron clad,” would have little effect unless it was enforced rigorously. This was easy enough at the relief office itself, where men assembled to receive their work orders each day: the relief officer simply assigned jobs only to married men. The process became more complicated when the city contracted jobs to local construction and hauling companies. Although the married-man-only rule applied to private firms involved on relief jobs, the relief office, being one step removed from hiring workers, found it more difficult to ensure that only married men were hired. For the most part, the contracted private firms followed city work relief distribution policies. For example, W. H. Carter of Carter-Hills-Aldinger Company explained the company’s practices and experiences on Winnipeg’s bridge work in a letter to the province in the fall of 1933: “We possibly employed on two relief jobs during the month of July 1932 around 500 men, and say 500 more in the plants in Winnipeg processing materials.” By rotating the men so they worked half-time at most, Carter estimated that his company had made provision for some two thousand men. All of the men were married, Carter said, and, based on an average family size of five (according to provincial statistics), he estimated that “this would take care of 10,000 individuals at least and possibly more.”

But not all contractors followed city dictates. Typically, city officials relied on outside complaints that single men were working on relief jobs. When Edmonton relief officials learned, for example, that the J. B. McDonald and Son grading company was using a single man to haul gravel for a relief job, the city’s chief engineer instructed the company to “remove him and make room for a married man.” In another instance in Edmonton, Alderman James Ogilvie received an anonymous letter advising him that “someone named Swanson was employing single men on city work.” Upon looking into the matter, the city’s chief engineer found that Swanson, who had earlier won a curbing and walk work contract from the city, had in fact hired five single men as finishers and form setters. The remaining thirty men on the project were married. The engineer
only allowed Swanson to retain the single men when he learned that finishing and form setting required experienced hands and no married men with that experience were available. Perhaps more importantly, the results of the engineer’s investigation showed that Swanson employed no other single men on the job. The chief engineer made a similar report on the Crown Paving Company and the H. G. Macdonald Paving Company, who had hired a combined total of eighty-seven men. All but five were married. Saskatoon city authorities were equally anxious to ensure that single men found no work on relief projects. In December 1930, the city commissioner received word from a concerned member of the Canadian Legion that the city was “employing New Canadians who are presumably married but are not actually married, or if they are, have wives living in the Old Country.” The commissioner asked the Legion to provide a “list of the names of the new Canadians” since the city was “more than anxious to deal with the difficult problem of seeing that the available work goes to those most entitled to it.”

On one level, of course, city work relief policies excluding single men made good economic sense: by offering work only to married men with wives and children, city administrators effectively stretched each relief dollar further than by hiring single men. But on another level, reserving work relief jobs exclusively for married men was aimed at enabling those men to fulfill their breadwinner role and to preserve their morale, self-respect, and manhood. In defending his city’s policy that only “bona fide” married men qualified for work relief, for example, Saskatoon’s Mayor John Hair explained to several single men seeking work relief that “one of the first principals [sic] of manhood was to recognize women and children first. Until we have taken care of women and children I had no authority to deal with men such as they.” Manhood, in the mayor’s estimation, involved breadwinners taking care of their families, not unemployed single men working on relief jobs. The mayor’s admonishment suggested that the single men lacked even a basic sense of what “manhood” was all about. His message was simple: single men need not expect work relief from the city until the married men were able to fulfill their breadwinner role. The director of Edmonton’s special relief office agreed with the principle of maintaining the primacy
of the breadwinner role through relief work, but he expressed it in legal rather than economic terms. “Undoubtedly,” he asserted in 1934, “a man has a legal responsibility to take care of his family.”

Others believed that an unemployed married man’s inability to provide for his family would negatively affect the man’s self-image, and only a proper course of work relief would ameliorate that unhappy situation. In a letter to Manitoba’s Public Works minister in November 1932, Ronald Hooper, the Winnipeg Tribune’s associate editor, wrote that married men had “struggled hard to keep off relief and preserve their self-respect.” But those same men, the “heads of families who are homeowners, who have been encouraged to expect a relatively high standard of living,” were nevertheless “coming on relief in increasing numbers.” In Hooper’s opinion, one he claimed was shared by unemployed family men throughout the city, heads of families needed relief work, preferably paid in cash to “help them in preserving their self-respect and make things a little easier for their wives.” Hooper’s emphasis on the loss of self-respect among unemployed heads of households speaks primarily to his anxiety over married men’s loss of breadwinner status due to unemployment rather than to a concern about simple pauperism. His remarks also reveal how class anxieties intersected with gendered ones in relief policy debates. Work relief would not only maintain the breadwinner role among both working- and middle-class married men, but it would also bolster the self-respect—and class position—of those unfortunate cases who had enjoyed a high living standard before they lost their jobs.

Groups representing unemployed workers also believed that without a proper course of work relief, the unemployed family man’s manhood was in danger. Direct relief for married men, the Building Trades Council explained to Winnipeg’s relief officials, meant “suffering privation, under-nourishment of women and children, and the stagnation of manhood.” Direct relief, like unemployment generally, led to a “loss of stamina, the disintegration of the home, and other heart-rendering [sic] effects.” In the view of the Building Trades Council, unemployed married men required “a standard of wages sufficient for any self-respecting citizen to maintain his home and family with the necessities of life.” Edmonton’s Unemployed Ex-Service Men’s Association (UEMA) shared
that view. Formed sometime during the summer of 1930, the association claimed to represent nearly 250 married men, together with more than 700 dependents. The association drew liberally on the idea of men’s provider role, linking it, perhaps not surprisingly, with veterans’ service to King and Country during the Great War in order to seek better unemployment relief terms for its membership. The uema president, F. J. Barringham, wrote to federal Labour Minister Gideon Robertson in June 1931: “The main object of this association is to solely look after the interests of the unemployed ex-service men [sic] and his dependents.” A proper work relief program, he wrote, would likely go some direction in alleviating their unhappy situation. Work relief would allow these men to “preserve their self respect by working honestly for the living of themselves and their families.” At the same time, the uema set itself apart from other unemployed men, suggesting that non-Canadians (and presumably non-veterans) did not share their type of manliness: uema members, Barringham reported to Robertson, “ask that they not be expected to stand in line with those of foreign extraction many of whom cannot speak our language. They ask that in any works undertaken that they be not classed with those that can never hold anything in common.” The uema, in other words, claimed that its members were willing to work for their relief, and hopefully maintain their breadwinner role in the process, but their role as provider was of a higher order than family men of foreign extraction.

Married men themselves also used language linking their desire for work relief to their provider role. One Edmonton man wrote to the mayor applying “respectfully for work of any kind” to support his wife and five children. Another who had “done no work” for months and who had a “wife and invalid daughter” to support sought the mayor’s help in finding him at least three days’ work each week. And a third, responsible for “bringing up and educating six children,” asked for the mayor’s help in his efforts to “earn a dollar cutting lawns, trimming hedges, and doing general garden work.” The man even offered to cut the mayor’s lawn for free, reasoning that doing so would be “a recommendation in itself to other citizens.” Like so many other unemployed family men, these three made their requests for relief work as husbands, as fathers, as breadwinners.
Sometimes unemployed workers’ use of the breadwinner ideal produced real results. In September 1931, for example, Saskatoon’s city council agreed, after hearing from a delegation of workers, to rescind its plan to reduce relief workers’ wages from forty-five to forty cents per hour. The workers had argued that wages on relief jobs should at least “give a married man enough to live on according to the number of his children.” The city council’s decision was not unanimous, but one alderman who spoke out on behalf of the married men suggested that “if there was to be any cutting, it should be on other city employees from the top down.” The delegation of workers attending the council meeting greeted this remark, according to the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, with a round of applause.51

City authorities were quite conscious of the hierarchy of relief and the implications of their work relief distribution policies. “Married men should, I feel, be treated differently,” Edmonton’s relief officer confided to an Alberta Provincial Police detective in March 1931. “From personal contact, I find necessity to exist among married men who have kept out of the bread line as long as possible.”52 Recipients, too, were clearly aware of the disparity in distribution of relief to single versus married men. One Edmonton widower, who was offered only single men’s relief after his wife died, railed against what he viewed as his diminished status in a letter to the premier in 1932: “Now they give me Single Men’s Relief, and compare me to the kind of men who know neither God nor Church. Do you think that I, 64 years old, should only eat twice a day?”53

The hierarchy of relief convinced some relief officials that single men were getting married only to improve their financial situation.54 Saskatoon’s relief officer, for instance, pointed out in March 1932 that more than half of the 2,152 families on relief had been married for only a year or so. The majority of these, he claimed, “got married in order to get on relief.”55 One week later, the relief officer pointed to the case of a man who, after being married for only three days, had applied for assistance.56 In order to deal with such situations, Saskatoon instituted a policy whereby newly married couples could expect no relief, and certainly no work relief, until they could satisfy the city that they had been married at least one year.57 Edmonton relief officials discovered similar activities
in their city, and followed a course much like Saskatoon’s. “No man on ‘single’ relief,” Edmonton’s relief officer declared in February 1933, “shall be allowed to transfer to ‘married’ relief notwithstanding the fact that he may have been married in the meantime.”58 The situation even led relief officials to make moral judgements about relief recipients’ conjugal relationships, accusing the newly married of failing to take account of their poverty before heading down the matrimonial aisle. Single men who married without “proper foresight and no funds,” Edmonton’s relief officer declaimed, were not yet prepared to take on the duties and obligations of the married man. “These cases are not isolated ones, but are occurring with sufficient regularity and frequency to indicate that there is an undoubted intention on the part of some people to get married and set up homes at our expense. When a man has no money whatever and has no job . . . we cannot accept [him] making his vows and then immediately coming to the Relief Department to ask us to carry them out.”59

In some instances, it seems that single men, rather than getting married just to get on relief, claimed they were married when they were not. In one case, a relief officer told the tale of five single “foreigners” who “had each produced the same woman in turn as his wife in making application for assistance.”60 Another Saskatoon man was sent to jail for three months after he had obtained $4.75 worth of work relief from the city on the apparently false claim that a certain woman was his wife and that one of her children was also his. The woman received a one-month jail sentence on the charge of “corrupting the morals of a child.”61 Clearly favouring a hardline approach to fraud, the relief officer told the court at the trial that “he was confident that many men were receiving relief as married men when in fact they were single and living with women for the purposes of defrauding the city.”62 In response to this trend, Saskatoon instituted a new policy insisting that applicants for married men’s relief produce documentation to prove that the marriage had actually taken place. Almost immediately, some single unemployed men found ways to circumvent the new policy. “Several [men] who had no wives,” Saskatoon’s relief officer reported, “merely bought marriage certificates” and produced them as proof of their married status.63 For these men, it seems, committing fraud to get work relief jobs reserved for
married men was clearly preferable to remaining on single men’s relief, which gave them, at best, farm work or camp work well outside the city and under close supervision, and at worst, the bum’s rush out of town.64

MARRIED MEN IN THE CITIES, POST-1932

By the early autumn of 1932, city relief officials across the country knew that both the provinces and the federal government had effectively ended their financial support for the sort of major urban work relief programs that had been the hallmarks of Bennett’s two unemployment relief acts. The conviction that only work relief could bolster the main breadwinner ideal, however, appeared to grow ever stronger among relief policy-makers and the general public alike. Indeed, breadwinner language played a prominent role in efforts to convince the federal government that the re-establishment of work relief was critical. Manitoba’s Premier John Bracken, for instance, drew on the breadwinner ideal in an effort to secure federal dollars for Winnipeg relief projects. “As the period which families are maintained on direct relief increases,” he wrote Prime Minister R. B. Bennett in April 1933, “the needs which must be met increase.” At issue was more than simply spiralling relief costs: the very independence of the family hung in the balance. Bracken continued: “The recipients become dependent on the relief officer for the solution of many of their intimate family problems such as the replacing of worn out clothing, supplying sewing material, providing medical attention and medicine, and repairing of bedding and household effects and numerous other items.” The premier believed that these were clearly things that a breadwinner’s wages should provide. Direct relief, he warned, weakened recipients’ moral fibre and self-reliance, and “in some cases their desire to work.”65

Voices across the Prairies called for a renewed course of jointly funded work relief programs, which would surely strengthen married men’s sense of responsibility for their families. Without work relief, a Winnipeg relief department report noted in December 1933, the city’s unemployed had taken on an “attitude of dependence . . . resulting in an
inevitable deterioration of human values.” Edmontons Highlands and District Community League, a group representing the Highlands neighbourhood, likewise feared that the system of direct relief was “destroying the qualities of self-respect and economic independence and initiative” in unemployed married men. The league insisted that the city immediately pursue a program of work relief to counteract the destructive nature of direct relief. A Calgary resolution shared with Edmonton’s city council in September 1933 was even more explicit: “It is generally recognized and admitted that the continued lack of employment of a large section of our population particularly in homes where women and children are affected, is having a degrading and demoralizing effect which is becoming daily more intolerable.” Calgary’s city council, like most city councils across the nation, was especially concerned about married men’s inability to provide for their families. The alternative, one Winnipeg businessman warned Manitoba officials, would be “a terrible item which you will have to pay for in years to come.”

Shrinking Funds and Mundane Work

The loss of provincial and federal funding for urban work relief projects, of course, had immediate and important consequences for urban public works plans. Gone were Edmonton’s extensive plans, set to begin during the winter of 1932–33, for nearly $4 million worth of road improvement work, waterworks and sewerage extensions, bridge and subway construction, and an extension to the city’s power house. Winnipeg’s new program of work was certainly off the table, nor would Saskatoon be able to proceed with its proposed schemes. The problem was simple: the cities were nearly broke. “Further capital commitments are not warranted in view of the City’s . . . abnormal bonded indebtedness,” Edmonton’s city commissioner concluded in October 1932. The following summer, municipal bureaucrats again turned their thoughts to the coming winter’s expected unemployment problems. “Your commissioners are in fullest possible accord with the idea of providing work,” Edmonton’s city commissioner reported to city council in July 1933, “but the city’s resources are limited and it
would be futile on the part of the city to even contemplate the possibility of providing any considerable program of public works or local improvements under present conditions. In Winnipeg, Manitoba’s assistant deputy minister of Labour resignedly wrote to city officials: “Provinces and Municipalities are not in a financial position which will permit of them entering into a program of relief works to any considerable extent.” It was an unhappy reality shared by cities across the Prairies. The problem was not a lack of work, one official in Saskatoon remarked, just a lack of money to carry that work out.  

As city administrators soon learned from the federal government, this did not mean that Dominion funds were no longer available for local work relief improvement schemes. To the contrary, the federal government promised to contribute one-third of the cost of municipal direct relief programs, and city authorities were allowed to use that contribution as wages for city relief projects, whether in cash or in kind. Any costs related to materials, supervision, and administration, however, would have to be borne by the cities themselves. These costs, of course, severely limited the sort of work relief that municipal governments could offer unemployed married men. Given the cities’ dire financial situation, the only relief projects they could undertake were ones, in the words of one Edmonton relief official, involving “for the most part hand labour and with a minimum of cash expenditure.” In practical terms, this meant that cities could carry out little more than maintenance work such as improving traffic views, brushing ahead of any construction work that might be started in better times, snow removal and ice harvesting, boulevardering and grass cutting, and cleaning vacant blocks throughout the city to prepare for their potential cultivation.  

Some city governments chose to avoid even these types of relief projects. Winnipeg relief officials revealed in July 1935 that “it is some time, two years in fact, since we had any work for relief, with the exception of the St. Boniface woodyard, where last fall the men did the piling.” But this could hardly be called work relief. “Each chap on relief,” the city’s relief officer admitted, “got, possibly, three days work every six months, as a credit against his relief account.” Through 1933, Saskatoon “endeavoured to secure a certain amount of return for relief supplied in
the way of work in the City Engineer’s and Parks Department.” The city’s efforts in this direction, however, did not last long, mainly because of the high costs. The work, city officials later explained, “involved considerable expense for supervision, tools and equipment, demands by the relief recipients for extra food allowance on the ground that more food was required because of the physical exertion involved in the performance of work, [and] extra clothing during the Winter period on the ground that such clothing was necessary to withstand the rigors of sub zero weather.” The heavy cost of these expenses, incidental to the work itself, convinced city officials that Saskatoon could not afford even minor work relief programs.
Equally important as cost to Saskatoon’s decision to abandon the policy of offering unemployed married men work relief was that “a great many of the men did a minimum amount of work.” The men’s attitudes were, in many ways, directly related to the sort of work on offer. While men had generally considered work on Saskatoon’s Broadway Bridge desirable, they had small regard for what they considered “make-work” projects that paid no real wage. On one occasion, Saskatoon’s city park superintendent, A. H. Browne, visited the city nursery to investigate claims that the men sent there to work off their relief hoeing garden beds were shirking. He found the men “sitting outside the nursery’s gate.”

Signs of men’s unwillingness to take such work seriously had appeared even before the bridge was completed. In May 1932, for instance, city officials discovered what appeared to be the increasingly common practice of relief workers loafing on a nearby riverbank job used as a work test for those men unable to find regular rotation work on the bridge. The men earned groceries and fuel in exchange for working five hours a day, two days a week. “If one man wants a match to light his pipe,” Alderman F. A. Blain complained, “four or five seem to go into conference on the matter and it takes about five minutes to arrange all the details. The passage of a train over the Canadian National bridge also appeared to be a signal to cease operations and look about.” Relief officials complained about one man who had a propensity go “down along the river bank for an hour and a half loafing.” An entire group of men, Alderman Blain pointed out, “were not even trying to work.” Of thirty-six men working at the riverbank, only five men were actually using their tools. “And the slow-motion action of the majority who were using their tools,” he continued, “was not a very desirable recommendation to their industry.”

Determined to find out for himself the extent of the alleged loafing, Saskatoon’s city commissioner travelled out to the riverbank worksite in late May 1932. He found that “out of one group of twenty men, only two were actually working.” Upon spying him, though, “the men all started working.” Later, the commissioner reported to city council that, given the men’s unwillingness to work for their relief, “the city would be just as well off if the relief groceries
were given direct as a donation with no return of any kind.” The city’s relief officer agreed, suggesting that the matter be set on the council’s agenda at the next meeting.87

Not all the men on the worksite faced charges of shirking, but relief officers believed that the ones who did set bad examples for the hard workers. In May 1932, two reports in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* quoted relief officer Frank Rowland on this issue: “There are quite a number of industrious and conscientious men working with the relief gangs on the river bank who would put in a proper day’s work if they were not afraid that their fellow workers would make conditions uncomfortable for them.”88 In some cases, the shirkers went beyond merely creating discomfort for their hardworking fellows. “Some of the men were merely putting in time,” Rowland noted, “and if anyone tried to put in a proper day’s work he was likely to be thrown into the river. This also applied to the foreman who wanted to speed up work.”89 The men were “only putting in an appearance and making a pretence of being busy so they could get their groceries”—although Rowland had little doubt as to the source of the problem: “If all the Reds or near-Reds were taken off the relief gangs, more work would be done.”90

Edmonton, it seems, accepted with more enthusiasm the use of the federal and provincial contributions, which amounted to two-thirds of the city’s direct relief costs, as wages for work relief. Special relief officer H. F. McKee described the city’s work distribution system:

> We receive our calls for work from the Engineer’s Department in specified groups, such as, fifteen men for Grierson Street, thirty-five men for the City Stables, etc. These calls come to the wicket the week previous to the time the work is done, and the men are picked out as they come for relief and as their turn falls due. After the man has worked, a payroll is made out by the Engineer’s Department. This payroll is checked with the men who are called at the wicket, and the number of hours worked are recorded to the credit of each individual man.91

Under this system, few unemployed married men in Edmonton worked on grading, gravelling, and water main extensions.92 Instead,
most found themselves at the city dump, at the city stables mucking horse stalls, or on the streets clearing debris. The experience was markedly different from their earlier work on the larger projects funded under the federal work relief acts. In addition to receiving no real wage, the men found that the worksite was subject to change on any given day, and while the city tried to assign men work near their own homes, this was not always possible. A delegation of Edmonton relief workers reported to city council that “men were required to go very considerable distances extending from the extreme limit of one end of the city to the other in order to perform their required quota of work.” The city’s solution to the problem was to issue free streetcar tickets to any man who lived more than two miles from that day’s worksite. The streetcar tickets cost the city a total of some $100 per week, and although the chief engineer acknowledged that this was a significant expense, he pointed out that it was the only cost associated with the relief work and was without a doubt “very much appreciated by the men.”

Relief Workers Strike in Edmonton

The married men were generally unhappy with the new work relief arrangements, in part because the work was labour intensive and did not rely on skilled labour to any great degree. What it did require, however, was a healthy body, something that, as the Depression wore on, fewer and fewer men seemed to have. In the fall of 1934, Edmonton’s Trades and Labour Council complained about the city’s stipulation that men on relief work use greater than “size 2 scoop shovels,” stating that the heavier shovels put “too great a hardship and strain upon their constitution. Many of these people have been on relief and this extra strain required of them with this exceptionally hard and heavy work for at least eight hours per day is liable to cause a breakdown in health, which will result in a further economic loss to the City because they will be responsible for their health and maintenance should they become sick.” Perhaps most importantly, however, the men insisted that the city pay at least some cash wages on relief jobs. In this, they found an unlikely ally in Edmonton’s Chamber of Commerce. The
men, of course, wanted cash to spend on whatever they chose, while, for its part, the Chamber of Commerce wanted as much cash circulating through the local economy as possible. City officials, not surprisingly, took a different view of the matter. “It is unfortunate that there has grown up the impression that work is a penalty,” Edmonton’s relief officer retorted to a series of worker complaints about the system of payment. “As a matter of fact, relief work is paid for notwithstanding the different method, the same as regular work, and at the same union rate. If a man who has received relief takes advantage of today’s work, he can wipe off his liability at a good wage. The majority of those on relief recognize this.”

Evidently, many relief workers did not recognize the benefits to being paid against their relief accounts, doing low-level maintenance work, and drawing what they believed was inadequate relief. On 15 May 1934, the Unemployed Married Men’s Association (UMMA) called a strike, exchanging shovels for picket signs at the city stables, where the men normally assembled for the distribution of relief jobs throughout the city. On the first day of the strike, little more than half of the 126 relief workers that the city had ordered for the day showed up for work at all. Moreover, according to the city engineer, the number of workers who did appear was subsequently “very much reduced . . . due to the activities of the pickets.” The picketers had been “very active,” even going so far as to forcibly remove one of the city’s non-relief workers from his wagon, “evidently believing he was one of the relief men.” When the picketers realized that the man was a regular city worker, they left him alone.

The following day, city authorities ordered a police contingent to the stables to ensure that the men did not engage in disorderly activities, but the police discovered that only three relief men remained on the job. “In view of this situation,” the city engineer suggested, “I think it would be advisable in the meantime to suspend operations . . . since most of the hand labour is effected [sic] by the strike.” Later that afternoon, despite an early morning downpour that threatened to continue through the day, more than seven hundred strikers gathered at Market Square and embarked on a parade through the city’s downtown streets. Many carried
signs, prepared earlier at the umma headquarters, reading “Support Our Strike” and “Our Children Are Slowly Starving to Death.”

Relations between the city and the strikers deteriorated rapidly, despite some early efforts at negotiations to get the men back on the job. When those failed, city authorities threatened to cut from the relief rolls entirely any relief workers who did not appear at their scheduled jobsite ready to work. The city assured the workers that police protection would be provided on all worksites. But the strikers were determined to continue their action. Two relief workers who tried to return to their worksites were beaten by strikers, and a third was threatened until he gave up and went home.

The umma also embarked on an organized campaign to get the wider community onside, soliciting support and funds by conducting a house-to-house canvass of Edmonton homes and insisting that local merchants either display strike notices in their shop windows or face blacklisting by strikers. “Women relief strike aides,” as the Edmonton Journal called women strikers, supported the workers by arriving at downtown cafés just before noon each day, ordering one cup of coffee, and sipping it “until five minutes past one o’clock, keeping all stools occupied against other customers . . . so that the machinery will be so tied up that the owner will be forced to appeal to city council.” Other supporters cast their assistance in breadwinner language. Edmonton’s National Labour Council, for example, urged the city to “bring about an amicable settlement as soon as possible bearing in mind the suffering of the families of these men.” The Brotherhood of Railway Carmen referred to the “starvation relief for unemployed married men” and voiced its approval for the workers’ action. The Unemployed Ex-Service Men’s Association (uema) went one step further, threatening to join the umma’s strike if conditions did not improve. “We are heartily agreed,” Colonel George B. McLeod declared at a uema meeting, that “there has to be a definite and a substantial increase in relief in the city for married unemployed.” Another speaker at the meeting noted the intersection between class and manhood: “It is up to you as men to stand behind those in the same class as yourselves.” The uema would be sure, however, to maintain its own identity if it elected to join the umma action, especially since rumours
had been circulating that the strike had a “Red” element. Ex-servicemen would consequently “march under the Union Jack” to ensure that there could be no question as to where their loyalties lay.\textsuperscript{111}

Near the end of May, the two sides reached an impasse and settled in for what seemed could be a long wait. While the city council debated acquiescing to at least some of the strikers’ demands and continued to press the provincial and federal governments for financial support, the strikers—sometimes as many as fifty at any one worksite—gathered for daily pickets at the stables, the dump, and various other locations throughout the city.\textsuperscript{112} The strikers called for at least part of their relief to be paid in cash, an increase in food allowances, and an end to using relief recipients on “maintenance work,” including “boulevarding” (that is, tidying up the streets), parks work, sidewalk clearing, and grass cutting. They also demanded fair treatment from the city: “We’re not a bunch of rough-necks,” one striker maintained in an interview with the \textit{Edmonton Journal}. He emphasized the respectable and reasonable nature of the strike: “All we want to do is peacefully picket the men who are going to work in the face of strike opposition. We want food for our children and for our wives and ourselves, but we don’t want to use force to get it.”\textsuperscript{113}

As for the city, Mayor Dan Knott explained that its “hands were tied by the two senior governments.” Premier Brownlee had earlier informed the city that “the province is not prepared to take such a wide departure from the present system, either in amount or method, at least until a new agreement was discussed” with Ottawa. And the last time Knott had asked the prime minister for $1 million to support a proper program of work relief, “all [he] got for his pains was a 20-minute lecture on sound money.”\textsuperscript{114} Still, the mayor was game to try again, writing the prime minister to advise him of the strike and to call on the federal government to institute a new program of major public works construction. “The local situation is becoming more critical,” Knott wrote, “and at present time the unemployed have refused to carry on work operations.”\textsuperscript{115}

The strike situation—which had long been simmering quietly in negotiations among the province, the federal government, the city, and the unemployed—boiled over on 28 May. The trouble began when
five relief recipients assigned to planting potatoes at a city-owned potato patch in an effort to augment the following winter’s relief stores encountered some two hundred picketers determined to persuade the men to stop work. Twelve city police officers quickly descended on the patch, arresting twenty-one strikers and charging them with creating a disturbance. The strikers tried the same tactic the following morning, when some one hundred picketers attempted to stop six workers from planting potatoes. Police again arrived shortly after the attempt and arrested thirty-two men and one woman on charges of intimidation.  

In the end, the city council agreed to increase the food allowance by 25 percent, but the relief workers were still paid no cash, and the work remained as undesirable as ever. Although the strike was ended by vote a short time later, the married men’s frustration with the city’s work relief system remained. A little more than one year later, married men on relief were routinely failing to appear for their scheduled shifts, forcing the city engineers to regularly order about 50 percent more men than any relief job required “to make provision for those who don’t turn out.”

DEALING WITH THE UNEMPLOYED SINGLE MAN

Single men, whether employed or not, have long been regarded as representing some element of danger. In the American context, for example, historian Howard Chudacoff traces the idea of the dangerous single man to at least the very earliest years of the republic. In part, this danger was related to the single man’s apparent independence and free mobility: he was, in many respects, unfettered by broader social concerns about respectability, family life, and responsibility. By the late nineteenth century, Chudacoff notes, bachelordom was on the increase, alongside the rise of a newly created consumer culture and growing urbanization. With increasing numbers of young men taking advantage of “alternatives to marriage, such as opportunities for economic, social, and sexual independence” came a growing sense that the single man constituted a danger to respectable, established society.
The very independence, mobility, and youth that made his experience reflective of the frontier (in both Canada and the United States) simultaneously made the single man dangerous in a number of ways. Historian Paul Laipson argues that the single man represented “both a failure of masculinity and an excess of it.”\textsuperscript{119} His state of singledom (whether permanent or transitory) imbued him with an ambiguous sexuality: he was perceived, on the one hand, as possibly asexual or even homosexual, and on the other, as aggressively “hyper-masculine . . . reluctant to marry because he is unwilling to restrict himself sexually to one woman or to give up access to the pleasures available to him as a single man.”\textsuperscript{120} More dangerous even than an ambiguous sexuality, however, was the single man’s supposed propensity for violence.\textsuperscript{121} According to historian Mary Beard, writing in the 1930s, single men were even behind the rise of fascism: “The Fascist movement in Germany, as in Italy and Japan, is essentially a dynamic of unmarried males. . . . Adolph [sic] Hitler, a bachelor like the majority of the thirty or forty leaders of the Nazi party, is a rover, a veteran of the World War, undomesticated and unused to the responsibilities connected with public life in a time of peace.”\textsuperscript{122} In less hyperbolic terms, others believed that younger single and working-class men were prone to engage at the very least in unruly, rowdy, sometimes drunken behaviour and that this sort of behaviour became even more dangerous when young men congregated.\textsuperscript{123}

While Western societies generally saw single young men as representing potential problems, economic conditions caused by the Depression exacerbated that potential in three important ways. Suddenly, single young men were not only unattached, independent, and prone to gather together and cause trouble, but they were also idle, susceptible to a reinvigorated Communist movement, and, perhaps worst of all, representative of both the wasted promise and vitality of youth and the bleak future of Western industrial society.\textsuperscript{124} Edmonton’s Highlands and District Community League warned city councillors in April 1933 that unemployment was “preventing the normal development in the young people [of] self-respect and economic independence and initiative.” Together, these “human qualities” represented “the most valuable asset of the Country.”\textsuperscript{125} Whether societal fears of single men were based on
real or imagined violence and disorder, freedom and independence from “civil society,” and danger, single men, as we shall see, were clearly singled out by relief administrators of Prairie cities as individuals on which to keep a close eye.

As early as December 1929, city officials had determined that single unemployed men represented a serious problem. “We have single men who are without food and a place to sleep,” Saskatoon’s finance committee reported, adding, “if work cannot be provided for them by individual effort, the only other course open is to have them arrested as vagrants and housed in jail, and hope that such an alternative may drive them out of the city.”

Edmonton’s chief of police saw similar problems. Writing to the mayor in December 1929, Police Chief A. G. Shute reported the “increasing tendency of single men coming to the police station asking to be taken care of during the night.” One man who had had nothing to eat since the previous day vowed to “commit a crime to get taken care of. Many crimes—thefts, hold-ups—by men who find it impossible to secure employment and the inclemency of the weather drives them to desperation.”

**Out of the City, onto the Farm**

Given the prevailing sense that unemployed single men represented disorder and potential danger, especially before the federal government took responsibility for them, city relief officials in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg employed policies designed to reduce their number on city relief rolls whenever possible. One way of accomplishing this was to charge them with vagrancy and put them in jail. Another was to shift responsibility to the family. As one relief officer in Edmonton explained: “It has been the practice of this Department in handling adult children of married couples that are on relief, to include them as part of the family. The method of handling the adult male dependent now is unquestionably cheaper than the meal and bed system, and provided there is accommodation in the home, it cannot be very much improved on.” Finally, cities occasionally offered single men some of the meanest work possible, explicitly discouraging them
from waiting on the city for relief altogether. Edmonton’s relief officer, for example, suggested that the city’s engineering department should “put on a good substantial force of single men with brooms sweeping the muck to the side of the street in little piles. . . . The offering of this work, day by day, until the whole street is cleaned up, would likely have its effect in reducing the number of men reporting for work, and consequently for relief.\textsuperscript{130} In this sense, work relief had different functions for different categories of relief. City relief departments simultaneously used work to maintain married men in the city and to remove single men from the city.

Far more common, however, were municipal efforts to remove single men by encouraging them to take up farm or camp work well outside the city. In this goal, city officials in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg were far from alone. US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, for instance, made substantial allowance for programs to take young single urban men from the cities and place them in the “healthy” surroundings of the American “wilderness,” there to fight forest fires, clear brush, plant trees, and build bridges. According to historian Jeffrey Suzik, Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps emerged out of the president’s “personal interest in the conservation of natural resources; but even more so, it grew out of a societal concern about the uncertain occupational prospects of America’s jobless male youth.”\textsuperscript{131}

Farm work was not an unusual or new response to the “problem” of single men, who had long relied on harvest work in the autumn through the three decades leading to the Depression. And farmers, too, welcomed a cheap and available labour supply of single men—and, less commonly, married men—to be available to work during the busy harvest season when wheat had to be threshed before the first frost. Encouraging single men to work on farms would, according to Manitoba provincial officials, “help solve the farm labor problem.”\textsuperscript{132} The idea made good sense to municipal, provincial, and federal officials for two reasons. First, paying part or even full wages to single men working on farms was cheaper than maintaining them in cities. Second, most officials recognized the added benefit of removing the idle and potentially dangerous men from city street corners and giving them something useful to do. Alberta’s Premier
John Brownlee, for one, believed that “the situation has to be handled carefully as otherwise we may have a considerable amount of disorder and possibly damage.”\textsuperscript{133}

Also of concern was the danger that single men, if left without work for too long, might never learn the value of honest labour. “For God’s sake,” one exasperated man begged Edmonton’s Mayor James Douglas, “relieve me of this deadly incubus idle for a very long time.” The “deadly incubus” was the man’s twenty-five-year-old “terrible burden” of a son. In the father’s opinion, his son’s main problem could be attributed to deteriorating values among young people in general. “I’d clean toilets before I’d be a burden to anyone, but the youth of the present day just want to ‘glass cock’ around with powder comb glass, long hair, no cap or hat and they make me sick in the head and stomach—two foot wide pants, trailing in the gutter.” The mayor replied a few days later by letter: “My advice to you would be to put that boy on a farm where he would be compelled to do a little at least for his board, and you might make a man of him.”\textsuperscript{134}

It was when the three levels of government began to jointly initiate organized farm placement programs that seasonal farm work became work relief designed to serve a particular purpose. This began early in the Depression, as exemplified by Saskatoon’s co-operation with the provincial and federal governments in placing single men on surrounding farms in early September 1931. By mid-month, some one thousand single men had been placed with farmers, and another thousand were set to go. The city’s relief officer also instructed investigators visiting the homes of Saskatoon families on relief to advise any single men living there to “take advantage of the threshing season.”\textsuperscript{135} As an added incentive, City Commissioner Andrew Leslie declared that “no more meals were to be served to unemployed single men, unless they were certified unfit for harvest work by the medical health officer.”\textsuperscript{136} Those single men still unwilling to take up harvesting jobs that autumn “would have a tough row to hoe when they apply for work in the relief camps this winter,” warned the mayor, who vowed to convince provincial officials to offer them space in the camps only after all harvest workers had secured a place.\textsuperscript{137}
In Saskatoon in the autumn of 1931, all three levels of government promised to contribute to paying urban single men five dollars per month to work on farms. The scheme was made more attractive to single men by allowing farm workers to “receive whatever wages from the farmer they could bargain for” over and above their room and board. A further five dollars per month would be paid directly to the farmer to take care of the extra costs associated with housing and feeding the men. In Winnipeg, the scheme worked a little differently, with the three levels of government together paying the single man a total of twenty dollars if he signed up to work on a farm for one year. The twenty dollars, representing five dollars per month for four months, would be held for the man in trust and paid out at the contract’s conclusion, leaving him a small amount of cash in his pocket when he left the farm.

Provincial authorities had some concerns about the program’s “bonus to farmers,” since it, perhaps unfairly, privileged farmers by assisting them in paying their labour costs. Despite these concerns, provincial officials believed that the costs were worth the removal of single men from the urban centres. The same benefit would not extend to other industries inside the cities because they could not remove single men from the cities. When two Winnipeg lumber dealers wrote Manitoba’s Department of Public Works seeking a similar five-dollar supplement to the wages of workers whom they secured from Winnipeg’s unemployment rolls, the department’s assistant deputy minister replied that such a scheme would set the dangerous precedent of providing aid “not only for every type of industry, but also for every individual firm which might desire to make a similar proposal.”

One of the scheme’s greatest difficulties, according to Winnipeg relief officials, was that “by far the greater number of single men on relief in Winnipeg are without farm experience.” Selection of suitable men for the program was based on their health and cleanliness, as well as their farming experience. Some men, of course, had little or no farming experience. These were the “labourers, mechanics, carpenters, railway maintenance or section workers”; in other words, the young men who had grown up in the city. One single man, for example, signed onto the scheme in early 1932 and was assigned to a farm some one hundred miles away.
north of the city. He subsequently made his way north through “the extremely severe weather of early February.” When he arrived, the farmer discovered that the man did not know how to milk a cow and consequently “told him to be on his way.” The man was then forced to walk the seven and a half miles back to nearest town, arriving there with “his face badly frozen.” Both the farmer and the single man were recent immigrants from Central Europe, and the employment offices organizing the movement of men to farms had evidently believed that the farmer would treat “one of his own countrymen” with more compassion. Other farmers were quite happy to take in city men. In 1931, Vegreville farmer P. Kostynuik wrote to Edmonton’s mayor offering to take two men from the city’s relief rolls to work on his farm in return for their room and board on the understanding that the three governments would pay their wages. Economic benefits aside, Kostynuik felt that the rural experience would be good for the men, who would, he suggested, “live better than in the city and bring there’s childern [sic] up in good and better habits.”

The city quickly found two men willing to take the job.

But despite the “good and better habits” that Kostynuik’s rural experience promised the urban unemployed, the transition from city to country was not necessarily easy. In August 1931, farmer Leo Bunting complained that the two relief workers sent to his farm in Wildwood were “not worth their board.” The two men did not like the work and, after some time, elected to return “to Edmonton to be fed mush and drink soup.” Cattleman Charles Henry McKinnon discovered other difficulties associated with taking on unemployed city workers at his ranch. “You couldn’t even use them,” he recalled later, “because if you’ve got other men working on the ranch they’re drawing a certain wage and some other fellow working partly for the government, works that way, and he don’t fit with the rest of them very long. They don’t associate well.” It seemed, at least on McKinnon’s ranch, that employing regular wage workers and relief workers made for a volatile working environment, in part because the relief workers were receiving a government subsidy while the others had to work for all their wages.

Another case ended more happily. Before being placed, all applicants for farm work underwent a medical check by a physician at the
relief offices. When one young man arrived seeking placement on a farm, the physician reported that the man “was found to be very weak.” The man “reluctantly admitted that he had not had a real meal for weeks, and had come for relief only after every other means had been exhausted.” On the doctor’s orders, he was promptly admitted to a convalescence room for one week, during which time he regained his strength. Shortly thereafter, he was placed on a Manitoba farm where he, according to relief officials, received hearty meals and a warm bed.¹⁴⁵

How the single men felt about the farm-placement scheme is difficult to gauge in any general way. Some men signed up quickly while others not only refused but also counselled their fellow single unemployed not to accept any farm relief jobs until the various governments agreed to pay something more than “starvation wages.” Some men, whom Saskatoon’s relief officers designated “ringleaders,” attempted to convince single unemployed men not to accept the jobs until the city agreed to pay their fares. The so-called ringleaders appeared to have some success in their campaign. In January 1930, R. Briscoe, a Saskatoon employment officer, reported that “there were a large number who were not keen to take jobs on farms for their board.”¹⁴⁶

For many men, however, remaining in the city meant no work or relief, and possible vagrancy charges. These bleak prospects drove them to the relief offices seeking farm placements. In Winnipeg, some fifteen or thirty single men could be found at the relief office each day at three o’clock in the afternoon “waiting for the doctor to give them the once over” before being placed with a farmer seeking labourers. There, to pass the time, they engaged in “good natured banter” that reflected their shared experiences as young single unemployed men. In good humour, according to relief officials, some speculated that they would take a trip to Europe or the Mediterranean once they received their payment at the end of the season. Others joked that they would get married or that, with the payment in hand, they would soon be ready for retirement.¹⁴⁷ They told stories, too. An apparently popular one was of a farmer who had hired two men from the relief office. A friend of the two men wished to go along. When told by the farmer that there was work only for two men, not three, the third invariably said, “Oh don’t let that worry you.
You’d be surprised at how little work it takes to keep me going.” Another story revolved around an inexperienced young city man sent for the first time to a farm to work. On being told by the farmer how hens produce eggs in their nests, the man deduced that he had found a cow’s nest when he discovered a pile of condensed milk cans. While stories like these represented single men’s efforts to “keep up their spirits,” according to Winnipeg relief officials, running through the stories was “a note of pathos,” for “still in them is the hope that it won’t be long until they can return to their chosen work, with some assurance of permanence and stability in that work and in the homes they try to build.”

That assurance, for many single unemployed men, must have seemed worlds away from their current realities. One Saskatoon man spent $1.30 on a railway ticket to get to a promised harvest job. He arrived only to discover that the farmer had already finished his threshing and only needed a man to do some light cleanup work. The farmer paid him $1.50 for three-quarters of a day’s work, leaving him with only twenty cents for his work after deducting the railway fare. Moreover, according to Saskatoon’s Mayor Joseph Underwood, some unemployed workers complained “that farmers were making them work all day Sunday for their board.” In the mayor’s estimation, expecting the men to do any more than regular chores on Sunday “hardly seemed reasonable.”

Filling harvest jobs was no easy matter even where wages and work were reasonable. Some unemployed men in Edmonton, for example, refused to accept temporary harvest jobs on farms, fearing that the city would cut them off relief as soon as they left town. Only with relief officer T. S. Magee’s assurances that their fears were groundless would men finally accept farm job offers.

Relief for Cities: Single Men in Relief Camps

In their effort to get unemployed single men off of their hands and to save money, urban relief authorities also steadfastly encouraged the provincial and federal governments to set up relief camps for single men. The first relief camps opened in the late fall of 1930. At first, federal Parks Commissioner J. B. Harkin had hoped, with good reason, that
the federal government would agree to open a string of relief camps in national parks across the West. Such relief camps, the commissioner believed, were a perfect solution to many of the problems then facing the nation. Not only would they take thousands of unemployed men from the cities, thereby relieving pressure on local city relief administrations, but they would also, through the men’s labour, turn the parks into important revenue-generating tourist attractions. In return for their labour, mostly on building roads into and out of the parks to accommodate motor car traffic, the men would get three square meals a day, a warm bed, and a healthy, natural setting in which to wait out the hard times.  

It was not to be, at least not to the scale that Harkin had envisioned. Because the federal Unemployment Relief Act maintained that responsibility for unemployment was purely local, none of its $20 million in appropriation funds could be used by any federal department. If Harkin was to get any relief money at all, he would have to convince provincial governments to use part of their appropriation to finance camp work in national parks inside their own borders. In the end, only Saskatchewan and Manitoba agreed to do so, believing that setting up camps at Prince Albert and Riding Mountain, respectively, would ease their unemployment problems.

Complementing the Saskatchewan camp at Prince Albert, opened in the fall of 1930, was a purely Saskatoon-initiated camp at the city’s southern edge. The province donated the use of a government building on the site, and the city renovated it to accommodate double-decker bunks for some five hundred men and installed in the building two steel bathtubs, three shower baths, a delousing plant and dryer, and a rack and wash tubs for washing and drying clothes. Heating was provided by a stationary boiler borrowed from the city’s engineering department, which offered some warmth for the men and protected the building’s plumbing from frost. The Saskatoon camp was run with military efficiency. Initially, single men applied for admittance to the camp at the city relief office downtown. Later, the city required the men to apply at the camp itself because, as the camp’s commandant explained, it engendered in the men “a much greater respect for authority.” It also made it easier
to verify the men’s statements as to their place of residence and employment history to eliminate “drifters from other provinces.”

If an applicant was accepted, the city relief officer handed him tickets to the baths and delousing plant on the camp grounds. While the man was in the baths, camp attendants sterilized all his belongings. Following the bath, the man visited the camp storekeeper, who provided him with clean blankets, assigned him to a bunk, and instructed him to read the “Camp Standing Orders.” The orders ranged from insisting that “all men who are warned for any duties must report [for work] on schedule,” to ensuring that every man “must shave and generally keep up his appearance,” to keeping the toilets “in good order.” On this last point, the men were reminded that “loitering there is absolutely forbidden.”

Any men found in contravention of the camp’s standing orders “did not get their next meal until they were interviewed at the Camp Office and given a warning.” On a second offence, “or charges of a more serious nature,” he was subject to summary dismissal from the camp. After dismissal, moreover, the camp kept a record of the incidents on file because, as the camp’s director later reported, “in some cases these men went down town and complained to some organization of unfair treatment.” During the day, the men were given “a certain amount of work . . . to keep them out of mischief.” Clearly, most of the men’s daily activities were closely monitored. In the evening, the men might enjoy performances by various Saskatoon-based concert bands, free movies at Saskatoon theatres once each week, or free attendance at hockey games played at the Saskatoon stadium. The men were also provided with free daily issues of the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix. Other entertainment included the loans of a piano from a Saskatoon music store and a radio from the Hudson’s Bay Company.

Meanwhile, Alberta opened relief camps along the Jasper-Banff Highway using its federal appropriation under the Unemployment Relief Act and accepted nearly one thousand of Edmonton’s single unemployed male population over the winter of 1930–31. Clearly, Alberta’s relief camp activities aided Edmonton’s city relief machine, reducing the city’s responsibility for roughly one-quarter of its single male population, at least for the winter months. With the arrival of spring, however,
the province intended to close down its camps and expel the men, posing a serious problem for the cities. If the camps closed, Edmonton’s city council believed, the men would have little choice but to drift back into the city. The rapid introduction to the city of potentially one thousand single men with nothing to do caused city officials a good deal of anxiety. Edmonton could not afford to look after the high number of unemployed in the city as it was. The addition of up to one thousand men (and potentially dangerous ones, at that) to the mix was seen as simply untenable.

Edmonton’s city council had already decided to cut all single men from city relief for the summer and to accept no new applicants beginning on the last day of April; to facilitate this process, city bureaucrats pleaded with the province to keep the camps running for at least another month “to prevent men from drifting into the city” before the cut was made. The province agreed to keep the camps open until the end of April, when the city typically shut down its office for single men. As of 6 May, the city relief officer reported that “no untoward incidents have arisen.” But that situation would soon change. In mid-May, the Edmonton Retail Clerks Association insisted that the city continue to issue relief to single men, and near the end of May, the United Empire Loyalists and the National Unemployed Workers’ Association added their voices to the call. The following month, those early efforts to have single men reinstated to the relief rolls grew larger, and by early June, Edmonton was reporting a “tense situation” among the single men. The arrival in the city of a detachment of the Strathcona Horse and a strengthening of the provincial police presence forestalled potential violence, at least for the time being; the city’s relief officer informed City Commissioner David Mitchell that because of these measures, “a very noticeable improvement in the demeanour of the crowd has taken place.” How long the single men’s demeanour might remain that way was anyone’s guess.

Through the summer of 1931, municipal and provincial bureaucrats grew ever more anxious about how they might deal with what had become known as the “single men problem.” Certainly, the cities’ favoured solution was to disavow any responsibility for them whatsoever. To do this with a minimum amount of backlash from angry and
frustrated men, however, city authorities would have to find some way to remove the men from their borders. Sending them to work as labourers on surrounding farms, as noted earlier, was one way, but the scheme never seemed to take up enough men. Alberta’s Department of Municipal Affairs suggested that single unemployed men should be “concentrated on a semi military basis.” Letting the single men roam through the cities and issuing them purchasing tickets would “leave them at large with a feeling of victory to take part in any disturbance agitators wished to promote.”

Prime Minister R. B. Bennett appeared willing to help. The prime minister, in fact, along with most other municipal, provincial, and federal leaders, had long believed that single unemployed men represented a menace and a threat to public order. He also believed that they were especially vulnerable to communist ideas. At a meeting with Alberta municipal leaders in Calgary during the summer of 1931, Bennett assured all in attendance that the federal government “intended to establish camps, particularly in the Parks and in British Columbia on the Railways” that fall. And, as Edmonton’s chief engineer reported to the city commissioner, although the prime minister admitted that “the Government has no power to compel single men to go to camps, he practically suggested that the cities should cut out single men’s relief.”

However the cities interpreted the prime minister’s assurances, Bennett himself remained unwilling to allow the federal government to accept full responsibility for single unemployed men. Instead, his administration’s Unemployment and Farm Relief Act, passed in Ottawa on Dominion Day 1931, would only provide provinces with federal monies to open road-building camps along the Trans-Canada Highway over the following winter. Although the only projects that Bennett was willing to finance as purely federal undertakings were in the national parks, these too aided beleaguered cities in no small measure.

Most cities regarded the work plans for single unemployed men as good news. Edmonton’s relief officer, for instance, was pleased to note that the Jasper-Banff Highway camps promised to rid the city “of these transients who are becoming a pest on our private institutions and city homes in the widespread system of begging carried on.” Edmonton would also benefit by sending single unemployed men to brushing
and clearing camps at Elk Island National Park, a federal relief camp, just a few miles east of the city. Winnipeg could similarly benefit from new programs for the single unemployed that autumn, federal Labour Minister Gideon Robertson informed a Manitoba delegation in Ottawa in late August 1931. If the province and the city agreed to jointly pay the men thirty cents each per hour for work on the Trans-Canada Highway west of Fort William, the federal government would cover the cost of the men’s transportation to the worksite. This arrangement could provide employment for two to three thousand Winnipeg men.166 In addition, the federal government had set aside $200,000 for work in national parks. In November, hundreds of Winnipeg men, as well as men from throughout the province, began arriving at Riding Mountain National Park, where they were soon engaged in constructing park buildings, clearing roads, and improving the park’s golf course.167

By the following spring, the threat of single men returning from the camps again emerged, and cities were in no better position to accommodate them than they had been in the spring of 1931. A worried Mayor Daniel Knott in Edmonton wired R. B. Bennett warning him that there was “strong pressure here to again open construction camps [for single men] at Jasper and Elk Island Parks.”168 By May, still no word had come from Ottawa, and Alberta’s premier intervened directly, writing the federal minister of the Interior to ask why they were being held up. There was, the premier warned, “an awkward situation with respect to the large numbers of single men in Edmonton and Calgary.”169 The minister replied that negotiations over wages for supervisors and foremen were behind the delay, but he expected the camps to open shortly. In the meantime, the premier informed Edmonton’s mayor, the province would open several of its own camps in the forest reserves north of the city to accommodate up to five hundred men.170 Some weeks later, the first group of eighty-five Edmonton men set out for Jasper.

It is difficult to measure how the men themselves felt about leaving the city to spend an indeterminate amount of time in an isolated camp, but cases of men quitting the camps or even refusing to go tell at least part of the story. Although eighty-five men agreed to go to Jasper, for example, another 119 refused, their chief complaint, according to Mayor Knott,
being the small wages paid at the camp. All were subsequently cut from the city’s relief rolls.\textsuperscript{171} A group of twenty-five men who simply left the Jasper camp and made their way back to Edmonton in early January 1932 received similar treatment. When an “extremely surprized \textsuperscript{sic}” city commissioner learned that the men, together with another contingent arriving in the city a few days later, had received minimal emergency relief, he ordered Edmonton’s relief department to stop offering the men any relief at all.\textsuperscript{172} But the men had their defenders. Writing to Premier Brownlee some days later, Secretary William E. Harrison of the Unemployed Ex-Service Men’s Association admitted that his organization was “most certainly not in support of the methods these men used in quitting work,” but, he added, the men should be given relief anyway “to prevent any portion of them possibly affiliating with the Communist element in the Province.” The threat, according to Harrison, was real and imminent. “We have definite proof,” he assured the premier, “that these men were lured away from the job by Communist propaganda.”\textsuperscript{173} Whether the men were communists is unclear, but relief officer H. F. McKee saw any occasion—no matter the circumstances—on which men left camps (or farm work, for that matter) as a “very evident excuse for taking up their identification cards” and reducing the city’s relief burden.\textsuperscript{174}

Clearly, then, married men and single men had very different work relief experiences—difference that were, in many ways, related to relief policy-makers’ perceptions of the nature of the problem that each category posed to their cities. Whereas married men’s work relief was intended, for the most part, to enable them to remain in the city and in their own homes as heads of their households, single men’s work relief was designed to remove them from the city. Wages paid to single men on farms or in camps were typically much lower than those paid to married men on city relief. The latter earned between forty-five cents and one dollar per hour. The going rate on farms, however, was five to ten dollars per month, and in the most notorious work camps, such as those housing the so-called Royal Twenty Centers and operated by the Department of National Defence, workers were paid only twenty cents per day.\textsuperscript{175} The single men who accepted such work, moreover, would find themselves relying entirely on farmers or camp commandants for their food and
their shelter. And while married men enjoyed a measure of autonomy when their shift ended, single men in the camps and on the farms were under more or less constant surveillance.

Earlier economic recessions had laid the foundation for the use of work relief as a viable approach to urban unemployment, and the sudden downturn in the local economy during the late autumn of 1929 offered no compelling reason to suspect that this approach would not prove useful once again. Few questioned the economic, social, and political value of putting the unemployed to work rather than on the dole. Although public works entailed higher administrative costs than did direct relief, certain social and economic benefits made the implementation of work relief projects worthwhile. From the perspective of city councils, the federal and provincial governments provided low-cost financing and funding for local improvements at a time when, without that support, such projects would have overtaxed municipal budgets. The social benefits of providing the unemployed with work relief rather than direct relief also made that approach worthwhile. Not only did work relief offer some semblance of market and social stability during periods of severe economic instability, but it also purported to combat the moral degeneration of the otherwise idle unemployed. Finally, federal, provincial, and municipal funding of public works made good political sense. Public works relief was simply a more popular approach to the urban unemployment situation than was direct relief.

But, in the end, the issue was moot. Neither the federal nor provincial governments were especially interested in restarting a course of urban work relief programs along the lines of those initiated earlier in the Depression. The cities carried on as best they could, advocating wherever and whenever possible for a renewal of the work relief approach to unemployment, but municipal authorities would be continually disappointed. In city council meetings, debates occasionally emerged over relief issues, particularly in Winnipeg after 1934, when residents of the city elected a council divided between socialist/labour and business/elite councillors. But those issues tended to be matters of degree rather than form. As we will see in the next chapter, local relief officials, municipal authorities, and the unemployed could only look to Ottawa for the next move.