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MILTON - THE RURAL DEPRESSION EXPERIENCE

Jayashree Panjabi

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of B.A. (Hons) in History, University of Otago

1979
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Photo of Bruce Woollen Mill staff, 1933.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B.H. : Bruce Herald
C.A.B. : Charitable Aid Board
M.B.C. : Milton Borough Council
R.S.A. : Returned Servicemen’s Association
S.O.H.B. : South Otago Hospital Board
U.W.A. : Unemployed Workers' Association
INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression of the 1930's has been seen by historians as essentially a national phenomenon which, unlike the Depression of the 1880's, was a relatively even experience geographically speaking, with no significant amount of regional variation. This assumption has never been vigorously tested. Ashton-Peach has studied Auckland in some detail, while Robertson has focussed on Dunedin, but the scope of each study was necessarily limited and neither has concerned itself with either the small town or the rural experience. This dissertation then attempts to examine both the regional and small town dimension of the Depression, for as Oliver succinctly comments, "The region is a building block; the ultimate interest in the building itself". Milton is an ideal building block.

Population of the town during the Depression was small. The 1936 Census records 1,423 residents in total. The town was also reasonably isolated and therefore largely unaffected by events in Dunedin. Fortunately for this study, the population has also remained fairly static over the past forty years, which means that apart from written documents, there is a wealth of oral material for the social historian. This dissertation relies in part on a series of interviews, undertaken in Milton this year, with twelve different families who lived and worked within the town during the Depression and still reside there today.
The study attempts in Chapter One to explain the effects of economic depression on the town as a whole. Chapters Two and Three deal with unemployment; first, what it was like to be unemployed, and second, how the town's administrative machinery coped with the problem. Chapters Four and Five deal more specifically with families which were hard pressed by the Depression. Particular emphasis is placed on the types of relief open to them, and the attitudes towards this relief, inherent within the community. Lastly, Chapter Six takes a brief look at general life within the community at this time.

The Milton Depression experience was different from that of the cities. It may be that the Milton experience was unique, or that it had much in common with other small, rural centres in New Zealand. Whatever the future verdict, this study attempts to add another piece to the jigsaw puzzle that is New Zealand history.


Chapter 1

The Elements of Survival

The township of Milton, small and remote, was in many ways insulated from the most severe throes of the Great Depression of the 1930's. Although escaping the soup kitchens, bread lines and violence of the cities, the town nevertheless suffered in its own small way. The "Milton Depression" was altogether milder than the general experience; it began mid-1931, was at its most severe late 1932 early 1933, and by mid-1934 had almost completely disappeared. However brief, the downswing was acutely felt by certain sections of the community and, notably, in the middle period 16%¹ of the working population was unemployed, a startling figure given that estimates for the national average range from 12 to 15% for mid-1933². Nevertheless, in general terms, the Depression left no lasting scars upon the community, recovery was rapid, and the town 'bounced' back to renewed prosperity.

Milton survived - and did so remarkably well. The elements in her survival were twofold. The Bruce Woollen mill, the main employer, and only heavy industry in the town, managed to continue production and, more importantly, keep its workers. Second, the community's farming sector, the farmers of Tokomairiro Plain, were less affected by the downswing than other farming areas that were solely pastoral. This in turn, helped to bolster the business community. Thus, the little township rode the waves of retrenchment with remarkable smoothness, and although at times the going was perilously choppy, the boat was never upturned.
The Mill

Little in the way of written evidence survives for the 30's period but the township is alive with a wealth of oral material. Thus the following information has been taken chiefly from a series of eight interviews conducted with ex-employees who worked at the mill in and around the period 1930-1935.

The photo, taken 1933, tells its own story. (Figure (1).) At the heart of the Depression, the Bruce Woollen mill managed to retain most of its workers - there are 273 heads in the photo, a significant number in a town whose total working population was estimated at 385 in 1936. As one observer commented, "The woollen mill was Milton" and the survival of the mill ensured the survival of the town.

There were no 'lay-offs' during the 1930-1935 period. A few of the younger men were asked to 'step down' in order to keep the family men in work but these men were permanently 'on call' and never left the ranks of the mill employees for more than a brief period. Production was down and sales were very poor so that "in certain instances it was a matter of building up stocks". The mill management made a conscious effort to retain its staff which meant in effect that work was 'rationed'. Many of the women for example, recall doing only two or three days work per week during the 1932-1933 period,

"If we finished a weave in the loom, we might have to wait a day or so till there was more work. They tried to give everybody a certain amount of work."
As conditions worsened, management began shifting staff around from department to department in an effort to give everybody a ration of work, "Things got slacker and slacker and they were putting labour in different places rather than put people off..."). One man, who was the last apprentice in the loom room, recalls being put down permanently to the dyeworks for the duration of the Depression and then was brought back up when "things picked up".

It appears that management tried, wherever possible, to retain trained apprentices, in preparation for the return of more prosperous times.

Wages were naturally low. With the mandatory 10% reduction in award rates in 1932, the starting wage for an apprentice was 74s 3d per week instead of 82s 6d. When rationing set in, many remember taking home from between £2 to £3 per week, depending on how many days' work they were given. However, meagre, wages were enough to pay rent and buy food, "Money was still being set free in the town", and this helped to keep business afloat.

In a sense, the mill was a 'community-institution' and management seems to have shown genuine concern for the welfare of families within the mill. Some recall how the father of a large family would be given extra work to help him through the bad times. It is significant that in 1932 a Sickness Benefit Fund for employees was started, with the Company advancing a loan of 10/- per member in order to provide the initial funding for the venture.
More significantly it appears that several large families who came from areas more severely hit by the Depression, arrived in the district at the beginning of the Depression and managed to secure work at the mill. One family came from the sawmilling district around Owaka, others came from the farming areas in the Catlins and one family came from as far away as Invercargill. All are remembered as arriving in Milton in either 1929 or 1930 and all families had large numbers of girls who gained positions at the mill. These families were often 'sponsored' by the mill to move to the district and most lived in the mill houses, provided by the Company at specially cheap rentals of 14/- or 15/- per week. Thus in the early part of the Depression, when the general contraction in production had not as yet made its impact on the wool trade, it appears that mill management took advantage of the labour surpluses in surrounding areas which had already begun to register the shocks of Depression, to bring a fresh influx of female labour to the mill. The importance of the mill's female workforce must be stressed. In the 30's the mill operated a large knitwear section, staffed chiefly by female employees, and which accounted for more than two-thirds of the annual turnover in sales.

Overall the Bruce Woollen mill just managed to keep its head above water, and in doing so kept the townspeople of Milton afloat also. Although production was at a minimum there was no severe contraction in any department. The mill, like the town, simply seemed to 'stagnate' for the period, production never regaining its former level until the wartime boom.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of holdings over 1 acre</th>
<th>Average area of holdings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1927-28</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>402.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928-29</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>406.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-30</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>411.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930-31</td>
<td>774</td>
<td>420.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>418.64 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-33</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>418.20 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933-34</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>422.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934-35</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>425.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935-36</td>
<td>747</td>
<td>426.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>747</td>
<td>425.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From N.Z. Agricultural and Pastoral Statistics for the above years.

* Note the consolidation process is temporarily halted here. This probably indicates a scarcity of capital.
The Farming Area

The farmers of Tokomairiro Plain were largely "cushioned" from the worst affects of the fall in export prices, for two important reasons. First, the Tokomairiro Plain was an older established farming district. Second, most farms were reasonably diversified in their production.

In examining the first point, many of the farmers in the area were descendants of the early pioneers and a high proportion had inherited their properties. "They were just about as well off as anyone, because they owned their own farms and didn't depend on outside labour ...". Some farmers were of course mortgaged, but none were under the heavy mortgages of the post World War I days. There were "few defaults in payment of rent or interest and there were very few applications for relief to the Mortgage Adjustments Commission". Although the actual number of holdings in Bruce County actually declined during the period, it appears that this was part of a long term trend towards consolidation rather than a direct effect of the Depression (Table 1).

The second element which contributed to the Toko farmers' survival through the period was the fact that the rich deposits of lime in the Milburn Hills meant that the Tokomairiro Plain had always been a successful mixed farming area. The area yielded a relatively high proportion of grain in comparison to many other areas in New Zealand (Table 11) and even its pastoral farming was relatively intensive (Table 111). The fact that farm production in the area was reasonably diversified meant, in effect, that the fall in export prices for wool, butter and meat did not have such a severe impact on the district, given the
Table 2: Percentage of Area involved in Grain Production in Otago and Total Percentage of area involved in Crop Farming 1932-1933

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grain and Pulse</th>
<th>Total Crops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waitaki</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maniototo</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wainemo</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waikouaiti</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peninsula</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taieri</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuapeka</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutha</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

'Total Crops' includes grain farming, green fodder crops and root crops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grain and Pulse</th>
<th>Total Crops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Auckland</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auckland</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gisborne</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkes Bay</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taranaki</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellington</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlborough</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westland</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otago</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southland</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of Bruce County to other Farming Regions 1932-33
Table 3: Number of Sheep and Cows per 1,000 Acres in Otago Province 1932-1933

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cows/1,000 acres</th>
<th>Sheep/1,000 acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waitaki</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maniototo</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waihemo</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waikouaiti</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peninsula</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taieri</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuapeka</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutha</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Percentage of Grain Exported from New Zealand 1928-1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Value of Grain Crop</th>
<th>Value of Grain Exported</th>
<th>Percentage of Grain Exported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>3,417,208</td>
<td>41,298</td>
<td>1.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>3,093,606</td>
<td>67,133</td>
<td>2.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>2,878,335</td>
<td>1,612</td>
<td>.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>2,203,510</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>3,021,091</td>
<td>1,080</td>
<td>.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>2,672,699</td>
<td>14,139</td>
<td>.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>1,736,684</td>
<td>7,366</td>
<td>.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>2,781,877</td>
<td>11,286</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fact that very little grain was exported during this period (Table 4). Prices for grain 'cushioned' the fall in other prices, and no-one in the district can recall a dramatic decline in farm incomes. As one retired farmer remarked, prices for certain commodities had been low for many years before the Depression,

"I heard one farmer say - at the time of the slump everything was low - but other times there could be certain things low and other things fairly dear - they wouldn't all be down at the same time."27

Undeniably farmers were hard pressed - the fall in Farmers' Union Membership from 148 in 1931 to 53 in 1934, is indicative of this - but none suffered the catastrophic Depression experience of those in more exclusively pastoral farming areas. Two of the retired farmers interviewed recall purchasing Model 'A' motor cars in 1929. Another recalls actually going into the dairying business around 1930, for, as he remarked, the fact that meat prices were low, meant in turn, that prices for cattle beasts were low also, making it an ideal time to buy.29

The Business Community

The experience of the business community in Milton township during the years 1930-1933, tended to reflect both that of the farming community, and the mill - things were right, but in general, life went on as usual. Business was slower and sales were naturally down,30 but there was no great contraction in purchasing power - the people of Milton kept buying. A significant feature of the times was that many people kept monthly or even yearly accounts with local grocery stores, and in this way, business helped to "carry" families unable to make immediate payments.31 Likewise farmers kept six monthly accounts which were
### Table 5: Small Businesses and Self-Employed Persons Within Milton Township 1932-1939

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>New Businesses and Self-Employed Persons Listed After 1928</th>
<th>Businesses and Self-Employed no Longer Listed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Draper 2, Carrying Co., Contractor, Boarding House, Butcher 2, Tobacconist, Journeyman Painter, Tea Rooms Proprietor, Fishmonger 2, Baker, Newsagent, Building Contractor, Fruiterer 2, Electrician, Milk Vendor 2, Boot Maker</td>
<td>Butcher, Coal Co., Timber Merchant, Chemist 2, Draper, Boot Maker, Undertaker, Grocer, Mail Contractor, Fish Monger, Dressmaker, Confectioner 2, Radio Dealer, Fruiterer, Bookseller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Baker, Fruiterer, Bacon Curer, Contractor, Dressmaker, Carrier, Fishmonger</td>
<td>Butcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Electrician 2, Fishmonger, Plumber, Motor Transport Service, Carpenter 4, Painter, Designer, Journeyman Butcher 2, Grocer 2, Fruiterer, Garage, Taxi Proprietor, Boarding House</td>
<td>Hotel, Boarding House 2, Fishmonger 3, Draper, Building, Contractor, Fruiterer, Confectioner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Stone's Street Directory 1928, 1932, 1933, 1935
very often paid in eggs and butter rather than actual money, a system known as "contra'accounting".  

An interesting point to note is that the building trade in Milton does not seem to have suffered during the period. There was no decline in the number of private houses built during the years 1929-1935 (Table 7), a significant fact given that building on a nationwide scale declined by 80% between 1927 and 1933.  

Analysis of Stones' Street Directory for the Depression years is also useful in determining the fortunes of the business community during this period; although it must be noted that Stones' figures may be considered only as a rough guideline, given the fact that names were submitted to the Directory on a voluntary basis only. The study of the Directory for the years 1928, 1932, 1933 and 1935 reveals a high turnover in the number of small businesses and self-employed persons entering and leaving the community between 1928 and 1935 (save for the significant lull in 1933). Overall, between 1928-1935 the business community of Milton actually increased in size (Table 5 and Table 6).

In sum, the township of Milton, singularly fortunate in the situation of its farming community and its main industry, was able to survive the Depression with a minimum of hardship. It is useful to conclude with a comparison. The neighbouring mining community at Kaitangata was far more severely hit by the downswing and this is evident if one compares Charitable Aid Donations for unemployment from the South Otago Hospital Board, to each town during the years 1932-1933. The Kaitangata community was given regular and quite sizeable donations often two or three times a month, whereas Milton gained only intermittent donations.
Table 6 : A Summary of Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>New Businesses and Self-employed</th>
<th>Businesses and Self-Employed No Longer Listed</th>
<th>Total Businesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 : Number of Homes Built in Milton 1929-1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Private Homes Built</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Local Authorities Hand Book, for above years
which were much smaller in size (Table 8). In 1932 Kaitangata was given £14 15s 6d from Charitable Aid, while Milton was given only £1 16s and again in 1933 Kaitangata gained £36 4s 8d whereas Milton was given £1 10s 0d. From this brief comparison it appears that the Milton depression experience was mild - the hardships and agonies of the New Zealand Depression myth being quite remote from the realities of the township's situation.
### Table 8: Charitable Aid Donations to Milton and Kaitangata 1932, 1933

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kaitangata</th>
<th>Milton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1932</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb.</td>
<td>$9-8s-6d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar.</td>
<td>$8-15s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>$6-1s-6d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>$7-3s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>$12-10s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>$10-0s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug.</td>
<td>$9-7s-6d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep.</td>
<td>$25-15s-6d</td>
<td>1-16s-4d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov.</td>
<td>$10-11s-6d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec.</td>
<td>$15-3s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kaitangata</th>
<th>Milton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1933</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan.</td>
<td>$5-5s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb.</td>
<td>$6-15s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar.</td>
<td>$6-17s-6d</td>
<td>1-10s-0d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep.</td>
<td>$3-7s-2d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct.</td>
<td>$6-18s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov.</td>
<td>$6-18s-0d</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From South Otago Hospital Board Minutes 1930-1935
Footnotes Chapter 1

1 See Chapter 2, p. 11. Note this figure pertains to male workforce only.


See Bibliography for full details of interviews.

New Zealand Census 1936, Vol 4, p. 21. Note this figure pertains to male workforce only and thus may be significantly lower than the actual workforce, given that a high proportion of females (usually unmarried) were employed at the mill.

Interview with Mrs J.G. Leckie, 3 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr J. Murray, 4 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr G. Melville, 4 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mrs G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Miss M. McHardy, 2 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr D. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.
Ibid.
Interview with Mr J. Murray, 4 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr D. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr A. Hansen, 3 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr J. Murray, 4 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr G. Melville, 4 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.
Minutes of Bruce Woollen Mill Board Meeting, 6 Apr. 1932.
Five such families were cited in the interviews.

Interview with Miss M. McHardy, 2 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr A. Hansen, 3 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr G. Paul, 3 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr G. Melville, 4 Jul. 1979.
Interview with Mr J. Murray, 4 Jul. 1979.


Interview with Mr J. Murray, 4 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Mr G. Melville, 4 Jul. 1979.


Interview with Mr Miller, retired farmer, 4 Jul. 1979.


Interview with Mr Miller, 4 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Messrs Allison, retired farmers, 4 Jul. 1979.


Interview with Messrs Allison, 4 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Miss M.S. Gray, 3 Jul. 1979.

Ibid.

Ibid.

R.M. Burdon, op. cit., p. 329.
Chapter 2

The Unlucky Ones

Although the Depression per se weighed only lightly on the township of Milton, for those that were unlucky enough to become unemployed, the going was every bit as tough as in the cities.

First mention that the town had an unemployment problem appears in Council Minutes early 1930; the first relief scheme was initiated September 1930 (providing work for five men);¹ and late 1930 the Central Unemployment Board gave Milton Borough Council the go-ahead to form a local Unemployment Committee.²

It is impossible to gain a completely accurate picture of just how unemployment numbers escalated during 1931 since the Unemployment Committee Minute Books survive only for 1933 and 1934. Nevertheless by piecing together figures from Council correspondence, public works records and the Unemployment Committee books, one can gain a reasonably solid outline of the situation (Table 9).

The most severe period seems to be late 1932 to mid-1933, and then there appears a gradual improvement which continues uninterrupted into 1934. The average number of men registered as unemployed, per month, for 1932 and 1933 is 65. Using the 1936 Census estimate for the total male workforce - 385, one gains the figure 16 percent for the average number of men unemployed within the Milton workforce for the years 1932 and 1933.
Table 9 : Registered Unemployed in Milton Borough 1930-1934

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. of Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sep. 1930</td>
<td>45 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1931</td>
<td>98 +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1932</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 1932</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1933</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1933</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun. 1933</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 1933</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep. 1933</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1933</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1933</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 1933</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1934</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1934</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From Public Works Correspondence 14/8/30 to Wellington Headquarters

+ From Unemployment Committee Minute Books
The Unemployment Committee began operations early 1931. Its chief function was to 'screen' all applicants for relief and make its recommendations to the Unemployment Board via its "certifying officer" the Postmaster of Milton, who seemed to have final say as to just who would be given unemployment relief. This stage having been completed, the Committee then had the task of allocating workers to the various local bodies who had agreed to absorb labour under Scheme 5. From analysis of the monetary allocations of the Unemployment Committee to the local bodies in the period January 1931 to March 1933, it appears that workers were allocated as follows - Bruce County Council absorbed 46 percent of the relief labour, Milton Borough Council 32 percent, Tokomairiro Domain Board 10 percent, the remaining 12 percent being divided up amongst the River Board, Hospital and School Committees.

By mid-1933 it is evident that the Unemployment problem had begun to subside. The Committee now met monthly rather than fortnightly and in October 1933, took the decision to meet every two months. In April 1934 the Postmaster informed the Committee there had been no new applications for relief that month, and in August 1934 intimation came from the Central Unemployment Board that in future all relief administration was to be handled exclusively by the Postmaster. The life of the Unemployment Committee had come to an end.

Applying for Relief

The ordeal of applying for relief was intensified by the small-town atmosphere of Milton - and many would have probably preferred the anonymity of the cities to the humiliation of applying for relief in this closed, familiar, environment.
In keeping with official Unemployment Board policy, each applicant had to reveal the full extent of his finances and anyone who was found to have savings was denied relief, "If you applied for relief they wanted to know how much you had in the Post Office - people used to hide their money". Indeed, there is one case cited in the Unemployment Committee Minutes of a man who was told he would be struck off the relief list unless, "he signs a statutory declaration before a J.P. stating that he has no further means or revenue ...". So intent was the Unemployment Committee on thoroughly investigating each applicant's finances, that in early 1933 it applied to the Unemployment Board for permission to correspond with the former employers of prospective applicants to ascertain just what their wages had been before they had become unemployed.

One had to prove virtual destitution before becoming eligible for relief. A man, for example, who ran a car, had little hope of being accepted. Indeed, in April 1933 the Committee passed a ruling to the effect that all relief workers who owned cars would have to hand in their number plates for the duration of their stay on Scheme 5.

The all-seeing eye of the Committee probed every little detail of the applicant's private life. As one man commented, "There was a man used to stand outside the picture theatre and watch them go in and if he saw them going into the pictures their 5/- a week would be taken off ...". People on relief were not allowed to drink and there are several references in the Minutes to relief men reportedly spending their wages on drinking and race meetings.
The community at large was the "eyes and ears" of the Unemployment Committee and it is not difficult to imagine the paranoia of the relief worker within this environment. "In a town like this with a small population you knew everyone ... You'd see people you knew were on relief on the booze and wondered how they managed it ...". Thus there was the same tendency, as in the cities, to "dehumanise" the relief worker and treat him as "a separate and distinct class whose actions and thoughts could be judged by different standards from those applied to the rest of the community". Added to the stigma of being a relief worker was the fact that everybody knew you were on relief - there was no haven of seclusion for the Milton relief worker - he was constantly on trial.

There are two cases in 1933 of men being almost excluded from Scheme 5 because (among other things) it had been reported to the Committee that their gardens had been neglected. Likewise in March 1933 two men were actually dropped from the relief roll because of their reported refusal to accept work offered to them at the threshing mill. The stigma of being on Scheme 5 is well revealed by one of the mean who pleaded his case before the Committee. Having denied he had ever been offered any work he is reported as stating that "he was also positive he had never said that he preferred to remain in the No. 5 Relief Scheme".

The Men on Relief

There is little information on the unemployed themselves and what little exists again pertains only to 1933 and 1934. Most people remember vividly the spectre of the unemployed worker, "You used to see them all hanging round the billiard rooms on their stand-down..."
days ...". The grim reality of being unemployed is revealed by the fact that as late as April 1933 there are reports of the Mayor and certain Councillors being stopped at social functions by people asking for relief, and of others actually going to the Councillors' homes and pleading for sustenance.

There was an Unemployed Workers' Association within the town, which was fairly active throughout 1933. In June, for example, the Association arranged a "combined sacred concert and community sing" at which a collection was taken up "to assist in alleviating the distressed through sickness or from reduced allocations of time for relief workers". In September 1933 a deputation from the U.W.A. met the Council and requested that some sort of fund raising project be undertaken by "other leading citizens" for the unemployed, intimating that some of them "were feeling the pinch very much" and were on "the starvation line".

The main grievances of the Milton unemployed were of a peculiarly parochial nature. Most resented the town/country dichotomy in relief rates and, more importantly, the fact that since mid-1932 the stand-down week had been abolished for city workers. Second, a source of continual irritation was the fact that the monetary allocations for Milton Borough from the Unemployment Board tended to fluctuate and bore no relation to the actual number of men registered as unemployed in any one month. This meant, in turn, that Milton relief workers rarely got their full allocation of work and that their wages fluctuated from week to week (Table 10). It is difficult to ascertain precisely just what wages were paid in each of the set categories (two day,
Table 10: Average Wage Paid to Milton Relief Worker 1931-1934

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Allocation Per Week</th>
<th>No. of Men</th>
<th>Average Wage Paid (Per Week)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1931</td>
<td>$136</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>$ 27/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1932</td>
<td>$117</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>$ 29/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 1932</td>
<td>$ 98</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>$ 25/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1933</td>
<td>$ 96</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>$ 25/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1933</td>
<td>$ 98</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>$ 26/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun. 1933</td>
<td>$100</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>$ 26/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 1933</td>
<td>$ 96</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>$ 25/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep. 1933</td>
<td>$ 89</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>$ 27/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1933</td>
<td>$ 80</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>$ 28/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1933</td>
<td>$ 63</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>$ 30/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 1933</td>
<td>$ 55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>$ 28/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1934</td>
<td>$ 49</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>$ 26/-.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1934</td>
<td>$ 57</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>$ 24/-.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
three day, and four day men) and Table 10 simply gives the average weekly wage paid to a worker in any particular month. There is, however, one reference to exact wage rates in the Borough Council Minutes for October 1932 which stated that since the weekly allocation had again dropped from £159 to £114, then wages would have to be reduced to:

- 10/6 per week for two day men;
- 26/- per week for three day men; and
- 30/- per week for four day men.27

The sense of grievance engendered by the seeming discrimination against rural workers was also imbued by the Council and the Unemployment Committee. Notably, in October 1932, following a letter of complaint from the U.W.A., the Council resolved to protest on behalf of the Milton relief workers to the Unemployment Board.28 Again in August 1933, following the new government subsidy to the building trade, the local Unemployment Committee protested vigorously to the Board on the grounds that the subsidy was "far too liberal", given that in the country districts, relief workers had still to endure a stand-down week and inadequate wage allocations.29

The Camps

No matter how grim things appeared to the Milton relief worker, the ominous spectre of the relief camps was a constant reminder that others did indeed have it worse. The two principal camps in the Milton vicinity were the 'Akatore' camp out on the Taieri Mouth to Milton road and the Clarendon camp. Each camp contained about forty men but only one or two in each actually came from
Milton itself, since the choice of men allocated to the camps was left in the hands of the Dunedin authorities.

Work at the camps was slow and backbreaking - pick, shovel and barrow being the most sophisticated 'machinery' involved. The Akatore camp, which began late 1932, initially undertook some minor road works, and then in 1933, embarked on a more ambitious scheme to actually build a new stretch of road, five miles long, which connected directly with Taieri Mouth (Figure 2). The Clarendon camp which opened late 1933 (just before the closure of Akatore) was principally involved in the excavation and removal of large quantities of clay (some 7,000 cubic yards) from the local cuttings.

Conditions at the camps were primitive - wages averaged about 10/- per week, and tents (even during the winter months) were the only type of accommodation provided. Examination of the "shopping lists" sent in by the camp overseers to headquarters in Dunedin reveals that camp food was very basic indeed. In October 1932, for example, Public Works headquarters in Dunedin took exception to certain "extravagant" items requested by the Akatore overseer, and asked why the men needed margarine when dripping was perfectly adequate, and why they needed coal and firewood when they were able to go out and collect fuel themselves. Even tobacco was something of a luxury - it had to be specially requested by the overseers and was usually paid for with an advance on the men's coming wages.

The isolation from friends and family and the tensions of camp living occasionally gave rise to bursts of frustration and anger.
In October 1932, for example, when the Akatore overseer was visiting Dunedin, some of the men shot a pig belonging to the farmer upon whose land they were camped. Attempting to investigate the incident, the overseer found himself "up against a wall", and the solidarity of the men prevented the culprit from ever being reprimanded. Trouble again began to brew early in 1933 following the arrival of a new man to the camp, as the overseer reported, "I heard myself tell the men if they did not unite and fight they would be in the same conditions for the rest of their lives". The offender was very swiftly removed from the camp and it appears the overseer had genuinely feared that the man might spark off a revolt. "I am quite sure he is just waiting until he is ready when he will do something that will cause me to put him off and then he will say he is being victimised and take the other men with him".

Whether or not indeed this man was a trouble-maker, the main conclusion to be drawn from the incident is that the spareseness and frugality of camp life made unrest virtually inherent.

Alienated from the mainstream of New Zealand life, the camps became a world unto themselves - their only point of contact with the outside being through Milton.

Interaction between the camps and Milton was frequent. Indeed, the camps provided a lucrative source of trade for some of the town's businessmen. Local baker James Anderson secured the tender to supply bread to both Clarendon and
Akatore and butchers Rennie and the McLaren brothers both undertook to supply meat, in the phenomenal quantities of 350 and 400 pounds per week.

People in general were very sympathetic towards the plight of the camp workers. The community donated much needed old clothes to the men at Akatore and several people recall inviting workers back to their homes for the warmth and cheer of homecooking. The camp workers had their own football team which regularly played against the "town-boys" and the men frequently came into Milton for the dances, "there'd be one scrap at the dance before you got to know them, then you'd be right - they'd be part of the community". Thus, although the camp men were, in a sense, "foreigners", they were largely accepted by the community - the Milton people almost assuming a degree of responsibility for the welfare of these men.

Having described the scope and depth of the town's unemployment problem, we must now turn to an examination of the town's response to it.
Footnotes to Chapter 2


2. MBC, General Minutes, Jan. 1931, p. 249.


5. Ibid. 10 Apr. 1933.

6. Note - we do not know how often they met in 1931 and 1932. What we do know is that in the early part of 1933 they met fortnightly and later in the year (by June) had begun to meet monthly.


8. Ibid. 23 Apr. 1934.

9. Postmaster to Secretary of Unemployment Committee, Mr Manson, Aug. 1934, MBC Letterbook 1934-1938, Hocken Library.

10. Interview with Mrs G. Elliot, 3 July, 1979.

11. Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 29 May, 1933.

12. Ibid. 14 Mar., 1933.

13. Ibid. 10 Apr., 1933.


15. Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 29 May, 1933.


18. A. Ashton-Peach, op. cit., p. 74. Peach suggests that in Auckland city unemployed workers and their families herded to become more withdrawn and sought seclusion from the rest of society.

19. Milton Unemployment Committee Minute Book, 29 Mar., 1933. The garden scheme was instituted nationwide on January 1, 1932. All relief workers had henceforward to cultivate vegetables. (See Robertson, op. cit., p. 82.)

Interview with Mr A. Hansen, 3 Jul., 1979.

Milton Unemployment Committee Minute Book, 10 Apr., 1933.


Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 28 Aug., 1933.


Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 1 May, 1933, 28 Aug., 1933.

MBC, General Minutes, Oct. 1932, p. 335.

Ibid.

Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 28 Aug., 1933.

Ibid., 24 Jul., 1933.

Mr Manson, Secretary of Unemployment Committee to Public Works, Dunedin, 27 Jun., 1932, Letterbook of Public Works, 6/17/34, Hocken Library.


Ibid., 8 Aug., 1933.

Ibid., 20 Jul., 1933.

Ibid., 24 Jul., 1932.


Ibid., 5 Oct., 1932.

Ibid., 18 Feb., 1933.

Ibid.


Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 24 Jul., 1933.

Interview with Mrs G. Elliot, 3 Jul., 1979.

Interview with Miss M. McHardy, 2 Jul., 1979.

Interview with Mr G. Elliot, 3 Jul., 1979.
Milton Borough Council's response to the town's unemployment problem was determined largely by its ability to finance work projects under Scheme 5.

Finances were indeed strained, but generally speaking, the Council managed to keep within its financial limits. Although expenditure exceeded income for every year of the Depression (Table II) and the Council maintained a steady overdraft of approximately £3,500,\(^1\) overall, the level of public debt remained static during the period (Table II).

Financial stringency led to significant economies within the Borough's labour force. In April 1931 there was a uniform 10% reduction in the wages of all Council employees,\(^2\) and in December of that year the position of Sexton at the local cemetery was made redundant.\(^3\) Similarly in June 1933 the position of Borough Inspector was amalgamated with that of caretaker to Coronation Hall, again to save on costs.\(^4\)

The outstanding landmark in the history of the Borough's finances for this period was the taking out of a £7,000 loan in 1934 for the purpose of constructing a completely new water supply for the town from the Glen Stream.\(^5\) The Council issued one hundred and forty new debentures of £50 each, to be repayable over a twenty-five year period.\(^6\) A special rate of 4d in the £ was levied in 1934 to furnish...
### Table 11: Income and Expenditure of Milton Borough Council 1930-1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
<th>Level of Public Debt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 1930</td>
<td>6,547</td>
<td>7,549</td>
<td>22,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1931</td>
<td>6,464</td>
<td>6,873</td>
<td>22,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1932</td>
<td>5,735</td>
<td>7,047</td>
<td>21,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1933</td>
<td>5,385</td>
<td>7,047</td>
<td>21,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1934</td>
<td>5,284</td>
<td>6,969</td>
<td>20,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1935</td>
<td>5,644</td>
<td>13,822 *</td>
<td>27,091 *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From Local Authorities Handbook for above years*

*These figures relate to the Special 7,000 loan raised to finance the Glen Stream Water Supply project.*
the first payments on interest and sinking fund, and thereafter a special rate of 8½d in the was to be levied on all rateable property annually, for the duration of the loan. Such a feat was not accomplished without a significant amount of strain being put on the Borough's resources, which forced the Council in 1935 to "convert" the remainder of its loans, which meant, in effect, that all other loans were 'refloated' for an extended period of twenty three years.

Milton Borough Council and the Unemployed

No figures exist for the exact number of men absorbed by the Borough Council as relief labour. But the fact that MBC was granted 32 percent of the Unemployment Committee's monetary allocation for the years 1931 and 1932 and that the average number of men unemployed in Milton during these years was 85, one arrives at the fairly safe estimate that in the worst years of the Depression, MBC employed on average perhaps 27 men on relief projects. Unfortunately the Local Authorities' Hand Books for these years do not list Council relief labour as a separate category and simply list Council employees under the headings "clerical" or "other". Nevertheless, study of the latter category seems to indicate that the estimate of 27 is reasonably correct, if not a little on the conservative side (Table 12).
Table 12: Employees and Wages of Milton Borough Council 1929-1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1929</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1930</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1931</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1932</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1933</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1934</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1935</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Local Authorities Handbook for above years

*This figure appears overly small considering 33 new employees have been added to the ranks since 1930. One speculates that this may be a misprint.*
First mention of relief labour appears in the Works Committee report for June 1930, which states, "a number of townspeople who were out of employment were put on to assist the regular staff during the month". Few other details are given, however, and the first truly Government sponsored relief scheme was instituted in September 1930 when five unemployed members of the local RSA were given temporary work laying drainpipe connections in Upper Spenser Street. The scheme had been prompted by the RSA who donated £30 to the Council for relief of unemployed ex-soldiers back in July 1930. By early September no moves had been made by Council to utilise the money and it took further promptings from the local RSA Committee who urged that "Unemployment was very prevalent" and that "Council should take steps as soon as possible in finding work ...", before the Scheme was eventually instituted.

The Council then applied for a Government grant to cover the cost of the labour, stating that "£30 has been raised from the townspeople" and eventually a subsidy of £20 on the labour cost was gained.

A more elaborate drainage scheme covering Dryden, Chaucer and Moore Streets was embarked upon towards the end of the year. The estimated cost of the Scheme was £651 and Council applied for, and gained, a £2 for £1 subsidy from Government amounting to £207. Council had proposed to furnish its share of the costs via "an unemployment loan of £300 specially raised this year", and gained the Government subsidy on this basis. The interesting point is that the
Council, after having gained sanction from the Local Government Loans Board to raise the amount, never actually went ahead with the loan, managing instead to somehow pay for the Scheme out of regular revenue.20 The drainage scheme wages amounted to 14/- per man per day and in late September initial work was begun by a party of nine RSA men.21 The major work was begun late October and it is interesting to note that Council did not simply choose workers at random, rather it preferred to take the names of the thirty applicants and ballot them in order of preference.22 This action provides another example, in fact, of the "small town" attitude to unemployment relief.

From 1931-1934 the No. 5 men were mostly engaged in general maintenance work, much of which was of a comparatively unproductive nature. In June 1931 the exigencies of Depression economy had caused the Council to resolve that in future any relief scheme undertaken would be such "as required a minimum expenditure for material",23 and this served to diminish productiveness even further. The men cleaned out channels and ditches around the town,24 gravelled roads and footpaths,25 cut down scrub at the Quarry Reserve at Tokoiti26 and in November 1931, following the dismissal of the Sexton, began to tend the graves at Fairfax Cemetery.27 Some tasks were certainly more pleasant than others. In March 1933 the Bruce Herald reporting on the recent achievements of the Scheme 5 men, recorded that, "Debris has been pulled out of the river and placed at the tip head".28
Glen Stream and Beyond

The greatest achievement of Milton Council's Depression response was, naturally, the Glen Stream Water Works. For years the townspeople had endured a water supply that was periodically polluted or discoloured and thus the £7,000 loan raised in 1934 was used to construct a completely new gravitational supply from the Glen Stream some 6½ miles north west of Milton township. Robertson, in his analysis of local body response to unemployment, concludes that local authorities, who necessarily had the closest contact with the unemployed, were the first to understand their real needs and, "were able to adapt their relief programmes accordingly". Hence,

"Some local bodies raised loans during 1934 and 1933 and began intensive local public works, increasing their permanent staff at the same time. Whatever the method, the aims were similar: to reduce pauperism and the effects of longterm unemployment by raising the wages of relief workers."  

On the surface it appears that the Glen Stream project fits into this general pattern - Milton Borough Council had boldly secured a huge loan and was now striving ahead with a constructive relief scheme. In the case of Milton, however, such bold foresighted activity was more fiction than reality. From the start the Council had not intended to pay full wages to the labour employed and had counted exclusively on being able to use Scheme 5. The main obstacle to such a plan was the plain fact that by 1934 the relief rolls had dropped dramatically and there simply was not enough relief labour to furnish such a project.
The Unemployment Board recognised this and "took exception to the loan being raised as if for the relief of unemployment when the primary purpose was for the improvement of the Borough water supply ...".35 The Board refused to pay the full costs of labour on the Scheme, offering instead a subsidy of 30/- per week for every married man on the Scheme, provided they were given a full five days' work per week.36 The Council was, therefore, forced into the position of having to somehow supplement these wages and eventually had to extend the loan by a further 10% (£700) in order to bring the wages up to 40/- per man per week.37 Even so, the Council still experienced the problem of an inadequate labour supply and in the end had to resort to the expedient of virtually stopping all other relief projects in the town in order to 'force' the men on to the Glen Stream project.38 This tactic was successful, and with all available relief labour concentrated at Glen Stream, the project proceeded smoothly, although it must be noted that the number of men working at Glen Stream averaged about 12 and never exceeded 15.39

Although most relief projects continued well into 1933, by mid-1934 there was more and more reference in works reports to 'casual' labour (as opposed to relief labour) being employed at the Cemetery and at Quarry Reserve, indicative perhaps that unemployment numbers had declined to minimal proportions.40 Shortage of labour had a particularly detrimental effect on maintenance at the Cemetery41 and it is noteworthy that in March 1933 the position of Sexton was reinstated on to the Borough workforce ranks.42
One can gain a handy overview of just how Council allocated its finances in the Depression years by studying the Local Authorities' Hand Book returns for these years (Table 13). Expenditure noticeably increased on street and footpath maintenance and of course (in the later period) expenditure on the water supply increased phenomenally. The most noticeable drop in expenditure was suffered by the Reserves Department - although general maintenance and clearing continued, the Council's afforestation programme was severely cut back and only a small acreage of trees was planted during the period.43

Finances were tight, and significant economies had been made, but in sum, the town had undergone no drastic hardships and emerged from the period relatively unchanged.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Roads and Footpaths</th>
<th>Water Supply</th>
<th>Cemetery</th>
<th>Parks and Gardens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 1930</td>
<td>£ 938</td>
<td>£ 713</td>
<td>£ 219</td>
<td>£ 1,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1931</td>
<td>£ 1,095</td>
<td>£ 845</td>
<td>£ 260</td>
<td>£ 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1932</td>
<td>£ 2,003</td>
<td>£ 876</td>
<td>£ 296</td>
<td>£ 739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1933</td>
<td>£ 1,079</td>
<td>£ 418</td>
<td>£ 234</td>
<td>£ 418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1934</td>
<td>£ 1,936</td>
<td>£ 733</td>
<td>£ 205</td>
<td>£ 366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1935</td>
<td>£ 759</td>
<td>£ 9,050</td>
<td>£ 86</td>
<td>£ 215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Local Authorities Handbook for above years
Footnotes to Chapter 3

2. Ibid., Mar. 1931, p. 258.
3. Ibid., Dec. 1931, p. 300.
5. Ibid., for early months of 1934.
8. Ibid., Apr. 1934, p. 396.
11. See Chapter 2, p. 11.
13. Ibid., Sep. 1930, p. 129.
14. Sent from the Dunedin Committee Poppy Day Funds.
15. MBC, General Minutes, Jul. 1930, p. 225.
17. Ibid., Sep. 1930, p. 236.
22. Ibid.

Ibid., Sep. 1931.

Bruce Herald clipping in MBC General Minutes, 8 Jul. 1931.

Ibid., Nov. 1931.

Ibid., 9 Aug. 1933.

Ibid., 8 Mar. 1933.

Ibid., 10 May 1933. Water supply up to late 1932 had been taken from a local well, and thereafter water had been pumped from the north branch of the Tokoiti River.

Robertson, op. cit., Introduction (iii).

Ibid., p. 426.

MBC, General Minutes, Aug. 1933, p. 372.

Ibid., May 1934, p. 398.


Ibid., May 1934, p. 398.

Ibid.

Ibid., Nov. 1934, p. 422.

Bruce Herald clipping in MBC, General Minutes, 10 Apr. 1934 and Jun. 1934.

Ibid., Jun 1934 and Nov. 1934.

Ibid., Feb. 1934.


Bruce Herald clipping in MBC General Minutes, 10 Jun. 1931.
"Charity to the Poor" - The Official Relief Story

In such a small township, there were few institutions that catered for the indigent and the sick. Indeed, the only lifeline for some unfortunate families was relief from the Charitable Aid Boards. Relief from "the Authorities" was charity in the traditional sense - paternalistic, moralistic and very much imbued with the self-help ethic. Robertson points to 1932 as being a watershed year as far as attitudes towards relief were concerned. He argues that after that date many relief institutions became more aware of the psychological and moral needs of the unemployed man - that it was every bit as essential to preserve his independence and his dignity as it was to keep his stomach full. This shift in emphasis, perceived by Robertson, does not seem to have occurred in Milton. Relief and attitudes toward it remained paternalistic right up to 1935, and the traditionally held concept that the poor was somehow morally responsible for its own condition, never really lost ground within the community.

Charitable aid for the Milton area was administered by the South Otago Hospital Board based at Balclutha. Milton retained two representatives on that Board. Aid was given in only the most necessitous cases, namely to widows, destitute families and incapacitated persons. In keeping with general Hospital Board policy the Board refused aid to the unemployed. On this last point the Board was adamant
and several seemingly needy cases were turned down. In December 1930, for example, a certain Mr Davis applied for relief on account of having been "burnt out", but was told that there was nothing the Board could do to help him. Likewise in January 1933 Mr McFail of Helensbrook, Milton, intimated that he could not pay his hospital bill because he was "on relief". The Board resolved that he was perfectly able to pay and handed the matter of payment over to the local solicitor. In September of that year the local Unemployment Committee pleaded on behalf of a Mr Ferguson who "was a member of the unemployed and was in Milton hospital", but again, the Board unceremoniously declined responsibility in the matter. So keen was S.O.H.B. to avoid involvement with the unemployment problem that initially it even refused to co-operate with the Unemployment Committee in the matter of giving free examinations to local men suspected of being too unfit to proceed to the work camps. But eventually the Hospital Board was persuaded to issue medical certificates for these men after direct intervention from the Unemployment Board.

"Charitable Aid" was very much as its name suggests—reserved for only the most destitute; it usually consisted of cash payments for food or to help pay rent. Characteristically such relief would be partial (no payment would fully cover a family's rent or food) and of an extremely temporary nature. The Board could also grant outpatients relief. One Milton woman, for example, who was suffering from an eye defect, was granted £2-2s-6d and 6/2 trainfare
in order to go to Dunedin to get glasses. In July 1930, Mrs Quelch of Milton was granted 10/- per week for special foods, "on account of the delicate health of her baby". She was also given a pair of blankets valued at 15/- and the food relief was continued until the end of the year.

The Board's tendency to moralise is well demonstrated in this case. In October 1930 a letter was written to Mr Quelch stating "it had come to the Board that he was not making the best use of the money he was receiving ..." and that since his family was now on relief he must now begin to do so.

In order to capture more precisely the atmosphere of, and inherent attitudes involved in, Charitable Aid relief, four exemplary case studies will be examined.

The first was that of Mr Tye who, incapacitated after his accident and "in straits", informed the Board in August 1930 that he was unable to pay his rent. The Board immediately granted him one month's rent to the value of £3. In September when it became evident he was no better, a more permanent arrangement was secured. Tye's landlord agreed to reduce the rent from 15/- to 12/6 per week and the Board agreed to pay 7/6 of this, provided Tye's two sons (both of whom were married with families of their own) put forward 2/6 each per week to help payment. Clearly the self-help ethic was still a strong motivating force within Hospital Board policy. This arrangement worked well until March 1931 when one of Tye's sons informed the Board he could not pay
the 10/- per month because he was no longer in full-time work. The Board's only response to this new development was to urge the man to continue payment, "since his father was dependent on him". Eventually in January 1932, a Committee was formed to investigate the possibility of having Tye's rent reduced even further. In such a small town, however, the potency of rumour was of incalculable strength. In April 1932 Mr Rennie (Milton Council representative on S.O.H.B.) revealed the startling news that "the family was earning about 54 per week in all and that they could go fairly regularly to the pictures". He then moved that payment of rent be discontinued. There then followed further investigations of the Tyes' finances which revealed that Mr Rennie (in his own words) had been "somewhat out" and the Board eventually moved to continue payment of the rent until Tye was physically able to support his family.

The case of the Hansen family was somewhat more desperate. In February 1932 the family applied for relief and was immediately granted 7/6 per week, in addition to one pint of milk daily, three loaves of bread and a bag of coal each week, until the end of March. The Board also undertook to pay the family's rent, but again, on a temporary basis, renewing the situation afresh each month. Rent and relief continued to be given in this way, and in July 1932 a grant of medicines for Mr Hansen was also put through. The situation of the family must have worsened over the winter months, for by September the Board had contacted the
Child Welfare Officer in Dunedin who subsequently advised that the Reverend McNeir of Milton would henceforward "take the oversight of the Hansen family". The officer further intimated that the Board must supply "some definite proof of the home being unsuitable" before any significant action could be taken. By summer it appeared that the fortunes of the family were improving and Mr Rennie reported "the Salvation Army had taken a decided interest in them". The improvement was illusory, however, and by winter 1933 the family had actually been forced to split up, Ivy Hansen being taken in by the Salvation Army and the "Hansen boy" being taken to Invercargill in the care of the Child Welfare Officer.

There is also mention in the records of a migratory family that arrived in Milton in March 1933. The Deniston family had previously been engaged in gold prospecting in Lawrence, "but had come to Milton for medical attendance for partially disabled hand". The family, who had "taken possession of a home in Dryden Street", was immediately granted 30/-, and thereafter 25/- per week food allowance for a limited period. Since the family was from outside the district, S.O.H.B. was not obliged to foot the bill for this relief, which was eventually paid by the Maniototo Hospital Board. The outside body actually suggested in April that the relief be reduced to 20/- per week, a request with which S.O.H.B. duly complied.

A typical example of a Charitable Aid Relief case was that of Mrs Jessie Duffy and family, who were left completely
destitute following the desertion of Mr Duffy. In December 1930 the Board granted the family 10/- per week food relief and this continued intermittently throughout 1931 and into 1932. In May 1932 the Board wrote to the Superintendent of Police in Dunedin asking, "that action be taken to compel Mr Duffy to contribute to the maintenance of his family". Police subsequently replied that Mr Duffy refused to do so and then the Board, most surprisingly, chose to wash its hands of the whole situation. Mrs Duffy was informed that "she must take steps to have her husband contribute towards her maintenance and that failing this being done the relief would be stopped as from the end of August." Such threats were not idle and in September 1932 relief to Mrs Duffy officially ceased - the fate of the unfortunate woman and her family never again being mentioned in the hospital records.

The strictness with which the Board administered Charitable Aid was carried over into the realm of hospital administration proper. Depression or not, people were expected to pay the hospital bills. The charge for hospital care in 1932 was 9/- per day for an adult (4/6 for children) - roughly 5/-3 per week - quite a hefty sum considering that most wages at the mill averaged between 5/-2 and 5/-3 at this time. The small cottage hospital admitted, on average, about 150 people each year (roughly twelve per month) and the number of Milton people who were unable to pay their bills was surprisingly small. In the period 1930-1933 only 23 people informed the Board they could not pay their
hospital accounts. In most cases these were people whose income had been severely affected by Depression conditions. Mrs Rakowski of Tokoiti, Milton, wrote to the Board in April 1930 saying that the family could not pay the £15 owing "as her husband had been a good deal out of work...". Likewise in September 1932 a certain Mr Borthwick informed the Board that he was out of work, and had a young family to care for, and therefore could not pay his bill of £9-13-6d. Others, who were relatively more fortunate, defaulted payment on the grounds that they were not getting enough work to pay all expenses. In March 1931, for example, a Mr Welham claimed hardship due to the fact that he was only working four days a week. Similarly, in 1933 Miss Lila Joyce wrote she was unable to pay her bill because she was only getting part-time work at the mill. The most tragic case cited in the records was that of Mr Sansom, who intimated that he could not pay the 4-4s owing on the treatment of his blind son, "as owing to his wife's death he has had to bear additional expense".

Although most cases of hardship were genuine, the Board took a firm stance against potential defaulters. Few accounts were ever "written off". All were expected to pay on an instalment basis of 10/- to £1 per month. The implicit "self help" orientation in the Board's thinking is well demonstrated by the fact that those people who informed the Board that they were unable to pay their account immediately, but offered a certain sum towards payment, were usually given some sort of reduction in
their accounts. In contrast those that simply intimated that they could not pay, were told severely that they must do so on the instalment basis. If payment still did not ensue, the Board had no qualms in taking legal action against offenders. Indeed a local solicitor seems to have done very well through Board business.37

Thus although to some unlucky families Charitable Aid was the difference between survival and starvation, the moral implications of this 'charity' were such that only the truly destitute were willing to undergo the humiliation of applying for relief.
Footnotes to Chapter 4

1 Robertson, op. cit., p. 180.

2 Note the circular to all Boards from the Hospital Board Association, received by S.O.H.B. Jul. 1931, "on account of reduction in income and possible increased demand for assistance ... Government has been asked to take responsibility for all relief to those who were unable to obtain work."

Also S.O.H.B. Minutes, Jun. 1932.

3 Ibid., Dec. 1930.
5 Ibid., Sep. 1933.
6 Ibid., Sep. 1932.
7 Ibid., Oct. 1933.
9 Ibid., Oct. 1930.
10 Ibid., Aug. 1930.
11 Ibid., Mar. 1931.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., Jan. 1932.
15 Ibid., Apr. 1932.
16 Ibid., May 1932.
18 Ibid., Jul. 1932.
19 Ibid., Sep. 1932.
20 Ibid., Nov. 1932.
21 Ibid., Dec. 1932.
22 It is unclear whether this woman was the mother or the daughter.

Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 10 Sep. 1933.

Ibid., 1 May, 1933.

S.O.H.B., Mar. 1933.

Ibid., Apr. 1933.

Ibid., Dec. 1930.

Ibid., May 1932.

Ibid., Aug. 1932.

Ibid., Jun. 1932.

This figure is surprisingly low given that one average yearly collection of fees due to S.O.H.B. was 51% (S.O.H.B. Nov. 1933).

S.O.H.B., Apr. 1930.

Ibid., Sep. 1931.

Ibid., Mar. 1931.

Ibid., Sep. 1933.

Ibid., May 1931.

There is little evidence that there existed any private relief organisations within the town at this time. Indeed the formal relief agency was a phenomenon peculiar to the cities. In a small nucleated environment such as Milton there was little need for the paraphernalia of organised relief - "everyone knew everyone". Those that were destitute "wore" their poverty like a badge, differentiating them (humiliatingly) from the rest of the community, yet at the same time forcing community responsibility for their welfare.

There were few examples of formalised (or more correctly documented) 'giving' within the community. A certain Mrs Hall and her pupils staged several gymnastic displays to raise funds for Christmas relief of the unemployed and in mid-1932 the Girl Guides requested free use of Coronation Hall for a concert to raise funds for relief men. An anonymous donor gave Council £50 towards relief of unemployment in December 1930 and in August 1933 someone donated 10/- "to purchase a pair of boots for an unemployed ex-serviceman", but apart from these isolated instances, there were no other recorded examples of townspeople proffering cash donations for relief of the unemployed.

Perhaps the nearest thing to the city relief agency was the Mayor's Relief Fund set up in April 1931, following the temporary shut down of the Unemployment Board machinery. A
deputation of three, representing the town's unemployed, met the Mayor on 18 April, intimating that they were "in needy circumstances" and requesting urgent relief. Council response was immediate. The deputation was asked to select from amongst them ten or twelve of the "most needy families", and the men in these households were each given two days' work. There was to be no wages involved in the scheme, rather, "each recipient of work be requested to given an order to the tradesman they are accustomed to deal with for goods to the value of the money earned". It was emphasised that the scheme was in no way a precedent, and indeed it appears the arrangement was extremely temporary, since there was no further mention of such a fund in the Council records after this date.

Council also helped ease the burden of those in necessitous circumstances by occasionally waiving payment of rates. Mrs A. Hamilton, for example, was exempted from paying rates for two years "owing to the prolonged illness of her husband and straitened circumstances". In 1932 Council discussed the possibility of waiving rates on a property in Dryden Street whose occupant was "practically an invalid", and another occupied by a family which was at present receiving C.A.B. relief.

There was also a food depot within the town which was situated outside the Bruce County Council offices - here farmers and townspeople brought surplus meat and vegetables to be distributed amongst the more needy elements in the
community. It is significant, however, that most people's recollections of the depot were vague. Indeed some even denied that such a centre ever existed, suggesting that the depot was not a prominent nor even important component in the Milton relief system.

In August 1933 the local U.W.A. approached the Council and requested that a special fund be set up to ease the plight of the unemployed. The Council, after lengthy deliberation, decided not to proceed with such a project, given "the general slackness in trade and low prices for produce" and the fact that "some citizens are only working half-time and some less than half-time", and, more importantly, the Mayor stressed that the public was "already heavily taxed to meet the needs of the unemployed families". The key to understanding the Milton relief situation is embodied in this statement, as one man later recalled, relief was "not made a public affair ... those in need received it quietly in our small community." The most essential relief was given discreetly - charity was a personal, informal and above all a silent activity within the community. In such a small town, community bonds were strong, "If it was a question of getting a few turnips, or eggs or helping out a young family - each one helped the other ...". Old clothes, surplus fruit or vegetables, would automatically be given to a neighbour in need, "You didn't sell anything ...". From the sources of oral history several figures emerge as having given silently of themselves during the periods of distress. Many, for example, remember Mr James Anderson, local baker, and
longtime member of the Salvation Army, who used to deliver his bread door to door, and was well known for "leaving" loaves in certain households and never demanding payment. Likewise Nurse Graham, the local Plunket Nurse, who visited all households with children under five, was in a position to see family conditions first hand and in cases of real need would arrange for food or clothes from Plunket Society members to be taken to the families in question. Often she gained assistance from local farmers. "It was so much easier to get milk then from dairy farmers - nearly everybody had cows then ...". In this way the community looked after its own and indeed in the country situation, such help between friends and neighbours was not really considered charity at all - it was part of a way of life.

The R.S.A.

The most formal organ of relief within the Milton situation was the local R.S.A., which in liaison with the Dunedin branch, sought actively to protect the interests of the unemployed ex-serviceman. Local men were asked to 'register' as unemployed with the R.S.A., and the local body periodically sent the latest figures to Dunedin headquarters. Subsequently it received grants, in proportion, from the Canteen Fund (Table 14). These funds were for the relief of unemployed ex-servicemen only and were usually passed on to various local bodies (mainly Milton Borough Council and the Bruce County Council) who were expected to supplement the grants on a 5:1 for 5:1 basis and then utilise them on work projects for the men. The President of the local
Table 14: Canteen Fund Grants to Milton R.S.A. from Dunedin Headquarters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>£55-0s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>£45-0s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>£35-0s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>£15-0s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>£55-15s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>£56-10s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Dunedin R.S.A. Poppy Day and Unemployment Committee Minutes and Milton R.S.A. Minutes
R.S.A., Mr Lynch, was also a member of the Unemployment Committee. Consequently there was a fair amount of coordination between local Scheme 5 and the R.S.A. work schemes, although in terms of wages and who was employed, the schemes were kept completely separate.

The R.S.A. made one heroic attempt to furnish its own independently run work scheme. In May 1930 it was decided to embark "on a scheme of employing ex-servicemen in a firewood business". Wood from Tokoiti was to be felled, chopped and bagged and then sold at the price of 2/3 per bag or ten bags of £1. Wages were set at 14/- per day, and it was hoped that the project would provide work for three men at a time who would be employed on a rotating basis. The scheme was doomed to failure from the start - there were simply too many overheads involved. The outlay for such a small organisation was tremendous. An old ford car, a saw bench, three axes, three saw files, two hundred sacks from Dunedin and a new circular saw were purchased in preparation and Leckies Carrying Company was given the tender for cartage of the firewood back into the town at the rate of 6d per bag. By mid-year the fledgling scheme was already floundering. A motion was passed in June 1930 to contact the Westport Coal Company and John Mill and Company "re purchase of surplus firewood", and by July the "business" was £41 2s in arrears. Indeed it was only through the voluntary efforts of several R.S.A. members who went out at weekends and chopped extra wood, that the deficit was reduced to £7-3s-11d by the end of the year. By early 1931
it was clear the scheme had been a failure and the Committee concluded "that as there was not sufficient firewood to make it a payable proposition and as the Committee had no funds to put into the plant, it was decided not to carry on".23

No further independent ventures were attempted and the Committee resolved henceforth to work only through other local bodies. The outcome of this decision was that towards the end of 1931 the generous grants put through by the Dunedin R.S.A. were simply allowed to accumulate at the Milton end. Further proof of this failure to spend the money successfully was provided in September 1931 when the Milton R.S.A. Committee moved that since "no suitable employment could be found at the present time, the money is to be placed in the Post Office Savings Bank ...".24

In November 1931 the Committee proposed that another jointly financed R.S.A.-M.B.C. scheme be launched and proffered $50 towards its share of the costs.25 Predictably M.B.C. replied that while it sympathised with the aims of the Committee, "the finances of the Council were somewhat straitened" and therefore no action could be contemplated at the present time.26 A seemingly ridiculous situation had, in fact, become a reality. Milton R.S.A. had money to spend but had no project to spend it on, and M.B.C., while desperately needing finance to cope with the general unemployment problem, lacked sufficient funds to subsidise and thus utilise the R.S.A. grant. Thereafter the R.S.A. Committee tended to work more closely with the Bruce County Council rather than M.B.C. and although it still sponsored
minor work schemes, no major local development projects were effected during the period.

R.S.A. was also engaged in relief activities of a broader spectrum. Each year, for example, $5 was set aside "for the purpose of assisting drifters passing through Milton" and such people were usually provided with bed and breakfast, or a parcel of food, to help them on their way. Widows of ex-servicemen were also given assistance as were any cases of genuine destitution known to exist within the community. There is sad irony in the fact that the name Mrs Duffy again appears on the relief rolls, this time of the R.S.A., which in June 1934 granted her family 10/- per week for the duration of six weeks.

Priority in relief was naturally given to any ex-serviceman, and in this case, relief generally took the form of clothes rather than food. Colonel Stewart, a member of the Canteen Board and leading local Committee man, was also on the Board of Directors of the mill and thus spare blankets and other odd garments were always easily accessible (free of charge) to the R.S.A. Committee. In February 1933, for example, a Mr Milligan was granted blankets, singlet and socks to the value of $2 and in June of the same year, Mr Sellars was given 5/- towards purchase of a pair of boots.

The Milton R.S.A. played a valuable Depression role. By aiding the plight of the unemployed ex-serviceman, it helped
ease the burden of relief on the rest of the community as a whole.

One vital question remains unanswered. Why did not more community organisations participate in the relief effort? Why, in particular, were the churches not actively involved in helping the destitute? Several hypotheses may be put forward. First, perhaps there was simply no need for any further relief in Milton, other than that provided by the C.A.B. and the R.S.A. Second, one may conclude that a certain amount of Church relief did exist but that it was of the silent, undocumented variety, so characteristic of Milton relief. Alternatively, perhaps this lack of involvement stems from the other defining characteristic of Milton relief, namely, the fact that it was imbued with the self-help ethic. The poor were in some way responsible for their own situation and therefore whatever relief was provided must never wholly redress that situation. The poor had to be forced to help themselves.

Further research and comparisons with other small centres is needed before any firm conclusion can be drawn in the matter.
Footnotes to Chapter 5

1 Christmas 1931 and 1932. MBC, General Minutes, Jan. 1932, p. 304.; and
   ibid., p. 335.

2 Ibid., Jun. 1932, p. 220.

3 Ibid., Dec. 1930, p. 246.

4 Milton R.S.A. Minutes, 1 Aug. 1933.

5 MBC General Minutes, Apr. 1931, p. 263.

6 Ibid., Oct. 1931, p. 289; and
   ibid., Feb. 1933, p. 351.

7 Ibid., Jan. 1932, p. 304.

8 The outcome of these discussions is never mentioned - therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether these people did receive exemption from payment of rates.

9 Interview with Mrs J.M. Gourlay, 4 Jul. 1979.
   Interview with Mr G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.
   Interview with Mr G. Melville, 4 Jul. 1979.

10 Interview with Mr and Mrs J.G. Leckie, 3 Jul. 1979.
   Interview with Messrs Allison, 4 Jul. 1979.
   Interview with Mr Miller, 4 Jul. 1979.

11 Milton Unemployment Committee Minutes, 28 Aug. 1933.

12 Interview with Mr J. Murray, 5 Jul. 1979.

13 Ibid.

14 Interview with Mrs G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.

15 Interview with Mrs G. Paul, 3 Jul. 1979.
   Interview with Miss M. Gray, 3 Jul. 1979.

16 Interview with Mrs J.G. Leckie, 3 Jul. 1979.

17 Unemployed ex-servicemen only.

18 Milton R.S.A. Minutes, 8 Apr. 1933.

19 Whether or not this was a competitive price is hard to ascertain - Beardsmore Bros. and Adams advertised coal in 1932 for 22/6 per ton. Bruce Herald, 26 May, 1932, p. 2, col. 3.
Milton R.S.A. Minutes, 13 May, 1930; and ibid., 27 May 1930.

Ibid., 2 Jun. 1930.

Milton R.S.A. Minutes, 28 Nov. 1930.

Ibid., 14 Apr. 1931.

Ibid., 1 Sep. 1931.

MBC, General Minutes, Nov. 1931, p. 294.

Ibid.

Milton R.S.A. Minutes, 9 May 1933.

Ibid., 26 Nov. 1932.

Ibid., 2 May 1932.

Ibid., 12 Jun. 1934.

Interview with Mr J. Murray, 3 Jul. 1979

Milton R.S.A. Minutes, 28 Feb. 1933.

Ibid., 28 Jun. 1933.
Chapter 6

All Things Considered

Although Milton people endured their own share of the suffering and poverty of Depression life, the community as a whole emerged unscarred. The Depression literally "slipped by" and memories of the era are hazy. "We couldn't have been hard done by or we might have remembered that - it seemed to be just ordinary life".¹

Naturally things were tight and resources were stretched to their utmost, but in the country environment where food was always plentiful, survival was assured. Food prices actually declined during the period (Table 15) and, "Money went much further so far as covering our immediate needs were concerned ...".² One woman recalls putting dripping in the biscuits instead of butter.³ Another remembers eating lots of sausages and potatoes and making 1 lb of mince last three days⁴ for a family of four. Life was not easy, but things were certainly not as grim as the cities. Everyone had a garden and most people remember eating meat every day, even if it was only rabbit that had been shot in the Tokoiti Hills.⁵

There was no money for clothes - most people made their own and things were made to last. The mill held an open day once a year where scraps of material were sold very cheaply and many a skirt and cardigan were made in this way.⁶ Stockings were darned and redarned, and hand-me-downs were
Table 15: Food Prices in Milton 1931-1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1932</th>
<th>1933</th>
<th>1934</th>
<th>1935</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dairy Butter/lb</td>
<td>10d</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>8d</td>
<td>8d</td>
<td>8d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eggs/doz</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>11d</td>
<td>10d</td>
<td>11d</td>
<td>9d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese/lb</td>
<td>1/-</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>7d</td>
<td>7d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onions</td>
<td>5lb/ls</td>
<td>4lb/ls</td>
<td>4lb/ls</td>
<td>3lb/ls</td>
<td>3lb/ls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Potatoes</td>
<td>5lb/ls</td>
<td>6lb/ls</td>
<td>6lb/ls</td>
<td>6lb/ls</td>
<td>6lb/ls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bacon/lb</td>
<td>1/6</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>1/-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Bruce Herald for above years

Table 16: Milton Athanaeum Membership Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Milton Athanaeum Cash Book
"re-made" several times over. Old shirts became new shirts and nothing was ever wasted. Dressmaking was reasonably cheap. It cost 1/6 to have a dress cut out which you could sew together yourself, some dressmakers actually specialised in "making down" old clothes for the next person's use.7

"You didn't drink much in those days - you couldn't afford to ..."8 recalled one observer. Milton was 'dry' and the nearest liquor outlet was a costly car-ride away at Henley. Thus "homebrew" was the answer in terms of economy and convenience. "You'd often see the smoke coming out of people's chimneys and you could smell ... you'd know they were brewing ... you'd say, 'Jerry's doing the washing today'".9

The most significant cut downs were made in the areas of recreation and sport. Many men, for example, were forced to give up Saturday afternoon rugby because they could not afford the taxi-fares to take them to matches in surrounding districts.10 The local library, the Milton Athanaeum, also suffered during the period. Subscriptions in 1933 dropped to almost half their former figure (Table 16), small wonder, given that the annual subscription was set at 15/- per family.11 Also there was simply no money that could be set aside for worthwhile causes. Plunket Society actually gave up canvassing the country districts for the two years 1931 and 1932, while the Society's membership plummeted to almost half in the latter year.12 Income from subscriptions and donations dropped by over 350 in
1933 (Table 17) causing the society to go into overdraft for the first time.¹³

A useful measure of stress in any community is the degree of increased politicisation caused by personal economic hardship. As Peach points out, those that had suffered because of the Depression now began to realise the importance of economic factors in shaping the community, "Economists took on the status of witch doctors".¹⁴ Rural communities which had been hard hit by the slump now flooded to the meetings of Douglas Credit, hoping to attain some of this magic. It is therefore significant that Milton remained politically dormant. The general conservatism, imbibed in part from the farming district, continued throughout the period. It is noteworthy that the area returned a National candidate in 1935;¹⁵ "Our understanding was of it that they were doing the very best they could...",¹⁶ "At that stage nobody had any idea how you could remedy it... People more or less accepted...".¹⁷ The voice of the working man was still to be heard, but it was largely confined to the mill. Even here it was doubtful whether Labour could have swung any more than 30% of the workers' votes. Yet there were strong Labour men within the community and many were disgruntled with Forbes and Coates, "You'd hear on the wireless that we're rounding the corner - but it seemed a hell of a long corner before we got round, you know...".¹⁶ But these men were essentially in the minority.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Income From Subscriptions and Donations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>$101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>$109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>$78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>$124</td>
</tr>
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</table>

From Plunket Society Minutes of Annual Meetings 1929-1933
Similarly, only one man remembers a Douglas Credit meeting being held in the town, and although Douglas Credit pamphlets were handed out at Labour meetings, it appears that there was no strong following within the district. The heroes of '35 made their mark within the community—many recall the meetings of 'Jo' Savage and Bob Semple, "he came in just like a dancing ball on to the stage and he held the audience right from then ...". But the district remained inherently conservative. The Depression had not been so severe as to change traditional political attitudes.

Despite this lack of political vitality, it must not be assumed Milton was an homogenous community—class distinctions of the most profound type did in fact exist. One family interviewed endured the Depression without electric power, deriving light from candles and kerosene lamps and heat from firewood which they collected themselves from the bush. In contrast, another family interviewed ran a car during the Depression and even bought a motorised caravan in 1931. An oft quoted phrase of the more fortunate ones was that those that were poor were simply "bad managers". One observer remarked adamantly, "I think the ones that were on relief were the ones that really didn't work", again providing further indication of the inherent conservatism of the area.

One of the key defining characteristics of Milton during this period was its isolation from the rest of the world. Few people had motor cars and the winding gravel roads made
travel slow and uncomfortable. Even the fifteen mile trip to Balclutha took anything up to forty minutes. 24

One source of contact with the city and beyond was through the hawkers who periodically did circuits through the district. One Assyrian lady used to sell drapery from door to door in a baby's pram, 25 others sold meat and fish, and the ones from the city would bring "gadgety" things to the little town. 26 The number of hawkers increased markedly during the period - a sure symptom of distress. 27 The intense parochialism and the general fear of strangers was certainly brought out in this context; "most of us didn't like them coming round because you'd be on your own in the house". 28

In sum, "Dunedin was as far away as Auckland" 29 and news of the 'riots' and general unrest carried with it a tinge of unreality. "You only read it in the paper or you'd hear if somebody came out or knew some friends or relations or something. It sounded more desperate than it was here". 30 Milton was a haven from the economic perils of the wider world, "We were very pleased we were bringing up our children in a country town". 31 Many remember sending food parcels to less fortunate relations in the city. 32 It is significant that the only formal clothes collections held in Milton during the period were for the relief of the unemployed in Dunedin. 33
Footnotes to Chapter 6

1. Interview with Mrs T. Young, 2 Jul. 1979. Indeed a scanning of the Bruce Herald for the period 1930-1935 gives the impression that there was little or no Depression in Milton at all.

2. Interview with Mr J. Murray, 3 Jul. 1979.

3. Interview with Mrs G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.

4. Interview with Mr and Mrs A. Hansen, 3 Jul. 1979.

5. Interview with Mrs G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979.

6. Interview with Mr A. Hansen. The cheapness of meat is indicated in the fact that the Akatore camp bought huge quantities of meat each week - 350 - 400 lbs, to feed less than 50 men. See Chapter 2, Footnote 43.


8. Ibid. and interview with Mrs T. Young, 2 Jul. 1979, and interview with Miss M. Gray, 3 Jul. 1979.

9. Prices of clothes as advertised in Bruce Herald for following dates:

Women's Clothing

BH, 2 Dec. 1932, p. 3, cols 7, 8.
Cotton frocks from 6s 11d to 12s and 6d.

BH, 20 Nov. 1933, p. 2, cols 1, 2.
Cotton frocks from 6s 11d to 9s. 6d.

Coats from 63s to 4 15s.
Jumpers from 9s 1ld to 10s 9d.
Summer frocks from 42s to 5-19s-6d.

Men's Clothing

BH, 31 Oct. 1932, p. 2, cols 1, 2, 3.
Men's shirts from 7s 6d to 9s. 6d.

Men's suits from 75s to 95s.

Made to Measure suits 95s.


10. Interview with Mr D. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.

11. Interview with Mr A. Hansen, 3 Jul. 1979.

12. Interview with Mr J. Murray, 3 Jul. 1979.

From Bruce Herald clipping in Plunket Society Minutes, 1933.

Plunket Society, Annual Reports Minute Book, 1929-1933.

A. Ashton Peach, op. cit., p. 77.

Election results for 1935 from BH, 28 Nov. 1935. Milton in the Clutha Electorate. Mr J. Roy, the National candidate for Clutha was returned by the Milton area 654:469.

Interview with Mr G. Melville, 4 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Mr G. Elliot, 3 Jul. 1979. Bruce Herald editorials around the time of the election also reflect these sentiments. BH, 4 Nov. 1935, p. 2, col. 6. The Editorial states,

"And if the Labour party is placed in office at the forthcoming election we feel sure it will not attempt to do most of the things it is talking of doing and will not accomplish a thousandth part of what it is at present trying to advise the people to believe it will accomplish."

In contrast, the paper seemed sympathetic towards the National candidate: from BH, 11 Nov. 1935:

"We think, too, that Mr Roy (National candidate) is prudent in not making rash promises, and in refraining from talking as some are doing about the many miraculous and impossible things that are allegedly to follow their own and their party's election to office."

Interview with Mr D. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.

There is no mention, however, in the Bruce Herald of any Douglas Credit meetings.

Interview with Mr D. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Mr A. Hansen, 3 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Mrs J.G. Leckie, 3 Jul. 1979.

Ibid.

Interview with Mr J. Murray, 3 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Miss M. Gray, 3 Jul. 1979.

Interview with Mrs T. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.
28 Interview with Mrs T. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.
29 Interview with Mr A. Hansen, 3 Jul. 1979.
30 Interview with Mrs T. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.
31 Interview with Mr and Mrs J.G. Leckie, 3 Jul. 1979.
32 Ibid.
33 Interview with Mrs T. Young, 2 Jul. 1979.
CONCLUSION

The township of Milton was very lucky. Although the little community held its breath and braced itself for the oncoming storm, it was never seriously affected. The diversified farming area and stable industry acted as a buffer and the harsh waves of poverty and social unrest hardly touched the little township.

For those that were unemployed, however, the story was entirely different. Life was hard. The stigma of poverty was possibly harder to bear in such a small environment than it was in the cities. On the other hand the problems of inadequate food and bad diet were negligible in the country areas. It is significant that the author was unable to interview anyone who had actually been unemployed in Milton during the period. Most have moved away; perhaps their memories of the period were such that it was just too painful to stay.

It is appropriate to conclude with another quote from Oliver:

"History is no more than the job of looking hard, putting together carefully and reporting faithfully - and doing this in an attempt to answer a set of questions." 1

The study of Milton in the Depression has been undertaken in this spirit. There are many holes, and many questions left unanswered, but hopefully, further research will provide fruitful comparisons and eventually some firm conclusions.
1. Oliver, op. cit., p. 23.


5. Milton District Unemployment Committee, Minutes, 1933 and 1934, Hocken Library.


8. South Otago Hospital Board, General Minutes, 1930-1935.
Primary Sources

Published

5. New Zealand Census 1926 and 1936.
Primary Sources
Oral Material

The following residents of Milton were interviewed:

- Mr and Mrs D. Young: Interviewed at home, 2 Jul. 1979
- Mr and Mrs G. Elliot: Interviewed at home, 3 Jul. 1979
- Mr J. Murray: Interviewed at home, 3 Jul. 1979
- Miss M. McHardy: Interviewed at home, 2 Jul. 1979
- Mrs Gourlay: Interviewed at home, 4 Jul. 1979
- Mr G. Melville: Interviewed at home, 4 Jul. 1979
- Mr and Mrs J.G. Leckie: Interviewed at home, 3 Jul. 1979
- Mr and Mrs A. Hansen: Interviewed at home, 3 Jul. 1979
- Miss M.S. Gray: Interviewed at home, 3 Jul. 1979
- Mr Miller: Interviewed at Milton R.S.A., 4 Jul. 1979
- Mr and Mrs G. Paul: Interviewed at home, 3 Jul. 1979
Secondary Sources

Unpublished

Theses


Articles

P.J. Gibbons "New Zealand Local History: Some arguments about present status and future prospects"
Secondary Sources
Published

Books

Articles