“What You Need Not What You Want”: Public Assistance Programs in Chippewa County during the New Deal Era

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“What You Need Not What You Want”: Public Assistance Programs in Chippewa County During the New Deal Era

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This thesis examines the impact of public assistance programs in Chippewa County. It examines the role the Social Security Act played in reshaping how public assistance programs were run in Chippewa County. Also it examines how the public assistance programs were made to reenforce the traditional role of the American family as the lawmakers saw it. The public assistance programs were made to preserve the paternalist system of America with the husband and father at the top supporting the family and the wife and mother being the person at home taking care of the family. Public assistance programs have always been a divisive issue, and to further understand how the system was made and how it affected those in the program can give a better understanding of why the system is how it is today. This thesis's main source of information was the case files of the families who applied for assistance and the government reports on how much was spent on the programs.

Dr. Robert Gough (signature) Date

iii
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1

Chapter

1. HISTORIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................... 10
2. FORMATION OF WELFARE SYSTEM ..................................................................... 25
3. PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN CHIPPAWA COUNTY DURING NEW DEAL .......................................................... 39
4. CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................... 77

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................... 84
Introduction

Public assistance programs in the United States are one of the largest expenditures of money that the U.S. government makes. Social programs made up approximately one-third of all federal expenditures in 2000.¹ These expenditures include many social programs other than public assistance, however; the largest is what is now known as Social Security. Although public assistance is not the largest program, the controversy about the difference between the poor and non-poor is most evident among “welfare” recipients. This program has always been controversial. In a society where the American Dream is for people to pull themselves out of poverty and become successful on their own, the idea of giving someone a handout is not popular. “Welfare” becomes a struggle between the haves and have-nots. During times of economic slowdown, many people believe that giving “welfare” to people who “do not contribute” to society is hurting the middle class. Even in good times, there is the idea that the resources involved in welfare can be put to better use. ²

What understanding can a historical study of welfare contribute to the discussion? When thinking historically about “welfare”, it becomes apparent that in America there is a huge contrast between the ideals of America and reality. The ideal of America is that there is wealth for all who want it, however time and time again people fail in their quest and seem never to be able to lift themselves out of poverty. Is that a

failure of America or the Americans who live in it? Jason DeParle in his book about the struggle of American families on government assistance saw this problem as one of the most troubling about American life. “We live in a country rich beyond measure, yet one with unconscionable ghettos. We live in a country where anyone can make it; but generation after generation, some families fail to do so. To argue about welfare is to argue about why.” Furthermore, today there is still a debate over the effect of “welfare” on gender roles. The 2012 Republican candidate for president, Mitt Romney, defended the role of mother in America, but he also said that women and single mothers on welfare should get out of the house and work much longer and harder. However, from its earliest days, social assistance programs took the view that women were passive actors in the workplace. Woman’s primary role was to support their family as wives and mothers, therefore social assistance programs were designed to keep this idea in place and support the traditional paternalist ideas of the American family and keep men as the active players in the workplace.

The Great Depression was one of the most significant threats to the United States in its history. To recover from this economic crisis required a radical change in how the federal government operated. The old way of distant government was not enough for recovery to happen. The federal government was the only thing that could combat this economic crisis. To help those who were in need was, at first, just the domain of the state and local governments, but normally there was no mandate to apply aid. The

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federal government stepped in during the Great Depression to supply aid to those in need. To do this the government passed the Social Security Act. This was one of the most radical changes in how the federal government acted towards its citizens in their daily lives.

The Social Security Act of 1935 forever changed the way the federal government was involved in the welfare of the people. This act created a pension for the elderly, aid for the blind and other categories and also a system to support the children of those who had trouble supporting their own children. The way these programs were formed in the 1930s was taken from many ideas about what the role of the government should be regarding the American family. Since this would be a major change in the role of the federal government, the law-makers were concerned about preserving the traditional role of the family, which they saw as most important.

Also in this law were ways to protect the role of the wage earner and make sure that only those who could not work or who could not get support from the traditional sources, such as family or their own labor, were the ones who received the aid.

During the thirties when the Social Security Act was passed, the paternal system of the government was still in place. The traditional paternal family in America was also very much still a cornerstone for Americans. The lawmakers and politicians, when forming the Social Security Act, wanted to maintain that traditional form of the family life. They envisioned the act assisting those who did not have the family ties to back them up. They also wanted to make a style of family life where mothers and wives were
just mothers and wives. They saw that the legislation allowed mothers to concentrate on
being good mothers and caring for their families.

Because this was such a radical change in the role of the federal government
from its traditional role to one where now it was deeply involved in people’s lives, there
was a sense of wanting to only help out those who were truly needy and those for whom
the traditional way of life was no longer working. So the public assistance programs were
set up to make sure only those who truly needed the help were the ones who received
it. Much of the work by the case workers at the state and county levels was done to
make sure only the truly needy received the aid. If they had support from other sources,
then the workers would encourage the applicants to seek out that support. Since public
assistance programs have always been met with distrust from both those on the outside
and also from those on the inside of the program, a great deal of time and energy was
put into making sure those applying for aid were not trying to cheat the system. This fear
of fraud has always been part of the public assistance programs in the United States. This
can be seen from its earliest days of the Civil War pensions to even today with news
stories about people buying cigarette and liquor with their food stamps.

With changes over time to what was the traditional American family, the public
assistance programs did not change. More women entered the workforce and two
worker households became the norm rather than the exception. Also many poor families
were single parent households. Since the original aim of the public assistance programs
was to keep women as wives and mothers, many saw the non-working women as an
affront to the traditional American ideal of work and earning your own living.

As the rest of the nation was hit hard by the Great Depression so too was Chippewa County, Wisconsin, which will be the focus of this thesis. With the Stock Market Crash in 1929 businesses in Chippewa County began to fail. Banks lost a great deal of money as a result of these economic downturns. Non-farm jobs in Chippewa County collapsed. In addition to this collapse of much of the business in Chippewa County, the largely agriculture economy was also hit hard. The harm to the farming community of Chippewa County was also compounded with the drought known out west as the Dust Bowl. This also affected the farmland of Chippewa County. Even Chippewa County was in need of a relief program to help out its needy citizens and also help to repair the broken economic system.⁴

The general aims of the Social Security Act at a national level affected people at the ground level in Chippewa County. The people of the county still had to deal with the idea of a paternal system that the social assistance programs still wanted to keep in place. After the Social Security Act was passed, the system of social assistance went from a voluntary program which was mostly supplied by private organizations to a mandatory program which was run by the public government.

The programs set up for public assistance went about supporting those who needed it. The government set up programs to help out the elderly if they could no longer work and if they did not have the traditional family support. The blind, as well, needed help since their disabilities kept them from working and supporting themselves.

Children were also included in the program for receiving aid because they depended on their parents for support. If the family support was not enough, the government felt the need to help out the needy children. While all this was included in the Social Security Act, over time the Old Age Assistance would become the most well known and popular program from this act. In fact today when Social Security is brought up, it is in the context of talking about Old Age Assistance.

Welfare in the U.S. always has had the dual purpose of providing employment and also encouraging gender roles along traditional lines with men as the earners and women as the family support. The government would step in either to help support employment or take the place of a paternal figure when one was no longer around. By the 1960s, especially when Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) evolved from the child support section of the Social Security to become the program most associated with welfare, this dual purpose created many problems. To try to shore up the old paternal standard, the government applied work restrictions on women, many of whom were single mothers. But this idea led many people outside of the program to see those in the program as lazy. Therefore they pushed for more labor and employment as the bedrock of the American dream, yet still held to the idea of a traditional family.

This thesis will look at how the public assistance program of Chippewa County affected the idea of the paternal family role in Chippewa County during the 1930s when the Social Security Act was first put into law. It will look at how the Social Security Act changed the system of public assistance in Chippewa County during the Great
Depression.

Chippewa County was unusual in the state of Wisconsin because of how the assistance program was managed. Within the state of Wisconsin there were many levels of support. Both the federal government and the state contributed money to the county. This aid was in addition to the taxes that both the county and municipalities paid for assistance programs. The way the money was paid out and who in the government took the lead was different county by county. In most counties the state took the lead in distributing the assistance money. In larger counties with cities such as Milwaukee, for example, the local and city governments were the leaders and controlled the program. Chippewa County was one of the few counties in the state of Wisconsin where the county government was the one directing the program.

Chippewa County also provides a unique look at how the public assistance system worked. Since this county was predominately white and most of the recipients of aid were also white, it provides a look at the welfare system without having to consider race as another factor in how welfare was used. Chippewa County was also heavily agricultural during the 1930s and many of the recipients of aid were farmers. Therefore this county provides a look at how welfare aid helped people who were agriculturally-based rather than focus on the urban and industrial locations used by that many other welfare studies.

There are two main questions I intend to answer in this thesis. First, to what extent was the system of public assistance based on need? The people in charge of the
system of public assistance only wanted to help those whom they deemed were truly needy. People whom the case workers deemed needy were the only ones who received public assistance. How did the labor of the family affect the neediness of the entire family and how did this then affect their recent public assistance?

Second, did the system of public assistance reflect the paternalist bias of the government? Did the system of public assistance uphold the paternal ideals of the traditional family where the male head of the family was the traditional wage-earner for his family?

This paper seeks to paint a picture of how those in control of the program tried to provide help to those whom they decided were the truly needy. It also seeks to understand how the original intent of the policy was to make sure the traditional format of the American family was maintained by keeping as primary the traditional role of women as wives and mothers.

In order to answer these research questions this paper will use both primary and secondary sources. The most important primary sources used most were the case files of the Chippewa County Relief Office. This paper looked at over four-hundred case files. These are the files used by the aid workers to administer the public assistance programs for Chippewa County. In the case files the aid workers from the Relief Office detailed their interviews and visits with those who applied for aid. They provide information about how much assistance was awarded to individuals.

These case files give an in-depth look at the role public assistance played at the
ground level. They provide a first-hand picture on people’s attitudes and feelings. One of the criticisms of using case files is that it involves personal bias when examining individual’s lives, but identifying the bias in the case files gives a good idea of what those in charge of the program were thinking at the time. It brings to light the attitudes of the case workers about who were the needy that they were supposed to help. It is also a good way to see what the public assistance programs did for one family at a time. It also provides a look at the attitudes of those who were receiving public assistance. Using the case files was a good way of looking at the small details in order to get the big picture of the history of public assistance Chippewa County. 5

The other primary source this paper used were the records created by Chippewa County and the state of Wisconsin which detail how much the state and the county paid out in their public assistance programs. These records of the payouts to individuals were usually separated into the different public assistance programs on which the money was spent. Since money is often the most important part of any government program, identifying the spending patterns can show the ups and downs of the program. Using these reports let us know what the government at the time thought was the program on which they wanted to spend money and also the program which it did not think was a worthy use of its time and money.

5 Due to privacy concerns this paper when discussing the case files of individuals cannot use their names
Chapter 1: Historiography

The welfare system in the United States has often been perceived as the focal point to many of the problems facing the United States population today. Fairly or unfairly, it has become fair game for both sides of the political spectrum. The liberal left says it does not go far enough, but feminists continue to voice their displeasure by saying the welfare system keeps women in a subservient position. The conservative right wing has always attacked it because, in their eyes, it kept people from expressing individual freedoms. They further question the role of government interfering in people’s private lives.

Many authors, in both the historical and political science fields, have delved into the development of the welfare system to bring to light many of its problems and successes. Welfare and welfare reform still remains an important issue of United States social policy, and therefore many scholars and welfare experts have scrutinized the source of many of the problems they see in the social welfare system. A few authors see that many of the problems date back to the Progressive Age where the reformers tried to force into the system traditional roles of motherhood that continue to persist. Others view the problem as coming from a perspective that social welfare is a privilege and not an entitlement like it is in other countries around the world.

Walter I. Trattner published a very complete history of the social welfare system in America stretching from the formation of America to the 1980s when the last edition

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of his book was published. He tracks the evolution of the public welfare system in America from the early days of the English Poverty Law of 1601. The American government used the foundation of this law to set up the first welfare system in America. This law essentially made government the primary organizer of the welfare state and set up the government as a sole administer of the welfare system for years to come.\textsuperscript{7}

Trattner illustrates how the welfare system changed and morphed though many different forms. For example, during the nineteenth-century, the American state governments stepped back from poverty assistance and private charities stepped up to fill the resultant gap.\textsuperscript{8} The government never really went away, however, and instead focused on providing aid for those that could not support themselves, in particular orphans and the mentally disabled.

Trattner cites many reasons for the changes in the welfare system. He does not just focus on one engine of change, but rather shows that the changes are both economic and social. He brings up other engines of change as well. Therefore he is not just an economic or social historian, and does not want to limit himself to looking at welfare through one narrow lens.

Trattner comes down on the more liberal side of the welfare debate. He is a person who supports more government responsibility in the welfare system. He concludes, through the examination the history and development of the welfare system,

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 11-12.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 91-92.
that the increase in the government role was a good thing. Trattner looks upon the reformers who wanted to increase the pool of those who receive welfare benefits as benefiting America. As a critic observed “This history, at times, reads like a Hollywood movie script with the ‘good guys’ (the social reformers) doing battle with the ‘bad guys’ (the conservatives).”\(^9\)

Another author who takes a long, hard look at the development of the American welfare system is Theda Skocpol. She wrote the history of the development of the welfare state in her book *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*. Unlike Trattner, Skocpol did not focus on the history from the foundation of America, but instead looks at three very distinct times for welfare reform in America’s history. She studies each of these times in depth to explain the creation of the American welfare state.

The first point on her time-line is post Civil War. She analyzes the creation of the pension system for Civil War veterans. This was the first time the government stepped in to provide financial assistance for a significant portion of the population. This is what she asserts is the first creation of a paternalist state by the United States government. One aspect that Skocpol demonstrates of a welfare program that continues to the present day is that the pension system was very corrupt. She links this to the patronage system that was heavily dependent on signing up pensioners to get their political support. “I was able to link the original expansion of Civil War pensions to the dynamics of nineteenth-century U.S. patronage democracy. And I was able to understand the reaction against

this precedent by many reformed-minded groups during the Progressive Era.”

The next points on Skocpol’s time-line are at the turn of the 20th century. Here she portrays America’s welfare system as a two-headed coin. On one side she points to the success of the drive to obtain more welfare, and on the other the failure of the drive by many reformers to make the United States system more in line with European public policy. As she stated earlier, it was the perceived corruption of the welfare system that helped defeat an enlarged system of welfare that closely resembled others countries’ social policies. In order to examine the “state building” aspect of the welfare system, Skocpol takes a bigger look at how the role of government played in the creation of the welfare system. She concludes that one of the reasons the welfare reform failed was because of the complexities of the federal system of the United States and also because, during this time, Progressives were fighting to reform government. Therefore they did not have the state that was necessary to enact welfare reform.

Another author who studies the welfare system in depth is Linda Gordon. She studies the foundation of the welfare system during the time period of 1890-1935, and looks very closely at the gender aspect and how the system as it was set up had profound influences on women in America. Pitied But Not Entitled is her book that expounds her view on this aspect of welfare. In this book, she looks at the drive to create the federal program Aid to Dependent Children, later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

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The book's main point is that the Progressive Era's drive for welfare assistance for poor women had an aspect by which single poor mothers were hurt. Linda Gordon feels that the Progressive reformers had a mistaken assumption that poor single mothers were widows even though a large portion of poor mothers was not. This led them to conclude that the primary role for a woman was in their family and, therefore, the welfare system was created with that role of women in mind rather than viewing them as workers or wage earners for their family. The idea of all single mothers as widows grew from the reformers' efforts to inject a lot of emotion on their side and have a kind of “rescue fantasy”\(^{11}\) to save all these poor women.

Another topic that Gordon wants to address is the fact that, contrary to other people’s beliefs, rich white male politicians did not create the welfare acts that were implemented during this time. Many reformed-minded women, who were knowledgeable about the profession, created them. In Gordon’s mind, instead of creating a good system they created the contradictory system that was also under-funded. One of the underlying reasons she proposes for this explanation is that, by the 1920’s and the 1930’s, the Progressive women’s organizations focused more on the middle class and “did not consider poor women central in their constituency.”\(^{12}\) Without the need to represent these people, they helped to push for a system that did not really help poor single mothers as much as it should have.


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 213.
Is welfare an entitlement for being poor? That’s a complex thought in the area of welfare reform. In today’s society, the prevailing thought among politicians is that welfare is a privilege, not a right. Elizabeth Bussiere uses this thought as the basis for her book, *Disentitling the Poor*. She studies the Warren Court and how welfare was no longer considered a right for the poor after the 1960s. Bussiere makes the case that having people feeling entitled to economic assistance for the poor was something that happened throughout American history.

She focuses more on the legality and theory of welfare reform than others who have studied this period. The idea itself had its beginnings in the 19th century when many people who fought for increased economic rights used natural law theory. Bussiere says that these natural law ideas were solidified in statutory law with many of the New Deal programs, especially the Social Security Act of 1935. This act put into law government obligations to support parts of the American population.

Bussiere arrives at the heart of her book and argument when she begins to discuss the Warren Court. According to Bussiere, there was a time when it looked like the Warren Court might actually make economic assistance for the poor a constitutional right. “In the 1968-1969 term, the Supreme Court overturned state duration residence laws governing welfare eligibility in a decision that might have prefigured the establishment of a national right to welfare.”13 This right to welfare never materialized, however.

Bussiere gives many reasons why this constitutional guarantee for welfare rights never came about. She delves deep into constitutional theory and uses legal cases as evidence to bolster her arguments. She concludes that one of the key reasons was that the Warren Court focused mainly on protecting individual rights and did not focus on protecting broad-base community rights.14

Bussiere concludes her book by discussing the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act, which, she says, serves as the last act in disentitling the poor by continuing the process started by the Warren Court. This law made welfare and functional assistance for the poor a privilege that people had to work for and not a right that the government had to provide due to natural law or any other type of legal theory.

The period of 1950 to 1980 was a time of great political and social change for the welfare system in particular and American social policy in general. During the 1960’s, one of the greatest expansions of federal support and growth of federal public policy took place in the form of President Johnston’s Great Society. Charles Murray took a look at the aims of the Great Society and how it wanted to combat poverty.

The central question that Murray wants to answer was if these government programs that were created during this time period were actually successful. Were their aims to help the poor and minorities ever met? Murray concludes the answer is no. He makes the claim that many of these programs were failures in their aims and did not accomplish what they set out to do. Murray cites evidence of the economic situation

from the fifties to the eighties to see if there were any significant changes for the better. Also, he wanted to see if during this time period there were any changes in the poverty rates for minorities.

Unlike other scholars who investigated these problems, Murray does not reach the conclusion that problems were because of lack of funding or a lack of interest on the government’s part. Rather, Murray attributes the failure to the fact that because it was in a democratic government it was already doomed to failure, “Social programs in a democratic society tend to produce net harm in dealing with the most difficult problems,” he wrote. Murray says he saw a basic flaw of many of the welfare programs when he looks at poverty records of families, focusing heavily on minority families. He saw that, even with the enlargement of government programs designed to help lift many people out of the poverty, there wasn’t a large enough change in the poverty rates in America. People who were in poverty when the programs were created and enlarged stayed that way even after getting financial assistance. Another point Murray makes is that social programs at a federal level are usually ineffective. According to him, most social policy programs should be at the state and local level. His book is heavily slanted toward the conservative side of the welfare debate with many of Murray’s points becoming part of the conservative platform about welfare reform, especially in the 1980s and nineties.

Conservative scholars, like Charles Murray, have said that federal anti-poverty

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measures are actually the cause of much of the poverty in America. He stated that by
giving the poor money they become more and more dependent on the government and
therefore would not work or try to come up with their own way out of poverty. Then the
economy suffers and more people fall into poverty. This also has an effect on the rich
which hurts the overall economy. When the government taxes the rich to pay for poverty
programs, the rich take their money and put it in tax havens such as off-shore accounts.
This hurts the American economy since now the government takes in less from tax
revenues. Murray was a prominent conservative scholar and his ideas received a lot of
traction within the Reagan White House during the 1980s. He pushed for more of a jobs
program while cutting off the poor from cash grants from the government in order to
force welfare recipients to get work. This, he said would make the government tax less
and get more people into the work force who would then start to become productive
members of American society.

Charles Murray also raised criticisms that welfare programs contributed to the
break up of the traditional American family, the same views as held by other
conservative critics of the system such as George Gilder. Charles Murray wrote in his
book, Losing Ground, that the poor made short term practical decisions to help
themselves but that these choices actually harmed them and American society in the
long run. He said poor unmarried couples were merely making rational choices about
collecting welfare checks from the government instead of working. Poor couples
believed that there were more benefits and more profit in staying unmarried and having
children instead of getting married and trying to support a family though their own income. It wasn’t their fault for collecting benefits, but instead, it was the federal government’s fault for making a system which made it easier to live unemployed rather than work for yourself. “I have for the most part used the data to make a case that the reforms flowing from the new wisdom of the 1960s were a blunder on purely pragmatic grounds,” he claims.\textsuperscript{16} Murray argued the expansion of the social welfare programs of the 1960s did not address their purpose, which was to limit poverty. If more people received welfare then it should mean more people should be able to get out of poverty. Instead the opposite happened. Because of these results the program failed, in Murray’s eyes, and was also itself the cause of these failures. \textsuperscript{17}

There were many critics who pointed out flaws in Murray’s theory. For example, not many people would consider it a rational choice to accept a low monthly payout rather than a steady job unless they could not find employment. Also the time line of Murray’s claims about welfare being one of the driving causes of more unmarried mothers and unmarried couples raising children could not be clearly specified. But Murray’s general arguments about the welfare system itself keeping people on welfare and causing the breakup of traditional families and morals made a lot of headway with conservative lawmakers who wanted to reform the welfare system.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Charles Murray \textit{Losing Ground}, 219.


Murray also overlooked many other reasons why poverty continued in poor populations. One of these was racial discrimination. By the 1970s and 1980s many of those on welfare were minority groups. Research done by one of the early authors on the history of the AFDC showed that many of those mothers on welfare had trouble looking for employment because many employers were not hiring minorities in the late 1950s. Because of this classification, many women had no choice but to stay on welfare during the 1960s.\textsuperscript{19}

One other book with a conservative slant on welfare was George Gilder’s \textit{Wealth and Poverty}. This book was written in the 1980s and became very influential on welfare reform by the Ronald Reagan administration. One of Reagan’s campaign pledges was to fix the welfare system, which he claimed was broken and full of fraud. Ronald Reagan heavily circulated the image of the welfare queen during his time in office.

Gilder’s book is a defense of capitalism, stating that it works very well if governments don’t take away the personal incentive for people to try and succeed and become entrepreneurs. For Gilder, these individuals trying to succeed makes growth in an economy. Based on his thesis, Gilder comes out against welfare since it takes away the personal incentive for people to try and succeed in business. If they are getting a check from the government, then there’s no incentive for them to risk it by trying to become an entrepreneur. He takes this point further in saying that government-run programs get the American people to see only short term goals to help themselves rather than encouraging them to help society grow. The main problem in these

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 120-121.
government-run programs is that they are attempts by the federal government to spread the wealth. This encourages the rich to put their money in tax havens, rather than use it to invest in the American economy and help it expand. This also hurts the poor since they wait around for a handout rather than trying to succeed and lift themselves out of poverty. Therefore, according to Gilder, welfare and other government run programs hurt everyone from the rich down to the poor.

This feeling gained a lot more traction in the eighties when the attempt to reform the system from the right took over. Gilder became one of the right's main voices on the need to reform the welfare system. He put forward the case that too many government handouts to the poor stop them from succeeding on their own. He also argued that the wealthy who would have to pay more in order to fund the system would grow resentful and take their money out of the United States and put it in off-shore accounts. Because of this, trying to tax more would result in the United States collecting less tax. This was later put forth as the Laffer Curve.

Gilder also attacked one of the first thoughts of the welfare program, which was to help preserve the traditional family when that family was met with rough times. But Gilder and many others on the right thought that it did just the opposite. It took away the need for a man and husband to provide for the family. By paying for assistance, the government took away the role of the man of the family and actually weakened the traditional American family. According to Gilder and many other reformers from the

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right, the keys to combating poverty were family, work and good morals that created the wealth needed to get out of poverty.\textsuperscript{21}

Lawrence Mead authored a book entitled \textit{Government Matters} that examined the welfare system in the 1990s, specifically focusing on the reforms in the state of Wisconsin. Mead chose to look at the state of Wisconsin because it “became home to the most radical welfare reform in the nation.”\textsuperscript{22} This is one of the few works to go into any depth on the welfare reform in the nineties focusing on a specific state. The question that Mead hopes to address in this book is whether or not radical reform in Wisconsin was a success. In Mead’s eyes it was a triumph.

Mead starts off by detailing the social policy changes that happened in Wisconsin during the sixties and seventies when liberals were in control and the system was expanded to produce generous welfare benefits. When the economy slowed down, the welfare rolls began to grow larger as more people needed financial assistance. As the economy began to improve, Wisconsin, in Mead’s words, was able to identify the problems with the welfare system sooner than other states or even the federal government. \textsuperscript{23} One thing that the state was concerned about was the perception that Wisconsin was becoming a “welfare magnet” state. This meant that with generous benefits, poor people are more likely to move to that state to take advantage of the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 23.
system and thus tax the welfare system even more.

Mead disagreed with many of Murray's claims. He did not want to get rid of the welfare state, but he did agree with some of Murray's claims about welfare reenforcing some of the bad qualities of poverty and encouraging "behavioral problems like withdrawal from wage labor and out-of-wedlock childbearing."24 Mead said that those on the right just wanted to get rid of the welfare state for those who could work, which would force them into employment. "They must work, marry or starve," he argued25 "The right sees illegitimacy rather than non work as the great evil in American life."26 Mead argued for the government to help shore up some of the moral obligations that came with welfare such as wage earning and traditional marriage and family life.

The governor of the state of Wisconsin, Tommy Thompson, received waivers from the federal government to experiment on a new type of welfare system. The federal government, under President Bill Clinton, was anxious to "end welfare as we know it". Therefore, it was willing to let Wisconsin explore a new path to see if welfare reform would work. Thompson changed the AFDC program and Wisconsin created a new system called Wisconsin Works, or W-2 for short. The new program was not just an entitlement program like it had become in the past, but incorporated strict work requirements to help get people working and off welfare. As with any new government programs, there were many setbacks at first, but eventually, these were found to be just growing pains

25 Mead, Government Matters, 56.
and many of the problems were addressed and fixed. Mead asserts that W-2 was successful in getting people off the welfare rolls. He claims that the success that happened in the state of Wisconsin shows that welfare could be eventually done away with and replaced. He further asserts that this reform of Wisconsin helped those on welfare get out of the defeatist cycle and end the feeling of entitlement that the former welfare system helped to facilitate. 27

The study of the welfare system is a long and complicated subject. Many historians have studied the history of public assistance programs in order to see why in today's world they act the way they do and why the American public reacts the way it does to public assistance programs. Many scholars who have studied public assistance programs, such as Murray and Gilder, have come to the conclusion that it hurts people, Others such as Linda Gordon have come to the conclusion that the way the public assistance programs were first formed led to problems that have hindered the programs. Also the lawmakers who made the programs had preconceptions about the way of life of those they were supposed to help which did not match up with reality.

27 Mead, Government Matters, 115.
Chapter 2 Formation of Welfare System

Much of how the welfare system was run and what ideals its workers and government officials had was based on the group of people who pushed for the system to be established in the early 20th century. The Progressive Era reformers brought their own set of morals and values into the debate. They believed in a paternalist system and a very traditional view of family. This view held the belief that women should first be mothers and care for their family. The family was a mother’s main responsibility and holding a job was not something a mother should do. But this view was not a reality for the majority of poor mothers. Many of these women were single mothers who could not count on the father of their children to provide support or be part of the traditional family that the Progressive reformers wanted to support. Single mothers were often the breadwinners in the family and many had to work full time jobs to support their families. When the Progressive reformers got their system of welfare passed, they did not acknowledge the occupational background of the women they were trying to help. During the Progressive Era middle class white women were the main case workers in a welfare system to help out the poor. They especially wanted to help poor women who had children that were dependent on them.

Under the Social Security Act of 1935, during the Great Depression a number of programs helped many people. This fundamentally changed the responsibility of the government when it came to poverty. A historian, Linda Gordon said in her book about welfare, “No longer were poverty and unemployment to be condoned as the fruits of
improvidence." Many of the programs provided benefits for the poor and also the disabled. This is the beginning of Old Age Assistance, which went on to become what most people consider Social Security. Also, aid for the blind was put into law with this act. Since many disabled people could not find work, they were able to receive benefits from the government. While this did not help many from getting out of poverty, it did keep them from starvation.

The New Deal’s public assistance program had four main areas of assistance for those it wanted to help. After the passage of the Social Security Act, the areas of main public assistance were:

1. Care for the elderly, known as Old Age Assistance (OAA)
2. Aid to the blind
3. General Relief – this program was designed to help those families who needed help. These families were usually headed by people who were unemployed in the 1930s
4. Aid for Dependent Child (ADC), which eventually would be renamed Aid for Families with Dependent Children.

These programs benefited only a certain group of people, usually ones that did not have much power in the first place due to their economic conditions. These types of programs are called a means-tested program, meaning that the person applying for the program must qualify under a means test. This policy is more about making sure that the

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person does not actually have the means they need. According to Peters, “Also the means testing itself tends to stigmatize, and to some extend degrade, individuals who must apply for the benefits.”

This can be seen in many of the Chippewa County case files from families where the head of the household expressed shame in asking for help and not being able to find a job. Also, the family tried to keep their need quiet even though they sorely needed help. This is because of the American ideal. American society puts a lot of emphasis on being successful and income seems to be a badge of honor among most Americans. This is a problem because, as stated before, most of the people asking for assistance were the ones that are usually powerless in American society because of their economic conditions. Asking for help reinforces this feeling of powerlessness.

It also does not help that the original intent of the program to help those people get out of poverty was not supported by the way the program was run. The primary cause of this was that, in the AFDC program, there existed a punishment for working. The AFDC, before it was changed by President Clinton in the 1990s, put a cap on how many hours a person could work and, if that person made too much, part of the money earned was taken away by the government “The recipient was required to return $2.00 in benefits for every $3.00 earned – in effect a higher rate of tax than any current income tax”, according to Peters.

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30 Ibid., 307.

31 Ibid., 307.
more because the government would take part of their earnings away. Therefore, it made more sense for a person to remain on welfare and not try to make more money. Apart from the work restrictions, medical insurance played an important part in keeping people on welfare. If a person worked too much, they could lose medicare coverage. Because medical care is very expensive for the recipient to pay, many stayed on welfare in order to keep their coverage, Jason DeParle pointed out "... If a Wisconsin woman doubled her earnings to $5,000 her net income would fall by $1,250 and she would have lost Medicaid." Because of these problems, welfare was attacked from both the political right and left. The right attacked having to pay for people who did not work and the left attacked it for not doing enough to lift people out of poverty and improve their lives.

In the late 1980s, the program was reformed by the Family Support Act which helped solve some of those problems which tended to keep people on welfare. Some of the changes that were enacted were job training, improved child care support, and the offering of medical insurance even if the welfare recipient worked. This was one of the first attempts by the government to help get rid of some of the obstacles in the system that hindered people's attempts to escape poverty. Even if it did not fix all the problems, it did bring to light many of the problems and attempted to fix some of them.

Today these programs are called entitlement programs, often with negative

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32 DeParle, American Dream, 94.

33 Peters, American Public Policy, 308-309.
meanings behind the word, but in the beginning they were not. Many of these programs were tied to work programs in which the recipients were given jobs and then were given money or surplus goods to help them out. Political acts and other judicial cases made welfare more an issue of rights, but judicial cases have stopped short of making it a right. Therefore, it is still an entitlement program. Activists in the 1960’s, motivated by President Johnston’s War on Poverty, launched a campaign for more welfare rights. However, these court cases created a type of ripple effect where the program was forced to be enlarged. This then created the need for more government institutions to deal with the increased work load. Cases like King vs. Smith in 1968 which said that there was an individual entitlement to benefits expanded the rights to welfare. This meant that everyone who qualified had to be served. This eliminated waiting lists for families and the problem of keeping people off the welfare rolls in order to keep costs down. Also there was the case of Goldberg vs. Kelly in 1970 which said that benefits could not be taken away from a person without due process.\textsuperscript{34}

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was first ADC. This welfare program was not controversial at the time of its passage mostly because it was passed along with Social Security. In the 1930s, the retirement part of Social Security was the controversial program. Therefore, most of the attention was given to Social Security and not welfare. At the present time these roles have been reversed. Now Social Security is an important part of American life and thought of as a right never to be touched by the

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.,88.
government, while welfare has become increasingly controversial and many politicians are trying to eliminate it. Another reason AFDC was not looked at closely was because its original intent was only to target widows with children who had no income. This was a small portion of the American population. Also the widows were thought to be truly in need. If a person applying for assistance was a widow with children the welfare was given quite easily.

The original idea behind the social assistance programs was to create a type of insurance for working men and other groups that could not support themselves. The original planners of this program had no idea it would become what it is in 2013. The original planners tried to exclude both unmarried mothers and racial minorities, but these two groups would later become the focus for this program.35 Even the writer in the Roosevelt administration who drafted the bill did not put much effort into the welfare for children and family’s provisions. He tried to pass off most of the administration onto the Labor Department and its Children’s Bureau. “AFDC was thrown in as a temporary measure to tide over widowed mothers until Social Security matured,” DeParle wrote.36 Welfare was usually reserved for what was called a “fit” mother that came from a suitable home. They were the worthy poor from the 1930’s. The primary goal of this program was to keep them in what was perceived as their primary role as a mother first and foremost. In fact, the common complaint about the welfare system in the present day is that it keeps people from working. This was exactly what one of the original

35 DeParle, American Dream, 86.

36 Ibid., 86.
intents of the program was. It wanted to keep women at home and give them money so they could just focus on raising their children, rather than focus on the cost of raising their children. But this type of generosity was only available to a select few. Divorced, unmarried and minority mothers were excluded from this program when it was founded. But many reformers did not understand the nature of single mothers. "... Their employment rates were higher – since few working-class women, even those married, could afford to not earn money."

In the beginning the program was funded by the federal government which matched the funds that the states contributed to the program. There was very little federal oversight of the program and it was left to the states to oversee the programs. The state governments were given great power in how to run the program. This was primarily because of Southern politicians who did not want the federal government to interfere with the South’s practice of using cheap minority field labor. They did not want the federal government to provide African Americans with money because the South became used to having them as a supply of cheap labor. Therefore, even in the beginning, there was a desire to use the program for the betterment of only a select few. Uplifting the masses out of poverty was not a huge concern of those who oversaw the program. With the power residing in the states’ hands, other problems were created. Since AFDC required matching funds from the states, this always made problems in the


38 DeParle, *American Dream*, 86.
state governments that resisted having to spend money on programs that the federal government mandated. Even though the states held much of the power in controlling the program, state rights politicians objected to what they perceived to be too much federal control over their local government.

The state of Wisconsin had a great influence at the federal level for setting up permanent welfare programs throughout the U.S.. When President Roosevelt in the 1930s became involved with this issue, he passed over the existing groups like the Children's Bureau and set up the Committee on Economic Security (CES). Roosevelt appointed people from academic advocate circles who came from outside the normal political and Washington circles. “Wisconsin controlled the CES.”

The people who ran this organization came from the state of Wisconsin. The leader of the CES, Edwin Witte, had been chief of the state's Legislative Reference Library, and he had a guiding role in designing the state's unemployment compensation program. Because of Witte's experience, he was made Executive Director of the CES. He brought in many of the people he worked with in the state of Wisconsin and gave them prominent roles within this new government agency. The CES had a large role in writing the Social Security Bill and Witte had a prominent role in this area, but he focused primary on the unemployment part of the bill since this was his main area of concern. The Old Age Assistance was put in much later. It is ironic that, in time, Social Security would be

40 Ibid., 206.
41 Ibid., 255.
mostly known for the Old Age Assistance and the name Social Security would be used to just describe this part of the bill.

Even though the CES had a great deal of control over the entire Social Security Act, the ADC parts of the bill were not controlled by Witte. In fact, all the advisory boards that the CES set up had nothing to say about ADC except that payments should be made to single mothers at the state and county levels. All the writing done for the ADC was entirely within the purview of the Children's Bureau.

AFDC was ended in 1996 under President Bill Clinton who made “ending welfare as we know it” one of the central tenets of his campaign for president. The repeal was passed by him with support of a Republican Congress who also made ending welfare one of its central themes. Between the Republican Congress and Clinton there was a renewed emphasis put on moving people to work, as Clinton called it “workfare” instead of welfare. He also put limits on the amount of time someone could claim benefits. The time limits were a Republican insistence, therefore the reforms did have both conservative and some liberal ideas in it. Also, the reformed welfare bill took many of the ideas that were being used in the state of Wisconsin under a plan by the Republican Governor Tommy Thompson.

Many changes were made to the welfare system in America in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). This act ended AFDC and took all the programs and combined them into one which was given to the states as one grant. It also gave the states more control over the program. Even
though the states implemented AFDC, they now had more flexibility in providing the
program benefits which were now called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
(TANF). Another change limited the time people could claim benefits to just five years
lifetime and only two years at one time. There was also a demand for work which was
the most important change from AFDC. This was based on the idea that the denial of
benefits would force a person to look for work to support themselves and having
employment would give them more economic freedom. There was also the requirement
that local and state governments would provide job opportunities for welfare clients. In
the state of Wisconsin under W-2, if a person could not find employment, the
government would help them find a job or pay for them to do volunteer work. But often
the jobs available were not providing them with any new skills and were jobs that often
did not need to be done. For example, one person folded clothes at a clothing drive and
folded the same clothes over and over again for hours. Also, this act was punitive
towards immigrants making them ineligible for food stamps and other government
assistance. Even legal immigrants got hit by this provision; however it was later revoked
in 2002.  

Many former requirements were dropped. Many of these were trying to enforce
more social aspects, such as punishing single mothers in order to try and force them to
get married to rebuild the traditional American family. This type of idea was used back in

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42 Peters, American Public Policy, 309-310.
43 Ibid., 309-310.
the early 1930s when the reformers wanted a woman’s primary role to be a mother, but these reformers did not understand that many single mothers were workers. Also, in the 1930’s many politicians wanted the government to step in and become a replacement father figure in the family to reinforce the traditional family and perpetuate women in the role as caregivers to children. This was a problem since the early days of the social assistance programs when many politicians and activists tried to impose their own ideas and morals into the programs. Many attacked the program saying it was the cause of moral decay and the breakup of the family. Some activists said that since the government pays for children born out of wedlock to single mothers there’s no reason for them to get married and use the father as support. Some said that the programs gave rise to mothers having more children just to get more support and that led to moral decay. In fact, PRWORA included lots of behavior requirements. “Interestingly, the very politicians who generally talk most about individual autonomy were central in placing so many controls on personal behavior in this bill,” according to Peters.44

This attitude became more pronounced in the 21st century when President George Bush tried to use the money to promote marriage and reduce divorce rates among those receiving welfare. Usually this was done on the assumption that two parent households were often the best thing for children and benefited them in the long run.45 President Bush was a main supporter of the power of faith based initiatives in the realm

44 Ibid., 310.
of social policy. For example, the fight against AIDS in Africa was largely spearheaded by faith-based groups that Bush’s administration provided with money and power.

PRWORA was a massive and fundamental change in the government’s relationship with the people it was trying to help. Because more power was given to the states, there was a wide difference in the success rates depending on the state where the reforms were implicated. For example, Rhode Island had only a 23 percent drop in the number of people receiving benefits, while Idaho reduced its welfare rolls by 94 percent.\(^{46}\) The greatest problem with the drive from welfare to work was that the entire program depended on the economy creating jobs and employing people who usually do not have the skills to thrive in a service economy that exists in the the United States. “Numerous studies have found that the creation of jobs that pay enough to support a family adequately and yet are suitable for people without considerable education and skills has lagged far behind the need created by the workfare reforms,” said Peters.\(^{47}\) Welfare and the reforms often depend on not only the welfare system, but also on other government programs and events largely outside of a government’s control, such as the economy. Employment for many is dependent on other things such as child care and the health of the worker. Welfare does not just exist in a vacuum of its own.

**The Idea Of Deserving Poor**

The idea of the deserving poor was always in the American system. The American

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 312.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 312.
System tried to care for the blind and disabled as best it could, and with the creation of welfare the blind received state sponsored help. There was hardly any means testing of the blind. They got welfare and government help without any of the problems that were normal for people trying to get economic assistance.

The idea that most of the reformers who created the program in the 1930s held was to preserve the family at its traditional idea. Even the programs that were meant to help women and children more than men were still made in a way to preserve the traditional male-dominated family. This idea of family and the traditional relationship between men and women was still commonplace. “A more inclusive generalization is that welfare programs were intended to replace and defend the family wage, by which is meant the wage should (theoretically) allow a husband to earn enough to support a non-employed wife and children,” Gordon concluded. 48 If the husband was unable to do this because of illness, disability or unemployment, the welfare programs would step in to replace his earnings for the family. In doing this, the traditional family would be maintained and the women would not have to work and could still keep her primary role as a wife and mother.

The formation of the welfare system in the United State was a long road. It started off with huge government support in one of the most troubling times in United States history but the way it was first formed also has led to it being attacked from people who disagreed with the aims of the program. It was first formed to help out

48 Gordon, _Pitied but Not Entitled_, 12.
women and the traditional family by making sure that women stayed as wives and mothers and did not have to work. But this also contained the seeds of its own backlash. Since work was not part of the original program, many activists saw it as a government handout and pushed to end it and make those on public assistance work for it.
Chapter 3 Public Assistance Programs in Chippewa County during the New Deal

Chippewa County has been in existence for over 150 years in the state of Wisconsin. It has gone through many territorial changes over that time when other counties in Wisconsin were broken off and formed from Chippewa County. Chippewa County, like the rest of the nation, was hit hard by the Great Depression. Bad weather and falling commodity prices further hurt the agricultural economy of Chippewa County. The stock market crash in 1929 further hurt the entire non-farm economy of Chippewa County, so the entire economy of Chippewa County was already in dire straights at the start of the 1930s. The state government of Wisconsin was well aware of the crisis it was facing. The governor told the local governments that they should consider a voluntary program of aid to people mostly centered on assistance for the elderly and also pensions for veterans. But this was still a voluntary program and was not a mandatory program for the state. As the Great Depression crisis deepened, more people were in need in Chippewa County. By 1930 almost 10 percent of the population of the county was on some kind of relief program. 49

The first attempt to deal with the problem of old age financial assistance came in 1912 when Milwaukee County started to issue small amounts of aid to widows so they could take care of their children. Before 1912, the only state assistance was by the State Public School in Sparta, which was established in 1885 "where children not receiving proper care and training could be committed upon order of the county of juvenile

49 The Chippewa County Chronicle (Friendship, WI: New Past Press, 1995), 139-140.
Even though this was expensive for the counties and undesirable it was a step up from the solution before 1885. That is where these children who were dependent on the state for assistance were sent to industrial schools along with juvenile criminals who were sent there as punishment.

The state passed its first law to allow for aid to children in 1913. This law allowed a judge the discretion to grant aids instead of commitment of the child to the State Public School.51 This law and aid was commonly referred to as a Mother’s Pension and in 1919 its name was formally changed to Mother’s Pension. The law was very general. It applied if the child lived and provisions were to be made if the child was homeless or neglected or the parents or guardians were unable to provide for the child’s well being and education. It also applied if it was in the child’s best interests to remain at home and not be sent to the State Public School; in those circumstances aid could be granted to the parents or a person designated by the courts. According to the law, the amount paid was not to exceed $12.00 a month for the first child and $4.00 a month for every other child after the first. These payments were limited to children under the age of fourteen.

The state set up a payment of $75,000 to be given as aid to the counties, and reimbursement was not to exceed one half of the amount given as aid. Effectiveness of the aid was limited because the state gave county boards the power to not pay aid. This was changed in 1915 when the aid was made mandatory. After that all counties paid aid

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50 Ibid, 88.
51 Ibid., 89.
to dependent children.

The population of Chippewa County in the 1930 census was 37,342 people, and of this 7,281 were children in school. To assist this number of people the residents petitioned the county in 1931 to start a fund for charity if employment could not be found for the people of the county. The county went forward with this plan and also set aside money to build roads and bridges to help combat the high unemployment. Even though the county board set up a system of employment, it still cut spending during 1932 by cutting the wages of county employees and limiting the number of people who could be employed by the county.\(^{52}\)

Eventually, World War II jump started the economy in Chippewa County. While non-farm labor was hit hardest by the Great Depression, the wartime economy gave new life to the industrial sector of Chippewa County. An army munitions plant was opened in Hallie in 1942 and with it came many new jobs for those who were not fighting in the war. The wages at this plant were high and it helped strengthen other parts of the county. Teachers asked for more money and received it since Chippewa County needed teachers and had to combat the high wages of the defense plant.

The Social Security law passed in the 1935 was one that forever changed the relationship of the welfare state to the federal government. The federal government was now fully involved in the welfare system. Before the 1930s it was mostly within the domain of the counties to decide whether or not to implement the social programs. The states were also involved, but not too deeply. After this law was enacted, all counties had

\(^{52}\) The Chippewa County Chronicle, 140-141.
to contribute to the granting of aid to recipients no matter what the reason. These
included the Old Age Assistance, Aid to Dependent Children, Aid to the Blind and general
relief. The Federal Government after the passage of the Social Security Act paid
reimbursements to the states and counties.

Public Assistance Programs in the State of Wisconsin

When Phil LaFollette was sworn in as governor, in 1931 he took steps to help
alleviate the problem of the Great Depression in the state of Wisconsin. As a Progressive
Republican who embraced his father Robert LaFollette views he saw the differences in
wealth between citizens of the state as the main problem for the Depression. "After 1929
he echoes other Progressives in contending that the most basic problem was the
maldistribution of wealth and income"53 The governor took the first step in the nation
and passed an unemployment benefits problem for the workers of Wisconsin. This was
to get money into the hands of workers who, in turn, the governor hoped would spur
spending so the workers could buy products from the industries around the state. Edwin
Witte was one of the primary architects of Wisconsin's unemployment insurance
program and would take the experience of drafting Wisconsin's bill to Washington to
work for Roosevelt's administration to bring this type of public assistance programs
nationwide.54 When the Social Security Act was past, it ushered in a new era of state and
federal cooperation. OAA was the only part of the act that was taken over by the federal

53 Paul W. Glad, The History of Wisconsin: War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940. (Madison:
Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1990), 466.

54 Ibid., 385-386.
government. The rest of the act would be handled by the states. After Governor LaFollette was returned to the office of governor in 1935, he put through a work relief bill to get away from the primary role of relief just by itself and try to restore full employment to the struggling workers of Wisconsin.

OAA in Chippewa County

Old Age Assistance, which would go on to become what is known today as Social Security, was established in the state of Wisconsin in 1925. In fact, Wisconsin was one of the earliest states to establish a form of pensions for the elderly. Earlier states to do this were Montana and Nevada in 1923. But this program was not compulsory. All it did was authorize the counties to set up pensions and it was up to the counties themselves to decide if they wanted to go forward with this program or not. The state tried to encourage the counties to do this by appropriating $200,000 to be distributed among the counties, covering up to one-third of their total aid payments. Even with this help from the state, most counties did not go forward with the plan. From 1925, when the policy was enacted, until 1934 only eleven out of the seventy-one counties were making payments. At the beginning of 1934, only eight counties were still granting assistance to the elderly. Chippewa County was not one of them.\textsuperscript{55}

After passage of the Social Security Act the federal government and the state would now pay up to 80 percent of the reimbursement costs for OAA with the rest being

paid by the county. The federal government would pay 50 percent of the total. The inflow of this federal money was the major reason for the increase in payouts for OAA. In July 1935 the monthly payments totaled $265,515 for the state of Wisconsin. After the Social Security Act, monthly payments increased to $1,299,466 in June 1938.\textsuperscript{56}

Even though the law said that the Federal and state governments would carry a certain percentage, they typically paid less than the total amount and the county governments picked up the slack. For OAA the federal government only paid 48.9 percent and the state's share was only 29.2 percent, and for ADC the federal government paid 24.9 percent and the state paid 32.4 percent, leaving the county to pay the rest. The reasons for this were that some of the percentages of payments were made by the county to people who were later revealed to be ineligible under the state law. Because of these mistakes the county was not able to be reimbursed for those payments. It needs to be pointed out that the Social Security laws were more liberal in the state of Wisconsin than the federal law. For this reason, they covered certain aspects that the federal level would not pay. Examples of these were that OAA covered burials and ADC covered payments for children over the age of sixteen.\textsuperscript{57}

The vast majority of funds coming into the local governments for OAA was produced by grants that were given to the local governments. This was also true for Chippewa County. For example, in the period from January to June 1936 after the

\textsuperscript{56} Wisconsin. State Pension Department. \textit{Statistical Summary of the Development of the Social Security Aids in Wisconsin to June 30, 1938}, Table 2.

\textsuperscript{57} Wisconsin. State Pension Department. \textit{Statistical Summary of the Development of the Social Security Aids in Wisconsin to June 30, 1938}, Table 3.
The passage of the Social Security Act, Chippewa County received a total payout of $34,647. $33,310 were given to communities by grants. The other $1,337 were given out by what was called an administration source. Of the money received, the majority came from the federal government because of the Social Security Act. In this same time period, $16,073 were given by the federal government. $10,867 were given by the state government and the other $7,707 was paid for by the county.  

When the OAA was first formed, it was not an entitlement program but it was a means-tested program with many restrictions. The welfare workers enforced these means-tested requirements very vigilantly when it came to OAA, even more so than public assistance for families. The number of people who were listed as having their OAA denied in the case files was high. This could mean that many who applied did not know the requirements of the program or needed the money too badly not to take the chance. As time went on more people learned about the program and many more activist groups tried to educate those who were eligible to receive aid. When the system was liberalized in the state of Wisconsin in 1937, many of those who were denied earlier now were accepted into the program. This liberalization was the beginning of OAA becoming more an entitlement program rather than the means-tested program.

There was also many cases of fraud with the OAA listed in the case files. Some of


59 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files, (1933-1949). Area Research Center, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin--Eau Claire Archives, Eau Claire, WI.

those people listed tried to change their finances to make them seem to appear to be more in need in order to qualify for financial assistance. When it came to investigating the requirements of those applying for OAA, the case workers paid more attention to making sure those that applied for OAA actually were eligible to receive the benefits. For example, one family was first given OAA, but it was later taken away from them when it became evident that they were hiding much of their finances in order to make them appear poorer than they actually were. This family gave much of their money and also ownership of their house to another family member. When this was discovered they were immediately taken off the program. This happened without any further investigation into the family. Once they were found to be in fraud that was the end of the case worker's role in the family.  

**ADC in Chippewa County**

Aid to Dependent Children in the state of Wisconsin has gone through many changes over the history of the state. “In Wisconsin, the history of legislation providing for neglected and dependent children reveals a continuous attempt to deal with this problem in a more liberal and humane way,” concluded a 1938 report.  

The Social Security Act increased spending for the ADC. Starting in 1935, the federal government paid for one-third of the total amount. The state paid for a additional one-third and the county paid out the rest. The ADC in Chippewa County had

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61 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

its monthly payments more than doubled during this time frame, from a starting point of $173,782 in monthly payments to $356,440 in June 1938.\footnote{Ibid., Table 2}

Statewide for ADC in the 1930s 75 percent of the recipients got at least $18 per month. Fifty percent of the recipients received at least $30 and the top 25 percent of the recipients received at least $43. For Chippewa county the number of families receiving the ADC grants totaled one-hundred and fourteen households. The grants for these families had a range of $8 for the lowest to $60 for the highest. The average grant for the families was $24.43. In Chippewa County, the payouts were lower than statewide. Seventy-five of the recipients received $16.00. Fifty percent of them received $25, and the top 25 percent of the recipients received $31. For the fiscal year 1937-1938, these numbers for Chippewa County went up. The average children in a household was 2.8 children. The average grant totaled $25.14 to a family with a range of $8.00 at the lowest all the way up to $45.00 as the highest amount paid. This in today's purchasing power was the average grant of $410, the lowest grant being $131.20 to $738 in 2013 dollars. Seventy-five percent of the families received at least $15 which was $246 in 2013 dollars. Fifty percent of the families received at least $25.00. The top 25 percent of those in the program received $40.00 which was $656.00 in 2013 buying power.\footnote{Wisconsin State Pension Department. \textit{Statistical Summary of the Development of the Social Security Aids in Wisconsin to June 30, 1938}}

Those who were widows often received the benefit of the doubt and received much greater compensation and government aid. This was due to the fact that widows,
especially if they were white and female, were considered to be part of the worthy poor. This goes back to the fact that the welfare system was basically paternally based and many politicians wanted it to support the traditional view of the American family with a father at top as the head of the household and as the primary breadwinner for the family. If this could not happen, then the government stepped in. In the case of widows the government had no problem giving the women aid because this was a case where the widows could not have the traditional paternal family.

This was quite evident in Chippewa County. When a widowed woman asked for government assistance, she was approved usually without all the questions and the investigations of need that other families had to go through. There was never as much follow up to make sure the recipient was following the rules. From the case files it appears that if the person was a widower with a family to support he usually received the government aid without question and much easier compared to other families.

An example to show the preferential treatment widows received from the government is one case which involved a widow who had no job and no children but still received food and money. Usually there was detailed examinations of the home life, but here there was none. After she got remarried the obligations of the case workers was over.

**Aid to the Blind in Chippewa County**

Another form of welfare aid in Wisconsin was the development of aid to the blind. This was not met with the type of resistance that many of the other programs had
since there was a feeling that the blind were not responsible for their predicament. This can be seen in state documents where they refer to the blind as “unfortunate residents affected by blindness”65 No other group receiving state aid was referred that way in state documents. The first laws that governed aid to the blind just empowered the county boards to give aid, but left it up to the county boards whether or not to give aid to the blind. This was passed in 1907. The aid was restricted to males over 21 and females over 18 and they could not be in any other charity or penal institution. The feeling about the role of government then was that the government should only step in when all else failed and there was no family to help out the person in need. The law also had very strict residency requirements. A person had to be a resident of the state for ten years and then a resident of the county they were applying in for at least three years. The maximum payment was set at $100.00 per year. In 1917 the residency restrictions were lessened. The new restrictions only required one year in the county and the person applying could apply to the county they were living in and it would be charged to the county of their legal residence until such time as the legal settlement could be set up in the county in which the person was living. Two years later a special provision was put in to help those who were both blind and deaf.

Before the Social Security Act, giving aid to the blind was within the power of the county boards. The state gave no payment to the total amount spent. The county boards did not have any oversight and did not put a great deal of emphasis on investigating the

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65 Ibid., 92.
claims of those who applied for aid. It was later found that the county boards paid aid to people who were fully capable of supporting themselves. Therefore, in 1921 “it was made obligatory upon all counties to pay blind pensions.”66 A state bureau for the Adult Blind was created to provide oversight for the administration of the payouts.

With the passage of the Social Security Act, the federal government now paid reimbursement amounts for half the money for the blind. The state would pay out 30 percent and the local government’s share was 20 percent. Aid to the blind increased about 10 percent after the passage of the act. This was not as large as the other welfare programs, but since the numbers for the blind were so low to start with, it was hard to have the massive increase in the program that the other groups had.67

**General Relief in Chippewa County**

General relief was one of the main sources of support for the poor and needy in Chippewa County. It provided aid and food to those who needed help. It usually worked with families of those who were unemployed. The case files for Chippewa County also showed the involvement of many of the New Deal Programs, such as the WPA.

The relief system of giving some money, goods and food still involved even those who had full employment if their income did not meet the budget the case workers gave them. This normally involved those who had large families. The smallest family whose male head of household who had full employment but still got food money was five.

These are the general relief payouts in Chippewa County for a three year period

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66 Ibid., 92.

67 Ibid., Table 2
from mid-1938 to 1940. Each month the state and county stated how much they paid out for general relief. Before 1940 the county of Chippewa was administered by the local towns, villages, cities and municipalities so there is not a breakdown of those payments. In 1940 Chippewa county started to keep track of those breakdowns.

For the year of 1938 the number of cases, that received general relief payouts went from $151 to $192 by the end of the year. During this six month period the county paid out $11,883. Altogether the state paid $4,679,636. Compared to the state, the county of Chippewa paid out about .2 percent of the total state payouts for all the counties. During this six month period, the number of cases of those receiving general relief payouts steadily increased and also the payouts increased as well from $1,972 in July of 1938 to $3,082 by the end of 1938. For the year of 1939, the numbers increased for the cases that were receiving payouts, but for the year the number did not have a steady growth. It went from two-hundred and two in January to a low point of one-hundred and sixty-seven in August and then ended the year at two-hundred and two cases. The state followed this same pattern that the county had as well. It went from 52,718 cases in the beginning of the year and then finished the year at 50,613 and had a low point of 43,748 in July at the middle of the year. 68

The amount of money payouts for the county followed the same pattern as the number of cases. The amount started out in 1938 at $3,381 in January and ended up at $3,763 in December. But the amount that was paid out went down during the Spring and Summer of 1939 before rising up at the end of the year. It had a low point of $2,433 in

68 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
July 1939. The average payout for the month for Chippewa in 1939 was $3,078.20. This was an increase from the average monthly payout for Chippewa county in 1938 which was $2,336.89. In the predominantly agricultural economy, employed increased and the public assistance decreased in the summer months.

The general relief in Chippewa County also went through many changes in the amount paid out by the local government. In the period from 1938 through 1939 the total obligations paid for general relief went though an up and down period. For the third quarter in 1938, the total money paid out was $7,782 with the bulk of those funds coming from the local government which provided $5,949 for general relief. During this period the biggest share for general relief came from the local government with the state’s share being low compared to the share coming from the local government. This would continue to be the norm for general relief. The number peaked in the late thirties during the beginning of 1939 when the total obligations being paid out in Chippewa County was $12,486. There was no increase in state funding in fact the state funding went down from $1,589 to $1,381. The increase in total obligations was paid by an increase in local funding. The number being paid out increased in the beginning of 1939 to $11,104, which was an increase from $7,954, paid out by the local government in the 4th quarter of 1938. The number dropped from that high to $9,909 by the middle of the year. 

For the year of 1940, the state only kept records up to the month of September.

69 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

70 Wisconsin. Division of Family Assistance. Monthly Statistical Reports of Public Assistance.
But for this year in Chippewa County the number of cases started at a high in January at 275 and had a steady decrease and ended at 186 the lowest for the year. The combined numbers for all counties followed this pattern closely, as well. It started off at 52,414, went up a little to 52,943 in February, but then had a steady decline to where the number of cases receiving general relief ended in September at 39,712. The lowest during these three years.  

For Chippewa County the money payouts followed a different pattern. The amount of money paid out started off at $4,715, but then went up the next month to $5,144, then down again. However in April it went up to its highest amount of the year at $5,255. After April, it then started to decrease for the rest of the year until it was under at $3,269 in September. For all counties in Wisconsin, the amount paid out started at $1,330,876, but unlike in Chippewa it went in a steady decline and ended up at $843,151. The average monthly payout for Chippewa County in 1940 was $3,907.70.

The total monthly payouts for all counties was $1,021,976 for 1940. So Chippewa County made up a very small percent of all the counties.

For the year of 1940, the state also broke down where the money went. It was broken down to three types of benefits, direct and indirect payments, medical care payments and hospitalization payments. The direct and indirect payments were always the highest amount of payouts. Hospitalization was second and medical care was third.

Direct and indirect payments usually made up more than two-thirds and the amount

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71 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

72 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
paid out; but one exception was in May 1940, when the payments just made up about half of the total payouts for the county. Direct and indirect payments amounted to $2,325 of the $4,672 of the total money paid out. Medical care made up $1,106 and hospitalization was paid out at the amount of $1,962. 73

Before the federal government passed the Social Security Act which made money for public assistance more available to states, the counties and local governments had a limited amount of money for public assistance. The vast majority of the case files had a note which stated when the money for the program ran out for the year and therefore the county could no longer pay out any more public assistance money. 74 The people on public assistance still received the surplus goods, but after the money was exhausted that ended and Chippewa County could no longer afford to pay out to the families of those in need. After the Social Security Act was passed, federal and state money was increased to the local governments ending the fear of running out of money. This can be seen in the government's records of payouts by month. Every month some payout was happening. There wasn't a month where no one got assistance. Even though there were months where the payouts went down, there was a steady rate of payouts for those on public assistance.

During the 1930s one program was offered to many families that were on assistance. That program was the New Deal Program of the Civilian Conservation Corps or CCC. Many young, unmarried men whose families were on relief enlisted in the

73 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

74 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
program. This program was open to men between the ages of 17 and 28. It was one of the most popular New Deal programs and it can be seen in many of the case files of those families who had sons in the program. Most of the families with sons who met the program requirements enlisted in the CCC. Many of those who enlisted in the CCC often reenlisted to serve another tour of service. Many people who worked in the CCC tried to reenlist when their tour of service in the CCC was up, but by that time they already reached the maximum service time with the CCC.

One interesting part of the CCC is that this program also showed many of the paternal interests involved in many of the welfare and relief programs during this time period. This was another program built around the idea that even though it was a work program for men it was the man's responsibility to care for the women in the family. Even if there was a father in the picture in the family the people who were in the CCC usually sent their money to their mother, since those in the CCC were unmarried without their own families. In this kind of paternal idea of taking care of the women to make sure the idea of the traditional family was intact, it makes sense that the sons would send money to their mothers. There were cases in Chippewa County of those who enlisted in the CCC sending their CCC payments to their father, but this did not happen in the numbers of CCC enlistees sending their payments to their mother. 75

The money that was provided by the CCC was $30.00 a month, but $25.00 of the total had to be sent back to their families. This shows that many of these programs were made to support a family. Even though the men in the CCC were unmarried, they were

75 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
still expected to support their families rather than just working for themselves. The idea of the CCC being popular among the people of Chippewa County makes sense due to the nature of the occupation of many of the families in Chippewa County. Just about all of the families applying for assistance were former farmers.

Another New Deal program that many in Chippewa County took advantage of along with WPA was the Rural Resettlement Administration (RA). Many persons in the case files for Chippewa were referred to the RA and some did take advantage of the program but most who were referred to RA still stayed in Chippewa County. The goal of RA was to take people out of struggling urban and rural communities and place them in new planned communities and give these families a fresh start. It had a goal of supplying affordable housing and work to the people who decided to move. The program was not very popular with Congress and therefore could not do much of what it wanted to do and eventually it was stopped. But it was mentioned often in the case files so it was an option for many of the struggling families in Chippewa County.

**Crime in Chippewa County**

Crime was no stranger during this time period for those on public assistance. Many of those collecting public assistance still had run ins with the law and many were arrested for crimes. The most common arrest which was mentioned in the case files was drunkenness and usually violence and fights related to the drunkenness that preceded it. Usually these infractions were spent with a night in jail and a record of it in their case files. But as long as those arrested did not miss any work, then the problem wasn’t a
serious problem with public assistance. But if they kept on drinking, then it became a problem especially if it affected their not working. The case files wrote harsh things about those who could not keep a job due to their drunkenness, calling them drunkards and sometimes being labeled worthless. But the need to provide for family was high. Even when a father in the case files was fired from WPA due to his drinking, the county still gave surplus goods to his family. Even when he was about to be evicted from his home, the county stepped in and paid the rent. But drunkenness did have its limits. In one family, where the wife was dead, the father had a drinking problem. The case workers decided to put another guardian in for the children which ended up being their uncle. The case got further complicated because of confusion over which government agency should pay for relief for the family.76

The next most common crime committed by those on public assistance was robbery and theft. This was a much more serious problem than the drunk and disorderly which was the most common problem with regards to the law from the case files. A few families that were documented in the aid files had the male head of the household arrested for theft. Since the person was incarcerated and could not work anymore, the family did lose some of the welfare benefits. The public assistance was tied to the work of the family, so if the person could not work then they could not receive public assistance payouts. The family could still collect surplus goods which included food and clothing, but with the major wage earner gone for an extended period of time the family

76 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
then would suffer. But this aid was mostly for the children and not for the father.  

Public assistance payouts were very often tied to the amount of work a person did. As was the case of the public assistance programs being made to support the father and husband as the wage earner for the family. The money payouts were often tied to him. There were some public works projects that those on public assistance could work on. Most of those in the public relief files worked on a bridge in Chippewa County. This was the main source of income for many on public assistance and by working on this bridge for construction and maintenance, they got public relief payouts as well. This was a WPA project for Chippewa County. The WPA during the 1930s was the main source of employment for those families who were on general relief. But the public relief payouts were tied to the labor of the head of household. So the first parts of welfare were tied to work for the male of the household. When it came to the female of the house and also to the children, this focus on their labor did not mean as much. The main job listed in the WPA files for females who needed money to help their families was a WPA sewing project. But many of those females who were on WPA were widows. Widows were treated well in the system. They received special treatment because they were in the predicament with no fault of their own. The case workers still looked for ways to make sure the female still played the traditional family role. In many cases, when the female was on a WPA project, it stopped when a son could work either on WPA to support their mother, or as many young men did they went to work for the CCC. This also goes back

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77 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

78 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
to the guidelines of the WPA where only one person in a family could be on the WPA. Later in the program, work limits and penalties in the limiting of assistance, if they made too much, came into being. Since public assistance was made for those who were truly needy, those administering the program took great lengths to make sure that only those who had a need for assistance received the aid.

**Outbreak of World War II and its effects on public assistance in Chippewa County**

When World War II began, the need for public assistance for adults started to decrease. With many people going off to war and the war industry starting up, there were more jobs available. Also, because of the war there was less money to pay for the public assistance programs from the federal government. This was another cause for the drop in public assistance.

In the two years prior to the war breaking out, those on general relief for public assistance was still high. Two-hundred and twenty-eight cases of those on general relief were listed in Chippewa County in December of 1940. A year later the number dropped to one-hundred and seventy-nine. But in 1942, with World War II going on the number dropped about half to ninety-three.79

This was also the case for the WPA. In December 1940 the number of cases of WPA was listed as four-hundred and fifty. A year later it dropped to two-hundred and forty-one. After the breakout of the war that number dropped about 80 percent to only twenty-two cases of those on WPA.80 Since these programs mostly affected adult males

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80 Ibid.
and also the heads of households, the drops in these two programs makes sense. With the outbreak of war the opportunities for these males vastly improved because of the war industry and many of these adults going off to fight in the war. This drop can be seen in the population of Chippewa County who were on public assistance. In December 1940 the percent of the population on public assistance was 8.3 percent. The number dropped to 6.5 percent in December 1941 but then took a huge turn down in 1942 when only 3.4 percent of the population of Chippewa County was on public assistance. This pattern also repeated itself on the state level where in 1940 11.3 percent was on public assistance. The number went down to 8 percent in 1941 and then went down by half in 1942 where it stood at only 4 percent. This massive drop with the outbreak of war can also be seen in the total number of persons who were receiving public assistance. Between 1940 and 1942 the number of total people who had cases of receiving public assistance in Chippewa County went from 3,396 in 1940 down to 2,664 in 1941. But in 1942, it was cut in about half with now only 1,364 cases of public assistance. The percentage of those on public assistance for Chippewa County was less than the rest of the state, but it followed closely the pattern for the state when the number went down due to the war.

Those that were still on public assistance during this time period were those that could not get the benefits of the war industry. The cases of those on blind assistance still stayed almost the exact same during this three year period, from thirty in 1941 to thirty-two and then back down to thirty in 1942. OAA stayed about the same as well, since the

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81 Ibid.
elderly could not fight or do the heavy work in the war industry. The number of cases in 1940, was five-hundred and eighty-five. But in 1942, the number of cases only dropped to five-hundred and seventy-four. Those on ADC also dropped with the outbreak of war. The main cause of this was now more head of households could support their children without the aid of the government. The number of cases of children receiving ADC went from three-hundred and sixty-one in 1940 to three-hundred and seventy-five in 1941. But then it went down to two-hundred and eight-three in 1942. Even though it had a drop with the outbreak of war, it did not have the massive drop that many of the other programs of public assistance had. The number of cases for families receiving ADC also went down, but like the cases for children, families also had a drop but not at the same levels as general relief, WPA or the total number of cases for the county. The number of cases for families receiving public assistance went from one-hundred and thirty in 1940, to one-hundred and thirty-four in 1941. The number then took a drop in 1942, when the number of families receiving public assistance went down to ninety-seven.\footnote{Wisconsin. Division of Family Assistance. Monthly Statistical Reports of Public Assistance.}

The payments handed out for general relief after the start of World War II also took a hit down to some of its lowest levels ever. In December 1942 Chippewa County only paid out $2,929 for general relief. Of this $2,528 were paid in grants, the rest coming from administration and also special sources. The federal government did not pay for any of this general relief, so it was handled by funds from state and local sources. But the largest share for general relief in Chippewa County was paid by the local government. Chippewa County only received $95.00 from the state the other $2,834 was
paid by the local sources. 83

The payments for ADC also went down after the start of World War II, but not as much as the general relief funds. In December 1942, after the start of America's involvement in the war, Chippewa County only paid out $4,972 for ADC. But as the war years went on, the payments for ADC actually went up from its level before 1942. There was an increase from all sources of funding, but the biggest jump was in spending from the federal government. In one of the last years before World War 2 occurred Chippewa County spent $21,226 for ADC from all the sources: federal, state, and local. But for the time period of January to June 1943 the number jumped to $27,692 for the ADC for Chippewa County. The number from all the sources of funding went up after 1939, with the biggest increase being the increase in money from the federal government. At first, the federal government paid the least, but over time the federal money given to Chippewa County increased the most. With the passage of the Social Security Act, the amount of money was supposed to be the same. For the most part it was equal, but the local source of funds was the greatest in the first period after the start of the war, from January to June 1943.

The county provided $9,599 during this period after the start of the war. The federal government gave Chippewa County $9,445. These numbers increased during the war to where the ADC payment was $39,549 during the period of July-December for 1945. But by the end of 1945 the federal and state governments did not pay out as much as the local sources for Chippewa County. Local sources paid out the most, $15,0603.

while federal sources only paid out $11,031 and the state of Wisconsin paid out $12,914. 84

Rejections for Public Assistance

Not all those who applied for aid received it. The aid workers were very reluctant to award aid to everybody who requested it. The fear of exploitation of the system was a very real fear to those who ran the program. In the ADC, statewide about half of applicants were rejected because they had support from relatives or family members. So the government did not feel the need to step in. In Chippewa County only one application for ADC was rejected because the family had the parent’s support. The number of rejections for this reason was six hundred and seven statewide. The other main reasons that some were rejected for ADC was that the father was not incapacitated within the guidelines of the ADC, or the family did not meet the residency requirements. The fact that some were rejected because the father was not incapacitated, and not the mother, shows the common belief that it was the father’s duty to provide for the family. If the mother could not work, that wasn’t a reason to get ADC. Also if the mother could work and the father could not that really did not matter to the ADC. The government did not want to step in to provide aid when family or parents could work, since it was the common belief that the government’s role was not to replace the patriarchal figure in the family. 85

84 Wisconsin. Division of Family Assistance. Monthly Statistical Reports of Public Assistance.

OAA had a lot of rejections since more people requested aid from the government. The largest reason for the rejections was the person requesting aid had financial resources to support themselves. Other reasons for the rejections were that the applicant was unwilling to comply with property requirements. At first this meant that the real estate that the applicant owned would be transferred to the county. After 1937 it meant that the county put a lien onto the property and used that money to help pay for the OAA. Many other people just voluntarily withdrew their application when the requirements were explained to them. In Chippewa County forty-two people were rejected. The largest portion of these, eighteen people, were rejected because they had relatives who could support them. Seven had invested capital which they could use to support themselves. Five had private earnings which got them rejected from collecting OAA. 86

One of the reasons for rejecting a person from OAA was because the applied had some kind of real estate. If a person owned real estate and wanted to receive assistance from OAA the real estate in question would be transferred to the county in order for the applicant to receive assistance. After 1937 this provision was eliminated. The county after 1937 would receive a lien on the property to the amount which the applicant would receive in assistance in their lifetime. The lien could not be enforced if the applicant, the spouse or the applicant’s minor children were living on the property. The lien would be canceled if the money received from the assistance was paid back. This goes back to the idea that OAA should only be paid to people who could not support

86 Ibid., Table 21.
themselves. If the applicant had money or a family to support them then the government should not step in to help. The fear of fraud also raised its ugly head. In order for the system not to be abused, the system wanted some form of collateral to make sure that those the system thought could help themselves would not cost the system and the government much money.

In the beginning there were many objections to some of the ways OAA was run. Many individuals documented in the case files objected to having to give Chippewa County their property and land in order to pay for this assistance. In fact many in the case files refused the OAA when it came time to give up their property to the county.

Some of those who applied for OAA were denied even as late as 1939 because they had children or other family who would be able to support them. One 65 year-old man eventually got $20.00 a month for OAA, but at first he was denied coverage. His son was employed by the WPA; because of this the case workers thought his son could support him and therefore he did not need OAA. They were not too eager to give two people in the same family both government support. This also happened with a woman who received OAA which was suspended at the times when her son was on WPA projects. A 72 year-old-female widow was also declined for this reason. The widow had a son and daughter who the case workers thought could support her. These case workers feared giving the grant to the widow because they thought she would use the grant to support her son. The case workers were fine with children supporting the parents, but they did not want government money supporting the children who could support
themselves. Another person, an elderly woman, was told “should only apply if there was need.” Her husband owned a farm so her application was denied because she had support. Not all support was the same, however. One man, who was receiving $20.00 a month, had his allowance reduced because his sons went to work for the CCC and the CCC monies were sent back to parents. This is one of the few cases found where the sons could support their father but he could still receive OAA. In this case the CCC allowance was probably not enough to keep supporting the father, so he was able to keep his OAA, but at a reduced amount.

The case workers with OAA always looked for other ways to find money to help support those applying for aid instead of having them depend on the government. Since Chippewa County was mostly farmland and those applying for aid were farmers, the case workers tried to get them to try and sell their property to get money and move into a smaller place of land. In one case file, they told one couple, who owned a large farm, to sell the farm and try to rent a smaller place. The case files said that the couple was told OAA would not be enough to save their farm and saving the farm was not the objective for OAA.

Fear of Fraud

In the area of welfare there has always been a fear of fraud. This attitude about welfare fraud can be traced back to the earliest major welfare system in America, the Civil War pensions. The Civil War pensions were notoriously corrupt, with politicians

87 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
88 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
using the money not for its original purposes but instead to enrich themselves and finance their political careers. The power to distribute the money was allocated to state politicians, many used it for their political gain. At first the pensions were given only to those who were injured or disabled in combat, but eventually the pension program was enlarged to include anybody who served during the Civil War. This amount of money in the hands of one group gave them immense levels of power in which they used for their own goals.

All these problems with the system caused many people to resent the pension program and to have serious misgivings about any other government welfare programs. Because of the corruption and fraud in this first government welfare system, many other systems that tried to do the same thing often come under a cloud.

During the thirties in Chippewa County, this was no different. One of the primary jobs of the welfare workers was to make sure that the people who requested aid were the truly needy and weren’t trying to take advantage of the system. Any perception of fraud by the welfare recipients ended with them being cut off. One example of this was a couple who requested aid and had a bank account that was not disclosed on their application. When the aid workers found out about this they immediately ended the family’s assistance. Another example had to do with Old Age Assistance. One couple got a marital separation in order to make their per person income appear less in order to meet the income requirement to be put on assistance. When this was found out, the assistance was declined for the couple even though at first they had qualified for
assistance. Another instance of this was when an elderly person gave just about all of his money to his son and then applied for old age assistance. After this was found out by the aid workers, the person in question was rejected for assistance and was told to go to his son for support. There was no further investigation to figure out why this happened or if the family in question was needy or even could care for an additional family member. Once the workers found out that a fraud was taking place, the case file was closed. Many man-hours of work by the aid workers was dedicated to double checking the financial statements made by people who asked for government assistance.

The fear of fraud was evident in many of the case files. The case workers always made sure those who were receiving assistance were those who were truly needy and met the requirements that the government came up with. For example, a 72-year old man was denied OAA because he had the property to support himself and also had children, but had given his son $1,500 in property in exchange for free room and board. So this 72 year old man made himself appear more needy in order to receive OAA assistance, even though he had support. Another person, a 65-old woman, also tried to make herself appear more needy in order to receive OAA. This woman had a joint bank account with her sister, but three months before applying for OAA she transferred the account in full to her sister. The case worker told her she would have to withdraw money to show need, but the case file ended with that last note so no further action was taken for this woman. The case workers looked at many of those who applied for OAA to see if they had money in the bank which could support them.
From the case files it looked as though the workers always were on the lookout for those who had more money than they claimed. Many of those applying for aid received mistrust from the case workers who looked into their financial records to make sure those that were applying really had a need. They looked at their families to see if they could take care of them and also looked at the applicants' property to see if they might be better off in a different house or with less land. At first the program was designed to help the elderly. But also the case workers needed to make sure that the local government was getting something out of it when the OAA applicants had to hand over their property to the county in escrow in order to receive the monthly allowance of aid. 89 A few other persons were denied OAA because they had an income which covered their budget.

The most common fraud cases found with the general relief program involved heads of families not working. The case workers warned them and some stopped receiving money payouts. But this brought up a debate which still continues today. Punishing the parents for their failings by dropping with from the program also punishes the children who are in the most need. So even though the case workers stopped providing some aid to the families, the families could still receive food and surplus goods. A couple of cases had too many offenses for the case workers to ignore. These infractions involved the more common idea of fraud. These families changed the amount of their grocery order. They were warned, but some continued so they were cut off. No other follow-ups were listed in the files.

89 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
This practice was common in many of the case files from the Public Assistance Office in Chippewa County. For example, one woman who was getting public assistance was given a coat by the office for the winter. She asked if she could get a different coat since the first one she got wasn’t stylish enough. The case worker in this instance refused to give her another coat, saying that style was not a reason to give a different coat. She also said that the public assistance office was just to provide “what you need not what you want.”

**Concerns over Government Control**

Not only was there a fear of fraud by people in the program, there was a fear of government control. This was plentiful among the people who were part of the program. Many men said the system was part of a government plot to control them. Some even talked about how it was all about keeping tabs on them. The recipients were often checked up on and the aid workers were the ones who controlled access to surplus goods. The aid workers also controlled access to labor and jobs. So it can be no shock that many people did not like this government interference in their lives. This was the first time many Americans actually had the government checking in on them and telling them what they had to do. Some of the recipients were not comfortable with this new level of government interference.

This system also made many people feel ashamed of their new status of being

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90 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

91 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
put on government assistance. This was quite common among the men and heads of the families who could no longer support their families without having to ask for help. In the past many of the recipients of government aid were often degraded by those who were supposed to help the poor. In one of the case files a woman tried very hard to still keep a clean environment for her children and family. This woman tried to cover up the poor condition of her house when the case worker came around which the case worker did mention in the case file.  

While the intrusion into the financial history of those who applied for OAA was great, it was over after the workers said there was a need. Those who then received OAA did not have many follow ups in their files except for changes to payments due to need for medicine, or due to changes in their budgets. This was in stark contrast to the check ups which happened for those on ADC or those who applied for general relief. Due to ADC and also general relief being strictly means-tested, the case workers did detailed examinations of the people in those families and their living standards. As historian Linda Gordon has written “it has required the recipient to submit to personal supervision of her private life; and it carries a great deal of stigma.” Many who applied for this aid were embarrassed about having to ask for it. In one family which applied for relief after the husband was laid off, the wife stopped the case worker from examining their food supply so no food order was given to the family. The case notes state that the wife was 

92 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

embarrassed and bitter for having to ask for help and also having a stranger come into their house and see their now troubling times. This was not an isolated event. In another family the wife, even though she had a sick child with TB, thought receiving general relief money was charity and refused to buy things her family needed with the relief money. Even with the stigma attached there was sometimes anger with the relief program when the clients felt the case workers were not doing enough for them in their times of need. In one very large family with nine children, the mother stated to the case worker that “the relief office would do more for dumb animals than her family” 94 Another said the system was making “slaves out of those in need.” 95

Women were usually not put on WPA unless there was a great need. The number of women on WPA in the case files for general relief was small. The exceptions to this were if the wife was separated from her husband or widowed. If widowed, there was less of a stigma attached to the need and those who applied for aid received it without much hassle. If a woman was separated, the notes in the case files put a lot more effect on trying to get the husband to pay for support. This goes back to the idea of preserving the idea of a traditional wage earner. It was the father and husband’s job to provide for the family, and the government should only step in if those obligations from the traditional earner were not being met.

Another person who was receiving aid said that the “sooner this form of government was overthrown the better.” She also said the Department of Relief should

94 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.

95 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
be the first one attacked. Even though the woman said these things about her resentment of the relief system in Chippewa County, she was still needy and aid was given to her family. But it was noted that home interviews involving this family stopped for a while. It is worth noting that many of those who received general relief and also ADC during this time had these angry reactions to the relief office and also to the program at large. But in the case files for OAA, this anger was not present. There were fewer interviews with those receiving OAA which shows how much more of an intrusion there was into the lives of those who received the general relief and also ADC by the case workers for Chippewa County.

**Criticisms of the Social Assistance Programs**

The welfare program was never very popular with many people, especially in the business community. Welfare fraud was very prevalent in the minds of those who criticized the program. Even some of the employees of the welfare program were fearful of fraud. The idea of the taxpayers of America paying for someone to not work for someone who was not needy collecting taxpayers' money was something that many people hated. A report written by the United States Chamber of Commerce, told a story of a lumberman who offered an elderly man $10,000 so he could cut down the man's trees. But the elderly man refused, saying he did not need the money because he was getting an old-age pension from the state and he was entitled to it. "Today, though, the old timber owner is typical of many who are consuming relief funds that could be better

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96 Chippewa County. General Relief Case Files.
spent on persons whose poverty is real..."97 This is the type of entitlement that many thought was a type of fraud. The elderly man was more than capable of helping himself, but he was still collecting a government paycheck. This is also an example of a problem that many in the business community had with entitlement programs. They felt it hurt the entire American economy. The elderly man would not sell to the lumberman because he was getting money from the government. By then the lumberman could not sell the lumber which hurt his business. Also in this report, the Chamber of Commerce claimed that even those families which were not hurting financially were claiming assistance. They were doing this by investing their savings out of state in order to qualify for aid. Also some well-off families put their parents on assistance and even called the state in order to get money for the funeral.

This report also attacked those families who did not use their money in the way the Chamber of Commerce thought it should be used. "Instead of spending the relief for their children, 'many mothers squander the money, or give it to the father who is still in the vicinity.' Such charges are widespread." 98

Another one of the main complaints from the political right about welfare was a problem that the benefits might be too generous, which would lead to diminishing returns for the people who were dependent on them. The idea was put forth of a state being a welfare magnet. If one state had more generous benefits, it would encourage the poor of other states to move there. Because of this, the state which has lower benefits

98 Ibid., 111.
would then have to pay out more. This would lead to the general downgrade of the program for a state since that state would then have to cut payouts for each person in order to pay for everybody. Even though there was no evidence to prove the idea of a magnet state was taking place, it got a lot of following in right wing circles.

OAA in the 1940s

The numbers for the programs other than general relief and WPA grew during World War II and afterward. The steady increase was caused by the general liberalization of the programs in the state of Wisconsin. This liberalization opened up the program to more people and also put fewer restrictions on those who applied for aid. In the period of January to June in 1936 the total obligations for OAA was $34,647. But in the years after it climbed steadily to where, in the period of July to December in 1939, the amount being paid to those on OAA in Chippewa County was $56,041. During this time Wisconsin passed new laws which changed the system and made it less restrictive. Some of the unpopular measures in the OAA such as handing over property to the county to hold in eschew was done away with. When the obligations of many other programs were reduced during the start of World War II, this did not happen to the OAA. Its obligations to people in Chippewa County remained the same and even increased over time. During World War II when WPA and also general relief funds decreased, OAA continued to rise. From the beginning of 1943 for a six month period the obligations for Chippewa County were $85,960, with the federal government paying close to half of the funds. A year later the amount rose to $94,036. Once again the federal government paid

close to half, with its contribution being $45,657. The aid for the blind during this time also remained the same. Since this was such a limited number of people in Chippewa County who requested aid for being blind, however, there were not many changes in total obligations.\textsuperscript{100}

Even though World War Two helped end the Great Depression and ended the need for many of the work centered public assistance programs, many of the New Deal Programs that were created by the Social Security Act were firmly entrenched in the 1940s. The public assistance programs which were created because of the Great Depression continued to exist in the United States well past the events that spawned their creation. The conversations about them would also continue into the 21st century.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
Conclusion

During its entire history the welfare system has drawn criticism from both the right and left of the political aisle. The system was never perfect, but its founding and expansion made women fit into traditional roles that they did not fit into. The conservative right often fought against the welfare state, because it said was to increase the role of government in the day-to-day running of a person’s life. They wanted to fix the system so that it would not take away someone’s personal freedom to try and improve their lot in life. Welfare continue to be a topic of much discussion since no matter what changes happened, there was always criticisms.

Chippewa County was hit hard in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Many people were in great need and had no choice but to ask the government for assistance. The federal government met this need to an unprecedented degree, especially through the Social Security Act of 1935. However, when those who needed help asked for it, the government had to ask the question, who was needy and did they deserve any help?

The government agents in Chippewa County wanted to help, but they did not want to change the entire way of life for its citizens. They still wanted to maintain the traditional way of life as much as it could with the wage earner model for the families that asked for general relief. They wanted men to work and women to keep the role of mothers as their primary focus. They believed the government should only step in if the men were not there to support their families.

The case workers for Chippewa County did all they could to make sure that the
public assistance programs were just for those who they deemed were the truly needy. They still wanted to support labor but also keep women in traditional roles. This would later become a problem when AFDC became a major program. The conflicting nature of the program came to a head with both the push for women's labor, but also keeping women as wives and mothers in their primary role.

From examining all the case files and also economic records of the public assistance programs for Chippewa County and the state of Wisconsin a pattern does emerge. The programs designed to help the poor tried to be exclusive to those that the case workers deemed worthy and truly needy. When trying to detail who were needy, this need was part of an idea about keeping the traditional family alive. Those who were needy were those who could no longer rely on the traditional paternalistic family. The government deemed a person needy if this paternalistic family could no longer be relied on. This case had a great impact on widows, especially if they had children. The case files shows those who were widows got the benefit of the doubt when it came to their need. The paternalistic family life no longer existed for those who lost the male wage earner, so the government stepped in to replace the male figure. Even those women who were merely separated still had to contend with having a paternal figure who the aid workers wanted to support their family. Only in rare cases when their wasn’t a male to support the family did the relief office support the woman directly. This attempt to only help the truly needed led to the government taking great steps in investigating other people's lives. The case files show a great deal of intrusion into the private lives of those who
applied for aid. Since these programs were means-tested, the case workers had to make sure those applying for aid were truly needy and not trying to exploit the generosity of the government.

The Social Security Act of 1935 changed forever the way public assistance programs were run all over the nation and in Chippewa County. Now all counties had a responsibility to provide aid to those who needed it. Before in the state of Wisconsin, aid was mostly a voluntary act. While Chippewa County did provide some aid for its citizens, it was never a great amount and also it was never for long periods of time. But after the influx of federal money and also mandatory state aid there was a lot more to be spent and now it could help a wider population of Chippewa County. The general relief payments in Chippewa County followed patterns that make sense for the farming community of Chippewa County. In the winter there was less work for those working in the agriculture economy and more people were needy, so the public assistance programs stepped up to provide more aid. But during the other months, employment was higher so therefore the need was less. Since the public assistance programs were reserved for the needy, the program tried to just help out when it was truly necessary.

All the programs were designed to help the needy, but in helping the needy they were still trying to preserve the traditional structure of the American life. Women and children were among the needy and so the government wanted to help them. But the public assistance programs did not want to replace an already existing paternal figure in the family. Much of the support, especially when it came to work relief and also general
relief, was made to support the paternal figure who would in turn support women. The government wanted to keep wives and mothers as women's primary roles. The goal was to free them from economic worries of supporting a family so they could be free to support their families in the traditional sense. This sense of supporting a wage-earning way of life, but also keeping women as a non-wage earner so they could support a family, led many people, over the years, to see the public assistance programs as a way for many to not work, even though the programs themselves kept many out of the work force. This was a way to make sure that the founders of the program kept their traditional idea of the American family alive.

Another interesting point the research has brought up was how much different the people were treated depending on the program they were on. Those who applied for OAA only had to submit to the financial background tests to show they were in need, but those who applied for general relief had to submit to a wide variety of means-tests and had to submit their homes to visits from the case workers. The elderly just had to show that they did not have the traditional way to support themselves working family members and also had low income. These families received assistance without many of the hassles or judgments the other programs had. The blind were often treated well in the system because they were seen to have done nothing wrong and were in need because they could not support themselves in the economy like other healthy workers. The need to help out children was also important. Even in cases where the case workers did not feel like the adults of the family were doing enough, they still tried to give aid for
the care of the children.

Even though the goal was to help preserve the traditional family many critics saw it as doing the opposite. Many saw the public assistance programs as destroying the traditional families by keeping many from getting married in order to keep receiving government benefits.

The history of welfare in the United States has always been an issue of concern for many. How can the American Dream, which is taught to so many, be seemingly out of reach for so many people? In a country where children are taught that the idea of self betterment and improving oneself by their own hard work is the key to success, how can the truth be that many have to rely on government in order to get through the day? This is the dilemma that exists when it comes to learning about social assistance programs. Are they good since they are helping the less fortunate or are they harmful to the very dream of American life? There was much hypocrisy in the system that I found while writing this thesis. The founders on the general relief program based much of their efforts on the labor of the paternal figure, but yet tried their best to keep labor away from the maternal figure in the family. The case workers gave the families in need just enough to live on, but still got mad that those families had to take it. The families of some who received aid had no choice but take this aid, but still resented and got angry with those who were giving them the aid.

These demands for labor, and then trying to keep some people out of labor, would create many problems in the future. When more single mothers came to be on
the public assistance programs, the idea of keeping them just as mothers could no longer be applied, especially when many were repulsed by the idea of someone getting aid for nothing. The principle of just providing for need came into conflict with this idea when aid gave them enough not to starve did not give them enough to lift themselves out of poverty. Also if they worked then they did not have a need for aid anymore, and the aid which they did still need was taken away.

The way the programs were first formed led to many of the problems that existed with it throughout much of its time in existence. Both the left and right saw it fail to do what they wanted it to do. For the left it failed since it did not raise the poor out of poverty. For the right it was as a waste of government money and supporting those who they thought should support themselves.

This research and writing brought to light topics for future research. Even though these did not have as much relevance to the specific topic of this thesis, I believe anyone could use this paper to continue research in this field. One interesting idea for future research is to continue looking at other counties to see how much they differed from Chippewa County. Chippewa County was a mostly rural county, but a more urban county’s public assistance programs might have went another way. Also, when the expansion of public assistance programs happened in the 1960s, Chippewa County did not have that great of a change. But another county, especially one with more minorities, probably had different changes in the 1960s.

Another topic that was brought up which could be interesting for further
research would explain why OAA became such a staple of American life, but other forms of public assistance became so controversial. Even though I brought up some points about the paternal family and also how the elderly were in more need, a more in-depth study just on OAA could provide some interesting results on the public's perspective on OAA in relation to other public assistance programs.
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