

AFTER THE 'DEVIL CLOUD': NAVIGATING MODERNITY IN THE
WAKE OF THE 1913 EASTER SUNDAY TORNADO
IN OMAHA, NEBRASKA

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AFTER THE ‘DEVIL CLOUD’: NAVIGATING MODERNITY IN THE WAKE OF
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In this dissertation, I use a localized “natural” disaster as a way of sifting through the competing ideologies, priorities, and power structures of a developing city in the embryonic stages of what we now often consider “modern” America. My research challenges dominant narratives of the United States’ march toward modernity as a relatively linear transformation, one where traditional and conservative ways of understanding the world died with the Victorian Era, and emerged fully formed by the end of the first World War. The first few decades of the twentieth century reveal that not only was this process not at all linear, even, or easily explained, but that it was full of contradictions and fraught with confusion. Omaha’s 1913 Easter Tornado ripped a swath through the city, and the destruction and disruption to the city offers a way in to better understand the tensions within a young western city at a pivotal time in the United States’ history.

Chapter One surveys Omaha’s political landscape in 1913, particularly the machine-controlled city government. This chapter attempts to disentangle Omaha’s power structures—both official and otherwise—and provides a crucial stage for the actions in the following chapters. Chapter Two examines the development of relief apparatus both within the city and outside of it.

Chapter Three studies the structures of power within post-storm Omaha, particularly the members of a hierarchical structure of relief committees empowered to act on behalf of the city, and more often concerned with Omaha's national business reputation than with the welfare of individual victims. The concern for business interests also launches an exploration of the perception and existence of federal aid in the early twentieth century. Chapter Four considers the ways in which Omahans sought to understand the storm on an individual level, primarily through the lenses of religious explanations and scientific understanding. Finally, in Chapter Five, I analyze the construction of narratives about the tornado in the year immediately after the storm and the ways in which certain storylines or themes about Omaha, its citizens, or racial minorities were promulgated or challenged with the help of the Easter twister.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Catherine Marie Biba studies the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the United States. She earned her B.A. in English and history from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Cornell University. Born and raised in Nebraska, her longtime fascination with the dramatic weather of the Great Plains came to fruition in this dissertation, which marries a catastrophic meteorological event in Omaha, Nebraska in 1913 with an in-depth study of the United States' often-fraught and uneven transition to "modern America."

For my family

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As anyone who has ever attempted to write a dissertation knows, it is far from a solitary undertaking, no matter how many hours alone the historian spends researching and writing in archives, libraries, or the local coffee shop. Awareness of my own limitations makes me keenly aware of how impossible it would have been to finish this project without the extensive network of knowledge, wisdom, and support with which I was blessed.

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INTRODUCTION

OMAHA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE APPROACHING STORM

Three weeks into March 1913, the weather steadfastly refused to offer the winter-weary any hope of spring's solace. This particular March so far had featured the unhappy combination of colder-than-average temperatures and higher-than-average precipitation, predictably resulting in a populace eagerly anticipating the spring thaw. Doane Powell, an cartoonist for *The Omaha Bee* and a lifelong Nebraskan, numbered among those tired of the interminable Nebraska winter and unceasing bluster of the Great Plains winds. Tapping into the frustration he doubtless shared with many of his readers, Powell set to illustrating his meteorological disappointment. A few strokes of the pen created the boxy, mechanized machine "March." Leaning over his desk, Powell concentrated on drawing the fine features and fantastical floral hat of the young woman, "Easter," who operated the crank of the machine. Creative juices flowing, he added an anthropomorphized "Old Lion Winter" roaring as he disappeared into the top chute of the machine to the wondering gaze of the "1st robin." Finally, Powell was ready to sketch his punchline: "Omaha," a slightly stocky man in a trench coat and bowler hat peered expectantly into the empty production end of the machine and wondered "Ain't there agoin' to be no lamb?"¹

Blocks away, Powell's counterpart at the *Bee's* rival newspaper, *The Omaha World-Herald*, Guy Spencer, planned a similar theme for the cartoon on

¹ "Something Missing," *The Omaha Bee*, March 23, 1913.

² "We Call Her 'Gentle' Spring!"

³ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, "Story of the Death Dealing Storm that Struck Omaha

the front page of his paper's Easter edition. In Spencer's rendering, "Spring" also took the form of a woman wearing an Easter bonnet. But unlike Powell's vivacious and festive young woman, Spencer's Spring was a formidable and cranky old crone, her enormous bonnet bedecked not with flowers, but with a fringe of icicles. Assuming a dominating stance, the cantankerous figure wields an enormous bellows, directing "icy blasts" at two unfortunate souls caught in her wrath. The humor of Spencer's depiction is driven home by the caption: "We Call Her 'Gentle' Spring!"²



Figure 1

² "We Call Her 'Gentle' Spring!"



Figure 2

Winter-weary newspaper readers probably chuckled with understanding at both Powell's and Spencer's lighthearted depictions of the unpleasant weather. Perhaps as each cartoonist made his way through his Easter Sunday obligations, his friends and family members congratulated him on his astute depiction of the prevailing mood about the tardy spring. But neither Powell nor Spencer nor his readers knew just how prescient their renderings of ferocious, lion-like, and ill-tempered weather was soon to prove to be. By 6:00 that evening, after a large and violent tornado ripped through

the city, anyone who cared to reflect might think the pair not cartoonists, but bona fide weather seers.

On Easter Sunday, after an unseasonably mild day that was welcomed with open arms after the late cold spell, a powerful tornado struck the city of Omaha, killing over one hundred unsuspecting residents. The “death dealing storm,” as the *Omaha Bee* dubbed the tornado the following day, lasted only a few minutes, but left a diagonal gash across the city seven miles long and a quarter of a mile wide.³ Over 2,000 survivors found themselves newly homeless, as an estimated 642 homes were destroyed or damaged to the point of inhabitability. The tornado left in its wake splintered wood, household goods, mangled automobiles, and all manner of other property, damage ultimately amounting to over \$8,700,000.⁴ Subsequent fires, a drenching rainstorm, and finally, several inches of snow amplified the misery and destruction.

The next morning, daylight illuminated a ghastly scene. Horse carcasses, mattresses, dressers, pianos, curio cabinets, vases, and clothing filled former yards. Piles of splintered lumber and downed trees blocked streets. Combined with the still-leafless trees of early spring on the surviving trees, the entire scene offered a strikingly apocalyptic landscape. For many families, in a matter of seconds, all of their material possessions were obliterated or blown away, seemingly vanished into thin air. The *Omaha Bee*,

³ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, “Story of the Death Dealing Storm that Struck Omaha Easter Sunday,” March 24, 1913.

⁴ Charles B. Driscoll, *Complete Story of Omaha’s Disastrous Tornado* (Omaha [Neb.]: Mogy Pub. Co., 1913).

appalled by the damage in Bemis Park, which it described as “the best residence section,” painted the scene for its readers: “Following the passage of the wind...fire broke out, and in the twinkling of an eye almost, homes of happy, prosperous people were turned into piles of blazing debris, from which maimed and crippled victims of the storm god’s wrath were dragged by rescuers. Others were taken out, dead.”⁵ Despite the *Bee*’s preoccupation with the homes of the wealthy, few of which were actually completely destroyed, the storm cut through neighborhoods and socioeconomic lines, damaging not only mansions in Bemis Park, but more catastrophically, obliterating the humble dwellings in the city’s ethnic neighborhoods.

Neither Powell nor Spencer possessed any far-seeing weather prediction abilities, and the tornado no doubt took them by as much surprise as the rest of Omaha. But they did have their fingers on the pulse of their society, a connection that allowed them to create drawings that reflected the mood and values of their community. Perhaps more than Spencer’s rendering, Powell’s Easter cartoon managed to capture not just the spirit of the soggy spring season, but the greater zeitgeist in America at the time. His choice to depict “March” as a mechanical device designed to produce a standard product was an apt visual metaphor for his audience. In 1913, Americans spoke a language of machinery. Robert Wiebe memorably demonstrated that a preoccupation with increasing efficiency and maintaining order within numerous sectors of American society was an overarching aim of many middle- and upper-class Americans in the decades before and after 1900—in

⁵ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, “Story of the Death Dealing Storm,” March 24, 1913.

short, making society run like a machine. In part, this was a response to actual, physical machines that revolutionized the way work in many industries was performed. But it also was a response of fear, prompted by the perceived unruliness and seismic shifts wrought by economic transformation, unprecedented immigration, urban growth and its many attendant problems, changes in racial relationships, and, finally, epidemic disease and the matchless slaughter of the Great War. In such chaos, the thought of somehow reorganizing society in the fashion of reliable, monotonous machines had its appeal.⁶

Evidence of this preoccupation is found in the language used in 1913 Omaha. Politically, the word “machine” abounded, thanks to the long-established presence of Tom Dennison’s machine and its control of Omaha city politics. Far from the only city under the influence of the machine, Dennison nevertheless maintained remarkable control of municipal politics, illustrated in part by his ability to place James Dahlman in the mayor’s office eight out of nine elections until Dahlman died in office in 1930.⁷ “A slate passed out in the lower wards is voted, voted solid, voted blindly and obediently,” one reporter bitterly noted after an attempted Progressive reform in the political structure of the city failed to dislodge Dennison’s men from

⁶ Robert H Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). T. J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987). Alan Trachtenberg and Eric Foner, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

⁷ Dahlman’s mayoral career spanned from 1906-1918, and from 1921-1930.

power.⁸ The “machine element,” as the *Omaha Excelsior* derisively referred to it, was not beloved by all, showing that machine-like predictability was not always an absolute good in the eyes of all people. Nevertheless, Dennison’s machine played—or plagued, depending on one’s point of view—a major part in shaping early twentieth century Omaha.

Omaha’s business community at least officially promoted cooperation with city officials, no matter how they got into office. In 1912, the Commercial Club of Omaha, a massive and influential group of businessmen in the city, created a Municipal Affairs Committee. Yet another reflection of the love of systemization and well-defined responsibilities, the committee was one of dozens within the club. Decrying the fact that city politics were as foreign to the club’s average member as were “the liquor laws of the Soudan;” the nascent Municipal Affairs Committee, Mayor Dahlman, and the city commissioners declared themselves “very favorable to frequent conferences between the business interests and the municipality as preferable and more effective than the spasmodic and irregular procedure of past years.”⁹ While individual members of the club disagreed with Dahlman politically or the idea of a machine boss philosophically, on the whole, they found it amenable to their interests to have a political system that “kept the lid on” potential unrest in the city, even if it was corrupt. After all, they were busy as a part of their own machine: “Each (Commercial Club member) should make of himself a useful part of Omaha’s commercial machine,” admonished the Commercial

⁸ *Omaha Excelsior*, March 16, 1912 (Vol. 29, No. 11) p. 3.

⁹ “Know Your City,” *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, August 3, 1912, v. 1, no. 6.

Club's *Journal* while listing a laundry list of member responsibilities.¹⁰ But this—contributing to the business machine—was the most important responsibility of all. This description of the city's diverse commercial enterprises was no accident. There were many parts—wholesalers, meatpackers, railroads, banks, small-time merchants, and hundreds of others—but all, according to the *Journal*, were necessary cogs in the giant machine of city commerce whose end result was prosperity and prominence for the city of Omaha, and by extension, the “cogs” in the commercial machine.

The machine-like aspirations of many in Omaha in 1913 explain, in part, why the Easter tornado inspired such terror. Of course, there was the obvious—it was a destructive, frightening, and horrifying event that left physical scars on both humans and the landscape, and it exacted a notable death toll. But it was what the tornado *represented* rather than what it *did* that directed much of the reaction to the storm and which caused long-term anxiety for city leaders. A “natural” disaster—in its very definition the opposite of a man-made and man-controlled machine—had the power to rust, destroy, and incapacitate all of the city's machinery, both literal and figurative. In a time and place where control and order were so valued and so pursued as a means of obtaining peace, prosperity, and power; an uncontrollable, unforeseeable force much stronger than any human or

¹⁰ “Members' Obligation,” *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, July 6, 1912, v. 1, no. 2.

human's machine was an unwelcome reminder of how much of their world remained stubbornly unsubdued.

In this dissertation, I use a localized "natural" disaster as a way of sifting through the competing ideologies, priorities, and power structures of a developing city in the embryonic stages of what we now often consider "modern" America. Omaha's landscape was riddled with seeming impossibilities: Progressive political reformers struggled for a foothold in a machine-controlled city; the religious faithful contended with the implications of new scientific understandings; and businessmen confidently asserted economic independence and regional significance while obsessively maintaining positive connections with established sources of capital on the East Coast. In part, my project asserts that pre-New Deal attitudes about federal funding and relief distribution created exclusionary and onerous burdens on victims based on middle- and upper-class reservations about "free" aid. Progressive-influenced relief groups created complex and bureaucratic processes of distributing aid, as those "in charge" sought to ameliorate suffering, but at the same time ensure that they were only aiding the "worthy" victims and protecting themselves from the nefarious scams they were certain were afoot. Sources of financial aid also had very different connotations that deeply interested and worried the business elite of Omaha. My work also delves into the stricken citizenry's attempt to construct meaning out of the storm and its aftermath. Some took a keen interest in the science of the storm, reading reports of hot and cold air masses, and parsing the difference between "cyclones" and "tornados." Others relied on their faith to

interpret the storm, a tactic that resulted in explanations ranging from “divine judgment on a wicked city” to a divinely ordained opportunity to demonstrate Christ-like love to one’s stricken neighbors.

The first thing about the Easter tornado that attracted my notice was the city’s refusal of outside aid. Even many decades after the storm, this fact seemed to garner particularly frequent mention, and when I began this project, only a few years removed from the horrors of Hurricane Katrina, which saw the government lambasted for inadequate response, and at a time when floods, tornados, and other disasters routinely drew declared states of emergency from local, state, or national governments, it struck me as a highly unusual response. I wondered what this refusal of aid said about the expectations for relief in times of crisis, especially since the aid refusal seemed to often be couched in terms of “maintaining self-reliance” or “rugged individuality.” In the pre-New Deal America, even at the height of middle-class Progressive reformers’ influence and/or meddling, did state aid really carry such stigma?

The growth of the national government evident in relief and welfare programs, in spite of frequent and ongoing contestation over just how big the U.S. government should be, is but one hallmark of the modern United States. “The Modern U.S.” is a chronological designation that we are all used to—it appears without comment in course listings, for the second half of the U.S. survey, and often as shorthand for the last 80 years or so of the twentieth century. However, the characteristics that earned the bulk of the 20th century the designation of “modern” are often unstudied, even by those who

confidently use the phrase. If pressed, we might be able to come up with some common, if not unanimous, characteristics conventional wisdom and academic scholarship agree are markers of modernity. World War I is often cited as a starting point, as the first of many large-scale, long-term overseas military engagements the United States engaged in throughout the century. Some might also point to the widespread adoption of cars and air travel in the United States, the enormous changes wrought on individual transportation opportunities, urban development, and economic patterns utterly transforming the country in many facets. Others might point to the incredible strides made in medicine, which helped to add thirty years to the average American's life expectancy over the course of the century. As medicine and science grew ever more useful, and as church membership in main line Protestant churches, others declared that the modern U.S. was one that rejected faith in favor of hard science. Others consider the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1919 an inextricable factor of modernity, opening a century of efforts by women to redefine their roles. Or maybe modernity is defined by demographics—the 1920 census showed that more Americans lived in the cities than in rural areas for the first time EVER in the nation's history—a pattern that has only continued to accelerate.

How then do these various characteristics of the modern U.S. fit into a story about a storm in Omaha, Nebraska in 1913? It occurred to me that a natural disaster might offer unique insight into the development of some of these trends by disrupting the status quo and better revealing the tensions that gave rise to the various facets of "modernity." The U.S. did not simply come

out of World War I newly minted with modernity. Rather, the transitions often taken for granted were uneven and contested, and the chaos and power plays rippling through Omaha in the wake of a hugely disruptive localized disaster reveal how at least some Americans dealt with, reconciled, or rejected the shifting landscape of the early twentieth century. 1913, over a decade removed from the nineteenth century, yet poised just before Europe exploded into war, is an ideal moment of transition to explore. Even Omaha itself represents the confusing tensions present at this crossroads: a Western city with its gaze firmly on the East, a new city trying to make claims of stability, and an urban area in a heavily rural and agricultural state. This unusual, if not wholly unique, situation provided a promising context for delving into the crosscurrents of American society.

My research challenges the dominant narrative of the United States' march toward modernity as a relatively linear transformation, one where traditional and conservative ways of understanding the world died with the Victorian Era, and emerged fully formed by the end of the first World War. The first few decades of the twentieth century reveal that not only was this process not at all linear, even, or easily explained, but that it was full of contradictions and fraught with confusion. Individuals sought to reconcile seemingly antithetical values and forces, an effort that required creativity and yielded mixed results both personally and societally, but which marked a crucial transition point to modern America. I base my arguments on documentary evidence from civic organizations, local histories, government records, and manuscript collections in local, state, and national archives. In

contrast to other studies of this time period, my dissertation considers the interrelation of politics, religion, science, and historical memory, rather than treating these as separate spheres that developed into their more modern forms independently from one another.

Chapter One surveys Omaha's political landscape in 1913. A machine-controlled city in spite of a brand new, Progressive-sponsored commission form of government, Omaha's formal power structure retained characteristics of urban municipal politics from the preceding three decades. Nevertheless, the Progressive political reforms percolating throughout American culture in the early twentieth century influenced, if only in small ways, this relatively new western city. This chapter attempts to disentangle and delineate Omaha's power structures—both official and otherwise—and provides a crucial stage for the actions in the following chapters.

In Chapter Two, the focus returns to the Easter tornado and its immediate aftermath, specifically the development of relief apparatus within the city and from afar. At a time in the United States when federal or even state disaster relief was unreliable, non-standardized, and fraught with negative implications (at least in the eyes of some), relief organizations large and small played a critical role in ameliorating the suffering of victims. Some of these groups, exemplifying an American obsession with expertise and tabulation that characterized the decades surrounding the turn of the century, enacted complex requirements victims needed to successfully pass in order to prove their "worthiness" for aid. Others, especially those focused on ethnic solidarity or neighborhood networks, worked more informally, relying on

word-of-mouth and personal referrals to aid their own—a continuation of ancient forms of community relief even in a budding modern, urban landscape. Sometimes, these micro-networks were the result of preference, but often were the result of necessity due to issues like language barriers (as the Jewish Relief Committee pointed out when assuming responsibility for Jewish victims) or racial discrimination, most evident in the African American sections of town. Women, who were largely excluded from the highest tiers of decision-making about responding to the disaster, nevertheless made up a high percentage of contributors to the relief effort. In fact, some women used either formal training in the emerging fields of social work or home economics, or preconceived notions of “women’s nature” to make a claim for female expertise that men did not possess. While Omaha’s elite men met at City Hall and concocted schemes for limiting access to the disaster area and constructing narratives designed to paint Omaha in the best possible light nationally; women like Louise Tancock were turning Trinity Cathedral into a full-service, 150-bed shelter.¹¹ Louise McPherson, former president of the Visiting Nurses Association, focused her expertise on managing the influx of donated goods to the City Auditorium.¹² At the same time that Omaha, and indeed the nation’s, newspapers featured frequent anti-women’s suffrage letters arguing that women’s “nurturing character” made them unfit to vote, Omaha’s women unleashed not only their supposedly uniquely “feminine”

¹¹ Tancock’s husband, Rev. James A. Tancock, was Dean of Trinity Cathedral. “Women in Quick Response,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 26, 1913.

¹² *Ibid.*

skills, but also a hands-on managerial capacity matched by few of the men on the relief committee boards.

Chapter Three studies the structures of power within post-storm Omaha. In most cases, those making decisions, particularly about money, were not the victims themselves, but members of a hierarchical structure of relief committees empowered to act on behalf of the city. Comprised of city leaders and elite businessmen, the groups mostly consisted of people with no particular expertise in disaster relief, and with additional goals besides simply helping victims recover after the storm. I argue that business concerns, especially a lingering insecurity about potential eastern perception of Omaha as a western “upstart” and panic about losing an economically competitive edge, led to decisions that considered the needs of victims last or not at all. Through the Commercial Club, a long record of insecurity about the city’s reputation within eastern business circles emerges, and directly influences the way that committees choose to act. Part and parcel of this concern are prevailing attitudes about blame in disasters and the implications of federal funding. Conventional wisdom has long held that federal disaster funding did not truly gain a foothold until the New Deal in the 1930s. Although the New Deal marked a pivotal moment for federal aid in the United States, scholars like Michelle Landis Dauber have documented that the history of federal disaster aid stretches back nearly to the beginning of the nation itself.¹³ But the

¹³ Michele Landis Dauber, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Dauber’s argument focuses on how New Deal administrators mined earlier instances of federal aid to establish legal precedent in anticipation of

mere existence of federal aid does not indicate a favorable attitude toward it, and as reactions to the storm demonstrated, Americans in 1913 were deeply ambivalent about the concept and divided over what accepting such aid implied. The party line of “good old fashioned self-reliance” promoted by the Commercial Club as they rejected outside funding retained an incredible amount of currency in tales of the storm told throughout the following century, an especially remarkable state of affairs given the generous amounts of aid from the state, city, and federal government eventually accepted and even solicited by the city’s relief committees. The implied equation of pursuing federal relief with a lack of self-reliance and responsibility shows that similar arguments made in the wake of recent disasters (most notably Hurricane Katrina in 2005) have a long history, and have not been dislodged even as disaster relief elements of the “modern” welfare state gained greater stature and acceptance throughout the twentieth century.

Switching gears from financial solutions and concerns with national perceptions of various types of aid, Chapter Four considers the ways in which Omahans sought to understand the storm on an individual level, primarily through the lenses of religious explanations and scientific understanding. The ascendancy of science and its increasing incorporation into everyday life, as

legal challenges aimed at invalidating much of the New Deal. Theda Skocpol’s landmark *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* is still useful for understanding the ways in which the United States has decided who is “worthy” of aid and how these decisions are rationalized. David Beito has also spent time studying the debate over how much and whom the state should help, and his book *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State* examines the decline in the twentieth century of mutual aid societies as the main source of aid in the event of personal misfortune.

well as Americans' willingness to trust it to solve their problems is usually viewed as one of the hallmarks of modernity in the United States. Certainly, this was true in the tornado. A thirst for scientific explanations of the storm is evident in the newspaper articles and memorial books about the storm, which featured a barrage of scientific experts explaining how the deadly tornado had come to pass. Meteorologists, practitioners of a relatively new field of science, garnered attention for what they knew about tornados, but also revealed the great limits to their knowledge, often ending their consultation with the reminder that "no one can predict a tornado." This did not stop people from hoping or expecting that prediction might someday be within the realm of possibility for meteorologists. But in the meantime, they set about determining plans to engineer their way out of harm's way with methods that ranged from the relatively simple (a dedicated tornado shelter) to the completely fanciful (a house that dropped entirely below ground within thirty seconds after the push of a button). Accepting the limitations of science for the present left ample room for religious or supernatural interpretations of the calamity. Unlike the judgment-centric explanations of a century and a half earlier, explanations of God's involvement (or lack thereof) reflected the religious pluralism and diversity characteristic of the twentieth century. To be sure, a few still saw judgment in the smiting of Omaha, but many others declared that "God was not in the wind," or that disasters were provided as an opportunity to practice Christ-like goodwill and love toward one's neighbors in need. Although plenty of scholarship exists regarding the American religious landscape at this time, few, if any, studies of Christian responses to

natural disasters exist, a strange omission considering the high-profile calamities that occurred, like the 1900 Galveston hurricane, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, or the 1918 influenza epidemic.¹⁴ Reconciling God, human scientific knowledge and technological innovation, and the disaster was but a small foreshadowing of the intellectual grappling faced by many Americans later in the decade with the devastating influenza epidemic and the horrors of World War I.

In Chapter Five, I analyze the narratives of the storm in the year immediately after the storm. Focusing primarily on print sources like newspapers and commemorative books about the tornado, this chapter looks carefully at the ways in which certain storylines or themes about Omaha, its citizens, or racial minorities were promulgated or challenged with the help of the Easter twister. In many cases, reporters and authors imbued the stories of the storm with a dramatic, romantic sensibility perhaps more expected of the preceding Victorian generation. This formulation had its advantages, for it provided not just the drama that helped sell newspapers and memorial histories, but also gave writers the opportunity to introduce both heroes and

¹⁴ Popular themes for scholarship on religious climate of the period includes the rise of fundamentalism that paved the way for the Scopes Trial in 1925, the liberalization of mainstream denominations, the adoption of the aims of the Social Gospel, the role of religious adherents in passing the Eighteenth Amendment, and the popularity and visibility of high-profile evangelists like Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson. Historical studies on the role of religion in interpreting disaster are usually concerned with earlier periods in U.S. history, particularly Puritan interpretations. One related work focusing on the twentieth century is Ted Steinberg's fascinating study on the ways the insurance industry has normalized the phrase "Act of God" to abdicate human responsibility in various disasters. Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

villains. Heroes were important to Omahans because they offered hope in a time of sadness and potential chaos, promising readers that good men (because usually the proffered heroes were male) had the situation in hand and would make everything better. More sinisterly, they contributed to the themes of “worthiness” that undergirded so much of the middle-class-led relief work, determining which cases were truly tragic, and whose lives *really* mattered. Where groups of people fell on the scale of sympathy determined not only how they were remembered and memorialized and how their stories were told, but also how they were allowed to recover from the storm damage. And in the case of the men killed in the Idlewild Pool Hall, the depiction of the way they died paved the way for community rationalization of continued discrimination and brutality against black men and women.

Omaha, Nebraska in 1913 is not a time and place that rings bells of recognition for many people, nor is “The Easter Tornado” a landmark American disaster in the same way that the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire still lingers in the country’s consciousness over a century later.¹⁵ But

¹⁵ The number of books studying various American disasters is staggering, although they vary widely in scope and quality. I found Karen Sawislak’s *Smoldering City* (1996) to be an excellent study of the turbulence created by a disastrous event, and particularly learned from her dedication to following the Great Chicago Fire’s aftermath through several years following the instigating event. Kevin Rozario’s *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (2007) is an intriguing look at the benefits—to selected members of society, of course—of catastrophic events. It is an unusual way of looking at disaster, but one that was useful to me as I considered the ways in which Omaha’s businessmen tried to put a positive spin on what had happened. Carl Smith’s *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief* (2007) is focused not only on a disaster (The Great Chicago Fire) that perhaps could be termed “natural,” but also on the Pullman strike and the Haymarket bombing. This unusual comparison gives insight to the role of chaos and disorder more

that does not mean that the Easter tornado was not significant, or that it cannot meaningfully inform our understanding of American culture and society in the early decades of the twentieth century. For one, as an urban space in a largely agricultural area, Omaha is a crossroads in that much ballyhooed demographic indicator of American modernity, the 1920 census, which revealed the monumental shift of Americans from rural homes to cities. Its location in the West also mattered. This project reveals that the concerns of a new city, and of a western city were far different, and reacted to an entirely separate set of fears than did urban centers on the East Coast. From a chronological perspective, 1913 offers a glimpse of the United States at a transitional point—a country filled with cars and even a few airplanes, a middle-class prospering and consequently high on optimism and the belief that things could be improved and perhaps even perfected, a populace largely failing to incorporate racial minorities and the tidal wave of new immigrants in tolerant ways. There was certainly plenty of grimness in the poverty-stricken tenements of New York and the spate of violence toward African Americans throughout the country, but there was also an almost absurd amount of hope in scientific management, knowledge, and expertise that made things like a house sinking below ground in 30 seconds at the push of a button to protect its inhabitants seem almost possible. For a disaster to come

generally and how deeply unsettling events, whatever their source, influenced the development of the modern United States. John M. Barry's *Rising Tide* (1997), though less theoretical or academic than the other books listed here, was an inspiration to me in its demonstration of the narrative power of a disaster, and how interconnecting stories and interests can form a cohesive whole.

crashing into this landscape and upset this middle-class optimism reveals much about how this influential stratum of society saw their world and how they made sense of it. Furthermore, it previews some of the strategies, successful and otherwise, soon deployed during the crucible of war, influenza, and a decade later, economic catastrophe that ultimately ended the optimism of various strains of Progressivism.

I argue that this catastrophe revealed the interconnected, but sometimes competing, nature of the political, religious, and scientific spheres and the complex, untidy, and varied transition to what is commonly thought of as “modernity.” Omahans’ attempts to understand, reconcile, and incorporate their beliefs into something meaningful as they faced a crisis signaled the anxieties and challenges of American society at large as the United States lurched toward a world wrought by epidemic disease, massive-scale military action, significant economic growth, an increasingly crowded religious marketplace, and other familiar markers of modernity

CHAPTER 1

“And That’s Municipal Politics in a Nutshell”: The Dennison Machine, Progressive Politics, and Omaha’s Business Community

“Thou shalt not be afraid to blow thine own horn; for he who failest to blow his own horn at the proper occasion findest nobody standing ready to blow it for him.”
--“The Ten Commandments of Business,” *The Commercial Club Journal*

* * * * *

The atmosphere in Omaha on the evening of August 24, 1906 was electric, rife with “rampant enthusiasm, the kind that sparkles, bubbles and overflows.”¹⁶ One hundred and fourteen prominent Democrats of Nebraska milled around the specially-appointed and elegantly outfitted train, climbing aboard to inspect the furnishings, or exchanging jubilant pleasantries with acquaintances about the good fortune which found them about to embark on this distinguished and historic trip east. Some enjoyed a cigar in the still-simmering August heat, or tapped their toes to the plucky strains of the nearby brass band playing “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight:” *Come along get you ready, wear your bran, bran new gown; For dere’s gwine to be a meeting in that good, good old town; Where you knowed ev’ry body, and they all knowed you; And you’ve got a rabbits foot to keep away the hoodoo...* Some waved to friends in the swirling crowd of thousands who had come to see them off, or bestowed a last kiss on a child’s cheek before leaving to join the other men near the train. A special police detail watched the scene for any signs of

¹⁶ “Nebraska Bryanites Leave For New York Reception,” *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, August 25, 1906, vol. XLI, Issue 282, p. 1.

trouble, but the crowd was “enthusiastically courteous to everyone and everything in the place.”

A few days later, the train laden with Nebraska Democrats arrived in New York City, and they did not arrive quietly. Decamping from the train, the delegation proceeded to the Hotel Victoria. Once in the lobby, Omaha mayor James Dahlman, “the leading spirit of the delegation,” challenged anyone within hearing to a bet of \$50-\$100 that “he could rope anything that came his way and tie it down—man or beast.” Rodeo braggadocio out of the way, the group got down to business. First, William Randolph Hearst, “political aspirant for several offices,” was denounced vigorously, receiving a metaphorical “sharp slap” to the face. This critical task dispensed with, the assembly turned its attention to the real reason for the trip—securing the honor of escorting Democratic superstar William Jennings Bryan from his steamer onto American soil, officially concluding his year-long global tour. There would be press. There would be photographers. There would be national attention and exposure. For the Nebraskans, such opportunities did not arise every day, and they intended to make the most of it. Bryan was one of their own, a privilege no others could claim, and Dahlman and company were determined that no one forget it.¹⁷ Dubbing themselves the “Home

¹⁷ Illinois Democrats begged to differ, since Bryan had been born in their state and spent 27 of his then-46 years of life there, but the Nebraska delegation apparently found this claim negligible. He had *chosen* to live in Nebraska, not Illinois, and the most famous years of his career all found him operating out of Nebraska.

Folks,” the group made plans to “corral their idol upon his arrival.”¹⁸ Mayor Dahlman, in his charismatic element, led the group’s determination: “We didn’t come 2,000 miles to meet Mr. Bryan in a crowd of 20,000 other folks, did we, boys?” Dahlman demanded. “We came here to take him off the boat and stick to him till we landed him at home in Lincoln, didn’t we?” Dahlman was preaching to the choir, which heartily assented to each question he posed. “I propose that we be there an take Mr. Bryan and see him right up here (to the Hotel Victoria). This is Nebraska headquarters, these are his homefolks and this is his home in New York, isn’t it? Now are you with me?”¹⁹

Emphatically, the Home Folks were. When Bryan’s steamer arrived in harbor, he immediately boarded a tugboat chartered by the Nebraska delegation, instead of the palatial yacht the wealthy Edward F. Goltra had arranged for the occasion. Flashbulbs fired, and there, for all the world to see, was political titan William Jennings Bryan, true Nebraskan, in their midst. Standing beside him was Omaha’s “Cowboy Mayor,” displaying his lasso prominently for effect.

¹⁸ “Bryan Boomers Are Enthusiastic,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 28, 1906, vol. 155, no. 59, p. 14.

¹⁹ “Row Grows As To Who’s Who: Nebraska Contingent Insists on Having Sole Charge of Bryan,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 28, 1906, p. 1.

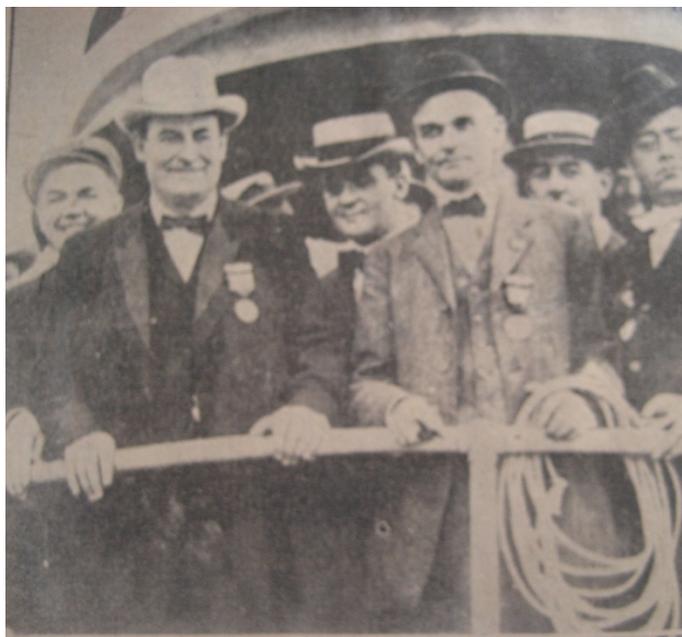


Figure 1

* * * * *

The unlikely alliance between hard-drinking, boisterous, machine-sponsored mayor James Dahlman and pious, idealistic, career presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryan seems a strange one. True, both men were Nebraska Democrats, and it is in state political circles that their paths first crossed. And although their styles were very different, both certainly knew how to charm and command a crowd, displaying an uncanny ability to reach the “common man.” Dahlman once reportedly responded to a critic who alleged that the unschooled, rough-and-tumble aspiring mayor would likely not even know how to write a veto message. Dahlman, in typical fashion, turned the slur in his favor and gave it a folksy spin—if it were in the people’s best interest, he declared, he would “write across (the proposed measure) ‘Nothing Doing’ and sign my name. Do you believe the average man would

have any difficulty in understanding that veto message?"²⁰ Dahlman profited from the "cowboy" mystique then cultivated by Theodore Roosevelt, even though the two were in different parties, and wisely used Roosevelt's popular image to his advantage, arguing that if a "cowboy" was fit to be the President of the United States, one certainly ought to do for Omaha.²¹ Bryan, although far more educated and polished than Dahlman, similarly appealed to ordinary Americans by recognizing and advocating their concerns, to the extent that he earned the moniker "The Great Commoner." While it is true that politics does occasionally make for strange bedfellows, Bryan and Dahlman's relationship transcended that maxim, as the two maintained a close, personal friendship until approximately 1910, when their massive differences over the issue of Prohibition cooled their mutual affection for one another.

In many ways, Bryan, Dahlman, and the train full of high-profile state Democrats typified both the expected and surprising contours of political life in Nebraska and the United States in the early twentieth century. The noisy arrival of the Home Folks represented the surging profile of the western United States, particularly the burgeoning cities of the West and Midwest, which were enjoying a Golden Age at that moment.²² Evident in large-scale events like the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, and in the flourishing of new cities—there were

²⁰ Fred Carey, *Mayor Jim* (Omaha, Neb.: Omaha news, 1930), 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² John Teaford, "The Development of Midwestern Cities," (presentation, Finding the Lost Region: Rediscovering the Midwest, Grand Rapids, MI, April 30, 2015).

proportionally more cities in the Midwest than in the Eastern U.S., although they were, as a rule, not as large—the West was having a moment of unprecedented vitality and visibility.²³ The raucous decampment of the Home Folks—loud and slightly uncouth, as portrayed by the eastern newspapers—mirrored the arrival economically and in national visibility of the new cities of the West.

Politically, the Bryan landing mirrored the era as well. Although the Home Folks were Democrats, the interests of the men on the train as well as Dahlman and Bryan displayed the remarkable array of issues and the uniquely cross-partisan alignments that bubbled up in the Progressive Era. For example, for the Democrat Dahlman to point to Theodore Roosevelt, headliner of the opposing party, as a positive example supporting his own political aspirations is a tactic that fell out of favor in later decades. But then, Dahlman was used to working with Republicans—the machine that sponsored him for so many decades was largely Republican, including its boss, Tom Dennison. Dahlman was a devoted Democrat, and active in the state’s party organization, yet this really did not matter to the Dennison machine. Dahlman was an amenable man who tolerated Omaha’s underworld activities and cooperated with the machine’s goals—in return, he got to enjoy public prominence without too much work, a position that a flamboyant extrovert like himself found the greatest job in the world. Between the machine’s voting power and Dahlman’s personal charm, the partnership was

²³ Ibid. From 1893 until 1915, only two World’s Fairs (1901 in Buffalo, and 1907 in Norfolk, VA) were hosted in the eastern U.S., compared to six in the West during the same time period.

a winning one, and helped enable a notably long-lasting political machine in Omaha.

Omaha's business community, which, if it did not outwardly support the machine or endorse it on an individual level, at least found cooperation with it to work to their advantage. A well-run machine could "keep the lid on" crime and the unsettling labor riots that had been the bane of many a capitalist in the preceding decades, and from a business perspective, this was a valuable service, even at the price of less-than-democratic means. Although many members of the business community heeded the call of Progressive reformers for clean government, even the attempted reforming of the city to a commission-style structure in 1912 did not dislodge Dennison's men. Even self-proclaimed Progressives realized that restructuring the city government was perhaps ornamental, at best, but that *appearing* Progressive in the right way was a critical feature for the city if it wished to continue to grow. One letter to the editor of the *Omaha Daily News* agitated for Omaha's new, post-commission charter to include a provision for voters to recall city commissioners, lest Omaha reap ridicule from the rest of the country:

Omaha, by leaving out that feature, will brand herself as belonging to the unprogressives, old fogysts, corrupt-politics believers. Many of us do not realize that, simply because people from other cities do not come and tell us what they think of us, our unrepresentative city government, that they do not notice the kind of government we maintain. And we certainly should not add to that by refusing to adopt modern progressive restrictions.
(Signed) PROGRESSIVE²⁴

²⁴ "Recall in the Charter," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 6.

Far worse than actually *having* a corrupt government, was being branded as having one, or, shame of shames, as belonging to the “old fogysts.” All but the most bright-eyed of business Progressives recognized that unseating the Dennison machine was more trouble than it was probably worth, even if it were possible, and so they prioritized their goals—growing the city of Omaha and its commercial empire—and sought to keep up with the political times as it was feasible and still benefited their aims.²⁵

By 1913, Omaha’s businessmen had much to celebrate. True, early booster dreams of becoming the next Chicago or even of outstripping the great city had not come to pass. But the more modest aims of developing into a regional power and perhaps becoming the second city to the Second City seemed either fulfilled or within reasonable reach. In 1912, the powerful Commercial Club of Omaha moved into new quarters that seemed to mirror the lofty successes of their city. Perched on the top two floors of the brand new, 18-story Woodmen of the World Building, club members could look down from the rooftop observation deck not only onto Omaha, but far along the Missouri River Valley. The pink granite building featured electric-

²⁵ “Business Progressivism” as a concept has spawned a large body of literature. However, although there were certainly many individual exceptions, on the whole, this strain of Progressivism was not overly concerned with municipal politics. Instead, business Progressives might concern themselves with ameliorating worker discontent by advocating for “corporate welfare.” (See N Mandell, “Allies or Antagonists? Philanthropic Reformers and Business Reformers in the Progressive Era,” *JOURNAL OF THE GILDED AGE AND PROGRESSIVE ERA* 11, no. 1 (2012): 71–118; Nikki Mandell, *The Corporation as Family: The Gendering of Corporate Welfare, 1890–1930*, The Luther Hartwell Hodges Series on Business, Society, and the State (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence: Industrial Paternalism in Progressive America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

powered revolving doors, gas-powered refrigeration in kitchens, steam heat, and was the tallest building between Chicago and the Pacific Ocean, a feat that likely did not escape the notice and pride of club members. “Members will have a downtown club for busy business men, with club facilities not surpassed by any similar organizations in the country,” bragged the *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal* shortly before the club moved to its new dwelling.²⁶ This was not much of an exaggeration. The club’s two floors were joined by a grand staircase, and express elevator service from street level to the 17th floor so that the “busy business man” would not have to endure time-wasting stops on lower floors. Maple floors and Circassian walnut trim lent the club opulence, as did oak furniture, a rich blue color scheme, china bearing the club’s monogram, and a thousand yards of custom-designed carpets.²⁷ A billiard room, “commercial library,” and cigar counter ensured that the busy businessman’s every want or need was met. If the men felt themselves kings of Omaha, their quarters did nothing to diminish their aspirations of grandeur.

Other regional cities of import harbored these aspirations too, most notably Denver and Kansas City, and these young western cities developed into competitive rivals for regional economic power. Beneficiaries of many of the same advantages enjoyed by Omaha, Kansas City posed the most direct threat, given its geographic proximity, aggressive business community, and

²⁶ “The New Quarters,” *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, August 10, 1912, 25.

²⁷ Those in charge of choosing furnishings erred on the side of excess, and an earlier issue of the *Journal* wryly reported “To carpet or not to carpet the new dining room, has been the question, but the carpet won.”

equally formidable slaughterhouse industry. Though the business communities in these cities had strong ties and occasional partnerships, and can be found mentioned in friendly terms repeatedly in the *Commercial Club of Omaha's Journal*, there is no doubt that the relationships were at their roots competitive ones. Yet even as they competed against one another, a kind of camaraderie built upon similar goals and a recognized interdependence linked members of commercial clubs together. The *Commercial Club Journal* touted "reciprocal relations" as "one of the most valued features of club membership."²⁸ By 1912, Omaha's club enjoyed these relationships with every such club in Nebraska and Iowa, as well as "approximately one hundred others scattered through practically every state in the union."²⁹ Though enjoying access to other clubhouses while traveling was undoubtedly a perk (Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, Portland, and Boise all boasted "unusually attractive" club facilities), the real allure was the prospect of entrée into a ready-made network of like-minded businessmen in other cities. "Hardly a day passes," insisted the *Journal*, "without at least one out-of-town visitor introducing himself here through his membership card in his home club."³⁰ Business at the dawn of the twentieth century was no longer a strictly local or even regional enterprise, and to grow one's economic interests at home, it was necessary to possess a regional and national perspective. Whatever the industry, a club member walked a tightrope of promoting "home goods"

²⁸ *Commercial Club Journal*, September 7, 1912. Vol. 1, No. 11) p. 41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

while also looking to establish revenue streams, distribution, and partnerships with businesses located across the country.

Most often, this meant looking to the eastern United States. The men who made up Omaha's business leadership were usually from "somewhere else," or at the very least, sons of men who came to Omaha from other parts of the United States, or even the world. This background made them especially able to remember that Omaha's existence and their profit depended on maintaining links to a wider world. Although fortunes could be made in the West, political power, financial backing, and revenue streams often came from the East. Consequently, while Omaha's business elite glanced to its sides at its regional competitors, it never truly broke its gaze on the East. Fiercely protective of the city's reputation and by extension their own business prospects, the club urged its members to be aware of any news of Omaha, both positive and negative, and obsessively catalogued its own press clippings. "The (Good Roads) campaign has created much comment throughout the United States and clippings have been sent the club from newspapers throughout the east, in which the good roads campaign of the Commercial Club of Omaha was commended," one issue boasted.³¹ A reminder of the "members' obligation" suggested that the useful club member should "in his travels, through the east particularly...be on the lookout for any desirable industry or mercantile concern that should have an Omaha branch or distributing agency."³² Members were also to be on the lookout for slights

³¹ June 29, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 1), p. 3. This was the very first issue of the *Journal*.

³² July 6, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 2) p. 5.

against the city: “Whether at home or abroad every member should be watchful to see wherein Omaha may be discriminated against, either in trade, mail, freight or passenger service, market or weather reports, or anything else. Anything amiss should be reported.”³³ The perceived economic importance of a strong national reputation shaped the work of the club and its interactions outside the city.

In spite of their vigilance against damaging slander, the Commercial Club, though never going so far as to openly endorse the questionable industries that gave Omaha its bawdy reputation, said little in opposition to them—but presumably they would have bristled had an outsider used them as a slight against the city. No doubt many of its members were loyal patrons of the city’s saloons (the mayor certainly was) and brothels, or if they were not patrons, they may have relied in other ways on economic ties with the underworld. Instead, they preferred to focus their efforts on promoting and developing “legitimate” businesses, and they employed a number of tactics to this end.

One way the club promoted the city was through old-fashioned boosterism. It had brought them the railroad in 1869, and though the specifics

³³ July 27, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 5) p. 20. Though this issue makes no mention of what will happen to naysayers, evidence suggests that strongly-worded “correctives” were sent to those dragging Omaha’s name through the mud. One man from Indianapolis wrote to the editor of the *Bee* to thank him for defending him from the Commercial Club’s (by then known as the Chamber of Commerce) publicity bureau, who felt he had slandered Omaha. “If it were my affair,” he wrote, “I should suggest to the C of C that it get a pub com that would exercise a little judgment in defending the city and not rush into print to show its zeal where no offense had been intended.” Meredith Nicholson to Victor Rosewater, June 21, 1918. Rosewater Collection, Box No. 1927, Victor Rosewater Correspondence, N-Q.

had changed in the intervening forty years, this impulse to promote the city had not dimmed by the early 1910s. In 1912, the Commercial Club sought to capitalize on the popularity of film, and produced a movie designed to impress upon viewers the majesty and opportunity that awaited them in Omaha. Initially shown only in Omaha, the club actively promoted its wider circulation, branching out into eighty theatres in Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota.³⁴ Advertising materials for the city were sent with the film, and occasionally a promotional speaker would also travel with the film. While the films circulated throughout the state, the club also made sure that it was available to screen to the many occupational conventions that met in Omaha that summer, allowing them to expose to regional or national attendees the many assets of their glorious city.³⁵ One Omaha weekly paper printed “The Ten Commandments of Business,” and the one most eagerly embraced appears to be the eighth: “Thou shalt not be afraid to blow thine own horn; for he who failest to blow his own horn at the proper occasion findest nobody standing ready to blow it for him.”³⁶

In the event that such boosterism succeeded in luring a new business, the prospective Omaha businessman found the club eager to help him settle in. One subcommittee, the Real Estate Committee, devoted its energies to matching new businesses to suitable quarters in Omaha. “The club is prepared at all times to direct strangers and other applicants for industrial and

³⁴ *Commercial Club Journal*, August 24, 1912 (Vol. 1, No.9) p. 35. By August of 1912, it had played in twenty two “moving picture houses” in Omaha, each wider release noted breathlessly by the *Journal*.

³⁵ *Commercial Club Journal*, August 17, 1912 (Vol. 1 No. 8) p. 29

³⁶ *The Omaha Excelsior*, February 10, 1912 (Vol. 29, No. 6), p. 2.

commercial locations to suitable property," it promised. "A list of vacant trackage property is kept for ready reference, as is also a list of the few available buildings for manufacturing or mercantile purposes."³⁷ The notation that such plum locations were "few" calculated to give the impression that though Omaha had room for newcomers, it was also so irresistible for the enterprising that buildings were quickly occupied. No matter, even if a suitable space did not exist, the Real Estate Committee could "induce...some capitalist" to build if there was a prospective tenant.³⁸ City building was both a figurative and literal aim for the club, and as their successes in selling Omaha mounted, so did their desire to expand even more.

All of this expansion and networking obviously directly benefitted many of the club members, who found increased markets, a higher profile for their own trade, and reciprocal or complimentary industries to their own. But in the club's official line, and perhaps sincere view, this industrious economic recruiting benefitted *all* of Omaha. The Commercial Club routinely conflated their interests with those of Omaha's greater citizenry, and regularly publicized this view. "The one great big fact that the Commercial Club stands for Omaha is the essence of the whole thing, and to rightly represent this city the Commercial Club should be an institution strong, alert, aggressive and high-class, and representative of every business and civic interest of the community, and that is just what I think it is," J.E. Baum, a former president of

³⁷ *Commercial Club Journal*, July 20, 1912 (Vol. 1 No. 4), p. 16.

³⁸ *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, June 29, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 1) p. 4.

the club dutifully opined in 1912.³⁹ Another former president espoused this view, citing the “unselfish” nature of the club’s leaders: “The Executive Committee of the organization should be trusted fully to perform their duties in a manner that would serve the best interests of the community. Every one, whether he be business man or professional man, should rally to the support of a commercial organization, having no selfish motive in view; simply working to build up and develop the city along business lines.”⁴⁰ The editor of a nearby town’s newspaper took this praise a step further, expressing a belief that not only was the Commercial Club making Omaha “greater,” but it was also uplifting the entire state of Nebraska. “When we help to make Omaha greater,” wrote J.W. Tamplin, “We are after all just pushing the whole state upward.”⁴¹ In the 1913 City Directory, most of the city’s innumerable trade organizations were listed under the heading “Commercial Bodies: For Special Trade Purposes.” Only one—the Commercial Club of Omaha—appeared under a separate heading: “Commercial Bodies: For the Public Welfare.”

The sources of these quotations were men who had considerable investment in the club—being a former president meant one had achieved some standing in the community and success in one’s profession, but being president of the enormous organization also required a substantial dedication of time. Therefore, it is not surprising that they would paint the club to which they had given hundreds of hours of their time in a rosy light. But the extent

³⁹ “Club Represents Every Business,” *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, September 14, 1912, (Vol. 1, No. 12) 48.

⁴⁰ “Commercial Club is City Builder,” *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, August 24, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 9) 36.

⁴¹ *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, July 20, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 4) 15.

of the club's dedication to portraying itself as the guiding light of Omaha and great benefactor to all its citizens is still impressive. The exclusionary language in statements like "every one, whether he be business man or professional man," or the club's omission of African Americans and women as proper members while claiming citywide representation apparently did not register as ironic. Belief in their own abilities and in the system of capitalism within which their business ventures existed, many club members probably did believe that their work and prosperity were crucial to the betterment of the entire city. The leadership of the Club certainly believed its goals and those of Omaha's more generally were the same, and these assumptions shaped many of the decisions made in the immediate aftermath of the tornado.⁴²

One of the most critical decisions, the decision to refuse outside aid for tornado recovery efforts was decided by the Commercial Club, and publicized by James Dahlman, mayor of Omaha. Dahlman, in addition to his City Hall activities, was an active Commercial Club member who delighted in the connections and conviviality the club provided its members, and spent part of June 1912 on a lengthy road trip west through Nebraska and Wyoming with a few other members of the club. A combination publicity tour for the city of Omaha and a campaign to improve the markings and conditions of roads between Omaha and other regional cities, the motoring brigade made frequent

⁴² These decisions, motivations, and goals are discussed in detail in Chapter Three. Nell Irvin Painter labels this tendency to conflate business interests with the greater good of the public "identity of interest" and illustrates its presence in the Gilded Age on a national scale. Clearly, the same habit held true for businessmen on a city level well even in 1913. Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987).

stops to expound to listeners the benefits that better roads would bring not just to Omaha, but to the entire state of Nebraska. Dahlman, who thrilled to crowds of any size, and as a former denizen of western Nebraska during his cattleman days, loved playing up his image as the “Cowboy Mayor,” and for the most part, crowds loved to see him “in character.”⁴³

James “Cowboy Jim” Dahlman’s mayoral career would prove to be an extraordinary one, though in 1913, this was not yet apparent. Eventually known as “Omaha’s Perpetual Mayor,” a moniker earned when he reigned as mayor almost continuously from 1906 until his death in 1930, his only brief hiatus came by way of a lone unsuccessful mayoral bid in 1918 that ousted him for three years. Dahlman owed his popularity and success to an array of personal characteristics that made him eminently electable in the burgeoning western city. Born in Texas on a cattle ranch in 1856, Dahlman’s coming of age was marked by hard work and irregular schooling.⁴⁴ In his teens, he left home, but later returned, only to leave again under the alias “Jim Murray” when he shot his brother-in-law in retaliation for abandoning his wife (Dahlman’s sister) and their newborn child.⁴⁵ Dahlman’s subsequent wanderings led him

⁴³ June 29, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 1) p. 3.

⁴⁴ Fred Carey, *Mayor Jim* (Omaha, NE: Omaha Printing Company, 1930). As might be inferred from the title, this account of Dahlman’s life is a very friendly treatment of the man and his mayoral reign; consequently, I have taken all but the most basic facts with a dose of skepticism.

⁴⁵ The story of the shooting crops up frequently, and was in fact addressed by the mayor himself. His account of the incident contains the basic facts listed above, but while he implicates himself for youthful hotheadedness, there seems to be a sense that the victim, Charles Bree, had it coming, with Dahlman concluding, “he deserved to be shot.” Orville Menard, the leading modern expert on Dahlman’s Omaha, accepts this story as true in his 1989 book about bossism in Omaha during this time period. However, Menard is quoted in a

into work as a ranch hand and cattle driver, and he eventually made his way to the western panhandle of Nebraska. There he met, charmed, and married a woman named Harriet Abbott, a Wellesley-educated and apparently adventurous young woman from Maine employed as a tutor for the trader at the nearby Pine Ridge Reservation. The young couple settled in the far western outpost of Chadron, and James established himself in city and county politics with several terms on city council, as sheriff, and, a precursor of things to come, as mayor. While in Chadron, Dahlman met William Jennings Bryan, which launched a personal friendship that lasted until Bryan's death, though it chilled around 1910 when the two found themselves on opposing sides of the prohibition question. The Dahlmans eventually moved east to Lincoln, and then on to Omaha, where Jim worked as a livestock commissioner in the city's booming stockyards and launched his long mayoral career.⁴⁶

Dahlman worked hard to cultivate and maintain his "of the people" aura. He never owned a car, nor accepted one from the city, preferring walking or public transportation instead. An avowed "wet," Dahlman openly enjoyed the wares of Omaha's multitudinous saloons. He doggedly promoted his "Cowboy Jim" persona, performing in lassoing and calf tying exhibitions

2006 newspaper retrospective of Dahlman as saying that Dahlman was wanted for cattle rustling, not murder, though the columnist does not probe what prompted Menard to change his conclusion on this point. If Menard's second assertion is true, claiming to have committed a shooting he did not would still have fit Dahlman's persona perfectly: a case of youthful-but-just frontier violence might only add to the cowboy mystique he cultivated, and it was certainly a more romantic tale than being a wanted cattle thief.

⁴⁶ Orville D. Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison's Omaha, 1900-1933* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 95–103.

on many occasions throughout his career, well into his later years.⁴⁷ He was an affable man, and undeniably enjoyed being in the midst of any significant activity in the city. From bars to church to City Hall, Dahlman was constantly present, if usually not actively doing much. He joined a panoply of associations and clubs during his Omaha tenure, including the Commercial Club. After his “Good Roads” trip to Cheyenne, he thanked the club for inviting him to join the brigade, voicing his confidence that they “did some good.” With the politically adroit reminder that “it took all of us to do it,” he urged them to remember that “any time I can be of any service to the club in any way, kindly let me know.”⁴⁸ In 1913, the Executive Committee apparently decided that he could serve the club as a member of the Public and Military Affairs committee, and appointed him to that post.⁴⁹

During this time, the club also strengthened its connections to City Hall, sometimes through Dahlman, but not always. Beginning in 1911, proposals for closer cooperation with the city government began, but little action was taken until 1912. The Executive Committee proposed “frequent conferences between the business interests and the municipality” and felt this “preferable and more effective than the spasmodic and irregular procedure of past years.” Dahlman was approached about the idea, though he was not appointed to the Municipal Affairs Committee the next year.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he and “several city commissioners” expressed the sentiment that “absolute

⁴⁷ I have found mentions of such displays in newspapers from 1906, 1916, 1923, and 1924.

⁴⁸ *Commercial Club Journal*, July 20, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 4), p. 15.

⁴⁹ *Commercial Club Journal*, February 8, 1913 (Vol. 1, No. 33), p. 132.

⁵⁰ *Commercial Club Journal*, August 3, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 6), p. 21.

harmony and true cooperation will prevail between the business men and the new city administration." "This," the *Journal* concluded, "is as it should be."⁵¹

Beloved by much of Omaha's working class and accepted in an official capacity by the Commercial Club, Dahlman enjoyed unique eminence in the city. His charisma, connections, and popularity with voters were political gold, and Dahlman represented a valuable commodity. The man who would capitalize on that mine was Tom Dennison, Omaha's political boss for over thirty years. Though a Republican, Dennison did not mind that Dahlman was a Democrat, instead recognizing the broad appeal he held. Dennison found in Dahlman someone who was "popular, but not power hungry...able to inspire followers, but not demand too large of a leadership role."⁵² In short, Dahlman was the perfect public face to front Tom Dennison's political machine.

While the businessmen scurried about scolding members of the club about the necessity of local patronage and trying to improve Omaha's national profile, Tom Dennison sat in his well-guarded office in the back of the Budweiser Saloon at 1409 Douglas Street and worked to build his vision of Omaha.⁵³ The saloon was supposedly "a remarkably quiet, genteel sort of place," and served a diverse array of clientele. In this way, it mirrored the persona and interests of the boss in the back room.⁵⁴

Like many Omahans, Thomas Dennison was not born in the city in which he would later find such success. Born in Iowa in 1858 to Irish

⁵¹ *Commercial Club Journal*, June 29, 1912 (Vol. 1, No. 1), p. 1.

⁵² Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America*, 89.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

immigrant parents, Dennison moved with his parents to a farm in northeastern Nebraska when he was two years old. While in his teens, his mother's death and his father's subsequent re-marriage resulted in a house filled to the brim with a blended family of 16 children, and Tom set out on his own. For the next decade and a half, he journeyed throughout the western United States, trying his hand at a number of occupations. Six feet tall and broad shouldered, he found ready work in a variety of physical labor jobs: blacksmith, railroad worker, wood chopper, prospector, and bar bouncer among them. He also found that he hated physical labor. His exposure to wilder elements in the rough-and-tumble towns of the West prompted him to try his hand at earning an income through armed robbery and professional gambling, and he proved particularly proficient at the latter.⁵⁵

When Dennison arrived in Omaha in 1892, he was 34 years old, and the reasons he chose to migrate to Omaha are mysterious. One hypothesis is that Dennison arrived in town as the representative of a gambling syndicate, at which point he promptly buttered up a local bank president with a gift of \$50,000 to use his connections to help Dennison's interests avoid any trouble with authorities.⁵⁶ Another oft-circulated explanation is that Edward Rosewater, a prominent Nebraska Republican and editor of *The Omaha Bee* daily newspaper, recruited Dennison as a political protégé.⁵⁷ While the influential Rosewater's role in bringing Dennison to Omaha is unclear, he proved a powerful ally to Dennison in the years until his death in 1906 as a

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3-5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

liaison between Dennison's emerging political machine and Omaha's "legitimate" business community. After Rosewater's death, Frank Johnson, the wealthy owner of the Omaha Printing Company, served as the link between Dennison and the business community.⁵⁸ Though Rosewater's son, Victor, did not continue the political link that his father had forged with Dennison's machine, the *Bee*, under his guidance, continued to print machine-friendly versions of events, and recognized Johnson's influence almost equally with Dennison's. One *Bee* reporter in 1918 or 1919 was sent by his bosses to Frank Johnson's office to get "facts" about a story. "Write it down just as he says it," the reporter was instructed, "Don't bother to check the facts or talk to anyone else. Mr. Dennison is interested in this story. It is the policy of this paper to print whatever Mr. Dennison or Mr. Johnson wants."⁵⁹ If true, it meant that the machine had a major daily newspaper devoted to representing their side of the story in every matter.

Less well represented in the Omaha press was the working class. As was common in other parts of the country at the time, the relationships between the large working class and its employers contained its share of tension. As the city grew and became industrialized, conflicts mounted and workers responded with attempts at unionizing. Omaha's growing manufacturing sector, its railroad jobs, and especially its sprawling stockyard

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 82. Johnson, habitually private and much less publicly visible and active than Rosewater, who was every bit the man about town, cropped up in 1913 as a member of the Citizens' Relief Committee.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* The citation for this comes from an interview Menard did with the reporter in 1979. He also lists two other interviews in this footnote, but it's a little unclear what they refer to.

attracted African American migrants and immigrants—particularly Czechs and Italians—in search of work. Also adding to the influx of workers were former farmers (often immigrants as well) who had either tired of trying to coax a living from the land, or had found themselves unable to afford the occupation during the periodic economic crises and droughts that cropped up every few years in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As immigration to the United States soared in the first decades of the twentieth century, reaching a peak in 1907, native-born whites and more established immigrant groups grew increasingly concerned about the seemingly unending flow of new residents and their assumed association with socialism, anarchism, labor activism, and violent tendencies, all of which tended to be lumped into one looming threat attached to eastern and southern Europeans. In 1903, nervous members of the business community formed the Omaha Business Men’s Association (BMA) as a response to and defense against striking employees. Over the next decade, the BMA fulfilled its members’ wishes, successfully breaking strikes among streetcar workers, meatpackers, and teamsters, among others. Though membership in the BMA was secretive, in 1909 the group chose to divulge the names of the twenty-six men on its executive committee.⁶⁰ The executive committee roster revealed, unsurprisingly, a listing of local business luminaries and overlapped considerably with the Omaha

⁶⁰ Lawrence H. Larsen, ed., *Upstream Metropolis: An Urban Biography of Omaha and Council Bluffs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 178–180.

Commercial Club, the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben, and other bastions of the business elite.⁶¹

According to one historian of the Dennison machine, it was into this fractious and fearful relationship that Tom Dennison inserted his influence. Businessmen in a growing city wanted nothing more than a stable environment in which their enterprises could flourish. Uncontrolled crime or frequent strikes threatened their ability to prosper. But Tom Dennison offered a way to help “keep the lid on” these problems and allow them to pursue their business goals.⁶² The possibility of patronage from the city, permissive permits, or a little bit of graft here and there probably sweetened the deal as well.⁶³ One historian maintains that the machine played a crucial role in keeping labor unrest in check through its beneficence to workers, “protecting [the business community] from labor unrest and forestalling unionization...it created a sense of gratitude and complaisance, disarming widespread worker unrest to the benefit of employers.”⁶⁴ This is likely an overstatement of Dennison’s importance—there were, after all, many reasons that workers did

⁶¹ Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America*, 187.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 184. I am a little bit skeptical of Menard’s claim that Dennison’s material assistance was that influential in winning the loyalty of the working class. To truly pacify a body of laborers with enough grievances to go on strike would require quite a bit of “generosity” on the part of Dennison and his associates. Menard does not show that this scale of pacification occurred—in fact, he argues that “welfare did not have to be visited upon every household on the block to have an effect on all of them; Dennison was shrewd about where he delivered his coal and groceries and counted on a ripple effect of gratitude.” (152) I believe that such a charity campaign could ensure voter loyalty, I am less convinced that it would erase worker dissatisfaction to the extent of allaying strikes.

not or could not strike other than the assumption that they were simply pacified by machine-administered welfare. Furthermore, there were examples of labor unrest during Dennison's regime, most notably in the anti-Greek riot of 1909, which ended in the killing of one Greek boy, the burning of most of the Greek homes and businesses in nearby South Omaha, and the vanishing of most Greek packinghouse workers. Although this incident was not directed toward the business elite, it did create a great firestorm of controversy and censure across the country, hardly an ideal situation of "keeping the lid on" or creating beneficial business conditions.⁶⁵

Although Dennison's machine may have had less influence over labor unrest than the business elite might have liked or imagined, the machine did have tight control over the police force, and by extension, over the city's vice element of saloons, gambling, and prostitution establishments, and it consequently had some control over crime. Omaha had a reputation as a "wide open" town, but at the same time, it was not exactly Five Points redux. By the early 1900s, the prevailing view of Omaha regionally and nationally

⁶⁵ The mob violence took place on Sunday, February 21, 1909, and seems to have been incited by animosity between more established immigrant workers in South Omaha's packinghouses and the newly arrived Greeks, who were brought in as contract laborers by the railroads and as strikebreakers by the meatpacking houses in 1904. Rumors abounded that the Greeks were dirty and syphilitic, and that they routinely assaulted local women. The unrepentant editor of *The Omaha Daily News*, Joseph Polcar, described the perceived threat posed by the Greeks the day after the riot: "Herded together in lodging houses and living cheaply, Greeks are a menace to the American laboring man—just as the Japs, Italians and other similar laborers are." (*ODN*, February 23, 1909.) Mayor Dahlman and his police chief both drew censure for their official policy of "staying out of it," rather than sending supplemental police to attempt to quell the riot. See John G. Bitzes, "The Anti-Greek Riot of 1909--South Omaha," *Nebraska History* 51 (1970): 199–224. Also Larsen, *Upstream Metropolis*, 212–216.

seemed to be that it was a town with a drinking problem, but not an exceptional amount of dangerous crime. This, apparently, was close enough to “keeping the lid on” for much of the business community. In return, Dennison’s business contacts allegedly helped fund his machine. One source claimed that “the business establishment” threw an annual party for Dennison’s machine workers at an upscale hotel in appreciation for his work on behalf of “the city.”⁶⁶ The veracity of this is questionable—the entire point of Dennison having a business liaison like Edward Rosewater or Frank Johnson was so that the business elite did not have to deal directly with Dennison. Furthermore, if a businessman or industry representative needed or wanted to funnel money to Dennison, there were plenty of ways to accomplish that more discretely than by throwing him a lavish party. But whether or not they actually feted him, it is apparent that the business elite and Tom Dennison’s machine reached some sort of symbiotic relationship satisfactory to both.

By 1913, the machine maintained strong control over the city’s politics, and its men were in place in every post of import in City Hall. But there had started to be pushback against the “gang rule” in Omaha. All across the United States, Progressives touted the commission form of government as a way to alleviate rampant corruption and inefficiency. City after city adopted it in the first decade of the century, most notably Galveston, Texas and Des Moines, Iowa. Curiously, one of the main proponents of the commission form

⁶⁶ Ibid., 188. The source Menard quotes is a personal interview he conducted in 1979. It is worth noting, however, that the interviewee was an opposition leader to Dennison’s machine.

was Victor Rosewater and his paper *The Bee*, which historically supported the machine.⁶⁷ Omaha adopted the commission form in 1911, and the 1912 city elections marked its first test. *The Excelsior*, a weekly paper sympathetic to a variety of Progressive causes, launched a full-scale effort to educate its readers about the benefits of a commission government and urged them to unite behind the Citizens Union (CU), a group committed to “good government.” The paper recognized that ideally, each candidate would stand on his own merits, but that given the “machine element’s” power, *Excelsior* readers must unite behind the Citizens Union slate in order to defeat the “co-operating forces” and their “undue influence in municipal affairs”—essentially attempting to beat the machine at its own game.⁶⁸ The quest to reform the city government was moral, not personal, the paper sniffed, and “Mayor Jim rather overdoes the campaigning when he assumes that the commission form of government law was enacted to get his goat. He flatters himself.”⁶⁹

But Dennison’s machine was not threatened or substantially changed by the new governmental structure. As long as the machine’s base voted uniformly, the same figures could be re-elected to City Hall no matter what governmental structure was employed, and Dennison’s wards continued to

⁶⁷ Supposedly, the reason for Rosewater’s support was that he wanted Omaha to appear modern, and felt that government reform was what modern cities were doing—similar to the writer of the letter to the editor who warned that Omaha would be identified with “old fogey-ism” if it did not adopt Progressive reforms. Additionally, Victor was never as tight with Dennison as his father was. The *Excelsior* charged the *Bee* with “customary disinclination to show the slightest favor to anything tending to reform in municipal politics,” so Rosewater’s support is a little bit surprising.

⁶⁸ *Omaha Excelsior*, March 16, 1912 (Vol. 29, No. 11) p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, April 6, 1912 (Vol. 29, No. 14) p. 6.

vote faithfully. "A slate passed out in the lower wards is voted, voted solid, voted blindly and obediently," the bitter *Excelsior* mused after the primaries, "And that's municipal politics in a nutshell."⁷⁰ The Citizens Union failed to get any of their candidates elected, and the "Square Seven" fronted by Dahlman rode to complete victory, firmly in control of the city when Easter tornado struck one year later.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid., April 13, 1912 (Vol. 29, No. 15) p. 6.

⁷¹ No candidates, unless you count John Ryder, police commissioner. Initially endorsed by the CU, Ryder lost their endorsement after earning a suspiciously high number of votes in machine-controlled wards in the city. The CU's forebodings were correct, and a special investigation of the machine in early 1914 concluded that Ryder was "not of the inner ring but is used as a tool" by Dennison.

CHAPTER 2

“They Believed Her & Wanted to Help Her:” Constructive Philanthropy, Expert Relief, and Determining Aid-Worthiness

I came to Iowa... just before the Omaha cyclone. At that time there were just three social workers in Iowa Mr. Hollingsworth, of Des Moines, Bess McClenahan of Cedar Rapids & myself (sent from New York for six months.)⁷² ... When the cyclone struck there was a setup in Omaha that was rather feeble and inadequate. The business men set up relief centers for the destitute but soon realized that they were being exploited. So they asked us to come to help.

—Gladys Wells Griffith, 1950

For the first time in the history of our great disasters, the country's machinery for relief has been found ready to move with that precision and efficiency which only careful previous organization could make possible.

—*The Survey*, April 5, 1913

* * * * *

As the train chugged west from Iowa, progress slowed considerably as it neared Omaha, stopping frequently so that crews of workers could move debris and make repairs to track damaged by the tornado a few days earlier. For Gladys Wells Griffith, the delays added a sense of excitement to her mission, rather than annoyance. A young woman recently arrived in Iowa from New York; Gladys thrilled at the important work awaiting her in ravaged Omaha and drew energy from her sense of purpose. Though she now

⁷² They may have been dispatched by the Des Moines Associated Charities. *The Iowa Alumnus*, v. 19 p. 243 in “Alumni Notes”: “’92—Judges in the Des Moines *Evening Tribune’s* Nobel prize for the most outstanding service to the community during the year 1921, awarded the cup trophy for public service to Horace Hollingsworth, general secretary of the Associated Charities of that city. Mr. Hollingsworth was selected by ten judges from among thirty-eight candidates nominated by the people of Des Moines. *He has been connected with the Association for twenty-eight years, and for the past ten years has devoted his entire time to charitable work.*” *The Iowa Alumnus*, Volume XIX, March 1922, No. 6. Published in Iowa City, IA by the University of Iowa Association.

knew that Omaha was not “wiped from the map” as early rumors advertised, she was convinced that there would be plenty for her and her two colleagues to do once they arrived. Aiding those in need was no simple matter of handing out soup and blankets, Gladys knew. And it sounded to her as if the Omaha businessmen and relief committees had found that out for themselves as well. Relief was a job best left to the experts.

* * * * *

“For the first time in the history of our great disasters, the country’s machinery for relief has been found ready to move with that precision and efficiency which only careful previous organization could make possible,” trumpeted the philanthropically-minded weekly *The Survey* nearly two weeks after the Omaha tornado.⁷³ Charitable relief, whether targeted toward victims of one-time misfortunes like storms or towards those more routinely in depressed circumstances, garnered intense study and attention in the first decades of the twentieth century. “Improvement” of individuals and society formed the backbone of many iterations of Progressive philosophies, and the amelioration of desperate circumstances fell within the purview of “improvement” to a sizeable number of reformers.

“Improvement” was a preoccupation for many well-meaning members of the middle and upper classes, and it was joined by other American fascinations: efficiency and expertise. The mania for creating perfected systems dated to the 1880s, when business owners in rapidly industrializing

⁷³ *The Survey*, Volume XXX, No. 1 Week of April 5, 1913, “Response to Flood Calls,” p. 1.

industries sought ways to squeeze maximum production (and profit) out of the machines and workers on hand. Soon, many Americans accepted “efficiency” as a nearly absolute good and desirable goal in areas of life beyond the factory. Expertise evolved as a related phenomenon—specialists, it was believed, held the keys to making any organization or endeavor more efficient, more organized, more precisely calibrated—and therefore, better. “Managerial thinkers,” enchanted by the envisioned rewards of a perfectly designed and efficient society, imagined a world “engineered by expert technicians and operated by obedient functionaries.”⁷⁴

Nineteenth century American charity had long been the domain of the religious, the affluent, and the female members of society. Many organizations were local affairs, run through places of worship or neighborhood societies. The economically well off served as benefactors and if the group had volunteers, they were predominantly female. But by the end of the century, “charity” was swept up into the emerging field of social work. “Social work” was a capacious term that encompassed a host of other initiatives aimed at

⁷⁴ T. J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 265. Robert Wiebe’s landmark work *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* most famously advanced this argument, but Lears more fully grapples with the appeal of such order, particularly to the anxious middle and upper classes who most enthusiastically embraced scientific management and implemented it in a variety of societal venues. Lears claims that “scientific management was often more about simulating efficiency than delivering it.” (261) Although in some contexts this may be true, Lears underestimates the earnestness of many of those who sought to apply the principles in charitable and philanthropic arenas, who sincerely believed that their unending tabulations and strenuous note taking enabled them to do their work “better.” Who, if anyone, ultimately benefited from this “better” work is open to interpretation and viewpoint, just as it was when implemented in factories.

“improving” those in straitened circumstances, a term that practitioners of social work often applied not only to the physical circumstances of their clients, but to their moral state as well. In 1916, O.E. Klingaman, the Director of the Extension Division of the University of Iowa, acknowledged that the “broad meaning” of “social welfare” included “not merely the problem of the dependent, the defective, and the delinquent, but also recreation, child welfare, the development of community spirit, the work of women’s clubs—in short whatever makes for better social adjustment in the community.”⁷⁵

As in many other fields during the late nineteenth century, those employed within or occupied by social work strove increasingly to systematize their work. Though casework was still approached on a case-by-case basis, most organizations established elaborate protocols for determining who was “worthy” of aid and in which conditions it should be meted out. Often, these standards placed the burden of proof on the applicant, which could be a hardship in a time where documentation was far from standardized or universally available, and unavoidable issues like illiteracy, immigration, frequent moves, fire, emancipation, and a host of other conditions precluded the ability to produce acceptable “proof” of circumstances, even when theoretically available.

In addition to the practical elements of social work jobs, practitioners increasingly focused on data collection. One essay about the field noted that

⁷⁵ Bessie Averne McClenahan, *The Social Survey*, The State University of Iowa, Iowa City. Extension Division Bulletin ; No. 26; Variation: Extension Division Bulletin (Iowa City, Iowa : 1916) ; No. 26. ([Iowa City, Ia.]: State University of Iowa, 1916).

“while the immediate task is to relieve [the poor’s] distress, beyond this lies the opportunity for raising the standard of living of individual families and for gathering together facts as to the environment of the poor and as to their physical, mental, and moral condition—facts which show the causes of poverty, which disclose the special evils to be overcome and point the way to needed reforms.”⁷⁶ The anecdotes, statistics, and “facts” duly collected served the increasingly numerous goals of Progressive charity and social work groups. Florence Hutsinpillar, the Assistant Secretary for the Associated Charities of Minneapolis, summarized the aims of her group as four-fold. First, there was the “treatment” of poverty within individual indigent homes, “by means of relief and service.” Characteristic of many reformers, the “relief and service” they envisioned was predicated on the idea that the poor were that way because of flawed lifestyles at odds with the middle-class value system most Progressive reformers involved in social work embraced for themselves. Hutsinpillar enthused to potential social workers that “the opportunity is at hand...to introduce the poor to right ways of living, to help them with material benefits, and to offer them a measure of spiritual uplift,” a list that both assumes and condescends a great deal. Second, the work of organizing existent charities within a city into a “cooperating system.” This second goal was not one that was shared by social workers in other groups or in every type of fieldwork, but the Associated Charities and Charity Organization Societies proliferated in the early twentieth century, and almost

⁷⁶ “The New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor” Halle D. Woods, *Vocations for the trained woman: opportunities other than teaching*, p. 33-34. Boston : Women’s Educational and Industrial Union, c. 1910.

every city of any consequence had such a network. The third goal, Hutsinpillar continued, was educating the public “as to the general needs of the poor and the working class.” She promised new workers the chance to “bring to the knowledge of the well-to-do concrete instances of poverty, of disease, and of physical and mental incapacity which cry out to them to exert their utmost energy for reform,” perfectly expressing the Progressive belief that only wealthy and middle class ignorance of the American poor’s plight caused their indifference and lack of action. The final goal would codify measures “to remove the causes of poverty in the community” and use the legislative process to obliterate want and exploitation, measures that would presumably pass thanks to the newly educated American public’s knowledge of the true ravages of poverty.⁷⁷

In the 1910s, college-educated women seeking “opportunities other than teaching,” found that working in the Associated Charities or in social work offered a socially acceptable outlet for their education. Hutsinpillar, after bemoaning that top-level positions within charity organizations were difficult for women to fill because “so few women are trained to do the work of supervising and directing,” cautioned aspirants that “a mere desire to do good to someone else is not sufficient to admit one to the ranks of trained workers,” (though she allowed that “as an inspiring motive it has its place”). Instead, the ideal candidates would possess “good health, energy and initiative, optimism...sound judgment...efficiency indicated by keenness of perception,

⁷⁷ “Work in the Associated Charities” Florence W. Hutsinpillar, *Vocations Open to College Women*, p. 7, University of Minnesota, 1913.

accuracy of thought and statement, a broad democratic sympathy, and tact in dealing with rich and poor.”⁷⁸ Hutsinpillar’s job description illustrates what Robyn Muncy identifies as a key problem for professional women in the Progressive Era: Professionalism increasingly demanded so-called “manly” behaviors like “activity, confidence, and self-assertion”—very much in keeping with several requisites named by Hutsinpillar—but professional women still found themselves restricted by the gender norms of the nineteenth century, which urged them toward “passivity, humility, and self-sacrifice.”⁷⁹ Female social workers, along with teachers and nurses, consequently occupied a “middle ground” characterized by an apparently dichotomous skill set and one in which their ability to perform their job usually was accepted—but was still most often overseen by a male hierarchy. Florence Hutsinpillar attributed this gendered system of management to a shortage of suitable supply, not necessarily a shortage of demand or limits of opportunity; yet given the active presence and considerable numbers of women in charitable organizations by the time she wrote her essay, women with experience in the field must not have been in short supply. Instead, she blamed a lack of “training” in management techniques.

Gladys Wells Griffith’s Iowa co-worker, Horace Sumner Hollingsworth, embodied the “trained” male sought for leadership positions. College-educated, Hollingsworth graduated from the University of Iowa in 1892 from the College of Liberal Arts and embarked on an eighteen-year career in

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.

⁷⁹ *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935*, p. xiii, Oxford University Press, 1994. Robyn Muncy.

banking as the assistant cashier of the Valley National Bank in Des Moines.^{80 81} A clean-shaven, apple-cheeked man with round eyeglasses and short hair neatly parted down the middle, Hollingsworth exuded middle-class respectability. *The Survey*, a national weekly journal of “constructive philanthropy,” announced Hollingsworth’s 1911 career change from banker to general superintendent and secretary of the Des Moines Associated Charities (DMAC) with the headline “Business Man for Secretary.”⁸² The announcement also noted that Hollingsworth had been “interested” in charity work since he graduated college, although there is no explanation of what his involvement prior to assuming the head of the Associated Charities entailed. The national banking community made note of Hollingsworth’s career change as well. A small announcement in *The Bankers Magazine* told of his resignation from the Valley National Bank and forthcoming new position with DMAC, explaining that Hollingsworth would be “engag(ing) in charitable work hereafter.”⁸³ He promised increased efficiency for the DMAC by fostering increased cooperation between existing charities in the city, and implementing a “new scheme of charitable contributions” to streamline giving, rather than the “haphazard” solicitations apparently characterizing the DMAC up to that point.⁸⁴

Horace Hollingsworth’s almost two-decade career in banking evidently equipped him for the “work of supervising and directing” identified by

⁸⁰ *The Iowa Alumnus*, Volume 19, No. 9, June 1922, p. 324.

⁸¹ *The Survey*, Volume XXV, No. 21, February 18, 1911, p. 872.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *The Bankers Magazine*, January 1911, Volume LXXXII, No. 1, p. 150.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Florence Hutsinpillar, and gave him a body of experience that few women in 1913 could hope to match. That Hollingsworth's training did not occur in the field of social work or anything related to it was not a concern. Instead, his time in the "masculine" business and banking world lent authority and perceived ability to his plans to reorganize and streamline Des Moines' charity collection.⁸⁵ Moreover, Hollingsworth's history provided him with a network of potential charitable donors. When Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace, a long-time resident of Des Moines before ascending to his national post, died in 1924, Hollingsworth's published remembrances of the man illustrated a fundraising network in action:

I knew 'Uncle Henry' and the boys in business when I was with the Valley National Bank. And fourteen years ago when I took the secretaryship of the Associated Charities, Harry was among the ardent backers of the cause. In those days we didn't have a Public Welfare Bureau to raise the money. Each organization put forth its own campaign. It was necessary for me to be in search of funds a third of the time. And long before any considerable number of people were on the list of generous givers, Harry and his associates were writing liberal checks and giving them without pressure. Harry would always say: 'Now Horace, if you find your treasury short, come back again.'⁸⁶

Obviously, close and personal connections with a community's wealthy and influential members constituted a boon for any organization reliant on voluntary giving and solicited funding. Hollingsworth's mention of the

⁸⁵ I saw no evidence that Hollingsworth was *not* an able manager of the DMAC, so I do not mean to imply that he was unable to do the job well, since it seems that he was, at a minimum, at least competent. Rather than speaking to Hollingsworth's specific abilities, I mean to underscore the apparent *assumption* that he would be an able manager on the basis of his business background, rather than any demonstration of success in charitable fields before.

⁸⁶ *Wallace's Farmer*, November 7, 1924, vol. 49, no. 45, p. 7.

origins of their relationship—in business, when he was working at the bank—is significant. Years in the business community established links with wealthy and influential men and laid an irreplaceable foundation for later solicitations of money. While women operated in well-defined social circles of their own and had connections to both male and female potential donors, they remained excluded from the informal networking of men in Commercial Clubs, Masonic and other fraternal associations, and saloons—in short, every place playing host to the proverbial “Old Boys’ Club.” In charity administration, as in so many other male-dominated fields, the old adage “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” found fulfillment.

The mania for reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that gave the Progressive Era its name paved the way for the expansion of social work and professional charities. As historians have long noted, “reform” meant different things to different groups of people, and the priorities of each person championing reform often differed wildly.⁸⁷ Progressive causes, diverse in their exact aims, held in common a belief that the “betterment” of American society and alleviation of social ills was not only attainable, but the inevitable result of achieving their specific goals. Progressives fervently championed such causes as reform in politics and banishment of machine bosses and corrupt leaders, safety in housing and food supplies, state protection of endangered children, more humane working conditions, women’s suffrage, and a host of other issues. Untethered from

⁸⁷ Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 1982): 113–32.

specific political parties, supporters of a given cause sometimes made strange bedfellows and previously unthinkable coalitions.⁸⁸ More importantly, the proliferation of special interest groups and their politically heterogeneous adherents normalized the idea of reform. Individual causes still remained divisive—consider, for example, the intensely heated rhetoric surrounding the issue of women’s suffrage—but as more Americans supported issue-oriented groups, whether one or many, the idea that change was necessary, desirable, and attainable through changes in law or institutional support began to seem a matter of course. Terms like “betterment,” “uplift,” and “improvement” grew inextricable from “progress,” a tantalizing goal spanning the political spectrum.

While support for Progressive issues broadened, the reformist animus emanated from a variety of sources. The Social Gospel, a movement that urged adherents to live out their Christian beliefs through dedication to social justice and thus bring earth closer to the level of heaven, found outlets in numerous facets of social work. Some hoped that improving social conditions would end the ever-lurking instability caused by (threatened, feared, and actual) strikes, uprisings, and assassinations. These threats terrified the middle and upper classes, and to them, social work seemed a beneficent way to quell unrest. Increasing urbanization also prompted greater concern, since the ravages of poverty seemed so much more horrifying and striking when it occupied entire swaths of the city, as opposed to the just-as-real, but much less

⁸⁸ Ibid., 115–117.

visible rural poverty.⁸⁹ Another contributing factor was the existence and stabilization of the middle class—without the need to worry about their own day-to-day survival and with far more leisure time than previous generations, members of this class were free to involve themselves in the lives of others.

The increasing acceptance of reform goals resulted in growing visibility and support for the machinery of social relief—namely, organized charities, settlement houses, and social workers. “Organized charities” were all the rage in the early twentieth century, and simply meant that the panoply of charitable and philanthropic groups within a city would cooperate together under a shared administrative body to better coordinate efforts, direct requests to the proper group, and ultimately increase the efficiency and capacity of a city’s charities. Nearly every city of any size had an “Association of Organized Charities” or the like, including Omaha—soon after the tornado, *The Omaha Bee* noted this trend, beginning an article with the observation “During the last year Omaha women have made wonderful strides in organization of charity work.”⁹⁰ “Social workers” often referred to salaried or

⁸⁹ The poor always existed in both city and country. But the growth of urban slums was difficult for city-dwellers to ignore, and with the surge in immigration, these areas threatened to only grow. In rural areas, the poor were more isolated, and sometimes, completely out of sight. Part of the reason the Farm Security Administration photography in the 1930s achieved such fame is because it highlighted the dire straits of the rural poor, who were often invisible to city dwellers and the middle classes. Photography had a long history within social work in its own right, and during the Progressive Era, photographers like Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis used photography as a way to instigate legislation and social action.

⁹⁰ “Women in Quick Response,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 26, 1913, p. 1. In the 1913 city directory, the Associated Charities for Omaha had an office in City Hall, and, notably, an all-female administration team. Omaha’s Jewish community had a separate charity confederation under the heading

long-time workers with organized charities or settlement houses, but by the twentieth century, social workers were sometimes employed by a city, county, or a state to carry out social legislation initiatives; or by a university or private organization as a researcher of “social questions” that conducted surveys in the field. These surveys—quantitative studies of conditions in a neighborhood or city—formed yet more evidence of the increased bureaucratization and professionalization of social work. Bessie McClenahan, one of the Iowa social workers who accompanied Gladys Wells Griffith and Horace Hollingsworth to Omaha after the tornado, later earned a PhD in Sociology at the University of Southern California and authored several books on social work and community organization.⁹¹ In her most influential book, McClenahan reflected on the development of social work as a profession in the preceding decades. “Its history,” she wrote, “can be very positively traced through the different humanitarian movements that led to special lines of social welfare activity, such as organized charities, social settlements, social centers, and child welfare and health organizations.” Social welfare activity, she continued, “is the expression of an ideal that is permeating law, medicine, the ministry, literature, and government—the ideal of social responsibility.”⁹² For

“Associated Jewish Charities & Immigration Bureau,” located in the Brandeis building downtown.

⁹¹ McClenahan was the first woman to earn a PhD in Sociology at the University of Southern California. USC’s Sociology department hosted a Division of Social Work beginning in 1920, and in 1928, McClenahan became a faculty member splitting her time between the sociology department and the Division of Social Work. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/about-us/>

⁹² Bessie Avera McClenahan, *Organizing the Community; a Review of Practical Principles*, The Century Social Science Series (New York: The Century co, 1922), xii–xiii.

McClenahan and many other Progressives, the pursuit of social welfare was no fleeting moment of well-intentioned activism; it was the next logical step for an evolving and improving society. McClenahan's introduction to her book traced the history of humanity from "early struggles...for sheer existence," to the "conquer(ing of) natural forces," and the development of "custom, tradition, religion, and primitive educational and governmental institutions." Up to this point, McClenahan claimed, these developments were "the unconscious outgrowth of the need to control the group for success in warfare," but eventually "they became instruments for the conscious effort to better social conditions." McClenahan's optimism for this ultimate evolution of humanity is striking. "Just as men from simple beginnings learned how to dominate in large measure the physical world, so they will in the end master social inequalities and injustices," she predicted. Concluding this happy thought, she declared, "The recognition of the fact that men together can accomplish social mastery is the basis of a new social philosophy." Finally, she admonished "together men must remove the handicaps, social, economic, and political, that limit the development of their fellow men; an in proportion as men accomplish this task the individual will be freed to work out his own salvation."⁹³ McClenahan recognized that Progressive ideals increasingly imbued diverse segments of the polity; this broad acceptance wanted only implementation and cooperation by those in a position to do something to achieve a transformed society.

⁹³ Ibid., xiii–xiv.

Full-time charity and social work was not interchangeable with temporary disaster relief work, although both practically and philosophically, the two overlapped. A key difference, aside from the instigating event that resulted in the need for aid, was the perception of the aid recipients themselves. Disaster victims generally avoided blame for what had befallen them, and a sense of the capriciousness of “nature” de-emphasized the pursuit of lifestyle change and “uplift” often bound up in Progressive policies toward those in straitened circumstances. Because victims of tornados, earthquakes, floods, and other acts of God presumably were blameless for their losses and suffering, disaster relief lacked the effort—as Florence Hutsinpillar phrased it—“to introduce the poor to right ways of living.” All but the most strident fire-and-brimstone proponents acceded to the Biblical idea that both sun and rain visited the just as well as the unjust, and that disasters did not pick and choose their victims from among the worthy and the unworthy.⁹⁴ Even those who interpreted disastrous events as a harbinger of supernatural judgment usually viewed the inciting wrongdoing as a collective shortfall by the community, rather than divine commentary on the sins of individual victims. In other respects, however, the principles of social welfare work guided the work of disaster relief. Philosophically, charity and relief workers both sought to ameliorate suffering and restore charges to a level of healthy and independent living. Practically, the influence of “constructive philanthropy,” a philosophy that emphasized stipulations and plans for recipients to “elevate”

⁹⁴ “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” Matthew 5:45 (KJV)

themselves out of poverty, was even more obvious. Proponents of both principles exerted themselves to systematize, bureaucratize, and formalize their aid, and as a result, even short-term charities organized in response to a single catastrophe developed in form and function into hierarchical associations modeled after permanent organized charities.

In Omaha, the committees established to oversee relief following the tornado emulated both the male-dominated character and professionalization of full-time charities. By necessity, neighbors and family members acted as the first means of relief, digging each other out from rubble and providing impromptu first aid to the best of their abilities—one good Samaritan was praised for “administering home remedies and reviving the injured with brandies.”⁹⁵ Volunteer work remained an important part of relief and especially of cleanup efforts in the weeks following the storm; however, neighborly impulses soon came under the purview of a hierarchy of committees composed of those who self-identified as city leaders. Soon, two bodies emerged as the “official” organizers of relief and these two groups quickly gained primary control over the relief operations of the city. The first of these groups, the Citizens’ Relief Committee (CRC), was the largest, comprised of fifty prominent community members. Of these fifty members, only seven were female. The group elected officers (none of whom were female) and soon appointed a separate Executive Committee (also devoid of women), which became the second major overseer of official relief. In the

⁹⁵ “Story of the Death Dealing Storm that Struck Omaha Easter Sunday,” *The Omaha Bee*, March 24, 1913.

afternoon of March 24, the day following the storm, the CRC met in the City Council chamber to “formulate definite working plans.” The council chamber, not only a convenient meeting place for so large a group, conferred legitimacy upon the CRC, further bolstered by the presence and cooperation of the city council members themselves. Appointment to one of the committees indicated that one had public stature of some import. J.H. Millard, President of the Omaha National Bank and a former U.S. Senator, prepared a circular to send to his “good bank friends” on the East Coast and reassured them that “committees of able men are in charge of the (relief and rebuilding) work “ in Omaha.⁹⁶ A year later, a triumphant retrospective of Omaha’s recovery from the storm described the committees as “headed by Omaha’s most reliable and responsible citizens” who were “vested with the power to act.”⁹⁷

In the coverage of the committees’ formation and their actions it is not precisely clear *who* determined the most reliable and responsible citizens, appointed them to a committee, and vested them with power to act. Most likely, it was either the city council and the mayor, or a group of “leading citizens” themselves who took the initiative to form the committees and met no significant disagreement from any city authority. What is clear is that the committees’ ascent to power was rapid and quickly endorsed by the city

⁹⁶ J.H. Millard Letters with the Red Cross. “To Our Correspondents” March 27, 1913, and “Letter to Hon. N.B. Scott” April 7, 1913. RG 200 National Archives Gift Collection

Records of the American National Red Cross 1881-1916
Box. No. 57

Folder 843 NEBRASKA, Omaha Tornado 3/23/1913

⁹⁷ Omaha World-Herald (Firm), *How Omaha Rebuilt the Tornado District in One Year* (Omaha, Neb.: Omaha World-Herald, 1914).

government and Omaha press. The CRC and the Executive Committee quickly issued several important decrees: first, that six official relief stations would be established along the tornado's path; second, that the city auditorium would operate as a receiving center for donations of material goods, as well as a distribution center for those same goods and a shelter for displaced persons; and third, that every citizen should give money to the relief effort as liberally as they were able. In support of the final point, the Executive Committee set an example by donating \$25,000 from its seven members, an impressive show of municipal support, as well as an indication of what level of wealth the most "reliable and responsible citizens" possessed. As in the case of Horace Hollingsworth and other businessmen who translated their business experience into positions of leadership within charitable organizations, few among their ranks questioned the assumption that local prominence conferred expertise and authority in the arena of emergency relief work.

The underlying assumptions of presumed capability to lead were twofold. The first assumption was that success in the business world, defined by personal wealth and career trajectory, made one "reliable and responsible" and therefore worthy of making decisions of import for the entire city. There was an exception to this rule, and it covered men who were not necessarily wealthy, but who were socially prominent community servants—thus the inclusion of several clergymen and the Secretary of the Y.M.C.A. The nobility of such service-minded professions afforded a similar presumption of belonging and competence on a relief committee. The second assumption relied on gender norms and took for granted that the most reliable and

responsible decision makers were male. The second assumption in some ways stemmed from the first—few women were in a position to create vast stores of wealth for themselves in the business world, and Omaha women in possession of some wealth came to it primarily by birth or by marriage. Some men “earned” their fortunes this way as well, but the ability to do work outside of the home contributed to the perception that their amassed wealth accumulated from their hard work and initiative, even if their privileged position in life was more of a testament to the work ethic of an ancestor than to themselves.

Aside from the unlikelihood of generating their own wealth, women still faced an assumption from some quarters that they were ill equipped to handle catastrophe. Probably owing to lingering Victorian sentiments about the sanctity and frailty of “the weaker sex,” there were some in Omaha that believed women did not stand among the “reliable and responsible citizens” able to cope with the demands and decision-making incumbent upon the committees. The *Omaha Daily News* reported that an “epidemic of ‘nerves’” followed the tornado:

Hundreds of women were hysterical after the storm and many have been almost on the verge of nervous breakdown ever since. There have been several suicides and cases of insanity, but in the main, the afflicted ones are suffering milder attacks. Physicians say they are having many cases of near-hysteria to handle, entirely among women and children. Dr. Joseph M. Aikin, the nerve specialist, said this morning he had attended a number of such cases and he predicted there would be many more in the next week or two, when reaction sets in.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ *Omaha Daily News*, “Epidemic of ‘Nerves’ Follows Tornado,” April 2, 1913(?). I am skeptical of this date. The Douglas County Historical Society does not have a complete set of the *Daily News*, and this article and others

Unnamed physicians, specifying that such a condition existed “entirely” among women and children, painted a picture of a city full of women in a precarious mental state, just waiting to go over the edge—implicitly implying that Omaha’s men were not experiencing this mental distress and were coping, presumably, in more healthy ways—taking care of not only themselves, but the emotionally frail women and children allegedly swarming the city. There is little evidence that “several suicides” happened as a direct result of the storm, though undoubtedly many men and women did suffer emotional distress from their experiences in the tornado. Unfortunately, rather than recognize post-traumatic stress disorders and afflictions as the natural and non-gendered outcome of a terrifying and traumatic event, many attributed it to innate female weakness. A portion of the population believed to be prone to “near hysteria” would not be a popular choice to have significant say in post-disaster decision-making.

As in professional social work, women performed a substantial amount of the tasks comprising the administration of aid while under the auspices of male-headed relief committees. The city auditorium, the central hub of tornado relief, was a hive of activity in the days following the tornado. Omahans from unscathed parts of the city brought clothes, bedding, and other items for the benefit of victims, and a steady stream of volunteers sorted and

from the *Daily News* were in a file of clippings about the tornado. The April 2 date is handwritten on the article, but almost all of the clippings from the *Daily News* in that file are labeled April 2, 1913, though I suspect that they are not all from that date.

distributed the goods. Many of these volunteers were women, a fact that the *Omaha Bee* took pains to point out. In the “lively scene” of sorting “garments, bed clothes, shoes and other wearing apparel brought in by generous people,” were “a large corps of woman volunteers from the different charitable organizations assisted by shop women detailed from some of the stores.”⁹⁹ While men directed the relief effort from the Executive Board, it fell largely to female volunteers to do much of the sorting and actual distribution.

Three days after the tornado, the *Bee* recognized that those women not afflicted with “nerves” had actually been quite busy in the days following the tornado. “Women in Quick Response” trumpeted one headline. “All charity societies have united as if in one great body. Each organization is taking care of its own people, but when a demand is made for any needy person, there is no standing on ceremony.” The praise for efficient and organized charity alludes to the era’s preoccupation with well-defined and orderly charitable bodies, as advocated by *The Survey* and Florence Hutsinpillar’s “cooperating system(s)” and shows that Omaha’s philanthropic sector embraced current theories of properly administered, efficient welfare. Women garnered praise for organizing and providing nursing services to the injured, immediate temporary shelter, food and clothing distribution, and for planning ahead for continued care of the homeless when their immediate arrangements were eventually rendered untenable.¹⁰⁰ Although mostly excluded from the decision-making bodies on a city-wide level, evidence suggests that the

⁹⁹ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, “Hundreds Helped to New Start in Relief Districts,” March 28, 1913.

¹⁰⁰ *The Omaha Bee*, “Women in Quick Response,” March 26, 1913.

knowledge and activity of Omaha's women directly resulted in relief and amelioration of suffering for many victims.

Publicly, praise for women's work waxed most enthusiastically when it fell in line with the lingering Victorian feminine values of domesticity. As in social work or nursing, characteristics perceived to be "natural" to women garnered high praise when deployed for the good of tornado victims. Two weeks after the storm, the *Omaha Daily News* featured several social clubs that had abandoned their regular business in order to sew items for those in need. Members of the Northside Mothers' Club "planned to meet once a week and devote their afternoon to dresses and other garments that they know are needed (by victims) by personal investigation." Likewise, the Maple Leaf chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star staged a sewing day dedicated to making sheets, pillowcases, and quilts for tornado victims.¹⁰¹ At Trinity Cathedral, arrangements were made to house 300 women and children, and to provide them all with rolls and coffee—no small feat of organization. Calvary Baptist church also offered its building as a shelter and provided provisions. Much of this work was carried out by female members of the churches—in Trinity's case, the housing and feeding of refugee women and children was "carried on under the supervision of Mrs. Tancock and the women of the parish."¹⁰² Two weeks after the storm, citywide cleanup days again reinforced the gendered expectations of relief. Men were released from work to help

¹⁰¹ The *Daily News*, "Organizations Sew for the Tornado Sufferers," April 2, 1913(?)

¹⁰² The *Omaha Bee*, "Churches Assist in Caring for the Poor Sufferers," March 25, 1913.

remove debris, and women were urged to do their part by feeding the workers. “The girls of Central High school will carry lunches to their boy associates on the job and the girls of the high school of commerce will do likewise for their representatives,” announced the *Omaha Daily News*. “Hot coffee will be served at the Lake school for the schoolboys,” presumably prepared and served by women.¹⁰³

In one of the few valorized tales of women departing from the realms of nurturing and domesticity, “society girls” used their social prominence to organize a “tag day” that raised \$2,500 by directly appealing for money to those they encountered (or targeted.) Mary Marsden, who organized the event, half-jokingly suggested that even more money could have been raised had some of the young ladies not inadvertently solicited funds from tornado victims. It is difficult to know how much stock to put into Marsden’s comment—it appears that most of the women involved quite deliberately sought out members of their social circle or acquaintance to solicit for money, so the incidences of mistakenly targeting victims cannot have been many. Furthermore, though some of the finest homes in the city were damaged (George Joslyn’s “castle,” for example), the superior construction and much larger lots these homes occupied meant that relatively few members of Omaha society were affected compared to more modest housing districts where closely built houses amplified the number of victims. It seems then that Marsden may have been speaking for mild comedic effect rather than actually stating a substantial issue in the fundraising method. Marsden’s portrayal of

¹⁰³ The *Daily News*, “Thousands Asked to Help Clean Up,” April 2, 1913(?)

slightly silly society “girls” injudiciously and unknowingly accosting tornado victims may have been meant to mitigate any potential criticism of this rather brazen method of fundraising. While men with official positions in charities like Des Moines Associated Charities’ Horace Hollingsworth could approach wealthy contacts with direct solicitations for money, there may have been more scruples about respectable young women doing the same thing, even for a good cause, when the more usual mode for their set’s fundraising would be to sponsor a benefit dinner or entertainment.¹⁰⁴ Marsden’s inclusion of possible gaffes might have suggested to concerned readers that there was really no long-term threat of women adopting such activities and interactions with men as a new norm. *The Omaha Bee* praised the young women’s efforts, but notably used martial, “masculine” language to describe their fundraising campaign, noting that they “marched up the streets, invaded business offices, and attacked miser and spendthrift alike.”¹⁰⁵ The exceptional circumstances and demands of the disaster allowed women to momentarily slip the bonds of gendered relief work, though mitigated with the seemingly paradoxical applications of folly and masculine military assurance to the endeavor.

In spite of the achievements of civic-minded volunteers, both on the CRC and in the community at large, some city leaders apparently still felt that the situation needed expert guidance. It was one thing to solicit and collect financial and material aid for sufferers, but it was quite another to ensure that

¹⁰⁴ Benefits were another popular way to raise money, and the social and entertainment sections of the city’s papers show that one could go out practically any night of the following week and be entertained “for a good cause.”

¹⁰⁵ *The Omaha Bee*, “Society Girls Raise Money,” April 1, 1913.

aid reached the proper recipients. Herein lay a challenge that preoccupied those involved in charitable work in the early twentieth century—how, exactly, could one determine who *really* deserved and needed aid? The fear of unscrupulous grifters or conniving layabouts exploiting the good impulses of charitable persons loomed large, and pressure to identify the “deserving poor”—those truly in need, whose circumstances were not the fault of habitual character flaws or unsavory hobbies, and whose inclination for “improvement” was demonstrated—occupied administrators of aid. Here, the emerging field of social work once again set the example for those engaged in disaster relief in Omaha, providing a template of casework that encouraged tornado aid workers to investigate each claimant’s story to the best of their ability.

Omaha leaders on the CRC, Executive Board, and within the community harbored much anxiety regarding potential exploitation of the disaster. J.H. Millard, one of Omaha’s most eminent citizens, wrote to the Secretary of the Red Cross of his and others’ fear that “professional people” would begin “going around the country begging for aid for the people who suffered by the tornado in this city, and of which very little, if any... would ever have reached us, and we would have gained an unenviable reputation through such solicitors.”¹⁰⁶ Most concern, however, focused on dishonesty on a more local scale. By the morning after the storm, victims seeking to re-enter the tornado-damaged district from wherever they had sheltered for the night met a military presence. Only persons with official passes might enter the damaged

¹⁰⁶ J.H. Millard to Charles Magee, April 18, 1913. Red Cross Papers.

area. In order to obtain a pass, and thus, permission to visit one's property or residence, the applicant needed to first visit one of the six official, city-established relief stations. There, a police officer in possession of the passes would attempt to verify that the pass-seeker either lived in the damaged area or had "very urgent business" there. After application and being "properly identified," a card declaring right of passage might be obtained. The card, an announcement in the paper decreed, "will bear the name of the man to whom it is issued and must no(t) be used by other for the purpose of gaining admittance within the lines established."¹⁰⁷ This measure ostensibly protected the area from looting—another fear that loomed large for committee members—but as with providing evidence to verify one's claim for aid, it created additional effort and stress for the very sector of the population that was already under some degree of distress. Once again, the effort at formalizing and systematizing post-disaster work resulted in potentially onerous conditions for victims to establish their worthiness and eligibility to those in charge.

Gladys Wells Griffith, writing her memories of the storm many years later, credited a prevalence (or a perception of prevalence) of relief swindlers for her and her Iowa colleagues' summoning to Omaha. "The business men set up relief centers for the destitute," she wrote, "but soon realized that they were being exploited. So they asked us to come to help."¹⁰⁸ Griffith, a 1905 graduate of Wellesley College, granddaughter of Charles Stanford, a New

¹⁰⁷ "Relief Stations for Victims are Fixed by Police Commissioner Ryder," *The Omaha Daily Bee*, p. 1, March 24, 1913.

¹⁰⁸ Gladys Wells Griffith, *Gladys Wells Griffith Papers, circa 1950-1963.*, 1950.

York state senator, and great niece of Leland Stanford, California governor and founder of Stanford University, typified the well-educated, economically comfortable young woman frequently drawn to social work. After her arrival in Omaha, she was tasked with making a “thorough investigation” of one portion of the damaged area. She recalled:

In the section assigned to me was a widow woman that the citizens committee was particularly distressed about. She was a very fine woman originally from Schenectady, N. Y. The roof & three walls of her house had been blown away, and every bit of paper etc & most of the furniture & her husband killed.

The problem, according to Griffith, was that “she had nothing to substantiate her story.” The CRC, she noted, “believed her & wanted to help her” and the Schenectady Masonic Lodge, to which the woman’s late husband had belonged, offered assistance if her story could be verified. Griffith was tasked with investigating the case. Happily for the woman, Griffith happened to share a link to Schenectady—her grandfather, Charles Stanford. The ensuing conversation, as Griffith remembered it, went thusly:

I went to see her & got her talking about Schenectady. She knew the Ellis family who owned the best hotel & the (illegible). Then I asked if she had ever heard the name of Stanford. She brightened up rightaway. “O,” she said, “The old senator! Many’s the time I’ve seen him! And the old mansion out on the highway. And his horses!” Then she launched into a description of the big bars in the center of the horse track and the cupola on top. “Oh,” she said, “And his little horse that climbed the stairs with him.”

This was proof enough for Griffith: “Many people could have described the place but very few knew of the little horse,” she concluded. With her word in support of the woman, both the CRC and the Schenectady Masonic Lodge readily lent their assistance to the woman.

According to Griffith, verifying the need of aid applicants formed the major part of her mission in Omaha—she and her colleagues were to make a “thorough investigation” of the damaged area, presumably by determining claim validity as in the case of the Schenectady woman. But the Schenectady woman’s case illustrates the unreliable nature of such investigations. In a happy coincidence, Griffith and the woman shared significant background history in common. But had the woman been from Utica, New York, or Auburn, New York, how would her story have ended? It is possible that Griffith would have discovered some other way of assuring herself and the committee that what the woman said was true. However, it is equally easy to imagine a scenario where, like the committee, Griffith believed her and wanted to help her, but allowed the inability to verify her claims to limit the amount and type of help she received. Furthermore, Griffith remembered the victim as “a very fine woman.” It seems that something about the woman’s dress, speech, or some other personal detail inclined the committee and Griffith to believe her and sympathize with her—something about her signified her as a “worthy” aid recipient to her benefactors.

Others did not enjoy the benefits of such warm inclinations. Not every victim presented the appearance of being a “very fine” person. Many factors might disincline the workers of the relief apparatus to fully credit an application for aid: language barriers, personal appearance, and race might all influence “worthiness” in the eyes of the aid giver. One of the hardest hit areas of the city, the blocks surrounding 24th and Lake Streets, housed many recent immigrants and African Americans. The relatively poor building construction

and more crowded living conditions in this area resulted in the highest proportion of death and destruction in the city. Unfortunately, the populations living there were also the ones least likely to be able to provide the types of verification sought by the committees. Not surprisingly, African Americans were particularly subject to insinuations about their aid-worthiness. One account praising the work of the volunteers at the City Auditorium evinced this bias: "The relief workers are forced to scan all applications for help closely and Tuesday detected several attempts at imposition," the *Daily News* reported, "One negro carried away a big assortment of clothes and tried later to get another lot."¹⁰⁹ Whether true or not, it is significant that this is the only example the writer felt led to give about the alleged "imposition." Another story, almost certainly based on rumor and not fact, was reprinted in one of the "complete" accounts of the storm published shortly after the tornado. The writer, Frederick Drinker, included this "tale of imposition," which bears striking similarities to the one above:

In one case a colored woman told a pitiful tale of the suffering of herself and family as a result of the storm. She was supplied with a large quantity of food and clothing. Something in her attitude led to suspicion, and her case was investigated after she left the station. She was traced to her home. It was found that the storm had not touched the place, and that she was keeping two men at her house who were not working and made no pretense of being laboring men. The three were sent to jail.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ "'Refugees' Put to Work by Officer," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ Frederick E. Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire, Containing a Full and Thrilling Account of the Most Appalling Calamities of Modern Times; Including Vivid Descriptions of the Hurricane and Terrible Rush of Waters ...* (Harrisburg, Pa., Minter Co., 1913), 62.

Drinker's story invites skepticism, since the jail records for the weeks after the tornado contain no inmates matching this description, and the few other cases of tornado-related fraud that are in the jail register are noted as such. But stories like these clearly indicate that members of the city's African American community were not going to get any Schenectady lady-style benefit of the doubt from the city's relief apparatus.

Omaha in 1913 was far from enjoying a Golden Age of racial harmony. The city's relatively young age and the perception of the opportunities that accompanied a developing city attracted new immigrants to the United States, and industries such as the stockyards employed many recent arrivals and African Americans. As in other places in the United States in the early twentieth century, the rapid influx of newcomers resulted in strife. In 1909, a vengeful riot against the Greek population resulted in their near-complete expulsion from Omaha.¹¹¹ The African-American community doubled in size from 1910 to 1920, growth that culminated in a horrific lynching of a black man and violent riot in 1919.¹¹² As a result of the extant tensions and discriminatory practices, ethnic and racial populations within the city mobilized their own systems of relief. The African-American community created a separate relief station within days of the storm. *The Omaha Bee* noted this action, stating: "the colored people have established a relief station...where they are aiding their people as rapidly as possible."¹¹³ The *Bee*

¹¹¹ Most of this riot was contained in South Omaha, a separate but adjacent city to Omaha until 1915.

¹¹² Cite.

¹¹³ *The Omaha Bee*, "Work at Relief Stations," March 28, 1913.

downplayed the notion that this establishment reflected insufficient or unjust treatment of black Omahans at the “official” relief stations, claiming that “there are no lines drawn... and colored people are given relief at the regular stations as regularly as they make application.”¹¹⁴ It is possible that the immediacy of the crisis overrode the racial divisions of the city and that African American tornado victims enjoyed a brief hiatus in discrimination. One photo after the storm depicts an African American family dining with white families with white women pouring drinks for everyone at the table. The caption identifies this scene as “Feeding the Sufferers” in an unnamed “House of Worship.”¹¹⁵ Significantly, the caption also implies that this scene took place “Before the relief committee had perfected its organization,” perhaps indicating the pictured meal was the result of an ad hoc dinner hosted by a local church to deal with the community’s immediate needs. It is known that the CRC initiated racial (and gender) segregation in the city auditorium for those staying the night.¹¹⁶ But the fact that the African-American community established their own relief station within the vicinity of the city’s relief stations suggests that racial distinctions affected the disbursement of aid. Furthermore, the *Bee*’s use of “their people,” rather than “our people,” a phrase they employed countless times when discussing the tornado’s aftermath, necessarily implied a sense of separation and a distinct

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Miles Greenleaf, *Thrilling Story of Omaha’s Tornado* (Chicago, Ill.: Hamming Pub. Co., 1913).

¹¹⁶ “‘Refugees’ Put to Work by Officer,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 8. “Several women were quartered on the stage and the men were on the main floor, whites on the north side and blacks on the south, under the balconies.”

line of demarcation, whatever the portraits of inclusiveness they hoped to paint.

Omaha's Jewish community also took matters into their own hands in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Spokesmen of the community explicitly rejected aid from non-Jewish aid sources, while promising to find housing and provide relief for all Jewish families affected by the storm, a number they estimated at fifty. Led by the Associated Jewish Charities, the Jewish relief committee announced, "We always care for our own people. We have notified the city that we will care for all. In view of this terrible calamity, we urge the members of the church to come to the meeting Tuesday evening and assist in caring for the stricken."¹¹⁷ The article also noted that the committee expected to raise \$5,000 to \$6,000 for its self-supporting relief group. Additionally, the Jewish relief committee established an independent relief station, supervised by a rabbi and "working independently and relieving the suffering of hundreds."¹¹⁸ The establishment of this separate relief station appears to have been less motivated by a sense of discrimination on the part of the city's relief stations than by a desire to address some of the particular concerns of the Jewish community, such as dietary restrictions and language barriers. "Because of the fact that many of the Jewish families have not a good speaking knowledge of the English language, the Jewish people thought it best to take care of these unfortunates with the aid of those who can

¹¹⁷ The *Omaha Bee*, "Mass Meeting Call By Jewish Charities," March 25, 1913. The original source uses the word "church," which is odd and unexplained.

¹¹⁸ The *Omaha Bee*, "Work at Relief Stations," March 28, 1913.

communicate easily with them," a second announcement of the Jewish relief station read.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, the Jewish Relief Committee (JRC) established a unique position, one of independence but also selective cooperation. Instead of the fifty families the committee originally anticipated helping, the committee's final report tallied nearly 150 cases of Jewish families affected by the tornado. Although 25 of these cases required no aid, the rest of the "co-religionists who needed relief" sought everything from food, clothing, and shelter, to monetary aid "to relieve financial distress and (prevent) prolonged poverty."¹²⁰ At the meeting advertised in the *Bee*, the JRC found that "the expressed sense of the assembly" was "that the Committee elected cooperate with the Citizens' Relief Committee, which was organized for the same purpose."¹²¹ This, apparently, came to pass, and the JRC summarized the cooperation with the CRC accordingly:

In a few cases, because of the insufficiency of our funds, the sufferers did not receive adequate relief from our Committee and in these cases the Citizens' Relief Committee, upon our recommendations, furnished relief in proper measure. This is an indication that the Citizens' Relief Committee recognized our Committee as one co-operating with it and that the Citizens' Relief Committee valued the work we were doing.¹²²

The JRC's observation that the CRC valued their work and accepted their recommendations for aid without question is significant. First, it shows that though the Jewish community in Omaha was relatively small and a religious

¹¹⁹ *The Omaha Bee*, "Jewish Relief Quarters." March 29, 1913.

¹²⁰ Jewish Relief Committee Report, p. 1.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

minority, their access to city relief resources remained readily available. In part, this willingness to assist the JRC without much apparent question might have stemmed from the fact that proportionally, the assistance required of the CRC was relatively small, since the JRC covered most of the cases themselves. But of larger import was the reality that many of Omaha's most prominent businessmen and community leaders were Jewish, including the Rosewater family (the owners and editors of *The Omaha Bee*), long-time city councilman and one-time interim mayor Harry B. Zimman (the chairman of the JRC), and the Brandeis family, owners of Omaha's finest department store.¹²³ Given the economic and social stature of many Omaha Jews—several of whom, like C.C. Rosewater and George Brandeis, belonged to the CRC—the Jewish community had ample influence to ensure that their community received the assistance it required, and likely could have achieved that result even if they had opted not to form the JRC. Economic and political power granted a small community access to resources in ways other minority communities could not replicate.

The second significant feature of the JRC's statement of cooperation with the CRC is its reference to the work done and recommendations given. Like the CRC, the JRC committed itself to thoroughly investigating the claims made upon it. "A large corps of assistants are working with Mr. Ravitz (a JRC committee member) and personal investigations are being made of the

¹²³ The second Brandeis son, Emil, was one of the first-class passengers who perished on the Titanic almost a year before the tornado struck Omaha.

needy," reported the *Bee*.¹²⁴ As in professional social work and the CRC-sponsored investigations, the JRC researchers sought confirmation of the losses for which recompense was sought. However, they expressed another fear: that some victims might be too proud to seek "charity," even if it was needed and "deserved." The JRC sought to minimize the chances of this happening, admitting that, "many sensitive Jewish people have shown a reluctance to ask assistance" but assuring readers that "these will be brought out and provided for in every way."¹²⁵ Curiously, the two most-cited fears regarding aid relief formed a paradox: on the one hand, anxiety regarding the potential for "defrauding" or wrongfully taking aid where none was needed; and on the other, concern that those in need might not apply out of pride and therefore continue to struggle themselves or inflict suffering on their families.

Although fraud fears occupied ample space in the committee's minds, the evidence that fraud occurred on a large scale is scant. Only two cases in the Police Court Dockets and Jail Registers for Douglas County in March and April 1913 mention such nefarious activity. On March 26, 1913, Guy Hoig, a window trimmer, was arrested and charged with "vagrancy & soliciting for cyclone victims."¹²⁶ He was sentenced to 45 days in prison. The second case occurred or was uncovered some weeks after the tornado, on April 12, 1913. Frank Wilson was charged with "defrauding relief committee" and sentenced to pay a fine of \$50, a decision that he appealed. Perhaps not every case of

¹²⁴ *The Omaha Bee*, "Jewish Relief Quarters." March 29, 1913.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Omaha, Douglas Co., Nebraska, Police Court Dockets, RG313, NSHS. Omaha, Douglas Co., Nebraska, Jail Registers, RG313, Roll 17.

fraud was prosecuted in the court of law, or perhaps some attempted fraud was uncovered before the CRC fell victim to a scam, but if Gladys Griffith's claims that the committee was being "exploited" to such a degree that it sent for backup social workers from Iowa is accurate, it appears that the problem was either overstated, or that enforcement and punishment for fraud offenders proved difficult to procure.

The men and women organizing Omaha's relief in the aftermath of the storm owed much to scientific charity, constructive philanthropy, and professional social work in their quest to achieve maximum efficiency in aiding the tornado victims. And yet, for all of the primacy of this goal, the language used to describe the relief effort, especially early on, evoked completely opposing ideas. Doors were "thrown open;" purse strings were loosened; instant heroes were made when they ran to dig a neighbor from rubble. Instead of the dispassionate language of the machinery of relief, descriptions instead gave the impression of spontaneity and impetuous generosity. The clear subtext of these gestures was an innate human goodness, or perhaps even an innate Omahan goodness that enabled the citizenry to respond in such a selfless way. But when it came to the official channels of relief, pride was not placed in spontaneous, selfless action, but instead in the extreme efficiency with which relief efforts could be undertaken. In imagining the legacy of Omaha's reaction to the storm, the CRC envisioned the fulfillment of Progressive visions: a motivated impulse to do good, carried out with the precision and efficacy of a charitable machine.

CHAPTER 3

“The City that Turned a Calamity into an Era of Prosperity”: Omaha and the Politics of Control

Omaha presents an unsightly condition, the result of the destructive tornado... We do not want Omaha to be known as the tornado wrecked city, but as Omaha the wonder of the west, destroyed in a night, rebuilt in a day—the city that turned a calamity into an era of prosperity.

--Mayor James Dahlman, April 2, 1913

...disasters are the real third rail of American politics: dangerous in the extreme, but also a source of great power for those who can tap into them.

--Michelle Landis Dauber, 2013

* * * * *

March 27, 1913

To Our Correspondents:

You doubtless have heard of the misfortune which came to this city on Sunday last, and probably the information which reached you Monday and Tuesday was of a most startling character. We have been advised from New York, Chicago, Colorado and San Francisco that the report was that the entire city was destroyed by either cyclone or fire. This, we are glad to say, is without foundation so far as the business portion and much the larger portion of the residence district is concerned. None of the business section was nearer than a mile and a half to the path of the cyclone and business has been uninterrupted. There were practically no buildings destroyed by fire.

The cyclone in a path about three blocks wide passed through a residential portion of the city, in which the houses were owned by occupants able to rebuild, repair or stand the loss if necessary, but a large part of the affected district was occupied by people either as renters or owners of small houses, who were illy calculated to bear the loss. It is in this section where the hardship really exists and where financial help is required.

The citizens of Omaha and also of the state have responded liberally both in cash and supplies, and committees of able men are in charge of the work, supplying the needy wherever need exists. It is believed that in a few days all needy people will be cared for and those who were injured during the storm will have such medical aid and nursing as will restore them to health.

People who are able are restoring their homes rapidly to their former condition, and others are preparing to rebuild. There are a goodly number who will have to be helped, but with the amount of tornado insurance which will be collected very material progress will be had in reconstructing the destroyed houses within the next ninety days. It is our belief that in one year from today the portion of the city that was destroyed on Sunday last will be a much better part of the city than it was heretofore.

Very truly yours,
OMAHA NATIONAL BANK,
J. H. Millard, President.¹²⁷

* * * * *

There was a big problem with the way things were being handled in post-tornado Omaha, J. H. Millard felt. And he, Millard thought, was the type of man who knew how things *should* be handled. One of the most powerful and prominent men in the city, Millard was already an elderly man, just shy of his 77th birthday, when the Easter storm struck. But those 76 years, the majority of which had been spent in, and devoted to Omaha, gave him an unusual grasp of the national implications that such a calamity might have for a burgeoning, non-coastal metropolis, and the potential consequences caused him grave concern.

¹²⁷ J. H. Millard Letters with the Red Cross, National Archives, College Park MD, Red Cross Central File, RG 200 National Archives Gift Collection, Records of the American National Red Cross 1881-1916, Box. No. 57, Folder 843 NEBRASKA, Omaha Tornado 3/23/1913.

Mostly bald with a neat white mustache and beard with a confident gaze under massive eyebrows, Joseph Hopkins Millard looked every inch the banking president, Union Pacific director, and former U.S. Senator that he was. Millard's mansion was mostly untouched by the storm, as was his current main business interest, the Omaha National Bank. His greatest personal interests secure, Millard turned his considerable energy and influence to managing the storm's aftermath. He was not on any of the official relief committees in the city, yet that dampened not his resolve to be involved in controlling the outcomes wrought by the storm. First, he determined that he would craft the story of the storm sent to influential men across the United States, an account designed to limit fears and soothe business contacts. Second, he involved himself in a testy exchange with the Red Cross about what he perceived to be their unsatisfactory response to the Omaha storm. Millard's letters, combined with the actions of the Commercial Club, reveal the complicated motives of Omaha's economic elite as they strove to assert power and control in a situation wildly in flux. Primary areas of concern included the account of the storm publicized outside of the state of Nebraska, the ramifications attached to various types of financial disaster relief, and the movement and behavior of Omaha citizens following the tornado. Each of these areas, they believed, might make or break their beloved city and ruin its—and their own—chances for prosperity and prominence.

* * * * *

On March 27, four days after the tornado swept through Omaha, with the immediate work of relief underway in the hands of the Citizens' Relief Committee (CRC) and the Executive Relief Committee, J. H. Millard and other prominent Omaha men turned their attention to the alarming reports trickling in from contacts in other parts of the country. The general rumor, their contacts told them, was that the tornado had made Omaha a complete wreck—homes, businesses, and transportation systems completely destroyed, either from wind or fire. Such destruction was far from the reality, with much of the city untouched by the storm, including the business district, and rain squelching the subsequent fires consequently causing relatively little fire damage. Yet rumor outstripped facts, and gave rise to the terrible foreboding that to the rest of the country, Omaha now constituted little more than a desolate patch of wreckage smoldering on the Great Plains. "We have been advised from New York, Chicago, Colorado and San Francisco that the report was that the entire city was destroyed by either cyclone or fire," Millard recounted in the report he carefully prepared for circulation among his numerous banking contacts across the country. "This, we are glad to say, is without foundation so far as the business portion and much the larger portion of the residence district is concerned," he elaborated.¹²⁸ Millard chose his words carefully, he explained to his friend in Washington D.C., fellow U.S. Senator and fellow banker, Nathan Bay Scott, in order to alleviate investment fears by Omaha business partners elsewhere in the country. "The circular which I had prepared and sent out was of course, conservative, intended to be

¹²⁸ Ibid.

so as it was given out from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast that the entire town of Omaha was wiped out," Millard wrote to Scott two weeks after the storm. "Had that been true," he elaborated further, "it would have taken what little we all possess. Happily, that was not the fact and I thought it was proper to give our people to understand that we had something to go on for the future."¹²⁹ With the CRC dealing with the immediate needs of storm victims, Millard turned his attention toward salvaging Omaha's future.

Others shared Millard's fear of damaging, exaggerated accounts of the storm. The Commercial Club of Omaha noted that the departure from reality must have been significant, "judging from the haste with which several businessmen returned to the city, expecting to find it in ruins. From a thousand to twelve hundred were reported killed, the city a raging furnace, with no water and the business portion wrecked."¹³⁰ "Dynamiting of Big Business Blocks Was One of the Cries of the Chicago Newsboys," the *Omaha Daily News* sourly reported.¹³¹ Rumor indeed outstripped fact in many newspapers far from Omaha. The *Evening News* of San Jose, California bemoaned the "several hundred dead" from the tornado, ruminating that "the city of Omaha in flames...is the appalling result of the worst tornado in history that swept through the central and middle western states

¹²⁹ J.H. Millard Letters, April 7, 1913. Millard to Nathan Bay Scott.

¹³⁰ "Misrepresentation Abroad," *Journal of the Omaha Commercial Club*, Vol. 1, No. 40, March 29, 1913.

¹³¹ "Surprised to Find Any of Omaha Left," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 2.

yesterday...in a few minutes the whole wrecked area was in flames."¹³² The *Idaho Daily Statesman* imparted to readers the report that "half of the city of Omaha was swept" and that "great alarm is felt here because of a dispatch that the mayor of Omaha has asked for state troops to prevent looting."¹³³ The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* gave its readers the same report.¹³⁴ In Portland, Oregon, the *Morning Oregonian* made a strong case for the most dramatic headline about the storm, plastering its front page with the news "CYCLONE KILLS 1000 IN OMAHA; CITY ON FIRE." The article underneath noted that the report was "unconfirmed" and credited to the Western Union Telegraph Company's Chicago office, and cited Omaha's lack of ability to communicate with the outside world as reason to fear catastrophe.¹³⁵ The *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, in northeastern Pennsylvania reported that 200 were dead in Omaha alone, and painted a picture of crime-ridden pandemonium: "Looting has been going on all night, although no arrests have been made. Victims tell of robberies perpetrated while the panic continued after the storm subsided." Furthermore, the paper added, few in Omaha held tornado insurance, owing to a local hubris attributed to "the old Indian prophecy handed down for centuries that Omaha was immune from high winds." This folly was widespread, according to the *Times Leader*, which asserted that faith in the

¹³² "Forty Cities are Wrecked; Scenes are Appalling," *The Evening News*, Vol. 59, p. 1, San Jose, CA.

¹³³ "City of Omaha Devasted by Fierce Storm," *The Idaho Daily Statesman*, March 24, 1913, issue 207, p. 1, Boise, Idaho.

¹³⁴ "Whole Towns Wiped Out by Middle West Cyclones," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 24, 1913, issue 83, p. 1, Cleveland, Ohio.

¹³⁵ "Cyclone Kills 1000 in Omaha; City on Fire," *The Morning Oregonian*, March 24, 1913, vol. LIII, issue 16327, p. 1, Portland, Oregon.

“prophecy” was “the confident belief of every resident.”¹³⁶ Elsewhere on the East Coast, newspapers reiterated tales of thievery and ruin. “Thieves Follow in Wind’s Wake Getting Rich Loot from Ruined Homes and Business Places of City,” blared the *Trenton Evening Times*.¹³⁷

The Kansas City Star, much closer to Omaha, apparently privy to more accurate or more numerous reports, and benefitted by a later print time, presented a more tempered view of the damage to its readers, and even provided a rough, but generally accurate, map of the storm’s path on its front page. The *Star* announced a death toll of 100, conservative, but within one or two dozen of the actual number of fatalities.¹³⁸ It elaborated on the fires in the wake of the storm, mentioning that they were “extinguished quickly and caused little damage.” The headline in the top left corner of the front page correctly assured readers “Store District Safe” and noted below that the tornado’s path was “almost entirely through the residence district.”¹³⁹

Nevertheless, in spite of accurate reporting in some areas, news of all-encompassing destruction spread quickly enough that Omaha’s business

¹³⁶ “Western Cities Swept by Storm; 300 Killed; Omaha Devastated,” *The Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, March 24, 1913, p. 1, Wilkes-Barre, PA.

¹³⁷ “Wilson Offers Country’s Help to Omaha, Stricken by Cyclone; Thousands Victims of Tempest,” *Trenton Evening Times*, p. 1, March 24, 1913, Trenton, NJ.

¹³⁸ While it is impossible to know the exact death toll, I have attempted to keep track of known fatalities during my years of working on this project. My tabulations include 124 fatalities in the city of Omaha, including two indirect victims—one man who caught pneumonia doing rescue work and succumbed to it a week later, and one man who fell off his roof while working to repair storm damage. Some papers’ higher death tolls might include fatalities from nearby Nebraska towns like Ralston and Yutan, which were also struck with deadly tornados on Easter Sunday. I have only kept track of those in Omaha.

¹³⁹ “Store District Safe,” *The Kansas City Star*, Vol. 33, Issue 188, p. 1, March 24, 1913, Kansas City, MO.

leaders feared the damage might already be done. Repair of physical storm damage seemed a straightforward task compared to the prospect of rehabilitating Omaha's good name and status as a rising star of commerce. In response, the Citizens' Relief Committee commissioned the Commercial Club officers with the task of crafting an "official statement" of the storm and current status of the city, "in order to inform the people of the country that Omaha was not wiped off the map last Sunday evening and to offset the exaggerated and sensational stories of the tornado appearing in the foreign press."¹⁴⁰ A meeting of the Commercial Club Executive committee convened just after noon on March 25, and "after considerable discussion as to whether or not the catastrophe had been misrepresented in news reports that had been sent to the outside world," the group decided it was "proper" to issue a statement with the "true condition of affairs." The estimate of losses would be "five million dollars and no more."¹⁴¹ Presumably to lend credibility to this version of events, the group decided that the statement should "mention the fact that the figures were unanimously approved at a well attended meeting of the executive and public affairs committees of the business men of Omaha."¹⁴²

The "authentic statement" crafted by the club officers stated its intention to "allay apprehension" of Omaha residents' loved ones and "put before the country the actual facts," rather than the "meager reports that went out through various channels." The veracity and good intentions of their

¹⁴⁰ *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, March 29, 1913, Vol. 1, No. 40, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Later estimates of storm damage, such as those published in the booklets about the tornado published shortly after the storm, estimated the damage at well over \$8 million.

¹⁴² "Minutes of Committees," Omaha Commercial Club, March 25, 1913.

report asserted, the officers wasted no time in assuming their right to lead the city through the crisis. The statement warmly commended the telegrams of sympathy and offers of aid sent to the mayor and Commercial Club, and claimed that all such communications were gratefully acknowledged. Furthermore, each reply promised that the appreciative business community, “believed Omaha can take care of the situation, for the present at least.” Property loss, the club explained, would not exceed \$5,000,000—a number the businessmen felt they could meet.¹⁴³

In the paragraphs following this rather stunning decision to refuse outside aid, the statement’s authors reported numbers and details. The storm had struck wealthy, “comfortable,” and “poorer” classes of Omaha residents. Fire, though it had indeed occurred in the wake of the storm, by no means engulfed the city, with the twenty instances not extinguished by ensuing rain put out by the fire department in a matter of hours. The club’s officers offered generous praise for Mayor James Dahlman, the federal troops from Fort Omaha and the militia, and Nebraska governor John Morehead. But they lavished the most accolades on “the leading citizens” who “assembled (Monday) to take immediate steps for the relief of those in need of financial or other help.” The rest of the statement praised an elaborate and well-organized relief apparatus put into place by these leading citizens, and included a litany of the era’s most-prized business buzzwords. The affected area of the city was divided into districts, and an “absolute census” of “the entire situation” was completed within twenty-four hours. The findings were indexed on cards

¹⁴³ *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, March 29, 1913, Vol. 1, No. 40, p. 3.

listing “name, location, condition of house, names of occupants, their injuries, financial condition, where they are being sheltered, etc.” (Figure 1).

Distribution of food and clothing proceeded “in a systematic way,” and each of the six districts was under the direction “of a prominent business man right on the ground.” The wholesalers, retailers, and other “leading men” of Omaha’s business elite likely embraced the era’s preoccupation with scientific management and efficiency in their work life, and it is no surprise that the highest praise the Commercial Club’s officers could offer was of the triumph of systemized cataloguing and controlling of the storm’s victims.

NAME <i>Nathan Kinsky</i> Owner or Renter		Dist. No. <i>17</i>
LOCATION (Street and No.) <i>2308 N. 24th Bakery</i>		
Condition of House <i>Complete ruin</i>		
Names of Occupants		State Kind, if any, Injuries
<i>Above with wife +</i>		<i>6 dead removed</i>
<i>5 children and an employe</i>		<i>4 children.</i>
<i>named Delora Wertzgel</i>		<i>Kinsky + Wertzgel</i>
		<i>working in ruins</i>
NEEDS (Most urgent, etc.): State if well off, medium or needy.		
What shelter, and where <i>Completely Ruined</i>		
Name of Friends <i>J. Kohn</i>		
Street Address <i>2232 Seward</i>		
Recommendations		
INSTRUCTIONS: Fill out one card for each family where there are a number of families in flats or tenements.		

Figure 1

But the club’s officers saved their main point of emphasis for the end of the official statement. “The Commercial Club desires to make it known that

the path of the tornado was through the residential district only and affected no business institution whatever; that there is no impairment of Omaha's business or its finances." All damage would be rebuilt, headed by a finance committee comprised of Commercial Club members.

Reading this "authentic" account, the foremost concerns of the authors appear to be not solely allaying fears of personally interested parties, but demonstrating their associates' control of the situation, and by extension, their trustworthiness as the "leading men" and "business men" of Omaha. This statement was less about what had passed and Omaha's present, partially devastated state than it was about the city's future following a potentially calamitous event. Relief of victims needed to happen and, according to the businessmen, was proceeding with speed, efficiency, and effectiveness. That an Iowa social worker disagreed with this assessment and remarked that the relief apparatus was "feeble and inadequate," that the businessmen were "being exploited" and knew it, sending for herself and two colleagues to aid them in distributing relief, mattered little.¹⁴⁴ The primary purpose of the official account was to project an air of control. This is not to say that the authors lied outright to the recipients of their account—in spite of problems and difficulties inherent in responding to a sudden disaster, post-storm Omaha did not devolve into a mismanaged, chaotic mess, and the district relief stations and attempts to systematize relief likely proved more useful than not. But it is easy to imagine some exaggeration (could a complete census

¹⁴⁴ Gladys Wells Griffith, *Gladys Wells Griffith Papers, circa 1950-1963.*, 1950.

of such a large area really be completed and compiled within twenty-four hours?) and carefully crafted emphasis on the positive.

Why this emphasis on control and competence? In part, simple self-flattery may have motivated the account—most of the leadership of the Citizens' Relief Committee and Executive Relief Committee were Commercial Club members, so praising the relief work reflected well on the whole, and there was nothing to gain by criticizing them to those outside the city. The self-interest extended to the privilege of naming a group including themselves “leading men of the city”—if the relief effort floundered, assuming they held rightful leadership of city matters made such a supposition open to criticism and derision. But the biggest reason for this account was more than pride or self-preservation—it was business.

Throughout the nineteenth century, railroads revolutionized commerce in the United States, transforming subsistence and local economies into national and global ones. Few places benefited from this transition more than Omaha—in fact, the city would likely not have existed, and certainly would not have prospered without the railroad and the resulting expansion of markets. Though white settlement in the area began officially in 1846 when migrating Mormons en route to Utah set up winter quarters on the bluffs on the east bank of the Missouri River, growth of the city did not begin in earnest until it secured the terminus of the Trans-continental railroad and saw construction begin in 1866.¹⁴⁵ Securing the eastern terminus of the Union

¹⁴⁵ Settlement in the area of course pre-dated the Mormons. The area was home to a few native tribes, notably the Otoes and the Omahas. The Mormons

Pacific's portion of the railway over competitors like Sioux City, Iowa; Kansas City; and Saint Joseph, Missouri; was achieved through a powerful cocktail of boosterism, political machinations, and the business interests of influential men; but the triumph seemed to cement Omaha's importance as a western city, the "Gate to the West."¹⁴⁶ Visionaries in the city, like Joseph Millard, saw the opportunities presented by such a strategic location halfway between the East Coast and the West, and dared to hope that Omaha might someday become the "second city to the Second City"—behind only Chicago in prestige and importance in America's inland cities. An important step towards this goal occurred in 1898, when the city secured the Trans-Mississippi and International Exhibition, an event that hosted President McKinley and 2.6 million other visitors.¹⁴⁷ Together they celebrated "the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon pioneers, first over the aborigines, and second over the forces of

reached an agreement with both of these tribes to camp on their lands for up to two years, and the Mormons had left the west bank of the river by 1848. Increasing pressure on the tribes in the early 1850s resulted in the surrender of their lands in March, 1854, and the Indian peoples' removal to reservations: the Otoes to a reservation on the Kansas-Nebraska border, and the Omahas to one in northeastern Nebraska. Further details surrounding these interactions can be found in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Upstream Metropolis: An Urban Biography of Omaha and Council Bluffs*, Larsen et. al, 2007.

¹⁴⁶ The Union Pacific branch connected with the Central Pacific line in western Utah on May 10, 1869, linking Omaha directly to Sacramento. Council Bluffs, Iowa, directly across the river from Omaha, boasted a number of railroad connections and from there, connected Omaha to nearly every major city in the East.

¹⁴⁷ *Upstream Metropolis*, 131.

nature,” and for that moment, in Omaha’s white city, modeled carefully after Chicago’s five years earlier, Omaha’s future prominence appeared certain.¹⁴⁸

Economically, the city blossomed in the four decades after the completion of the railroad. In the early years, an Omaha newspaper editor accused local businessmen of sitting around “enveloped in the illusive but enchanting cloud land, where magic air castles are built and precious gifts abound,” yet sufficient enterprise carried on and by 1913 the business community was vibrant and active.¹⁴⁹ A number of advantages worked in the young city’s favor: its position on the transcontinental railroad secured connection to nearly every market or major city and allowed it to develop into a transportation and shipping hub; Nebraska and the rest of the Great Plains were being rapidly settled and farmed, resulting in a robust agricultural hinterland; the cattle grazing in the western plains and Rocky Mountain region were similarly situated to feed into Omaha; and its location in the very middle of the country gave it potential as an entry point to the West from the East. Stockyards were the first great industry concentrated in Omaha, and jobbers (wholesalers) soon comprised the second, an industry concentrated in an impressive seven-by-three block area soon known as “Jobbers Canyon.”¹⁵⁰ Though it was vulnerable to depressions and repeated drought conditions that

¹⁴⁸ Qtd. in *Upstream Metropolis*, 133. No further note is made of the original source, only that it was written by Albert Shaw in an 1898 article in a national magazine.

¹⁴⁹ *Omaha Bee*, May 8, 1874. Qtd. *Upstream Metropolis*, p. 107.

¹⁵⁰ Twenty four buildings comprising the bulk of the district were placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The buildings fell into disrepair, and in spite of a lawsuit and public controversy, they were torn down in 1989 by ConAgra, and the company’s new campus replaced them. (See the Nebraska History article on this)

threatened its agriculture-related industries and its farm-based hinterlands, the overall growth of the city was impressive.

Omaha, quite literally the right place at the right time, represented the modern American city. Unlike the metropolises of the East Coast, established before the United States and secured in commercial prominence through ocean access and international trade, Omaha was as far from an ocean as one could get. It owed its existence to railroads and the persistent westward encroachment of white settlers throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Although Omaha boasted its “established” families, there did not exist anything close to the generations of “old money” and socially prominent families that populated the elite of East Coast cities. Joseph Millard was born in Ontario, the son of farmers who later moved to Iowa.¹⁵¹ Edward Rosewater, patriarch of the clan who owned and edited the *Omaha Bee*, was born in Bohemia before immigrating first to Ohio, and then westward to Omaha. Jonas Brandeis, who with his sons created one of the premier department stores of the Midwest, was, like Rosewater, a Czech Jew who saw opportunities in Omaha. A product of post-civil war Americans’ mobility within their own country, as well as an influx of immigrants increasingly ready to move to the American west, most Omahans readily identified themselves with America’s Great West, as well as with the self-flattering mythology surrounding the region.

The railroad connection meant that Omaha’s first boom came as a railroad worker and supply camp, and with that, attendant unsavory

¹⁵¹ *Joseph Hopkins Millard* Harl Dahlstrom. VHS. UNO.

connotations. A Kansas City paper labeled it “a very cesspool of iniquity.”¹⁵² In 1869, *Harper’s Magazine* printed a “disgustful poesy” about the “objectionable region” featuring several colorful stanzas, including:

Hast ever been in Omaha?...
Where whiskey shops the livelong night
Are vending out their poison juice;
Where men are often *very* tight
And women deemed a trifle loose?
Where taverns have an anxious guest
For every corner, shelf and crack;
With half the people going west,
And *all* the others going back?...
And if it lies upon your way,
For God’s sake, reader, *go around it!*¹⁵³

The city indeed fostered an impressive proliferation of saloons and brothels, and thus began a “wide-open” reputation that remained even after “legitimate business” dominated the city landscape. Whether Omaha was actually the Gomorrah of the Missouri or whether it fell victim to prevailing ideas of what it meant to be a “Western city” at that time, there is evidence that its vice activities were of some real note. In 1895, the Nebraska State Fair Board threatened to move the fair to Lincoln because the atmosphere in Omaha was deemed too raucous for families. “Provide entertainment other than saloons, gambling houses and honkeytonks for the 1895 fair or lose it to a competitively alert Lincoln,” the board demanded.¹⁵⁴ Although sixty “of the most prominent businessmen” formed a committee and a plan for bringing

¹⁵² Orville D. Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison’s Omaha, 1900-1933* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 37.

¹⁵³ *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, September 1869, p. 623 Accessed through hathitrust.org. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101064075631>

¹⁵⁴ Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben Foundation website. www.aksarben.org/history2

Mardi Gras floats from New Orleans to Omaha as part of the entertainment, the fair soon moved to Lincoln anyway—perhaps Mardi Gras was not the spirit of “family entertainment” the board sought.¹⁵⁵

By 1913, Omaha had not completely cleaned up its act. Mayor James Dahlman earned the sobriquet “the wettest mayor in America” for his leniency towards and personal enjoyment of the city’s saloons. Omaha’s police court dockets reveal a steady stream of arrests for drunkenness or infractions regarding prostitution. However, though the activities themselves remained, their popular associations changed. Increasingly, such vices were viewed as characteristic of urban living, rather than as an outgrowth of a wild and untamed western character. Instead, the West underwent a change in perception. The settlement of the western United States transformed the country, quickly and completely. Native Americans, fighting to maintain autonomy and livelihoods in the face of an onslaught of land-hungry settlers, found themselves on the wrong side of United States’ treaties that ultimately relegated them to reservations. New settlers reveled in the availability of land and carved the undulating, grassy plains into farms and platted towns and cities. By 1890, census data revealed that white settlement so suffused the West that the frontier was declared “closed.” Almost immediately, a romanticized version of the “Wild West” gained popularity, promoted by shows like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, a circus of buffalo, cowboys, natives, and gun shows that was founded in western Nebraska. The ascendancy of

¹⁵⁵ Some of the businessmen were undoubtedly members of the Commercial Club, which began in 1893.

Theodore Roosevelt and his own efforts towards self-mythologizing his time in the western U.S. further added to the western mystique. *Harper's* censure of Omaha's vile western character gave way to a romanticized, sanitized and altogether less wild conception of the West.

At the same time the West's wild side was being tamed in the American imagination, the region was also imbued with a characteristic born of conflicting feelings about the country's rapidly corporatizing culture. The region's explosive growth offered myriad possibilities and opportunities for enterprising individuals, though not without substantial risk, since the booming economy resulted in many busts and failures, given the repeated depressions the United States cycled through in the late nineteenth century. Especially appealing to young men like Joseph Millard, to whom the prospect of personal gain outweighed the risk, would-be businessmen flocked to the West. The success stories among them became a new American icon, the self-made man, the fulfillment of what America supposedly offered those willing to work hard.

Millard was emblematic of this turn-of-the-century hero. After clerking in a store as a teen in eastern Iowa, he joined an older partner moving west to open a land office in 1856, to take advantage of the newly sanctioned settlement of Nebraska Territory. By 1860, the land office turned into a banking firm, and four years later, a restless Millard moved even further west, to Montana, to open a bank catering to the local mining industry. His foray to Montana was short lived, and two years later, he returned to Omaha, still little more than a muddy railroad town, and bought into the Omaha National Bank

founded by his brother, Ezra. Millard's subsequent career brought his wealth, political power, and stature in the community. Elected mayor of Omaha in 1872 and to the U.S. Senate in 1901, he also secured the directorship of the Union Pacific Railroad via appointment by President Ulysses S. Grant. He invested his money in other local business ventures, such as Omaha's street railway and the city's electric works, and an upscale hotel, making himself a very wealthy man.¹⁵⁶

If Joseph Millard was unique in the scope and stature of his success, stories like his became a part of the new mythology of the West. Gone were the cowboys and Indians and drunken brawls in saloons previously pictured as part and parcel of the American West. The new image of the West offered up the opportunistic, hard-working, self-made man, who built a prosperous life for himself while creating an active, necessary, and vibrant business community that hauled the West forward with the Eastern U.S. and contributed to that favorite hobby horse of the era, "American progress." One historian claims "the West saw itself not as a departure from the mainstream of European American civilization, but hopefully as the fulfillment of it."¹⁵⁷ The popular prints and paintings of the 1860s and 1870s depicting the United States' westward expansion such as Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* or John Gast's *American Progress*, foreshadowed the role the West would take in the United States' early twentieth century self-image.

¹⁵⁶ Joseph Hopkins Millard VHS, 1995, Harl Dahlstrom

¹⁵⁷ Harl Dahlstrom, *Westward the Empire: Omaha's World Fair of 1898*, DVD. 1998, UNO television.

The West was the final piece of the puzzle as the U.S. launched on a path toward a greater global presence.

Leutze and Gast painted this western transformation as an agricultural one, with farms popping up in the wake of the railroad in land newly vacated by fleeing Native Americans and bison. But if they had painted in the earliest years after the turn of the century, their depiction of encroaching American civilization across the nation's midsection might have more accurately depicted a suited man in a bowler hat outside of a towering brick bank or a cavernous dry goods warehouse, rather than a farmer cultivating his land. Agriculture continued to be a vital industry in the West and in Nebraska, and its importance enabled a number of financially important industries in the region. But increasingly, the business landscape of places like Omaha looked like, and was connected to, those on the East Coast, a development that the Omaha Commercial Club gloried in.

For all of the West's new cachet, Omaha's businessmen exhibited a near-constant anxiety about the perception of their city, especially by Easterners. Omaha, and other cities like it, lacked the "ancient" provenance of places like New York or Boston, and the boom-and-bust cycles of entire towns and industries in the late 1900s meant that they had far from proved their ability to flourish long-term. One embarrassment still within the memory of Omaha's Commercial Club members in 1913 concerned the Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898. The exposition ultimately was a huge success, but this was hardly a foregone conclusion when plans were first underway. The Commercial Club, one of the driving engines of planning and executing the

fair, failed to secure widespread foreign participation because of significant doubts about Omaha's capacity to host such an event.¹⁵⁸ Triumph did not erase the memory of the sting, as the *Omaha World-Herald* could not resist exulting "Who said Omaha could not 'swing' a great exposition?" after the fair's successful completion.¹⁵⁹ The uneasy suspicion that people in other parts of the country and world did not value Omaha or believe in its future as they did gave rise to an obsession with tracking Omaha's reputation in other cities and jealously defending its honor.

Nowhere is this fixation more evident than in the Commercial Club's journal, a weekly newsletter circulated among members beginning in 1912. The very first issue contains an example of this language, when, reporting on a car trip made by several club members and Omaha Mayor James Dahlman in support of road improvements in the region, the *Journal* happily reported that "the campaign has created much comment throughout the United States and clippings have been sent the club from newspapers throughout the east, in which the... campaign of the Commercial Club of Omaha was commended."¹⁶⁰ The next issue contained an admonishment to members about their obligations to the club, namely, that each should "write his manufacturing and jobbing friends and suggest to them Omaha's desirability from a manufacturing and distributing standpoint. In his travels, through the

¹⁵⁸ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 107.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁶⁰ "Omaha Goods Roads Boosters Busy" (sic) *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, June 29, 1912, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 3.

east particularly, he should be on the outlook for any desirable industry or mercantile concern that should have an Omaha branch or distributing agency."¹⁶¹ Investment in Omaha, the article continued, was the ultimate goal and a boon to every citizen of Omaha. No opportunity for displaying Omaha missed the notice of the *Journal*, which in the same issue informed its members of possible plans to create stationary urging tourists—"eastern people especially"—to plan a stop in Omaha on their way to the Pacific Coast Exposition in 1915.¹⁶² The preoccupation with outside perception escalated to near-paranoia a few weeks later, when an item titled "All Members Should Be Alert" admonished "Whether at home or abroad every member should be watchful to see wherein Omaha may be discriminated against, either in trade, mail, freight or passenger service, market or weather reports, or anything else. Anything found amiss should be reported."¹⁶³ Former president of the Commercial Club, J. H. Dumont, expounded on the club's importance to "increase the business and prestige of the city," and "protect it against unjust discrimination and unfair competition."¹⁶⁴ What sorts of nefarious activities he considered "unjust and unfair," he did not specify, but the club members evidently did not subscribe to the notion that "all press is good press."

¹⁶¹ "Members' Obligation," *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, July 6, 1912, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 5.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, "Omaha to Benefit by Expositions," p. 7.

¹⁶³ "All Members Should Be Alert," *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, July 27, 1912, Vol. , No. 5, p. 20.

¹⁶⁴ "Club Protects Against Unjust Discrimination," *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, August 3, 1912, Vol. 1, No. 6, p. 24.

One example of “unjust” activity might have been the issue of parcel postage up for debate in 1912. The *Journal* waded into the fray, aligning themselves firmly in opposition to eastern business interests:

The average western mind cannot conceive of eastern merchants and manufacturers being opposed to a parcels post...The establishment of a parcels post is like a great many other national and some international questions including the tariff—a local issue after all. New York merchants want a parcels post, but it must be framed to benefit them. They are opposed to all others. The merchants of the west see nothing but danger to them in any parcels post and are therefore consistently opposing them all. This club is so on record. The man who can frame a bill that will be acceptable to both the east and west has not yet been found at Washington.¹⁶⁵

This illustrates the occasionally dueling interests of the Omaha business community—for the most part, they eagerly sought investment and attention from businessmen on the East Coast and maintained existing networks. At the same time, they recognized that the demands of business in the western United States sometimes put them at odds with their potential investors and allies. Ambition and necessity created a balance between opposing eastern businessmen and actively courting their investment and partnership.

When the Easter tornado hit Omaha, in spite of the devastation and confusion, this commercially focused balancing act retained the attention and concern of Omaha’s business elite. Through their positions on the Citizens’ Relief Committee and the Executive Relief Committee, many of this class busied themselves with the relief administration activities publicized in the press. But both publicly and privately, many others spent their energy considering the possible business consequences of the storm and ways to

¹⁶⁵ *The Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, July 20, 1912, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 13.

ameliorate any negative effects. The first way, as already discussed, carefully constructed and controlled the narrative about the storm and its impact, and made reassuring statements like “the Commercial Club desires to make it known that the path of the tornado was through the residential district only and affected no business institution whatever; that there is no impairment of Omaha’s business or its finances.”¹⁶⁶ The other method evaluated potential sources of monetary relief for negative implications or consequences, and intervened as they deemed necessary.

In the weeks following the storm, individual donations came from all over the country. Printed in the city’s papers, whether small amounts or large, the running total for storm relief was very public. Some donations came from cities and towns, and commercial, church, and ethnic organizations also sent in contributions. Letters or telegrams from other municipalities mostly wished Omaha well and made general offers of aid though a few notes, like those from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and San Francisco, invoked a sense of reciprocity for financial aid proffered by Omaha during those cities’ calamities in previous decades.

Among the pile of telegrams on Mayor James Dahlman’s desk was one from President Woodrow Wilson. It was brief, and in substance no different from many of the others: “I am deeply distressed at news received from Nebraska. Can we help in any way?” it read.¹⁶⁷ Wilson’s offer was open-ended, and he put the next step firmly within Dahlman’s control. The

¹⁶⁶ *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, March 29, 1913, Vol. 1, No. 40, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, “Wilson Makes Offer of Aid to Omaha,” March 25, 1913.

telegram was widely reprinted in the city's newspapers—and so was

Dahlman's response:

We deeply appreciate your offer of aid, but I believe we can handle the situation. Our people are responding nobly. Major Hartmann of Fort Omaha and his men came to our aid promptly and are doing great work. The people of Omaha are deeply grateful for your kind message of sympathy.

Dahlman's refusal of Wilson's offer of aid was not an independent decision.

Several reports of Dahlman's response mention a meeting with the Commercial Club of Omaha, where he was advised to turn down the offer of aid from Wilson for the benefit of Omaha's business interests.

The Executive Committee minutes of the Commercial Club reveal that the club discussed the matter of "outside funding" explicitly, decided that outside funding should be refused, and that the reason for this stance was out of concern for Omaha's wider reputation in the national business world. "It was... decided that for the present at least Omaha business men take care of the (relief) situation and that communications offering assistance should be answered, expressing appreciation for the offer of assistance, but stating that for the present at least it would not be needed," the minutes summarized. "This was after Mr. Mohler and Mr. Kelly and others had stated that Omaha's credit at the present time is at stake; that it is A-I and if she is able herself to take care of the situation it will more firmly establish the city in the business world." Consequently, federal aid was refused, Omaha appeared

strong, and, the businessmen hoped, business might quickly resume as usual.¹⁶⁸

The skittishness concerning outside, particularly federal, aid was not a foregone conclusion. As Michelle Landis Dauber has documented, federal relief funding was far from unknown before the Great Depression, in disaster both man-made and nature-made. However, by the twentieth century, conventional wisdom held a distinction between “man-made disasters” (such as the massive economic downturn of the 1930s) and “acts of Nature” (like tornados or earthquakes), the latter usually being worthy of government relief, and the former requiring a tougher sell.¹⁶⁹ But even though natural disaster relief escaped much of the anxiety about constitutionality espoused by opponents of federal social programs, such aid was not without ideological baggage. Money from Washington still reeked too much of charity, albeit on an extremely grand scale. For those among the economic elite or with aspirations to it, there was nothing wrong with *giving* to charity, nor anything wrong with *other* people receiving charity—but one did not want to *personally* be on the receiving end of such a “gift.” There were too many negative implications about laziness, a lack of independence, and pity for any self-respecting person to resort to charity in anything but the most dire of circumstances. For Omaha leaders, the situation was not yet dire enough to

¹⁶⁸ Commercial Club Minutes.

¹⁶⁹ Michele Landis Dauber, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

justify risking bringing these negative associations down on their city through the acceptance of federal “charity.”

Contemporary observers suspected that members of the Commercial Club worried that the “negative” publicity associated with accepting federal aid would damage Omaha’s credit and ability to attract business and investment from other American cities. The author of a commemorative volume of the disaster published by the *Omaha Daily News* included a summary of a meeting of the Real Estate Exchange (another businessmen’s association) to illustrate this suspicion:

Criticism of the business interests that caused reports to go to the world that Omaha was financially able to take care of itself in the storm crisis was made...by W.H. Green. He charged that partly selfish motives at least, prompted those responsible for the reports that the city didn’t need money. ‘What right has any man, though he be rich, to say whether a poor man shall accept money from another city rather than go into debt fro a new home or start to paying rent again...?’” Another prominent business man—not a member of the Commercial Club—said: ‘Ask the man who lost everything if he would be too proud to accept money from another city and see what he will say.’¹⁷⁰

Green and his associates’ suspicions were accurate. “The people of Omaha” might indeed have been grateful for Wilson’s sympathy, but as it quickly became apparent, they would have been even more grateful had they received some of the proffered aid. Victims and other observers criticized Dahlman’s decision in the press. “Why should Omaha be too proud to accept outside aid for its tornado sufferers?” wrote Anna Doran to the *Daily News*. “I

¹⁷⁰ Charles B. Driscoll (for the *Omaha Daily News*), *Complete Story of Omaha’s Disastrous Tornado* (Omaha: Mogy Publishing Company, 1913). Green “of Creighton” and “democratic candidate for lieutenant governor” spoke at the rally (described in Chapter One) of William Jennings Bryan supporters headed to New York to meet Bryan after a year-long tour. *The Omaha Morning World-Herald*, 8/25/1906 p. 1.

consider it an outrage for the Commercial club to deliberately refuse those kind offers of aid from other cities, when it must have been known the city could never raise enough money to handle the situation." She finished with a personal excoriation: "I escaped the storm and am caring for a family of four people. They may stay with me as long as necessary. I lost dear friends in the tornado and would like to see these business men forget their self-interests in the relief work."¹⁷¹ Doran was not alone in her indignation. One writer penned a particularly acerbic criticism the aid refusal:

Scarcely had the storm cloud lifted when from over all the land
flashed the offers of assistance, and the brothers friendly hand
was outstretched to help the needy.
Early on that mourning day
Came the word from Woodrow Wilson: 'Can We Help in Any
Way?'
Gravely our commercial captains, rising from a good night's
sleep,
Talked it over in the club rooms, sat in consultation deep.
Seized a pencil then our mayor, and this courtly answer made:
'Thank you, Mr. Woodrow Wilson, but our people need no aid.'
Yesterday I saw a widow, white her hair and bent her form,
Gazing on the desolation wrought by Easter Sunday's storm.
And she moaned, 'What's left to live for? Where the rest for
which I aimed?
Now to dig I am not able, and to beg I am ashamed!
Guardians of a stricken city, did you think of this that day,
When you spoke for the afflicted, turned the proffered aid away?

A few more lines elaborated further tales of distress and castigated the mayor and Commercial Club for speaking for the "poor workman," "homeless thousands," and "hungry hundreds." Atop the carefully composed criticism, titled "For Frantic Boast and Foolish Word" an illustration showed the author's point: on the left, a pair of hands outstretched holding a bag stuffed

¹⁷¹ "More Comment on Storm Situation," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 4, 1913, p. 4.

full of money; on the right, a well-dressed man stood in front of two anguished souls, holding out his hand to halt the proffered money.¹⁷²

The frustration with the aid refusal rankled many. It was easy enough, they believed, for those who had lost nothing or who had resources to rebuild to take this self-righteous stand in the name of self-reliance. But not everyone had that luxury, in fact, the majority of the victims did not. The decision reeked of pride and poor planning. Abe Levine, a furniture salesman, asked a simple question in his letter to the editor: "Will those who say Omaha can be rebuilt without any outside assistance tell us how?"¹⁷³ No one from the Commercial Club deigned to answer Abe Levine. But after speaking at the Real Estate Exchange meeting, William Green and other critics of Dahlman's refusal took matters into their own hands. On April 2, representatives of various "improvement clubs" met to form their own resolution on the matter and protest the commercial interests. The *Bee* reported that Green was "particularly severe" in his criticism of the Commercial Club for "the action taken in regard to soliciting relief from outside the city."¹⁷⁴ Others echoed Green's concerns and the group passed a resolution requesting \$2,000,000 of federal aid, specifically for the relief of "small home owners." The resolution noted that the damage was "far in excess of the estimate and opinion entertained for the first few days," and that though Omahans had indeed responded "liberally and willingly," they could not meet the burden on their

¹⁷² "For Frantic Boast and Foolish Word," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 5, 1913, p. 2.

¹⁷³ "No Charity, But Help," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 5, 1913, p. 4.

¹⁷⁴ *The Omaha Bee*, "New Homes to Rise Where Wrecks (illegible) Path of the Storm," April 3, 1913.

own. "Believing that the government of the United States," the resolution continued, "in its stand and rank for charity, benevolence and Christian principles and readiness to relieve distress, stands ready and willing to aid in part to retrieve...the losses of its citizens through acts of God," this group of citizens sent their plea to their congressmen in Washington D.C.¹⁷⁵

The expressed belief by Green's group in the U.S. government's commitment to "charity" and "readiness to relieve distress" reflected an emerging attitude often ascribed to the people of the Progressive Era, but one that was far from universally held. A quarter century earlier, Grover Cleveland, the only Democratic president elected after the Civil War until Woodrow Wilson, vetoed a House bill proposing federal funding for seeds to be distributed to Texas farmers suffering from a prolonged drought. In his veto message, Cleveland acknowledged that "there seems to be no doubt that there has existed a condition calling for relief," and even expressed his belief that the measures of the proposed bill would end the Texas drought crisis. Nevertheless, Cleveland felt "obliged" to veto the plan to "indulge a benevolent and charitable sentiment through the appropriation of public funds" for the people of Texas. Such an action, Cleveland believed, not only stretched the provisions of the Constitution too far, but threatened to weaken "the sturdiness of our national character." Federal aid would encourage the "expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government," and the government should instead only undertake actions which would strengthen "the bonds of a common brotherhood." This meant that the plight of the Texas

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

farmers should be publicized, so that the charitable impulses of the American people might sacrifice for their needy, drought-stricken countrymen. Other farmers could “well bear the temporary deprivation” for themselves, and in helping the Texans, “would experience the satisfaction attending deeds of charity.” Leaving the good deeds to the general public, Cleveland concluded, “though the people support the Government the Government should not support the people.”¹⁷⁶

By 1913, Cleveland’s position showed some signs of disfavor. Wilson’s initiation of an offer of help alone marked a difference in attitude. When the same storm system that spawned the Easter tornado moved east and caused devastating flooding in Ohio, the state’s governor openly pleaded for federal assistance and a congressional measure directed funding toward the relief of the flooded area. The idea that the federal government should have no role in “supporting” its people did not hold universal sway—indeed, it is apparent not everyone agreed with Cleveland in 1887, since the Texas aid bill made it through the House of Representatives. But one part of Cleveland’s rationale still carried particular resonance with segments of American society, namely, that the acceptance of aid posed a particular threat to a locality’s collective character and that accepting aid came with the price of implied shame.

By mid-April, the business leaders either yielded to criticism or came to the conclusion that the Abe Levines of Omaha had a valid point. On April 12, nearly three weeks after the tornado, a massive meeting at City Hall resulted in a formal request for \$2 million in federal relief. This conclusion followed

¹⁷⁶ Grove Cleveland Veto Message, February 16, 1887.

two hours of debate about “whether or not the citizens of Omaha have a right to ask the federal government for aid,” and in the end, the *Daily News* reported, probably over-optimistically, that no one opposed the plan. The group decided that a committee of five men would be appointed to petition Congress, and if necessary, go to Washington to lobby in person. The speakers argued that “charity should give a man the right to the same standard of living he had before the storm, and that actual relief consists in restoring homes,” essentially stating that providing bread, soup, and a new coat was all well and good, but hardly a completion of the work of relief. One man argued that everyone who had ever bought a pound of sugar or cloth or “any other tariff-burdened necessity” was entitled to money from “the government coffers.” H. E. Johnson, the mayor of Dundee, a town adjacent to Omaha, pointed out that if the government were “in danger” it “would not hesitate to call on us to help,” and that disaster aid was just reciprocity.¹⁷⁷ William Green, still carrying the torch for this cause, flipped the argument of the business community on its head, claiming that money spent on restoration “all reverts back into the channels of business.” “It is the duty of business interests to get behind this movement to secure government aid,” railed Green. In the end, after weeks of public debate and sharp criticism, Green’s side carried the day, and Omaha became a federal aid recipient.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Johnson would get to see how right he was when the U.S. government enacted a draft for World War I four years later.

¹⁷⁸ “To Ask 2 Million of U.S. For Relief,” *The Omaha Daily News*, April 13, 1913, 1.

Aid from the state of Nebraska apparently carried less stigma than federal aid, since from the start, community leaders expressed willingness to accept state funds. T.J. Mahoney, a prominent Omaha lawyer and chairman of the Citizens' Relief Executive Committee, urged acceptance of state aid, decrying "false pride" and concluding, "if the state wants to help us, we should sincerely thank the legislature and the governor."¹⁷⁹ Governor John Morehead assured Mayor James Dahlman that he would request "sufficient funds" from the legislature to care for homeless tornado victims.¹⁸⁰ The use of city funds also drew no ire, apparently falling under the purview of "taking care of one's own." The city commissioners quickly approved a \$25,000 appropriation for storm victims, an amount matched by citizens attending the meeting—J.H. Millard donated \$2,500 on behalf of the Omaha National Bank, an amount exceeded only by several railroad companies, the Omaha streetcar company, and the gas company. The rest of the initial privately donated \$25,000 came from wealthy individuals and prominent Omaha businesses, like T.J. Mahoney's law firm, the *World-Herald*, and the Krug Brewing Company.

Underscoring the expectation and importance of local sources of aid, Doane Powell drew a cartoon for the *Omaha Daily Bee* which ran on the front page of the paper several days after the storm, emphasizing the community's responsibility to its own (Figure 2). In Powell's rendering, a stricken family of

¹⁷⁹ "Omahans Rally to Victims' Aid in One Impulse," *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 25, 1913, 1.

¹⁸⁰ The appropriation was to be used for homeless tornado victims elsewhere in the state, as well as in Omaha. The storm that spawned the Omaha tornado also contained tornados that hit several small Nebraska towns, causing property damage and death.

three huddled at the base of an enormous sign labeled at the top “Help For Tornado Victims,” while a man on a ladder wrote sources of expected aid. “Mr. Poor Man, Mr. Rich Man, City Council, Doctors, City Commissioners, Neighbors, Military Aid, Business Firms, School Board, and Miss School Teacher” formed the list in the left-hand column. Through this diverse list, the cartoon aimed to show that every Omahan was expected to do their part to help relieve the distress of the tornado’s victims. Facing the unfortunate family, Powell added a well-dressed man with a bulging pocketbook labeled “Mr. Everyman” and a woman with a basket laden with food labeled “Mrs. Everywoman.” Even children could be expected to give, suggested Powell—the lower left corner of the scene shows “Baby Everychild” offering her doll to her newly homeless counterpart.¹⁸¹ Given the very public (initial) decision by city leaders to “handle the situation” independently, garnering aid from every possible local channel was critical in salvaging Omaha’s reputation and its future opportunities. Powell’s illustration also reveals a very specific vision of appropriate relief: men would give money, women would give domestic comfort, and the children of Omaha would learn good values from the shining examples of their elders. With the exception of the inclusion of “military aid” on the list, the picture was one of intensely local and independent action, a vision thoroughly compatible with the growing American fascination with the self-made, ruggedly individualistic new West.

¹⁸¹ Doane Powell, “Room for Everybody,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 27, 1913, p. 1.

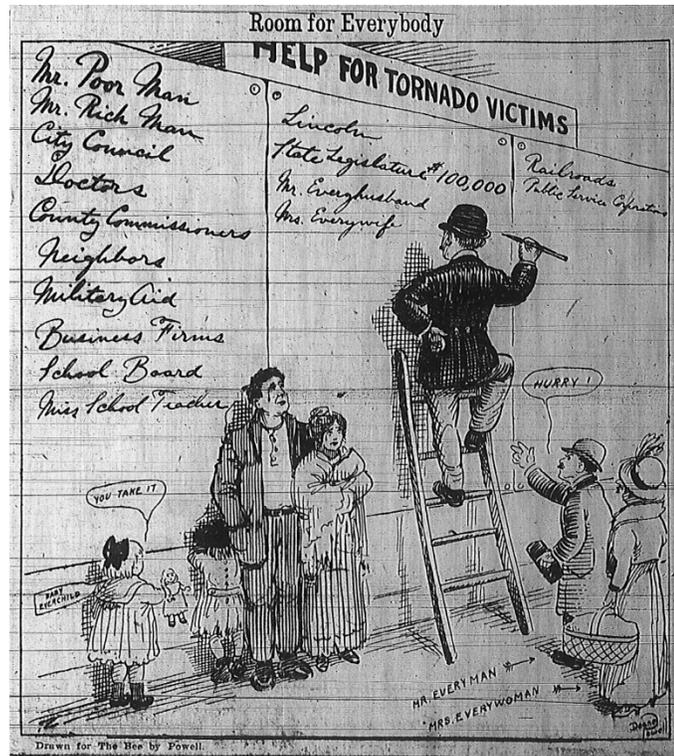


Figure 2

Given the unpredictability of federal disaster relief, which relied upon the prevailing political opinion about giving such aid, the ability and willingness of one's congressmen to make a compelling case for the aid, and the political party and politicians who happened to be in power in one's hour of need, many Americans sought to offset their risks in a variety of ways, most notably through some type of insurance. Insurance during this period took two main forms: that provided by fraternal organizations, and that provided by the rapidly expanding insurance business. With an unreliable state safety net, any number of disasters, from the personal to the large-scale, man-made or otherwise, might spell ruin and hardship.

Fraternal societies filled a pressing need for social welfare services not available through other channels. Government aid and organized charities

often provided scant assistance, and accepting such assistance carried a price of stigma. “In contrast to the hierarchical methods of public and private charity,” he explains, “fraternal aid rested on an ethical principle of reciprocity.”¹⁸² For individuals in a culture that valorized personal independence, fraternal societies offered a way around the specter of dependence—all contributed to the group’s funds that were used for relieving a member’s distress, and so a member receiving assistance need not feel ashamed for taking something he had not earned, which is how some felt about government assistance or charity. Pride remained intact, and the promise of a safety net reassured members. The most common fraternal benefit was life insurance, though in many instances, lodges or other local congregations of members assisted in non-lethal cases, such as illness, injury, or property loss. Many also served as a special part of a member’s funeral service, either performing rituals or acting as an honorary guard. Usually, members of similar backgrounds, either socio-economically or ethnically, made up the groups. Frequently, though not always, the groups had a social component as well, and many groups operated within a building or set of rooms dedicated to the group’s particular use. These spaces often boasted names designed to underscore the specialness of belonging to the group or a sense of community, and monikers like “lodges” or “castles” were common, no matter what the actual structure looked like.

¹⁸² David T Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3. This is an excellent and exhaustive overview of the ways in which these organizations functioned as a safety net for members.

Many tornado victims belonged to fraternal organizations, an unsurprising fact, since nationally, such groups reached peak popularity in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Thomas B. Norris, “probably the most widely known victim of the tornado,” according to one paper, perished in the tornado along with his daughter, who was recovering from a lengthy illness. In response to a houseguest’s warning that “the trees were coming,” Norris grabbed his convalescing daughter and ran for the cellar, but unfortunately both father and daughter were fatally struck by debris before reaching safety. Norris, a former shoe retailer and current vice president of H.F. Cady Lumber Company with a “circle of business acquaintances includ(ing) nearly all of commercial Omaha,” like many men of his social and economic position, was an active Mason. After his funeral at the First Baptist Church, “the Nebraska grand lodge of Masons conducted the full Masonic burial service.”¹⁸³ For a man like Norris, a successful businessman, the social services of the Masons were probably not the primary reason he belonged to the group, and immersed in “commercial Omaha” as he was, it is not unlikely that he held some form of life insurance. Yet the importance of fraternal burial services remained strong, judging by the heavy involvement in such groups. Fraternal organizations offered a vestige of community mourning and care, even as older forms of community fellowship vanished with the rapidly urbanizing and unrelentingly mobile twentieth century. However many times a man moved, and no matter how far his quest for prosperity took him from his roots, if he were a Mason, his fraternity brothers would offer a personal

¹⁸³ “Death of T.B. Norris and Daughter,” *The Examiner*, April 5, 1913, p. 7.

farewell.¹⁸⁴ An insurance company would send the contractually obligated money to one's widow, but they would not be there to grieve with the widow at the funeral. In many ways, fraternal societies allowed members to maintain personal, communal connections in both death and life in an increasingly corporatized world.

In at least one instance, the extensive national network of the Masons enabled the support of a woman widowed in the tornado. Her husband was entitled to "income" from the Masons upon his death, but unfortunately for her, he had never transferred his membership from his previous home lodge of Schenectady, New York, to the Omaha lodge. A social worker, Gladys Wells Griffith, after some investigation, vouched for the woman's story, and according to Griffith, "the Schenectady people" considered this proof enough, and "sent for her and took permanent care of her."¹⁸⁵

The city's ethnic and racial minority communities often formed similar or parallel organizations. Omaha's African-American community, as was the case elsewhere in the U.S., was barred from many well-known fraternal organizations, and formed their own. The Knights of Pythias, an organization boasting the motto "Friendship, Charity, Benevolence" and promising aid to "worthy Pythians" was one such fraternal order, and an estimated 70,000 men

¹⁸⁴ Norris and his daughter were an example of this. In spite of the performed "burial service," the bodies were shipped back east to his Virginia home for interment, accompanied by his widow and surviving daughter, who planned to move back to their families.

¹⁸⁵ Griffith, *Gladys Wells Griffith Papers, circa 1950-1963*.

belonged to the order by 1905.¹⁸⁶ Formed during the Civil War, the order established an “Insurance Department” within the first decade and a half of existence.¹⁸⁷ Initially, a few lodges admitted individual African-Americans, but when groups of black men sought charters to form independent lodges, repeated denials from the organizations hierarchy prompted them to break away from the group. Styling themselves with the all-encompassing name “The Knights of Pythias of North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa,” the new African-American groups mostly retained the rituals and goals of the original organization. In the city directory of 1913, Omaha listed nearly five pages of “secret societies” with their lodge information. Of these, Ben Hur, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Masons, and the Knights of Pythias all had African-American chapters, their lodge information listed separately under the heading “Colored.”

Several black men who perished in Idlewild Hall when it collapsed in the storm and subsequently ignited belonged to the Knights of Pythias. Photographs of their joint funeral depict four flower-covered coffins on a flatbed wagon decked in black fabric, as the city’s hearses were in short supply (Figure 3). Two other African-American Pythian victims followed the wagon in individual horse-pulled hearses. Their fellow Pythians performed a “Pythian service” for the group at the African Methodist Church down the road from the funeral parlor that served the black community (and which only

¹⁸⁶ Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips, *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

¹⁸⁷ “About the Order,” www.pythias.org February 16, 2015.

escaped the tornado by the narrowest of margins itself.) The ceremonial aspect complete, the group presumably made some financial payout to the victims' survivors. For African-Americans, such means of insurance may have been doubly important, since long experience taught that their relief would be, at best, a municipal afterthought, and at worst, something completely unavailable to them.



Figure 3—The man standing on the wagon with his hand in his coat is wearing a Pythian badge on the left side of his chest.

Fraternal organizations, then, formed an important safety net for many Omahans, particularly in regard to insuring one's life and alleviating the financial burden for one's survivors. While not every organization was open to every individual, the variety and number of such groups ensured that nearly anyone could find a fraternity aligning with their wants and needs. However, the landscape of insurance was changing, and national insurance

corporations gradually gained a more prominent place in American's lives. This transition was already beginning in Omaha by 1913, as one observer castigated the Nebraska state legislature for kowtowing to "the old line insurance companies of the east" and their attorney, who had been "dropping into Lincoln at intervals of late." Every time this over-paid representative appeared in Lincoln, Sorenson charged, "a few new prongs were put into the proposed insurance code to make it hard sledding for Nebraska life insurance companies." This was not the first time the state legislature had put the screws to small sources of insurance—two years earlier, according to Sorenson, the laws passed by the legislature "put all of the Nebraska fire insurance companies out of business within six months."¹⁸⁸ Now, warned Sorenson, the new laws under consideration aimed to do the same to Nebraska's life insurance companies, as well as "the fraternal beneficiary concerns," all so that Eastern insurance giants might prosper from the subsequent transfer of risk management investments.¹⁸⁹

The insurance business existed long before the Easter tornado, and its biggest market was as protection against losses incurred in fires. In 1913, many homes and businesses still relied on open flame for heat, and nascent heating and electric technology could, and did, go haywire with disastrous results from time to time. Wood construction meant that potential fires still might spread quickly through a city, particularly residential districts and

¹⁸⁸ Advertisements in every Omaha daily paper show that Sorenson exaggerated the demise of Nebraska insurance companies somewhat, as whatever harm befell local insurance firms, it did not eliminate all of them.

¹⁸⁹ *The Examiner*, April 5, 1913, p. 2.

smaller, neighborhood commercial centers. Fire, a constant presence and threat to human habitation for centuries, remained a real concern in the early 20th century. After all, the Great Chicago Fire that burned a third of that metropolis was within living memory for Omahans of middle age and older. Increasingly, however, Americans sought peace of mind and protection of their assets against this destructive foe. For a fee, insurance companies provided just that.

Life insurance gained slower acceptance than fire insurance. First, during this golden age of fraternal organizations, demand for life insurance provided from an entity solely devoted to insurance was relatively low. The need existed, but was already adequately met by other groups. And second, until actuarial science developed further, life insurance was not as appealing to insurance companies as property-focused insurance. However, as evidenced by Sorenson's mention of Nebraska's life insurance companies, corporate providers of life insurance did exist by 1913.

Fire insurance aside, calamity-specific insurance appeared to have relatively little popularity in this era. Tornado insurance existed, but even in tornado-prone Nebraska, many apparently did not see it as a necessity. It is difficult to tell how many people in Omaha—victims or otherwise—carried tornado insurance, and accounts vary. Joseph Millard, in his reassuring missive to eastern banking and congressional friends, implied great faith in the amount of insurance held by victims: "There are a goodly number who will have to be helped, but with the amount of tornado insurance which will be collected very material progress will be had in reconstructing the destroyed

houses within the next ninety days.”¹⁹⁰ Millard’s statement perhaps was meant to allay fears raised by reports like the one in the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, which blamed Omahans and a foolish belief in an “old Indian prophecy” for the fact that almost no one held tornado insurance. A recent review of the tornado favors the Wilkes-Barre paper over Millard, and estimates the number of tornado-insured Omaha property owners at only two percent.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, tornado insurance protection likely only covered property owners—part of the storm’s path went through areas of town where large portions of the populace were likely to be renters, rather than owners, such as the particularly decimated area around 24th and Lake Streets, where many African-Americans and recent southern European immigrants lived. For such victims, the storm made them homeless and robbed them of their possessions, without much hope for restitution for their losses.

Supporting the theory that fewer Omahans than Millard hoped were protected by tornado insurance was the explosion of advertisements in every daily paper for tornado insurance in the days following the tornado. Literally filling page after page, insurance companies sensed the chance for a business boon. That insurance men felt there was such opportunity in the market may indicate that very few policyholders previously took out tornado insurance

¹⁹⁰ J. H. Millard Letters with the Red Cross, National Archives, College Park MD, Red Cross Central File, RG 200 National Archives Gift Collection, Records of the American National Red Cross.

¹⁹¹ Travis Linn Sing, *Omaha’s Easter Tornado of 1913*, Images of America (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2003), 21. This estimate also appears in sources from 1913, and I find it likely that this number is closer to reality than Millard’s estimate.

policies. With the death and destruction before them, a rare economic opportunity presented itself to the insurance community. (Figure 4)

The image shows a collage of newspaper clippings and insurance advertisements. On the left, several columns of text from a newspaper report on the aftermath of a storm. Headlines include "DOZENS OF MEN AT RISK", "MADNESS AND DEATH", and "DEATH AT DINNER PARTY". The text describes the chaos and destruction caused by the storm, mentioning the rescue of men from a building and the death of a man at a dinner party. On the right side, there are several large advertisements for insurance companies. The most prominent one is for "TORNADO INSURANCE" by Baldridge-Madden Co., which offers "5 Reliable Companies" and "1,000 for 3 Years--\$5.00". Below this is an advertisement for "Tornado Insurance" by Foster-Barker Co., which offers a "\$1,000 Tornado Policy Costs Only \$2.50". Other smaller advertisements include "FIRE AND CYCLONE INSURANCE" by BERKA & MUSIL, "Tornado and Fire Insurance" by Garvin Bros. & Bollard, and "Tornado and Windstorm Insurance" by J. H. MITHEN CO.

Figure 4

The capriciousness of the storm and the sheer chance that preserved some streets and leveled others was better advertising for their product than any money could buy, and they knew it. A spooked populace, one that would probably see the destruction for themselves in the coming days, either through curiosity-driven sightseeing or through clean up and relief efforts, offered an excellent opportunity for the enterprising insurance man to sell a few policies, and newspapers published the day after the storm showed that Omaha's insurance brokers were ready to seize the moment.

The Love-Haskell Insurance Company offered an especially zealous example of this business impulse. Their advertisement in the 1913 Omaha City Directory trumpeted their offering of “every known kind of insurance.”¹⁹² Following the tornado, Love-Haskell took out a newspaper advertisement resembling a news article and probably not coincidentally placed after several columns of social news detailing the current whereabouts and housing situations of those who lost residences in the storm, Love-Haskell described their important work in the days after the tornado. “All day long the large office force is engaged in adjusting and promptly paying tornado insurance losses,” the advertisement bragged, “as well as writing new insurance in this line.” It was a pity that more people did not have tornado insurance, but then, “A great many people never think of tornado insurance. Their first thought is of life insurance, next fire insurance, and next accident insurance. But the tornado of Easter Sunday has set everybody to thinking.” Some might think that Omaha, once stricken, was unlikely to take such a blow again. Love-Haskell allowed that “such a tornado as that of last Sunday may never happen again in a hundred years,” but cautioned, “then again it may occur in Omaha early next month.” To drive their point home, Love-Haskell cited Reverend Irl R. Hicks and his almanac. Hicks’ almanac was not the only such guide to the

¹⁹² Omaha Directory Co, *Omaha Directory Co.’s Omaha City Directory, Including South Omaha, 1913 Embracing a Complete Alphabetical List of Business Firms and Private Citizens, a Miscellaneous Directory of State, City and County Officials, Churches, Public and Private Schools, Banks, Asylums, Hospitals and Homes, Commercial Bodies, Secret Societies, Street and Avenue Guide, Etc.: Also a Complete Classified Business Directory and Numerical Street Directory.*, Variation: Genealogy & Local History ;; LH14552. (Omaha, Neb.: Omaha Directory Co., 1913), 965.

future on the market, but his vague, yet more-or-less accurate foretelling of the Easter storm earned him a degree of cachet in the weeks following the storm.¹⁹³ Hicks had been correct this time, Love-Haskell reasoned, and alert Omahans might note that Hicks' almanac forecast "a reactionary storm period" and "dangerous TORNADIC storms" on April 5 and 6. If he was right once, he might be right twice, and it simply did not pay to risk going without tornado insurance a moment longer.¹⁹⁴

Witnessing firsthand the tornado's destruction may have convinced many, but Love-Haskell left nothing to chance, and went after the unconvinced with an indictment of the stupidity and irresponsibility of remaining uninsured. "No one ought to solicit you to take out insurance of any kind," the company admonished, in direct contradiction to theirs and every other insurance company's marketing policy following the tornado, "It is your duty to yourself, to your dependents, your family and your creditors, to keep yourself insured in every way." Instead of waiting for a solicitor to "virtually beg" you to insure yourself properly, "Do it without solicitation. DO IT NOW. It's simply a plain business proposition." With this appeal, Love-Haskell left the rationale of "better safe than sorry" and instead went straight for the reader's sense of self. A good citizen kept himself insured in every way. A good family man made sure his family would be provided for

¹⁹³ Hicks and his almanac are discussed at further length in Chapter Four.

¹⁹⁴ "Hicks' Predictions," *The Examiner*, March 29, 1913, p. 13.

no matter what happened. A good steward of his money did things that made good business sense. In short, a good man was an insured man.¹⁹⁵

Love-Haskell incorporated many of the ideals championed by white Americans of some financial independence and success. Although insurance involved a payout of money, that was the end result of an agreed-upon financial contract (“a plain business proposition,” as Love-Haskell put it) and thus an entirely different animal than charity, relief, or government aid. If the terms of the contract required one to pay \$2.50 a year for a \$1000 coverage policy, as long as one paid their \$2.50, that \$1000 was money a policy holder was unquestionably entitled to receive. Relying on charity or the state, in addition to being a less reliable source of money, lacked the implication of personal responsibility attributed to those with the foresight to take out and maintain insurance policies. Non-insurance funds also savored of a lack of reciprocity—with no yearly payment or formal contract for each side to fulfill, bestowed aid smacked of pity, rather than fulfillment of a plan the carrier was farsighted enough to enact. For those in higher socioeconomic classes, the differences between insurance payments and relief payments was massive, as was the gulf attending the positive and negative connotations attached to each of these income streams.

In addition to the values of responsibility and taking care of one’s self and dependents, Americans also viewed insurance as a way to control risk. The concepts of mastery and control held massive appeal for turn-of-the-

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

century men.¹⁹⁶ As boasted at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in 1898, the very markers of white “progress” were mastery: “first over the aborigines, and second over the forces of nature.” As was painfully evident on March 23, 1913, nature was less repressible than previously boasted, and while many probably acknowledged that man could not stop “acts of God,” man could certainly control his risk in the face of the few uncertainties not yet mastered. Such control manifested in many ways around the turn of the century. Scientists sought ways to predict incoming calamity, and engineers sought ways to restrain or protect against nature’s more violent tendencies in new and creative ways.¹⁹⁷ Insurance was one more way to check that which could not be stopped, manipulated or otherwise controlled—it allowed the well-prepared individual to manage the risk of losing money or livelihood when uncontrollable forces intervened.

In controlling the story of the storm sent forth from the city, Omaha’s city leaders and the Commercial Club members who wrote the “official” account deployed carefully chosen words and descriptions to create or correct impressions for those outside of the city thought about the tornado’s effects. In deciding which types of disaster recompense promulgated an idea about Omaha that suited their best interests, elite Omahans did not hesitate to take

¹⁹⁶ The literature on the preoccupation with manliness at the turn of the century is vast, ranging from muscular Christianity to San Juan Hill. Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization* remains a standard, but see also Kristin L. Hoganson’s *Fighting for American Manhood*, and Jackson Lears’ *Rebirth of a Nation*, which frames the ongoing attempts of early twentieth century men to assert their masculinity as a larger cultural project of regenerating the country in the post-Civil War generations.

¹⁹⁷ For a deeper examination of the scientific and engineering responses to the storm, see Chapter Four.

action to control which types of money was received, and how it was accepted. Shaping a narrative and dictating allowable types of aid did not control individual Omahans, and had those outside of Omaha as the main target of this influence. But one other aspect of post-tornado response exhibited top-down control, and this area had direct influence on the people of Omaha, including tornado victims.

Managing the movement of people within Omaha after the storm quickly became a dominating and complicated concern for those in command. Getting victims out of the path of destruction; deciding who should and should not be allowed back into the ruins; distinguishing between victims, workers, and spectators; managing the influx of aid workers and military personnel; and ultimately, deciding who moved back into the ruined area once rebuilding was complete all demanded the attention of the various organizations and committees working to resolve the issues wrought by the tornado.

The movement of people loomed large in the United States in 1913, an unmistakable hallmark of modernity. Railroads etched the face of the country, connecting small villages on the Plains with the greatest cities in America. Ships zipped across the world's oceans, and although the "unsinkable" *Titanic* shook confidence the previous year and still loomed large in memory, ocean travel had never been faster or cheaper. Automobiles, not yet ubiquitous, were nevertheless increasingly common and promised yet another way to move people around with improved efficiency. Rail travel remained readily available and accessible to a large proportion of the population, and

individuals moved about the country with a casualness and frequency few could imagine half a century earlier. In Omaha, a city that owed its very existence to mobile Americans and their transportation systems, the well-to-do sent their children east to be educated at schools like Bryn Mawr, Amherst, and Yale, and wintered in Florida. Pages of newspapers were devoted to the comings and goings of city residents—a single woman visiting her sister for six weeks in Panama, a couple spending six weeks touring Europe, another couple returning from their own European tour, and scores of individuals traveling all over the United States visiting a variety of relatives, or being visited in Omaha by the same. Others traveled to warmer climates not for pleasure, but for health, seeking relief from yet-uncured chronic diseases.

Movement was a way of life for many Americans, and formed an important part of their personal history. Many followed the phrase popularized by Horace Greeley fifty years earlier, when he implored them to “Go West, young man!” Some moved to Omaha from established Eastern states like New York and Ohio, like Joseph Millard. Others moved from nearby states like Iowa, such as Omaha political boss Tom Dennison. Still others, black and white, moved from the South, among them Mayor Jim Dahlman, a native Texan. In the first decade of the twentieth century, an unprecedented number of Americans came from other countries, taking advantage of the same developments in transportation that allowed wealthy Americans to freely gallivant across the country and the world. Immigrant movement elicited mixed reactions. Peak immigration into the United States occurred in 1907, and by 1913, numbers of newcomers had scarcely

diminished from that high point. Many native-born Americans (or Americans of competing ethnic groups) decried the influx of southern European immigrants, who dominated this period of immigration. In 1909, an anti-Greek riot in nearby South Omaha reached deadly proportions and resulted in the destruction of “Greek Town,” the expulsion of nearly every Greek in South Omaha, and reportedly, the death of one boy.¹⁹⁸

Mobility, then, was a constant fact of life for Omahans in 1913, sometimes embraced as progress, and sometimes feared as a destructive force, depending on who was moving and for what reason. City leaders exhibited this same ambivalence on a smaller scale following the tornado, as efforts to determine who should be where and when they should be there resulted in military occupation, massive paperwork, and controlled rebuilding.

The military presence loomed large in Omaha in the immediate aftermath of the tornado, with federal troops on the scene within hours of the storm, and the Nebraska National Guard adding 400 men to the area by noon on Monday. Omaha was the intermittent site of a federal Army installation known as Fort Omaha. Opened in the late 1860s as an outpost of the federal government as white settlement rapidly expanded westward, the need for such presence was deemed unnecessary, and the post was abandoned in 1896. Nine years later, the federal government resurrected it as a Signal Corps School, specializing in the new military technology of ballooning.¹⁹⁹ It was

¹⁹⁸ Lawrence H. Larsen, ed., *Upstream Metropolis: An Urban Biography of Omaha and Council Bluffs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 212–216.

¹⁹⁹ Later in 1913, the U.S. Army closed Fort Omaha once again, and moved balloon training to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. However, the escalation of

these soldiers, under the orders of Fort Commander, Major Carl Hartman, who constituted the first military presence on the scene. The record of events in Fort Omaha's post returns from March 1913 reveals that the course of instruction was discontinued on March 23, 1913, as "the entire command (had) been performing guard duty and relief work in the City of Omaha on account of (the) tornado which destroyed part of the city" since 7:00 pm on that date.²⁰⁰ Nebraska Adjutant General, P.L. Hall, Jr., accompanied by Nebraska Governor John Morehead, departed Lincoln sometime after midnight on a special train, and arriving in Omaha, met with Major Hartman, Mayor Dahlman, Sherriff Felix J. McShane, Jr., City Police Commissioner John Ryder, and unspecified "others" at the Paxton Hotel in downtown Omaha to discuss the situation, since it was deemed too dark to see anything in the wrecked area. During this meeting, these men made several decisions pertaining to how the damaged area would be controlled. According to General Hall, he and Major Hartman "carefully went over the map and divided the territory between (the two of them)."²⁰¹ At 4:30 am, they set out to see the damage for themselves, "going as

World War I and the presence of extant ballooning equipment at Omaha resulted in yet another re-opening, this time as the Fort Omaha Balloon School. It soon became the largest balloon school in the world, and 16,000 men were trained there by 1921, when the balloon school moved again, this time to Belleville, Illinois. The property was used by the U.S. Armed Forces for a variety of purposes after that, including as a work camp for Italian prisoners of war during World War II. In 1975, a local community college bought the land and developed a school campus on that location.

²⁰⁰ Fort Omaha, Nebraska, Post Returns Jan. 1911-Dec. 1916, Series 1, Film RG517, Roll 5.

²⁰¹ "Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Nebraska for 1913-1914," 1914, 5, Nebraska Public Documents nebpubdocs.unl.edu, http://nebpubdocs.unl.edu/searchdoc.php?fulltext=1914%20adjutant%20general&doc_id=npd.00035.00003&sort=page_id&pageLength=300.

far as possible in machines,” but ultimately abandoning their cars and picking their way through the considerable wreckage on foot.²⁰² General Hall described a near-apocalyptic scene, with the air full of lingering smoke and lime from the by-then-doused fires, and the smell of gas from broken gas lines. He saw “half stunned” horses “moving here and there,” and humans in a similar dazed, zombie-like state. According to General Hall, victims were quiet, not screeching with despair or weeping, but instead “stood or laid on the ground, too weak to rise, with a delirious stare in their eyes.” He asked some of them about their families and received few answers.²⁰³ “After fully realizing the situation,” General Hall returned to the Mayor’s office, where he sent word to his assistant to dispatch the six nearby companies of men he had left word to mobilize before leaving Lincoln.

Notably absent from mention in most of Hall’s version of events was Omaha Police Commissioner John Ryder. According to General Hall’s account, Ryder attended the meeting at the Paxton and was therefore apprised of plans for controlling the tornado district. Apparently, the men in charge decided that a military approach, rather than a police one, was required in the wrecked portion of the city. No doubt some of this was a practical decision—as is customary of tornados, the path of the storm featured astounding damage, but the path was narrow, meaning the majority of the city was untouched and the usual concerns of police continued in unaffected areas of the city. Police court dockets and jail registers for the week after the tornado

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., 6.

reveal that Omaha police carried on business as usual, arresting scores on a variety of offenses (usually vice-related), but in roughly similar numbers and for the same sorts of crimes that appeared in the weeks immediately before the tornado.²⁰⁴ With 400 National Guardsmen and over 200 soldiers from the fort on site relatively quickly and for the sole purpose of patrolling the tornado area, the Omaha police may have been reserved to focus most of their efforts on arresting public drunks and prostitutes elsewhere in the city. In fact, the court dockets and jail registers recorded startlingly few offenders booked for tornado-related crimes. Only four men appear in the lists for these violations: John Flood, a white lineman, received a sentence of \$25 for “vag(rancy) & stealing from ruins of storm” on March 25, and was arrested with a 15-year-old accomplice named Arnold Dolan; Guy Hoig, a white window trimmer, got 45 days in jail for “vagrancy & soliciting for cyclone victims,” apparently some sort of a scam; and Frank Wilson was fined \$50 on April 12 for “defrauding the relief committee.”²⁰⁵ In the week following the tornado 28 men and women of a variety of nationalities and mostly members of the working class were detained under the charge “suspicious character.” It is possible that some of these were suspected of looting; however, John Flood’s citation indicates that if they had been identified as looters, more detail about their crime would probably have been recorded. Furthermore, “suspicious character” was a common means of detaining individuals by the Omaha police department

²⁰⁴ Omaha, Douglas County, NE Police Court, Roll 17, Jail Registers, RG313, NSHS and Omaha, Douglas County, NE Police Court Dockets, RG313

²⁰⁵ Omaha, Douglas County, NE Police Court, Roll 17, Jail Registers, RG313, NSHS and Omaha, Douglas County, NE Police Court Dockets, RG313

before the tornado too—the 28 recorded incidents in the week following the storm actually marked a drop in such arrests from the week before, when 32 were taken into custody for this reason.²⁰⁶ In both weeks, the majority of these cases were dismissed without any charges or fines. There are two interpretations of these court records—either the looting and “defrauding” so feared by those in charge were nowhere near the scourge they imagined them to be; or arresting, holding, and trying looters occurred under Major Hartman and General Hall’s jurisdiction, rather than the police department’s. Hall makes no mention of arresting or holding looters in his detailed report, and Fort Omaha’s post records, though admittedly extremely concise, make no mention of this type of work either. Therefore, if the Army and National Guard were in charge of looter discipline, there were either no records kept, or they have since been lost.

Wherever his force was stationed, Police Commissioner Ryder’s tornado duties continued on the night of March 23. In consultation with General Hall, the two created the victim inventory cards of which the Commercial Club was so proud, as well as passes, issued under Ryder’s name, that would be required to be shown at a checkpoint by anyone wishing to enter the tornado district. The passes, designed to discourage looting, required victims to furnish “proof” that they had reason to be rummaging through detritus of their former homes, and aid workers, reporters, and photographers required passes as well.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ The passes brought their own problems.

But guarded checkpoints were not the only distinctly martial measures enacted by the men at the Paxton Hotel. General Hall's report details a number of other measures enacted to "secure" the damaged area:

I established stations through my district, where I placed men who were acquainted with the people in each community. I gave passes to those persons, and all people were identified by them before passed by the guard. At 2:00 o'clock I placed one battalion in charge of relief stations and completely surrounded the district. I then took the second battalion and deployed them as skirmishers at the north end of the district and moved south. The second battalion carried only their pistols, leaving their rifles at the relief station. Orders were given to these men before starting to help or carry out all sufferers to the relief stations, to secure all dead and wounded and to arrest anyone caught taking advantage of the adverse condition of the people...In each squad of skirmishers I placed two trained signal men from the signal corps, with their tools, to take care of live wires, for not only the protection of the sufferers, but the troops as well. In the meantime, Governor Morehead returned to Lincoln...and convened with the legislature, with regard to making proper appropriation to care for the suffering people and the expenses of the Guard.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ "Report of the Adjutant General," 6.

As is clear in General Hall's rendering, there was an element of battle to the whole affair. His men were armed, even those tasked with helping the injured or removing the dead. That they carried "only their pistols" and not their rifles was noteworthy to him, implying that the battalion surrounding the tornado's path probably retained both weapons. Furthermore, Hall described some of his guards as "skirmishers," used in the military as a line of harassment and distraction to the enemy, allowing the bulk of troops to carry on their mission unhindered (although at least a few of these skirmishers had the less glamorous task of clearing their area of live wires.) Hall's supreme organization and his divide-and-conquer mentality reflected his training as a soldier, certainly, but also exemplified the closely monitored control over the people within the wrecked area that appealed to a city elite terrified of the consequences of chaos or the appearance of it.

Looting constituted a particularly terrifying specter for businessmen, and the fear of widespread thievery commanded an inordinate amount of their attention. Securing the "ruins" was a high priority for city leaders, and a preoccupation with post-storm property loss marked reports of the days following the disaster. At ten o'clock the morning after the storm, the city council met—not to discuss feeding victims, housing them, or helping them to rebuild—but to "determine on putting on large squads of special police to aid in the rescue work and in guarding the ruins."²⁰⁹ This is not to say that the attempt to protect property was not something that tornado victims also

²⁰⁹ "Relief Stations for Victims are Fixed by Police Commissioner Ryder," *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 24, 1913.

wanted from the city—undoubtedly, many did want to secure their belongings, particularly if their house was only partially damaged and still contained much of their worldly goods, as was the case in many residences. One resident complained about a *lack* of property protection in his portion of the city, since it seemed to him that the guards concerned themselves only with property owners of some means, a charge that may well have had some merit.²¹⁰ But the meeting held at City Hall was only the first of many looting-related actions undertaken by the city elite revealing their interest in this particular crime. Evidently, news of looting (or the lack thereof) carried a particular cachet during the time period, as though this one crime was a litmus test for the honesty, worth, and respectability of a city's residents.

As a consequence of the outsized importance bestowed upon opportunistic property theft, reports of looting varied wildly, depending on who was discussing the matter, and with whom. Herman Bloom told a newspaper on Monday morning that he had spotted two separate incidents late at night, after search teams had dwindled: "I saw two (looters) at different times," he said, "I saw them carrying away some things from my neighbor's barn."²¹¹ In addition to possible looting, the law and order element found itself overwhelmed by disobedient spectators, even on the day following the storm when rescue efforts were still in full swing. The problem was particularly pronounced in the area near 24th and Lake streets, where the greatest number of fatalities and most dramatic property damage occurred. As rescue workers

²¹⁰ "No Guards for Poor," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 1, 1913, 4.

²¹¹ "Lake Street Death List is Growing," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913.

removed the bodies of several black men from the Idlewild pool hall, crowds of onlookers surrounded the wreckage-filled foundation, craning for a glimpse of the carnage. (Figure 5) A similar scene played out two blocks south, near the bakery where Nathan Krinsky lived and worked with his wife and five children. None of the family had been heard from since the storm, and the crowds awaited the expected excavation of the family's bodies.²¹² Other crowds formed around the Diamond movie theatre and the Gem restaurant, where dozens more were rumored to have met doom.²¹³ Police and troops alike attempted to banish the pressing crowds from the area to no avail. "Officers shouted incessantly, 'move on,' but the crowds did not decrease," reported the *Daily News*. So fruitless were their attempts that they "called for additional protection before noon, insisting they were unable to handle the crowds."²¹⁴

²¹² "Lake Street Death List is Growing," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913. This article uses the surname "Klinsky" for the baker and his family, but most other sources, including the "official" card filed to report the fatalities, uses "Krinsky." The family never appeared in the city directory under any variation of the name that I can find.

²¹³ In spite of dire predictions, the death toll did not appear to be substantial in either of these businesses.

²¹⁴ "Lake Street Death List is Growing," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913.



Figure 5

Such recalcitrance was not merely an inconvenience to rescue and cleanup workers, but for a business elite so invested in managing the city's public image, the unruly crowds were a downright embarrassment. In spite of accounts like Herman Bloom's and the enormous amount of attention the Commercial Club paid to the purported problem behind the scenes, their public strategy focused on denying the existence of any form of lawlessness. Looting, chaos, and opportunistic behavior did not fit into the story they were crafting for national consumption about Omaha's great character and associated continued desirability as a business partner; consequently, the official statement and many media accounts emphasized the "pure gold of citizenship" that supposedly animated Omaha's citizens in the days after the storm. A story in the *Omaha Daily News* subtitled "RICH MEN GIVE LIBERALLY" typified this approach. "Wealthy men open their purses," it declared, in response to the "feeling of pity and sympathy" that resided "in every heart." So stirred were Omaha's elite that "human kindness found

ready expression, and purse strings were loosened, willing hands were extended, buildings, schools, and homes were offered and in every way the meeting demonstrated that the strong men of the city are equal to any emergency.”²¹⁵ Such praise confirmed to readers far and wide that the “right people,” as the Commercial Club obviously felt themselves to be, had the situation well in hand. Their own largesse duly praised by the local media; their “official statement” promulgated an image of complete control, thanks to the quick occupation of the Army. “Before any disorder or looting could be attempted,” the statement read, “the federal troops from Fort Omaha, under Major C. F. Hartman, were in charge of the situation, which was completely under control before daybreak Monday morning.”²¹⁶ The contrast between this version of events and the *Omaha Daily News*’ article depicting disobedient sightseers, looters, and overwhelmed law enforcement is striking.

In Omaha, relatively little public criticism of the military emerged in the public record. It may have been stifled in the city’s major media outlets, given the emphasis the Commercial Club and other leaders placed on positive portrayals of the city after the storm. Undoubtedly, the Army and National Guard successfully refraining from igniting multiple conflagrations across the city—as had the soldiers in San Francisco in 1906—helped their cause in the eyes of the public. But their active role in relief may also have mitigated their presence. In Chicago, after the massive 1871 fire, the military troops “did not

²¹⁵ “City Appropriates \$25,000 for Relief of Storm Victims,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913.

²¹⁶ “The Official Statement,” *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, 1, no. 40 (March 29, 1913).

aid the police, assist in the distribution of relief, or help in the early stages of rebuilding,” instead, they were there to ensure “the security of valuable property and its owners.”²¹⁷ The main purpose of employing and retaining the troops in Omaha did not differ substantially from that in Chicago, and property protection constituted a major part of the military mission, as General Hall’s own account of his order to “arrest anyone caught taking advantage” of victims reveals. However, the troops also played an active role in relief and clean up, as well as controlling access and movement of Omahans. Perhaps their more utilitarian contributions lessened any incipient resentment. Even the writer who complained that the troops guarded only the property of the wealthy to the exclusion of the poor directed his fury toward Omaha city officials he believed were directing the military’s patrol zones, rather than toward the troops themselves.

In fact, General Hall viewed the entire experience as a boon to the National Guard. According to him, larger public sentiment was not in favor of the Guard’s very existence: “the National Guard is looked upon by many people as a menace to society and a useless appendix of the State and Federal government,” he wrote in the introduction of his biennial report in 1914. The Guard’s service after the Omaha tornado, he thought, must materially heighten them in the public’s esteem, and make them aware of the “invaluable benefit” of such a military program.

²¹⁷ Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 58, 63.

It is true that the young men who belong to the National Guard receive pay both from the Federal government and the State during times of encampments, maneuvers, riots, and war, but the pay is of such small amount that it might openly be said that these young men tender their services more from patriotism than from the idea of receiving compensation...it must be borne in mind that upon these young men, when a crisis comes, the brunt of the same will fall upon their shoulders and it will be up to them to bear the hardships which the weaker ones can not undergo...In other words, it is no other than an insurance to the State and the Nation, which is acknowledged by the Federal government, who has in the past...shown herself to be more appreciative (of) this fact in that her allowance for the support and training of the National Guard is almost double in dollars and cents to that of the State.

Hall's description of the sentiment toward the National Guard reveals that in spite of previous high-profile disasters in large U.S. cities, a portion of the populace viewed the organization as a "menace" to society. Americans in 1913 were no strangers to terrifying and chaotic events, whether natural disasters or one of the many racial, labor, or ideological confrontations that rocked the era. And yet, Hall sensed hesitation or outright hostility to the idea of a state militia. Perhaps the resistance stemmed from how badly awry military intervention in San Francisco proceeded seven years earlier. It may have stemmed from anxiety over the quickly escalating militarization in Europe, and a desire that the United States should stay wholly removed from any warlike preparations. Given Hall's statement, it seems likely that the issues of states' rights and federal limitations also influenced this attitude. Like the Love-Haskell Insurance Company, Hall wanted to appeal to the public's sense of responsibility as a citizen. But however much sense insurance made for an individual and his property, Hall's conception of the National

Guard as insurance for Nebraska and the United States seems to have been a tougher sell.

In his study of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Kevin Rozario concluded that the city's business elite ultimately benefitted from the catastrophe, and viewed the destruction as a valuable opportunity and boon to the city. The massive destruction paved the way for newer, more impressive buildings (the construction of which enriched businessmen in several industries) and the relocation of poor or ethnic neighborhoods from prime real estate now "reclaimed" for the wealthy or for business districts.²¹⁸ To some extent, this enthusiasm was certainly present in Omaha: Joseph Millard explicitly stated it in his self-published circular when he assured his Eastern friends "It is our belief that in one year from today the portion of the city that was destroyed on Sunday last will be a much better part of the city than it was heretofore."²¹⁹ However, the city's leadership, for all its bravado about immediate rebuilding and a strong, resilient citizenry, seemed more possessed of abject fear about the deleterious consequences of the storm. Assuming near-complete control of financial resources and displaying a fanatic devotion to shaping the story of the storm outside of Nebraska the economic elite enlisted military aid in establishing physical control of storm ruins and Omaha residents. Their decisions drew criticism and partial

²¹⁸ "What Comes Down Must Go Up: Why Disasters Have Been Good for American Capitalism," Kevin Rozario. Steven Biel, ed., *American Disasters* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Rozario's book, *The Culture of Calamity*, makes the argument that not only have business elites worked to spin disasters positively when they occur, but that disasters have been a critical piece in the development of American capitalism.

²¹⁹ J.H. Millard Red Cross Letters.

capitulation, but did not materially lessen their involvement in establishing Omaha's post-tornado course. Michelle Landis Dauber has claimed that "disasters are the real third rail of American politics: dangerous in the extreme, but also a source of great power for those who can tap into them." Omaha's elite recognized and feared the danger of mismanaging the event, but ultimately conveyed their existing power into pervasive control of the city on all fronts.

CHAPTER 4

“Only the Infinite is Master of These Forces:” Making Sense of the Storm

I knelt down on the floor and prayed to God to save me, and I believe he did, for I was not hurt, although my home was completely wrecked. How I escaped unhurt I shall never be able to tell.

--Mrs. James Byrnes, 1913

At 7 a. m. the temperature was 40°; it rose until 4 p. m., when the highest for the day, 68°, was reached. The sky was overcast with strato-cumulus clouds from the early morning until the middle of the afternoon, when for an hour or so it was only partly obscured. About 4.30 p. m. the sky again became overcast and grew more and more threatening in appearance until the storm, approaching from the southwest, burst upon the city. At 5.10 p. m. distant thunder was heard and rain began to fall and was heavy at intervals; the rain ended at 7:35 p. m. Small hailstones fell with the rain from 5.40 p. m. to 5. 50. p. m. The prevailing wind for several hours preceding the storm was from the south, but for a period of 15 minutes before the storm struck it became changeable, with increasing velocity, and blew from all directions, but the general direction maintained during the passage of the tornado was southwest. The extreme velocity of the wind recorded at the station during the storm was 34 miles an hour; it occurred at 6.17 p. m.

--Lucius A. Welsh, Local Forecaster, United States Weather Bureau, 1913

There is no sure definition of the course of the earthquake, the path of the wind, the time and place of the stormcloud. Science has its limitations. Only the Infinite is master of these forces...But to seek the reason and to know the purpose, if there be purpose in it, is not necessary. The fact is enough. It challenges, staggers, calls a halt, compels men and women to think—and even to pray.

--Logan Marshall, 1913

* * * * *

Professor Alphonse Schmitt yawned and stretched his arms as he leaned back from his desk at Creighton University on the afternoon of March 23. It had been a warm Easter Sunday. The sun had broken through the clouds a couple of hours earlier, and in conjunction with the fanciful Easter bonnets sported by many members of Omaha’s female half of the population, gave the day a definite spring-like feeling. But now, as he stretched, Schmitt noticed

that clouds were again spreading across the sky. Turning back to his work, he paid little heed to the increasing obstruction of the sun, until raindrops began to hit his window about forty minutes later. Twenty minutes after that, Schmitt, long fascinated by the science behind the dramatic weather of the Great Plains and an enthusiast of the emerging discipline of meteorology, noted that most of the horizon had cleared of clouds, save for a small patch to the southwest of Omaha. Walking toward his window, Schmitt had a fleeting thought—the strange color of the sky, the early evening hour... if this were May, he'd be sure these were harbingers of a tornado. But as quickly as the idea occurred to him, he dismissed it—it was too early for such storms in Nebraska, it didn't seem extraordinarily hot or humid, and the strong winds all seemed to suggest nothing more violent than a gentle spring thunderstorm.²²⁰

Schmitt returned to his desk, certain he was not to see anything of especial interest. He was wrong. Fifteen minutes later, he was on his feet again as increased wind and small hail pelted his window and his electric lights flickered. This time, Schmitt knew exactly what he was seeing, and he dashed to a hallway window where he had a full view of Omaha's western horizon. Though the clouds above him did not rotate, he saw exactly what he had dismissed as impossible only a quarter of an hour earlier. Schmitt

²²⁰ "Tornado of March 23, 1913 at Omaha, Nebr.," *Monthly Weather Review*, March 1913, p. 396-397. Schmitt apparently expected the proverbial "calm before the storm" because in accounting for his dismissal of the idea of a tornado, he recounts one of his reasons as "the wind was strong when I thought there should have been a comparative calm, and it did not veer in the least, as far as I could judge from the smoke."

summoned two others to the window, and together, the trio watched a well-defined funnel cloud only half a mile distant churn across the adjacent neighborhoods. Schmitt kept careful time of the storm on his watch, even as he watched telegraph poles and trees snap like twigs, and wood and brick homes collapse.

And then, it was past, over the Missouri River and into Iowa. Behind the funnel was clear sky, and above the storm a cloud towering like Babel, seemingly reaching to the heavens, the highest Schmitt had ever seen.

* * * * *

Sunday, March 23, 1913 marked a celebratory day for members of two different communities of faith. Omaha Jews were observing Purim, a celebration commemorating God's deliverance of the ancient Jews from the murderous plot of Haman through the intercession of the beautiful (and secretly Jewish) Queen Esther of Persia. Meanwhile, Christians throughout the city were rejoicing over Easter, another holiday in praise of divine deliverance—this time, a rescue from sin and eternal death through Jesus Christ's redeeming death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. That these two festivals of gracious deliverance from death and doom occurred on the same date was an exceedingly rare occurrence, and that they would further coincide with a deadly and destructive tornado added a twist of cruel irony. For a day already laden with spiritual significance for so many Omaha residents, it is perhaps no surprise that many turned to their faith for comfort and understanding in the wake of this devastating event.

Using holy writings or religious tradition as a method of explaining and understanding catastrophic events is an ancient practice, spanning cultures and dating back as far as humans have believed in a higher power. In the United States, such tendencies had robust beginnings with white settlement, since early Puritans related nearly every facet of life to God, and natural disasters were no exception. When a massive earthquake shook New England in 1727, ministers throughout the region used the event as a prod toward greater righteousness within their congregations. Cotton Mather, in a pamphlet published shortly after the earthquake, named three things that “the *Thundering Voice of CONSCIENCE*” would certainly say to his flock after the upheaval: first, that “there is the *Providence of GOD in the Dangers* that have now overtaken thee;” second, that “This ‘Tis a *GOD offended by thy Sin*, who sends thy *Dangers* upon thee;” and finally, that “*REPENTENCE, REPENTENCE!...is the most likely way to escape thy Dangers.*”²²¹ Mather’s interpretation of disastrous events cast them as deliberate acts of God, a visible manifestation of His wrath against a sinful people. This interpretation was not uncommon—Mather’s fellow New England ministers penned such post-earthquake sermons as *Thunder and Earthquake: A Loud and Awful Call to Reformation* and, even more blunt, *Earthquakes the Works of God and Tokens of*

²²¹ Cotton Mather, *Boanerges. a Short Essay to Preserve and Strengthen the Good Impressions Produced by Earthquakes on the Minds of People That Have Been Awakened with Them.: With Some Views of What Is to Be Further and Quickly Look’d For.: Address’d unto the Whole People of New-England, Who Have Been Terrified with the Late Earthquakes; and More Especially the Towns That Have Had a More Singular Share in the Terrors of Them.: [Three Lines from I Chronicles].*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.; (Boston: Printed for S. Kneeland, and sold at his shop in King-Street., 1727), 9.

His Just Displeasure.²²² All of these emphasized the role of the divine, crediting God with foreknowledge and control of the event.

These ministers did not dismiss the material aspect of the earthquake—the shifting plates of the earth’s crust, though they did not understand it to quite that level—but seamlessly integrated the natural world into their explanations by subverting it to God’s will. “We know that merely *material* Substances can only move in the Circuits of Nature as they are moved by [God]...But [material substances] are incapable of knowing the wonderful Laws by which they are Governed. They are therefore constantly Guided by the Wisdom and Power of him that made them: He must continually hold them in his immediate Hands and both empower and direct them in all their Actions,” explained Reverend Thomas Prince. Reverend James Allin took a similar stance regarding God’s role in the natural world: “’TIS absurd and atheistical to assert that Earthquakes are the Effects of a blind Chance, or to resolve them into natural Causes exclusive of the Divine Superintendency,” he declared. Decades later, in 1755, John Winthrop, professor of Mathematics and Philosophy at Harvard University delivered a lecture about earthquakes. He too considered nature subordinate to God, reasoning that if God had created the natural world, He logically must be superior to it. “The all-wise CREATOR could not but foresee all the effects of all the powers he implanted in matter; and as we find in innumerable instances (and the more we know of his works, the more such instances we discover) that he has established such laws for the

²²²http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text1/god_earthquakes.pdf

government of the world as tend to promote the good of *the whole*, we may reasonably presume that he has done it in this case as well as others."²²³

For many, the relationship between the natural world and God did not pose a significant crisis of confidence—it was perfectly logical, after all, that a creator God would retain power over his creation. However, this did not resolve the implication wrought by crediting all natural occurrences to an enabling God—if God controlled these catastrophes and willingly visited them on earth, many felt it imbued Him with a more sinister than loving nature. For Mather and his contemporaries, this fact did not detract from God’s worthiness as an object of worship, as it was just punishment for humanity’s chronic sinfulness. Making extensive use of stories of Israel’s repeated judgments in the Old Testament, these men of the cloth cited scripture to show that though these calamities were terrible, they were no more than God’s chosen people deserved when they went astray. The correct response, they preached, was not questioning God’s goodness, but repentance of one’s sin. Reverend Allin’s sermon title, *Thunder and Earthquake: A Loud and Awful Call to Reformation*, said it all—the earthquake was a way of getting his people’s attention, and those whose lives were spared now knew that repentance was the only acceptable response. God’s desire for a renewed relationship with his people was not cause for questioning God’s goodness, but instead, cause for recognition of God’s great love for his people. As one historian put it, Mather “rhapsodized” over the state of affairs: “O Wonderful! O Wonderful! Our GOD instead of sending *earthquakes* to destroy us as He

²²³ Ibid.

justly might, He sends them to fetch us home unto Himself, and to do us the greatest Good in the World!”²²⁴ Professor Winthrop, though more subdued in his response than Mather had been in his exclamations nearly thirty years earlier, also emphasized God’s purpose to act according to “the good of *the whole*,” allowing that disasters might be very bad for individuals. Winthrop recognized the “skeptical minds” of those who “suffer either loss or terror” in such situations, but reminded his audience that “they may be beneficial in a thousand other ways than we, short-sighted mortals, may pretend to guess at.”²²⁵

By the middle of the nineteenth century, such a judgment-centric interpretation had lost favor, at least in some circles. Perhaps disenchanted with the project of trying to decipher God’s inclinations in the wake of losing a Civil War in which much theological ink was spilled attempting to craft arguments of divine support for their cause, some whites in Charleston, South Carolina, dismissed divine wrath as a valid explanation following an earthquake in 1886. In fact, they ridiculed the idea, and claimed it was the exclusive province of the city’s large black population. One planter’s son decried the reaction of the city’s African Americans, contrasting it with that of the white citizens. The whites, “although extremely terrified,” refrained from outward emotional demonstrations and “seemed to regard the event as belonging to the order of nature.” Meanwhile, he accused, black residents “were absorbed in prayer during the continuance of the minor shocks...under

²²⁴ “What Comes Down Must Go Up,” Kevin Rozario, Steven Biel, ed., *American Disasters* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 75.

²²⁵ “A Lecture on Earthquakes,” John Winthrop. National Humanities Center.

the belief that this was a punishment visited upon them for their sins.” A *Baltimore Sun* reporter echoed this criticism, complaining that “the ignorant, of whom the large mass are colored people...attribute the visitation to the wrath of God for the sins of the people, and not to the order of nature.” He continued, “The more intelligent people are busy in trying to figure out the cause of the disturbances and the chances of their subsiding.”²²⁶

Such accounts are suspect, since in 1886, the dismantlement of Reconstruction was well underway and most white Americans were deeply committed to the project of legally subordinating the country’s African Americans. It is hard to give much credit to the claim that whites reacted completely non-emotionally to a major earthquake, or that the predominant reaction of white Charlestonians was one of calm, careful consideration of the “disturbances.” Such reactions would make white Charlestonians exceptional in the history of disaster survivors, and fly in the face of myriad other experiences with sudden, frightening, and catastrophic events. This, combined with the benefit to these authors in marginalizing and making foolish the black community, must caution against reading these as wholly truthful presentations of what happened after the earthquake. Nevertheless, that attributing the earthquake to divine judgment was enlisted as a mode of discrediting a group of Americans is significant and demonstrates the shifting attitudes regarding God and natural disasters. An argument that was a widely

²²⁶ Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Steinberg’s first chapter, “Last Call for Judgment Day,” covers this disaster and the relations between Charleston’s African American and white citizens at length.

held opinion in Mather's time, even among the educated elite, was now being used to paint a group of people as "ignorant," superstitious, excitable, and reactionary. Regardless of how the blacks or whites of Charleston really reacted, or how they actually viewed God's role in the affair, for society's opinion shapers, a wrathful, corrective God was passé.

The declining acceptance of a vengeful, supernatural rationale evident in Charleston is often partially attributed to a growing reliance on scientific knowledge, which in turn is frequently given as one of the defining attributes of modernity in twentieth century American society.²²⁷ But religious declension in this vein is only true if using the broadest strokes to paint this transitional era. In fact, while religious explanations of disastrous events did change from Mather's interpretation, the ways of invoking the divine in fact proliferated, instead of declined. Even as the science of storms professionalized and popularized, using religion as a lens for viewing the storm retained a noteworthy amount of currency, both for individuals, and within larger cultural expressions. Unlike the Puritan readings of disaster, which tended toward the theological, using Scripture to draw exact connections to a calamitous event, early twentieth century Americans instead read God into the storm as a catalyst for applying the principles of their faith.

²²⁷ Whether this was a welcome development or a cause for concern depended entirely on one's viewpoint. A decline in religious authority opened avenues of advocacy for previously taboo subjects like birth control, at the same time it seemed to some to spell doom for the country. Fundamentalists, according to George Marsden, blamed evolution and Modernism as twin evils responsible for "the profound spiritual and cultural crisis of the twentieth century." George M Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3.

Where Mather and his contemporaries found the bottom line to be a demand for repentance, turn-of-the-century Christians were much more likely to interpret the storm as an opportunity to exhibit Christ-like neighborliness, charity, and kindness.

“Sunday before last Omaha was swept by a fearful storm destroying life and property. The Sodom of Nebrsaka, some of the superstitious will liken it unto the distruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, of the early ages,” (sic) wrote the editor of the *Adams County Democrat*.²²⁸ Located approximately 150 miles to the southwest of Omaha, the Adams county editor’s comparison of Omaha to Sodom, one of the legendarily wicked cities destroyed by God in the Biblical book of Genesis, reflected a relatively common view.²²⁹ Omaha’s flourishing vice district and unrepentantly wet mayor drew the city into such unsavory comparisons from time to time. Yet while earlier generations might have solemnly compared Omaha’s post-tornado fate to the smiting of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Adams county writer dismissed this judgment-heavy interpretation. Only the “superstitious,” he claimed, would see the comparison as anything more than literary. Frederick Drinker, author of a quickly published account of the storm, agreed. “The very magnitude and superhuman force of it will suggest to many minds the thought of an ordered punishment and warning for offenses against a higher power,” allowed Drinker. But, he continued, such an idea was dangerous, and happily

²²⁸ *Adams County Democrat*, April 4, 1913. Nebraska State Historical Society, “Omaha, Douglas County, Scrap Book No. LVI, Weather.)

²²⁹ Genesis 18:17-19:28 records the story of the judgmental annihilation of these cities.

subsiding in the great majority of the population. The idea, he declared, “is, of course, revolting to sober judgment and to the instincts of religious reverence.”²³⁰

In spite of these two writers declaring those who saw vengeance “superstitious” or “revolting to sober judgment,” essentially equating those who saw divine retribution for Omaha’s sins in the storm with outdated, old-fashioned, and ignorant flights of fancy still practiced by those without education or without sufficient understanding to see things from a more logical point of view, a sizeable portion of Americans continued to read heavenly reckoning in earthly disasters. This was, after all, the era when American fundamentalism gained traction, even as literalism fell out of favor in mainline Protestant denominations, often bastions of wealthy, white elites. Fundamentalists favored a literal view of nearly every part of the Bible, and considered it the inerrant Word of God, free from error and supernaturally inspired. They rejected Darwin’s theory of evolution, and often conformed to a very strict, sometimes legalistic, morality. Meanwhile, other segments of Christianity, considered theologically liberal (and wrong) by fundamentalists took a more literary view of the Bible, trying to draw larger themes and messages from Scripture, instead of treating it as a strict historical guidebook to humanity’s past. For such “modernist” Christians, Darwinian evolution posed no real conflict of interest, and rather than doubling down on lists of

²³⁰ Frederick E. Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire, Containing a Full and Thrilling Account of the Most Appalling Calamities of Modern Times; Including Vivid Descriptions of the Hurricane and Terrible Rush of Waters ...* (Harrisburg, Pa., Minter Co., 1913), ix.

rules, they preferred broader mandates, and usually emphasized the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers over the often-angry Israelite God and the Old Testament. As the latter group gained prominence in mainline churches, fundamentalists abandoned those denominations for groups like the Baptists; for theologically conservative breakaway sects of existing denominations; or for entirely new denominations and congregations. Mainline Protestant churches continued to house many of society's elite, and as a consequence, many faith-based reflections found in major media sources reflect a modernist Christian viewpoint. However, to interpret their relative public and media silence as a paucity of fundamentalist believers is a mistake—in fact, for many, fundamentalism proved an attractive answer to the rapidly shifting world of the early twentieth century.²³¹

Fundamentalists did not absent themselves from the public sphere entirely, and the tornado prompted several to express their interpretation of the tornado. In the *Omaha Daily News* those who saw God's wrath in the storm found a forum to express their concern, and the paper printed several such missives. Some did not feel so bold as to attempt to identify which of Omaha's many sins prompted God to action, such as the writer who thought "there was at least a possibility" that the storm was a direct punishment. Taking the Bible literally and attempting to learn from the past, this writer, who signed his name "C. J. Johnson" and whose wording suggests that he may have been a

²³¹ For a more complete examination of fundamentalist Christianity, its development, and its varieties in the 1910s, see George Marsden's exhaustive *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, in particular, Chapter 15. *Religion in American Life: A Short History* by Jon Butler et. al. offers a synthesis of fundamentalists' departure from mainline Protestantism.

clergyman himself, concluded that if God was unchanging, then there was at least a chance that the tornado was a deliberate act of wrath in response to the specific sins of Omaha residents. Johnson took issue with Omaha ministers who “made statements to the effect that God had nothing to do with the tornado, and that it was not sent as a punishment upon Omaha for its wickedness... I would like to know how they know,” he challenged. Johnson allowed for the possibility that there was not deeper divine meaning behind the storm. However, he emphasized that one could not be sure that this was the case: “If we are to believe the bible it seems that God had something to do with the deluge, the destruction of Sodom and of Jerusalem, and that those calamities were sent as punishment. Is not God the same today that he was in years gone by? Does he not hate sin as much today as he ever did?” Johnson continued that all he knew was that “God is still in existence, that he is back of natural law and that he can, if he will, make use of the forces of nature to punish people for their iniquity today, just as he did in ages gone by.... That Omaha has the reputation of being a wicked city no one will deny,” added Johnson, citing Mayor James Dahlman, “the chief apostle of personal liberty in Nebraska today,” as but one symptom of Omaha’s disease. Ultimately, Johnson felt it unwise to purport to know God’s level of involvement with the storm, concluding “I think people take in too much territory when they assert positively that God has nothing to do with these natural forces, and that they are not sent as punishments.”²³²

²³² “More Comment on Storm Situation,” *Omaha Daily News*, April 4, 1913, p. 14. My suspicion that Johnson may have also been a pastor comes from a

Others did not share Johnson's relative restraint in diagnosing the storm's divine cause. One writer blamed disregard for the Sabbath and Holy Days for the recent disasters befalling the United States, of which he numbered not just the tornado, but the Ohio floods and the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*. "I think that God has in the last year poured out some of his wrath upon the earth," he wrote. "These are only warnings, but how many heed the warnings?" His blame (and presumably God's) did not rest on the working man, the writer claimed, who had little choice in the matter if he wanted to feed his family, but on the employers whose greed led them to force their workers to labor at every possible moment. "Since I have become a man I work on Good Friday just the same as on any other day," he lamented. "Why? I am working for a greedy corporation which cares not for God or anything except money. No one's soul is taken into consideration."²³³ This "Constant Reader" was not alone in his conviction that Omaha's sins might be a root cause of the tornado. But while "Constant Reader" mostly excused Christians whose hearts were pure while condemning those who hindered their worship

passing reference he makes to "my sermon." There is no pastor by that name listed in the weekly sermon compilation, though he may have led a smaller congregation or lived and worked in a town near Omaha, but not within the city itself.

²³³ "Working on Holy Days," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 5, 1913, p. 4.

Interestingly, the writer did not mention the community clean up days, which caused consternation with some members of the clergy due to being scheduled on a Sunday. It is possible that this individual wrote and sent his or her letter before the clean up days were announced. God, he felt, would differentiate between those who could control their Sabbath work, and those who could not: "God will keep the account," he wrote, "and when the reckoning time comes and we give an account of ourselves, he will ask 'Who compelled you to work on a holy day or on Sunday? Show me the fellow,' and he will receive his reward."

of God, a letter penned by “M.F.” saw God’s judgment primarily aimed at Omaha’s wayward Christian community. “Who knows but that the tornado was a punishment,” this writer thundered. “I’m sure it’s a warning not only to Omaha, but to the whole world. For he says (the Lord God), ‘I am a revengeful God. I will have my revenge. He destroyed cities in olden times because his people were walking after their own penurious ways, and what are they doing today, churches and all?’” he demanded. “Penury” aside, the church’s sins were many and severe in his eyes:

I know of some churches using graphophones to entertain the people. Say, stop and think. Do you go to church to be seen and entertained, or to worship the Lord? And do you sincerely think God wants worldly things and pleasures in his house, such as church entertainments and fairs? What did he say about buying and selling in the house?...Christ says furthermore, “In the later days they will walk after their own penurious ways, not my ways, and I will destroy the whole earth, not by water, but by fire, and I will send dire punishments on my people.” The Lord God will not always stand those things any more than we (in) our children, for we surely punish them if they do not mind us.²³⁴

Although fundamentalist Christians and their predilection for reading disasters as divine judgment had far from disappeared from American society, they tended to be less visible in major media sources and less-frequently cited by prominent society members. But even this transition provoked public rumination about the future of faith in an increasingly secular society. The morning of the tornado, the *Omaha World-Herald* pondered this change. “Is the preacher out of a job?” the Easter Sunday article began:

²³⁴ “God in the Tornado,” *Omaha Daily News*, April 15, 1913.

To a great many men, especially to the elderly ones, everything seems to be getting topsy turvy. Nothing is as it was and those trying to follow the trails laid down on the maps of life are finding that they are entirely obliterated or branching off in a thousand different directions, with no sign posts to direct one's steps. *There are none more bewildered than some of the clergy.* The occupation of thousands has disappeared. The road that they started out on in the beginning of life has come to a sudden end.²³⁵

In some ways, the closing line of the *World-Herald's* paragraph perfectly encapsulates the upheaval witnessed by those Americans in adulthood in 1913, and the next few years would make the statement yet further apt. But this writer, whatever he achieved unintentionally and in hindsight, did not intend his musings as a requiem for broader American habits and ways of thinking. He meant quite literally to consider only the fate of the once-ubiquitous and influential Christian pastor, now seemingly in danger of relegation to obsolescence.

To address the threat, the *World-Herald* consulted one of the endangered, Reverend Dr. Frederick T. Rouse of the First Congregational Church. Rouse's reply blended a reaffirmation of the need for not only clergy, but also religion, tintured with a faint bitterness about his profession's fading public influence. "My respects to my competitors; they were all once in my hands," Rouse began. "Now they have run into a far country and left me alone. They are:

The press, million tongued.
The stage, pearly voiced and divinely set.
The school, rabbi'd by laity, and supported by seculars.

²³⁵ "The Preacher's Job," *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, March 23, 1913, p. 2N. Emphasis added.

Medicine, faith eliminating, anti-septic treated, rather than holy oiled.

Charity, state administered, society fed and faded.

Government, once anointed and shared by the priest, now church-free and secular.

The priest baptizes infants, buries the dead, and drones sermons to empty seats not having a respectable trolleyful of auditors."

Rouse then turned this mournful recounting of lost influence to a comparison of the preacher with the farmer, who might also be considered to be "out of a job," since so many parts of the farming process were now delegated, such as store-bought clothing and candles, and hiring a thresher during harvest.

However, Rouse argued, though the farmer's job looked different in this modern era, if farmers ceased their jobs, the world would certainly notice and be much worse off for it. So too, he claimed, in the case of the preacher.

"Ultimately all the world depends on not the preacher but the preacher's message of faith, and hope and love," concluded Rouse. "Without these the world would go to pieces. The press, the stage, the school, healing, charity and government—all inevitably need the moral substratum of service, religion and love. Their heartstrings must be swept by the breath of the living God." Not content to end on the poetic, he added one more practical summation: "It is simply a case of more careful division of labor. Let the preacher look to his task."²³⁶

Reverend Rouse capitulated Christian religious influence in the public sphere to secular authorities who were increasingly professionalized and specialized, and most significantly, separate from the church. He appears to have sensed different degrees of danger from the transformation in each of

²³⁶ Ibid.

these spheres—the press and theatre attracted less comment than the ominous words about “faded” charity and “faith eliminating” medical advances. But although Rouse’s words about the empty pews appear cynical or hopeless, he still maintained the importance of religious faith. In fact, though he conceded the loss of public influence and stature by those in his profession, he argued that their work is not just important, but crucial to the function of society. Borrowing liberally from 1 Corinthians 13, the famous New Testament chapter on the crucial importance of love to all human relationships and the futility of any actions without it, Rouse envisioned a world infused with the best of Christian values, of “heartstrings...swept by the breath of the living God,” lest “the world go to pieces.” This is what people of faith needed to focus on—creating a moral underpinning influencing, not controlling, society.

Such a creed was beautifully suited for the era—science might be supplanting God in the “how’s” of natural occurrences, but it remained silent on what one should do when they inevitably happened. Here, religion still had a purpose, one that science could not challenge. Science could have the nuts and bolts of natural phenomena—religion had loftier concerns. Gone were the days where a specific Christian church or even a broader, vaguer Christianity dictated the output and everyday operations of American society’s organs. Instead, the new function of faith was to provide a foundation, a solid morality on which social institutions could operate. As long as this moral base remained vibrant and strong, one need not fear the increasing uncoupling from church control.

But this does not mean that theologically infused explanations of the storm were absent, even from secular sources. In fact, many readily invoked Scripture in defense of their particular reading of the storm—the difference was that unlike fundamentalists and earlier generations of Christians, the reading was not one of divine judgment. Instead, these individuals viewed catastrophic natural events as a matter of course for humanity, a consequence of living in a “fallen” world. Reading individual fault into a storm was not productive—after all, these advocates argued, the Bible said as much: “(God) maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”²³⁷ Not only were such misfortunes simply a feature of earthly life, they were not an absolute detriment to humanity. Referencing several accounts of early Christians in the New Testament, as well as the Bible’s most famous sufferer, Job, these believers argued that life’s trials were necessary to strengthen individual faith and to learn how to better love one’s fellow man. This was the tack chosen by Episcopal Bishop David H. Greer in New York City after reading the news of destruction in Nebraska and flooding in Ohio. “O Merciful God and Heavenly Father,” Greer began his (later widely published) prayer, “who hast taught us in Thy holy word that Thou dost not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.” Far from endorsing a Mather-style message of angry judgment, Greer focused on a verse from the Old Testament book of Lamentations, a portion of the Bible, as the name implies, devoted to the expression of grief following tragedy.²³⁸

²³⁷ Matthew 5:45, KJV.

²³⁸ Lamentations 3:33.

Greer continued, beseeching God to “Cause them in their sorrow to experience the comfort of Thy presence, and in their bewilderment the guidance of Thy wisdom.” And then, “Stir up, we beseech Thee, the wills of Thy people to minister with generous aid to their present needs, and so overrule in Thy providence this great and sore calamity that we may be brought nearer to Thee and be knit more closely one to another in sympathy and love.”²³⁹ Responding to disaster in a truly Christian way, according to Greer, could bind humanity together “in sympathy and love,” the physical embodiment of Rouse’s heartstring-sweeping “breath of the living God,” and by acting out Christ’s love, bring individuals into closer fellowship with the Almighty. Science, for all of its impressive strides, could make no such promises.

In some ways, this brand of Christian interpretation was perfectly in step with the optimism of the era. As Progressive reformers sought to “perfect” society, they invoked many of the same calls to neighborliness and love. Consider the action plan put forth by one Christian periodical: “When these friends of the human race—the air, we must have for our breath, the water we must have for our thirst, and the fire we must have to warm our body and cook our food—when these turn against us, where shall we turn for succor?” queried *The Christian Reporter*.²⁴⁰ Concluding that “we can but bow the head and reverently worship” God, meditating on the precarity of human

²³⁹ Logan Marshall, *The True Story of Our National Calamity of Flood, Fire and Tornado ...: How the Whole Nation Joined in the Work of Relief* (Lima, Ohio: Webb Book & Bible Co., 1913).

²⁴⁰ *The Christian Reporter*, Bethany, NE. March 28, 1913, Vol. VII, No. 16.

life, the final step was to get “up and on again, bury the dead with tenderness, help the helpless and homeless generously, and build again upon the foundations better and stronger than ever. It is such a time to do the will of Christ, ‘Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me.’” In fact, this was essentially an espousal of the Social Gospel, fitted especially to this specific disaster.

Rouse, Greer, and *The Christian Reporter* espoused a distinctly turn-of-the-twentieth-century iteration of Christianity, one that incorporated Scripture and allowed for a supernatural but ultimately kind God; and most importantly, one that called for a practicable faith as the cornerstone of any takeaway from humanity’s trials. The work was messy, unpleasant, and at times, tragic. But, as the *Omaha Daily News* reminded its readers, “sometimes sordid details are all a part of a work which is divine—that of ministering to the hungry, clothing the naked and covering the shelterless.”²⁴¹

Sermon Title	Church (Denomination)	Pastor or Speaker
“Who Hath Gathered the Winds in His Fists” (Morning) “A Service of Thanksgiving for Deliverance” (10:45 am)	Third Presbyterian	George Jack
“Where Storms Never Come”	Dietz Memorial Methodist	C. N. Dawson
“McCabe’s New Field of Opportunity”	McCabe Methodist	W. H. Underwood
“Was the Roar of the Cyclone the Voice of God?”	Gayety Theater	Charles W. Savidge
“The Lord Was Not in the Wind”	First Unitarian	L. Walter Mason (visiting minister from First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh)
“Saved” (Morning) “He is Risen” (Evening)	Church of the Covenant	Charles H. Fleming
“Saved” (Afternoon)	Fairview Presbyterian	Charles H. Fleming
“Omaha’s Tragic Test”	St. Mary’s Avenue	J. A. Jenkins

²⁴¹ “The Relief Work,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 6.

	Congregational	
"The Publican's Prayer" (Morning) "Immortality" (Evening)	First Swedish Methodist	Gustav Erickson
"Lessons from the Storm"	First Congregational	Frederick T. Rouse
"The True Spirit of Benevolence" (Morning) "Lessons from the Recent Cyclone" (Evening)	Grace United Evangelical	Thomas M. Evans
"Omaha's Calamity, or The Problem of Natural Evil" (Morning) "Does the Stormy Wind Fulfill God's Word?" (Evening)	Dundee Presbyterian	Grant E. Fisher
"Life and Possession" (Morning) "Life's Conflicting Voices" (Evening)	First Christian	Andrew D. Harmon
"A Voice in the Storm" (Morning) "The Last Saying of Jesus on the Cross" (Evening)	First Methodist Episcopal	M. B. Williams
"The God of Our Fathers" (Morning) "The Resurrected Life" (Evening)	St. Matthew's English Lutheran	G. W. Snyder
"Lessons from the Storm" (Morning) "The Song of Life" (Evening)	Lowe Avenue Presbyterian	Nathaniel McGriffin
"Deep Calleth Unto Deep at the Noise of Thy Waterspouts"	Plymouth Congregational	F. W. Leavitt
"God's Teachings in Great Disasters" (Afternoon)	Zion English Lutheran	G. W. Snyder
("a sermon appropriate to the tornado") (11 am)	First Methodist Episcopal	
"The Judgment Day; What Is It? What Is It For?"	International Bible Student's Association	Frank Draper (visiting Bible lecturer)

Table 1

The weekly lineup of upcoming sermons in city churches exhibited the full panoply of early twentieth century American Christianity.²⁴² Though none of the sermons survive, the titles alone reveal the competing currents of

²⁴² Chart information compiled from "Sunday at Omaha Churches" *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, p. 5B. This is far from every church in Omaha, and it is unclear what determined whether or not a church's service information appeared in the paper.

fundamentalism and liberal theology; a wrathful God versus an emphasis on humanitarianism or a beneficent God. Charles Savidge, pastor of a congregation meeting at the Gayety Theatre asked with his flock “Was the Roar of the Cyclone the Voice of God?”²⁴³ Grant Fisher, pastor of Dundee Presbyterian, pondered the question of “natural evil” and wondered aloud if the “stormy wind fulfill(ed) God’s word.” These pastors, whether they answered their questions about God’s role in the affirmative, or whether they renounced His involvement, at least contemplated the possibility that the storm had divine origins. Meanwhile, other pastors, such as the visiting Unitarian minister L. Walter Mason, emphatically gave their view of God’s role (or, more accurately, His lack thereof) with sermons like “The Lord Was Not in the Wind.”²⁴⁴ Others left aside theological implications of causation and instead focused on outlining a Christian response to the storm, like Methodist minister W. H. Underwood’s sermon on “McCabe’s New Field of Opportunity,” or Thomas Evans’ “The True Spirit of Benevolence.” Many of the others drew multiple takeaways from the calamity, as “Lessons from the

²⁴³ Why Savidge’s congregation was meeting at the Gayety Theatre, which was either shortly before or after 1913 a burlesque theatre, is unknown. According to the city directory, Savidge was pastor of something called “The People’s Church” and a few years before the storm was superintendent of something called “House of Hope.” Perhaps the theatre was a temporary home, or perhaps Savidge and the People’s Church were rather non-traditional.

²⁴⁴ Mason drew his title from 1 Kings 19:11-13, a popular passage following the tornado. In that passage, the prophet Elijah is instructed to go stand on a mountainside to speak to God. While Elijah waited, a strong wind passed through and broke rocks into rubble, but “the Lord was not in the wind.” An earthquake and fire follow the wind, but the Lord likewise “was not in” them. Finally, Elijah hears a “still, small voice” and that was the Lord. The passage translated well to the situation for ministers and Christians who did not see a judgmental God in the storm.

Storm” (a title chosen by two separate pastors, one of whom was Frederick Rouse, who attempted to answer the question of a pastor’s fading influence in the Easter edition of the *World-Herald*), “Lessons from the Recent Cyclone,” and “God’s Teachings in Great Disasters” all demonstrate.

Not everyone was filled with neighborly kindness, and some religious persons and institutions garnered criticism to their interpretation of the storm or actions following it. Reverend T.J. Mackay, Rector of the All Saints Episcopal Church, unleashed a torrent of censure on the pastor of the Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church, Reverend Oliver D. Baltzly, in *The Examiner* shortly after the storm. Apparently, Baltzly endeavored to move his flock to godly gratitude for escaping the worst of the tornado and held a special service of thanksgiving for that purpose. But this effort struck a sour note for some outside of Baltzly’s congregation. Under the sarcastic headline “That Specially Favored Church,” Mackay raked Baltzly over the coals for his insensitivity: “We must certainly congratulate the pastor of the elegant Kountze Memorial church on the mental condition which enabled him to hold a special thanksgiving service on Sunday because ‘his church escaped injury, and none of his flock were hurt, and few suffered from property loss,’” spat Mackay. He was not finished with Baltzly:

How comforting it must be as one looks at the wrecked homes and numerous churches destroyed, to feel that while God had it in for those people, He spared us, and how grateful we Omaha people should be that ‘it was the tornado which struck Omaha and not the floods which devastated Ohio,’ and still more grateful ‘that the city was not swept by fire after the tornado.’ Poor tornado victims! Poor Ohio sufferers! We pity you and in a thankful spirit we tell you! Do not complain, for did not God do it? Was not God in the tornado and in the flood?

His tempest of indignation thus spent, Mackay concluded, "Verily, 'Wickedness is more curable than shallowness,'" his public excoriation of Baltzly complete.²⁴⁵ Mackay presumably did not think one should lack thankfulness for surviving the storm. His main criticism appears to have been that Baltzly's thanksgiving lacked true sympathy for those who had suffered in the tornado and subsequent floods. The implications of being "specially favored" also smacked of self-righteousness, and conjured unpopular and unpleasant implications about who did or did not deserve to suffer misfortune. Instead of bringing the community together in neighborly love, Baltzly's message struck Mackay as unnecessarily divisive and elitist.

Reverend Baltzly's sermon from his ill-received thanksgiving service does not survive, so it is impossible to tell whether or not he deserved Mackay's impassioned critique.²⁴⁶ In any event, he was not the only Omaha man of the cloth to be roundly condemned in the weeks following the storm. The Citizens' Relief Committee's plan to hold a city-wide cleanup effort on April 5 and 6, a Saturday and a Sunday, met opposition from a group of pastors from the Omaha Ministerial Union. The *Omaha Daily News* reported on the confrontation, which was "marked by considerable feeling:"

The Rev. Mr. Williams took up the cudgel in behalf of the ministers and was the principal (sic) spokesman for what he termed 'Sabbath observance.' He characterized the proposed

²⁴⁵ "That Specially Favored Church," *The Examiner*, April 19, 1913, p. 10.

²⁴⁶ In spite of Mackay's insinuations to the contrary, Baltzly was not the only one who led his flock in a service of Thanksgiving. On the Sunday following the storm, the Third Presbyterian Church also held "a service of Thanksgiving for deliverance" after their usual morning service. "Preachers and Themes," *Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, p. 5B.

Sunday work as 'desecration of the Lord's day.' The central relief committee answered in substance: 'We are going to work on Sunday if it is necessary, and what are you going to do about it?' ... (Executive Committee Member) Mr. Cowell arose and told the militant pastor that he knew as much of Sabbath observance as did the minister. (Fellow Executive Committee Member) Mr. Byrne then said: 'If I had a son and he was able to work and he refused to go out next Sunday and help in this "cleanup" work I would horse-whip him.'²⁴⁷

"Considerable feeling," it seems, was no overstatement. The Sabbath-defenders, unable to secure cooperation from the CRC and smarting from the vehemence with which their position was denounced, urged churchmen not to attend the Sunday work day.²⁴⁸ Probably to draw contrast to this group of ministers, the *Daily News* featured a story the next day of a "Minister on the Job," who, instead of waiting around to be told what to do, began to clear wreckage as "a free lance." The *Daily News* heartily approved of Rev. Fisher's efforts, declaring, "the muscular Christianity exerted by Mr. Fisher in clearing up the ruins of those two houses exceeded the amount necessary for a whole week's revival."²⁴⁹ Others added further condemnation of the Ministerial Union—on April 5, Alfred Sorenson, editor of the *Examiner*, printed a "hot tamale" of a letter purported to be from one of his "constant readers":

Some of the ministers of the city have taken it upon themselves to criticize the clean-up movement scheduled for Saturday and Sunday, the working on Sunday seemingly 'sticking in their

²⁴⁷ "Refuse to Call Off Sunday Clean-Up," *Omaha Daily News*, April 4, 1913. The Reverend Williams leading the Sabbath-observance charge was Milton B. Williams of the First Methodist Church, not Rev. John Williams of St. Barnabas Church, who was a member of the Executive Relief Committee.

²⁴⁸ They were, the article noted at the very end, perfectly enthusiastic about the Saturday work day.

²⁴⁹ "Little Stories of the Big Clean-Up Day," *Omaha Daily News*, April 5, 1913, p. 3. "Reverend Fisher" was probably Grant Fisher, pastor of the Dundee Presbyterian Church.

reverend craws.' I had almost come to the conclusion that even the preachers were getting somewhat wider between the eyes—that the bigotry of olden times was passing away. But no such luck! One would think that even the ministers of the gospel could forego the day's business in the face of a misfortune for which their god is responsible. The time of calamity is when men show the best or worst that is in them, and the present is no exception to the rule. Do the ministers of Omaha want it to be known throughout the length of this intelligent nation that they alone held back while others worked?

The writer, whose disillusion with things religious seemingly predated the tornado, rounded into impressive form to close his letter: "The bible says it is proper to pull your ox or your ass out of the mire on the Sabbath day. But some asses are buried so deep in the mire of their bigotry that they do not wish to be pulled out, and insist that everybody else follow their example."²⁵⁰ In an ironic twist, this apparently irreligious writer imitated Christ censuring the Pharisees about their legalistic standards, privileging community-led storm recovery and clean up ("doing good") over Sabbath observance. Instead of appearing holy and observant, the clean-up day protestors with their "reverend craws" seemed out-of-touch, lacking in compassion, and reeking of self-righteousness.

These two critiques illustrate the potential pitfalls of religious responses in a secularizing, if not secular, society and the accusations aimed at some churches' responses to the storm. In both of these examples, Christian leadership failed to adequately meet the demands of the situation, and exhibited a lack of compassion that was appalling to outside observers. The latter case's legalism showed religion at its least relevant and most alienating,

²⁵⁰ "To the Editor of the Examiner," *The Examiner*, April 5, 1913, p. 3.

a form useless in meeting the needs of the present hour. In the former case, Rev. Mackay did not advocate for disregarding the faithful or argue that Christians should not weigh in on the storm or participate in the direction of its recovery. As a man of the cloth himself who obviously had opinions about the proper Christian response to the storm, such a position would have been hypocritical. Perhaps instead Mackay was sensitive to the concerns raised by Reverend Rouse in the *World-Herald*—that the world depended on the “preacher’s message of faith, and hope and love.” Instead of “looking to his task” and preaching this critical message, Baltzly instead offered a tone-deaf message of exceptionalism that threatened to alienate rather than contribute to society’s moral bedrock.

The *Examiner* reader disgusted by the Sabbath-observing clergy notwithstanding, others found in the storm a reaffirmation of their religious beliefs. Several tornado survivors attributed their escape from death directly to divine mercy and sometimes, their own direct supplication for salvation. The *Omaha Daily News*, descriptively titling one such brief account “Prays; Is Unhurt” carried several such stories the day following the tornado. “A few minutes after the tornado struck, a woman knelt at Twenty-sixth and Parker and prayed. She was unhurt,” the item read.²⁵¹ *The lack of details in this account do not illustrate good journalistic practices, and call the veracity of this testimonial into account—but in this case, providing the details was not important. The story seemed like it could be true, and probably it was true, more or less.* The same page featured another similar account, this time with more detail: “Mrs. James

²⁵¹ “Prays; Is Unhurt,” *Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 9.

Byrnes of 2806 Franklin street was home alone. She said she was too ...'I knelt down on the floor and prayed to God to save me, and I believe he did, for I was not hurt, although my home was completely wrecked. How I escaped unhurt I shall never be able to tell,' said the woman."²⁵² George Sheldon, who witnessed another tornado from the storm from his farm outside of Omaha wrote to "Dear ones at home" that the tornado narrowly missed his property but caused significant damage for many of his neighbors. "While we are sorry... for those injured we are thankful to God for sparing us," he told his family, before reassuring them that he would "see about uncle Geo. right away," a resident of Omaha.²⁵³

The nuns of the Sacred Heart, who lived and taught at Duchesne Academy survived a direct and destructive hit on the building. Miraculously (as they indeed saw it), none of the nuns or resident students were killed. The house journal for Easter Sunday, evidently written some time after the storm, records the nuns' journey from surviving the initial blow to the arduous task of making their way through the massive, heavily damaged, and dark building to check on the other inhabitants. When the tornado struck, the community of sisters was gathered in the recently built chapel for an Easter

²⁵² "B.H. Fields Dies Underneath Debris," *Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 9.

²⁵³ Letter of George C. Sheldon (NSHS—RG1378) March 26, 1913. Sheldon assured his family earlier in the letter that Uncle George's residence appeared to be close to but not within the path of the storm, and that a careful monitoring of the newspaper death lists had not included his name, therefore, he presumed he was fine. Sheldon's letter is also an unusual and graphic account of the effects of the Easter tornado outbreak on farmers—he includes detailed descriptions of the loss of livestock and the resulting euthanasia necessary for injured animals.

blessing. Windows shattered, a candelabrum fell, statues of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph were “hurled” to the floor, benches were “thrown helter skelter,” and the myriad flowers decorating the chapel for Easter scattered everywhere. A few nuns were pinned by debris, and those that tried to flee were “blown down the corridor like leaves in an autumn wind.” After a difficult and dangerous journey through the wreckage, the nuns approached the infirmary to check on the residents within. Finding the door blocked, Mother Meagher and three companions “used one of the doors (littering) the corridor as a battering ram,” freeing the occupants. Eventually, several Jesuit Fathers and other religious members of Omaha came to the nuns’ aid, and obtained temporary shelter for them. Some of the victims slept “as if nothing had happened,” while the Reverend Mother “devoted the rest of the night to prayer.”²⁵⁴

The nameless nun who recorded the night of the storm in such vivid detail adopted a philosophical and God-centered interpretation of the storm by the time she wrote her entry. This is evident by the way she began the entry for that night: “Before we had the opportunity of finishing prayer, our God Himself came to crown our Easter joy with, what seemed at the moment, a heavy cross. But perhaps we understand better now than ever before that God’s ways are not ours, and that in the cross is joy of the spirit.” She did not shy away from attributing the storm to the work of God—in fact, she emphasized His perceived role by stating that the tornado was from “God Himself.” Notably, however, she does not hazard a guess at interpreting a

²⁵⁴ “Easter Tornado,” *Duchesne Today*, Spring 2008, p. 14-15.

purpose or motivation behind it—there is no assumption that the storm is judgment, nor is there mention of any sort of divine test to encourage Christ-like love towards one’s neighbors. Instead, she links the storm to the ultimate Christian symbol of Easter—the cross of Christ. As Jesus suffered through personal devastation, so too must his people at times. Omaha’s tornado was one such time—a “heavy cross,” as she phrased it. Trying to decipher why it had happened was beside the point to her—she was content to consider it a mystery this side of heaven, as she summed up with the conclusion that “God’s ways are not ours.” All she knew was that joy sometimes came only after great sorrow.

Attributing salvation to God, whether in a very close call or not was a way of understanding a disaster particularly rife with capriciousness. Newspapers reveled in stories of both tragic and lucky coincidence, as well as freakish physical effects—bits of straw driven through a piano, one house smashed while its neighbor remained untouched, a house picked up and spun around 180 degrees before coming to rest back on its foundation. The concentrated, swirling, and very strong winds of a tornado frequently produce improbable and strange damage, and Omaha’s Easter twister was no exception. For those who survived or emerged entirely unscathed while their neighbors suffered, divine intervention offered one way of understanding their good fortune—their prayers had been answered. Or, even if they had not prayed during the storm but had escaped, thankfulness for preservation perhaps still seemed like a good policy.

Clearly, God and Christian religion served an important role for Omahans attempting to come to terms with the tornado. Christianity in twentieth century is often presented as a tale of decline—indeed, even Reverend Rouse noticed the many empty seats in Omaha’s churches—but the narrative of declension in the face of science and secularism oversimplifies the case. Faith offered a powerful rubric for interpreting the storm for people from all places on the religious spectrum: from Catholic nuns to fundamentalists to Unitarians. A decline in participation in regular church services did not mean that personal faith or religious traditions were expunged from early twentieth century society. Instead, religion proved a surprisingly flexible tool for sorting out the storm’s aftermath. For some, it provided an explanation of why the storm had happened in the first place. For others, it offered a guide for what to do next. For scores of Omahans, religious interpretations of the storm offered the “faith, hope, and love” they needed to move past the storm, just as Reverend Rouse hoped that it might.

The move away from “judgment narratives” should not be seen as a rejection of God, but as an affirmation of applicable Christianity. If God’s role in the tornado was to move and empower them to better love their neighbor, for example, that was a dictate that did not require much theological parsing or soul-searching. Furthermore, pursuing this type of Christian interpretation allowed one to maintain faith in God and also accommodate scientific discoveries. It could simultaneously be true that hot and cold air spun around into a tornado *and* that God wished Christians to use the opportunity to demonstrate love to one another. Understanding how a tornado formed did

not preclude one from finding comfort, joy, and satisfaction in their faith; and likewise, nurturing one's belief in God did not mean that one needed to reject knowledge of air masses as un-Christian. When face to face with a tornado, no one later remembered thinking in the panic about the awesome ability of air masses to create such furious destruction, but many remembered praying or crying out to God. Science answered many questions, but in a time of extreme crisis, it was not uncommon for people to find themselves willing to believe in a God who heard prayers and was capable of sufficient power to stop a storm.

In times of calm, however, there was eagerness to answer questions about the natural world. The nineteenth century was one of frenetic scientific discovery and innovation, and the beginning of the twentieth century showed no signs of slowing this wholesale change in the depths to which humans understood the way the world worked. Natural processes previously understood only in the most superficial and obvious ways were being broken down, classified, and studied; and the body of knowledge surrounding people, animals, and the world they inhabited expanded seemingly daily. Not every "discovery" proved valid or was used for good—infamously, the "scientific" field of eugenics attempted to enlist the vocabulary and methodology of science in support of damaging and discriminatory policies and procedures enacted against various groups of people—but advances in other fields revolutionized scientific understanding.

Meteorology, a nascent field in the late nineteenth century, is one such example. In 1872, two years after President Ulysses S. Grant authorized the creation of the Weather Bureau of the United States, the *Scientific American*

magazine rhapsodized about the possibilities of mastering an understanding of the weather. "Of all the sciences now engrossing public attention, and lending aid to the benefit of mankind, there is none deserving of more minute study than that of meteorology," one article claimed. Though it was "a late birth into the world of knowledge," this new field invited "earnest and capable laborers to enter into the harvest, for there is at present demanding public attention no science which promises so ample a reward to students, and such valuable results to society as this of the phenomena of earth, sky, and sea."²⁵⁵ But great though its potential upside might be, it was not an easily understood area: "the principles of the science can scarcely as yet be considered settled, and the ideas of most persons on the subject are still very vague," the article cautioned. This was no understatement. So little understood were the principles behind storm development that one reader wrote to the magazine the following suggestion for managing tornados:

For (changing the track of tornadoes) I propose the following: Take one keg or barrel of common rifle or cannon powder to the limit of your city or town where it is approached by a tornado. Fix to it an artillery priming tube, having a string to it about 100 yards long. Take your position at the end of the string, holding it taut. Wait till the tornado seems to be precisely over the powder, then fire the powder by pulling the string, and if the charge is large enough, that gyrating, whirling tornado will be effectually blasted out of existence; at least, made harmless till blown beyond your town, where perhaps it will reform itself."²⁵⁶

John F. Schultz, the author of this plan and letter, was from New York City, an area of the country not known for experience with tornadoes, so this

²⁵⁵ "Meteorology, Its Capabilities and Its Future," *Scientific American* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 1872): 7, doi:10.1038/scientificamerican01011872-7b.

²⁵⁶ "Correspondence," *Scientific American* 49, no. 23 (December 8, 1883): 357, doi: 10.1038/scientificamerican12081883-357.

plan may have seemed perfectly reasonable to him. Or, perhaps he was merely having a little fun with the *Scientific American* and its readers.

Whether serious or not, Schultz's letter was reprinted in at least one Nebraska newspaper, and prompted a Topeka man to write his own letter to the *Scientific American* pointing out the flaws in Schultz's explosive weather management proposal. Bert Davis, the Topeka respondent, first corrected Schultz's language, taking issue with the use of "tornado," which, Davis claimed was "properly a 'straight blow,'" and taking the liberty of supposing that Schultz meant a cyclone instead. Such confusion was common for decades after this letter was written, particularly surrounding the word cyclone, which could mean to various people at various times a tornado, a low-pressure system, or a hurricane. Aside from terminology, Davis quibbled with other parts of the plan: a "whirlwind" did not travel in a straight line, making it nearly impossible to correctly place one's barrel of gunpowder; tornados occurring at night posed all kinds of difficulty in detection; there was not adequate time to position the barrel and take cover oneself ("by the time the powder was in place the cyclone would probably be in the next county"); and finally and perhaps most convincingly, few would have the nerve to pull off the plan in the face of an advancing tornado. Even if someone did have such bravery, Davis concluded, "the whirlwind would probably miss the powder and blow the man out of existence."²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ "Correspondence," *Scientific American* 50, no. 2 (January 12, 1884): 21, doi:10.1038/scientificamerican01121884-21. The Nebraska newspaper in which Schultz is cited is the March 13, 1884 issue of the *Tekamah Burtonian*.

It is hard to argue with Davis' critiques, or with his alternate suggestion for saving oneself from a tornado—dispensing with the gunpowder and taking shelter in a cellar. But both Schultz and Davis' letters reveal two features of attitudes toward science generally, and meteorology specifically, that characterized the next several decades. First, these letters—and the very existence of the *Scientific American*—demonstrated popular engagement with these new fields of discovery. John Schultz may have been a normal man from New York City, but that did not stop him from proposing an unconventional idea for tornado prevention to a national readership. The *Scientific American's* call for “laborers for the harvest” seemed to imply that any young man going to college might excel in the new science (though college-bound young men were admittedly a relatively small and privileged demographic).²⁵⁸ Both of these are hints of the interest in and engagement with scientific discovery, and the rise of popular science. No longer the sole bastion of the most learned members of society, scientific theories—and pseudoscience—increasingly were consumed by the broader public. Magazines like *The Scientific American* and *Science* made the complexities of the universe available to any family's living room. Expositions and World's Fairs featured scientific exhibits, particularly physical sciences. Access and exposure to science reached unprecedented levels during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

²⁵⁸ Interestingly, the metaphor used here by the *Scientific American* is a biblical one, specifically from Matthew 9:37-38: “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.” (KJV)

Secondly, Schultz's input especially, illustrates a distinctive feature of the time period—the conviction that with enough scientific knowledge, problems in the natural world might be overcome. This attitude was evident in many corners of society at the time, culminating in Progressive reformers of a variety of stripes. But in meteorology, there was a sense that science might eventually defeat nature, or at least give humans the tools to better withstand it.

By 1913, the scientific inclinations evident thirty years earlier had reached full flower, as well as acquiring other characteristics of the time. As with social work and relief, a societal mania for professionalization and systemization left its mark on meteorology. In some ways, this was an easy progression for the field—for decades, the main purpose and activity of the Weather Bureau of the United States was meticulous recording of various climatological markers, both precise (river levels or air temperature) and those more open to the interpretation of the observer (what exactly did a “fair” day look like, anyway?) Pages upon pages of tables at hundreds of locations across the country bore testimony to the constant measurement and observation of the air Americans breathed and the weather they endured or enjoyed. Of course, they did not just record these numbers and descriptions for no reason—the end of each month necessitated averaging all of these numbers, and the end of the year brought even more attempts at analysis. Comparisons over years and between locations revealed patterns and gave a good sense of

the historical trends of the weather, but forecasting the weather with any certainty remained a dream.²⁵⁹

On March 8, 1913, the maddening uncertainty of the science was explicated by Vilhelm Bjerknes, a prominent Norwegian physicist and meteorologist, in an article headed “Meteorology as an Exact Science,” surely a tantalizing title to its students.²⁶⁰ “The difference between (the physics of the atmosphere and meteorology) might be expressed by recalling that physics is an exact science, whereas one might be inclined to describe meteorology as a most inexact science.” Bjerknes had a dream though, specifically “mathematical predetermination of the weather.” The goal, he admitted, was still a long way off, and he, personally, did not entertain hope that he would live to see it, but he believed that one day reliable forecasts could be obtained. In the meantime, Americans relied on vagueness, guesswork, and their own observations to anticipate the weather. On Easter morning, the *Omaha Bee* offered a forecast of sorts to its readers for that day: a cartoon of a dizzy-looking honeybee with the caption “unsettled” purported to be Sunday’s weather. In a sense, this was accurate—but not particularly helpful without the benefit of hindsight. (Figure 1)

²⁵⁹ Ever-improving long-distance communication made the sharing of data easier, but not always more effective.

²⁶⁰ Vilhelm Bjerknes, “Meteorology as an Exact Science,” *Scientific American Supplement* 75, no. 1940 (March 8, 1913): 147, doi:10.1038/scientificamerican03081913-147supp. This article was made up of excerpts from a speech Bjerknes made two months earlier.



Figure 1

Another forecast for that day's weather promised "Twelve Hours of Sunshine" for "most of the country." This front page article gleefully reported the "relenting" of "the weather forecaster" and promised that for most, Easter would feature "a golden sun undimmed in a cloudless sky...(shining) upon the blush and bloom of the Easter parade in the greater part of the country." This forecast was an especial gift to American women, the article noted, crediting the forecaster with the ability to cut through politics, condescendingly describing the forecast as a gift to "American womanhood—suffragist and anti-suffragist, united in the common cause of beautiful clothes." In this account, the forecaster's greatest wish was to make people

happy—not only “American womanhood.” A prediction of rainy weather was given “sadly and timidly” for the gulf states.²⁶¹

The apparent irreverence characterizing this report, privileging Easter celebrations over potentially unpleasant weather forecasts, did not characterize most practitioners of meteorology, professional or hobbyist. Though it was only emerging as a formal science in the early twentieth century, amateur meteorology existed for centuries in the form of rudimentary forecast maxims or private weather observation journals. But in 1913, popular science and increasing access to weather observation and measurement instruments allowed non-scientists to indulge their interest in the field in increasingly technical ways. Professor Alphonse Schmitt, who watched the Easter tornado from his office at Creighton University, was one such serious hobbyist. Schmitt taught students at the Catholic college the time-honored academic disciplines of English and Classics—fields not particularly renowned for their overlap with the physical sciences. Yet Schmitt’s account of the storm was published in the *Monthly Weather Review*, a publication of the United States Weather Bureau, alongside the account of Lucius A. Welsh, the Bureau’s local forecaster. Schmitt, the *Weather Review* noted, had “for a number of years...been a student and an investigator of meteorology.”²⁶²

Schmitt’s account was more descriptive and personal than Welsh’s, whose description was almost entirely composed of scientific measurements

²⁶¹ “Easter is Fair Generally,” *The Omaha Bee*, March 23, 1913, p. 1.

²⁶² L. A. Welsh, “Tornado of March 23, 1913, at Omaha, Nebr.,” *Monthly Weather Review* 41, no. 3 (March 1, 1913): 396, doi:10.1175/1520-0493(1913)41<396:TOMAON>2.0.CO;2.

and precise locations of the tornado; yet Schmitt's version is far more technical and exact than personal accounts of the storm found in other sources. It seems clear that Schmitt attempted to observe the storm as a meteorologist, not simply as an interested and horrified witness. Schmitt knew something about severe storms, as is clear from many of his observations, including this one:

The peculiar color of the clouds—a muddy buff—and the time of day led me to suspect the approach of a tornado, but it was hardly more than a passing thought. The season seemed too early for such phenomena in this latitude; the wind was strong when I thought there should have been a comparative calm, and it did not veer in the least, as far as I could judge from the smoke; it had not been unusually sultry or warm for the end of March; these considerations led me to abandon the idea...

Schmitt regretted dismissing the idea, not because he felt he might have warned those in the storm's path (an impossible task with no wide-spread warning system in place, and no way of predicting where, exactly, the tornado might strike the city), but because he missed a unique opportunity to document the storm: "Many times since I have upbraided myself for taking my eyes off that narrow black strip on the southwestern horizon," he wrote in the *Weather Review*, "for it was the top of the funnel cloud, and for not getting my camera ready." Nevertheless, when the tornado did finally strike, Schmitt was ready to watch with all of the exactitude at his disposal. He timed the tornado, and from this information, he made confident assertions about the tornado, correcting the "uninformed" reports in the press:

Under the erroneous impression that it is the speed of the forward progress of the tornado upon which the amount of damage depends, it has been estimated in press dispatches that the "twister" must have moved at a rate of not less than 75 miles an hour. My own estimate, made by timing the progress of the funnel for a distance of 1 block, is that it was going at the rate of

40 feet a second, or slightly less than 30 miles an hour. It was just 5.49 when I first saw the cloud at about Fortieth and Farnum (sic) Streets, and it was 5.55 when it crossed Twenty-fourth Street.

Schmitt followed up these calculated observations with an in-person inspection the next day, traversing the “entire path” of the tornado throughout the course of the day. He paid careful attention to the amount of damage, concluding “the tornado was one of only moderate intensity, far less severe, certainly, than the St. Louis storm of 1896.” Confident in what he saw and in the accuracy of his observations, this professor of English and Classics did not hesitate to offer his findings as fact, and the National Weather Bureau agreed, publishing them in the journal written for the benefit of its employees across the country.

Schmitt’s ability to operate as an informed non-professional with an acceptable level of knowledge about meteorology illustrates an odd outgrowth of the worship of expertise characteristic of this era of American history. Schmitt, as a professor of English and Classics, likely did not gain his meteorological expertise through formal training. However, he was knowledgeable about meteorology, noting features of the storm like the frequency of cloud-to-ground lightning and the behavior of the wall cloud that spawned the tornado that a casual observer would be unlikely to note. He had initially dismissed the idea of a tornado on the basis that it seemed too early for them to occur “in this latitude,” again showing familiarity with storm systems. Furthermore, Schmitt deployed some technical terms about cloud formations, describing the “cumulonimbus” and “cirrus sheet” following the

storm. That a Jesuit priest professionally concerned with Plato and Virgil could be accepted as an expert in the area of meteorology shows that “expertise” could be conferred on certain people even without them devoting their lives to the pursuit of that field. Obviously, employment within the field made the assumption of expertise an easier bridge—Lucius Welsh, the National Weather Service’s forecaster, probably did not need to offer much proof of his ability to speak to barometric pressure and wind velocity, such an ability was assumed to come with the job. Likewise, in other fields, Horace Hollingsworth and Gladys Wells Griffith could claim expertise in social work and aid by virtue of their full-time employment in the field. Schmitt, whose “day jobs” might naturally place his expertise in classics, literature, and the Catholic Church, staked a claim for expertise in a wholly unrelated field. His language shows that he did, indeed, have knowledge that was out of the ordinary about meteorology, so his claim was not necessarily an invalid one. But his ability to transcend his “rightful” fields to authoritatively speak within another one reveals a slippery attitude toward expertise. Yes, it was valued and revered. But it was also assumed to be obtainable, at least by some people, even if practiced on the side. This was a powerful assumption, one that did not just let the hobbyist meteorologist see his name in publication, but was part and parcel of Omaha’s businessmen uncritically appointing themselves at the head of the relief effort, simply assuming that they had the capacity to absorb the needed expertise.

If the general public did not demand or claim weather expertise for themselves, there at least existed a general curiosity about what pushed some

thunderstorms from rain, wind, and rumbling thunder into swirling vortices of destruction. Frederick Drinker, author of one of the commemorative accounts of the Easter tornado and subsequent Ohio floods, thought this demand so great that he inserted the section “What Science Tells Of Tornadoes and Western Storms” before the introduction to his book. “With the storm tragedies fresh in the public mind,” Drinker began, “a clearer understanding of the causes and destructive powers of tornadoes and floods is sought by many.” Drinker’s instincts are of a piece with the Progressive undercurrents of his time, when many of the movements of the era began with the premise that where there was a problem, there must also be a solution. Tornadoes and floods were definitely a problem—perhaps understanding the science behind the storms could provide a solution. Drinker promised that the collected wisdom of George Bliss, a meteorologist for the U.S. Weather Bureau, would “be found interesting and pertinent.”²⁶³

Bliss, for his part, credited the American public with keeping up with the larger contours of meteorological knowledge. “The public is generally coming to understand that weather and temperature conditions drift across the country from the West toward the East,” he wrote. However, this knowledge was imperfect, at best. The consequence of this basic understanding, he continued, was that when those on the East Coast heard of the tornado and the flooding, local weather bureau offices were “fairly besieged by anxious inquiries over the telephone as to whether we might expect the tornado or the floods.” Bliss felt that better public understanding of

²⁶³ Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire*.

hazardous weather conditions would be useful, and undertook an explanation of the components of a tornadic storm. "Only the larger atmospheric disturbances, several hundreds of miles in diameter, maintain their formation long enough to cross the country," he explained. These enormous areas of "disturbances" were not the same thing as thunderstorms or tornadoes, Bliss said. Instead, thunderstorms and tornadoes, "the intense local disturbances," formed within the massive disturbance, and rarely traveled across the entire country, spending their energy rapidly and dissipating before able to move that far. Sometimes, he allowed, numerous thunderstorms might form at once and cover a large area, giving the false impression of a single, massive storm. Bliss then elaborated on tornados, that their area of coverage was small, but that the velocity of contained winds was incredibly high, so that when "they happen to pass over a large city, as in the case of Omaha, the results are appalling." No instrument could be made that might measure these dangerous winds, Bliss said, but their effects were undeniable. Finally, the damage to buildings, according to Bliss, was caused by differences in pressure which caused structures to more or less explode, leaving the pieces to be scattered by the tornado's winds.

Bliss's explanation of tornados and thunderstorms were broadly, if not exactly, correct. But he left his most chilling fact about these storms until the end of his summary: "Tornadoes may form whenever conditions are favorable for thunderstorms. Their formation cannot be forecasted," he wrote.

Thunderstorms occurred in nearly every part of the United States, meaning

that the tornado menace potentially threatened every sector of the nation.²⁶⁴ Bliss's acceptance of the capriciousness of tornados is not surprising—without radar and sophisticated imaging instruments, tornado forecasts are very difficult to make accurately. But his next statement is more unusual: "if it (a tornado forecast) could be done, a warning for tornadoes would probably frighten about as many people to death as the storm would kill."²⁶⁵ Anyway, argued Mark Walrod Harrington, the first civilian chief of the U.S. Weather Bureau and author of the 1909 book *About the Weather*, tornados were incredibly rare, too rare to waste much time worrying about. Harrington claimed there were only fifty tornados per year in the United States, that the area which they covered was extremely small, and that an individual had only a 1 in 625,000 chance in seeing a tornado. In fact, wrote Harrington, "there is not one chance in a million, though they lived to be centenarians, that they will be injured by a tornado."²⁶⁶

This leeriness of tornado warnings did not exclusively belong to Bliss; it was part of official Weather Bureau policy. Although experiments on tornado forecasting and warnings occurred in the 1880s, they proved unreliable and

²⁶⁴ Bliss did limit this somewhat, pointing out that although tornados occasionally occurred in the Northeast U.S., they primarily occurred in the South and Western United States.

²⁶⁵ Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire*.

²⁶⁶ Mark Walrod Harrington, *About the Weather*, Appleton's Home Reading Books; Division I. Natural History; (New York: D. Appleton, 1909), 164–165. Harrington's calculations are wildly off, but because technology did not yet exist to detect tornados that occurred beyond the view of population centers, at night, or hidden within a rain curtain, it is not surprising that tornados were undercounted. In a quirk of fate, Walrod reportedly later died of complications of a lightning strike, an event more statistically probable than one in a million, yet still quite rare.

impossible to reasonably implement.²⁶⁷ Consequently, the U.S. Signal Corps, then in charge of meteorological activities, ceased any effort to forecast storms in 1887, and when the U.S. Weather Bureau formed in 1890, it reaffirmed this position. The word “tornado” was banned from any official Weather Bureau release, and this remained the policy in fact until 1938, and in practice until at least 1950.²⁶⁸ Combined with the dramatic images of destruction and freakish accounts of the wind’s effects, the utter unpredictability of tornados completed their terrifying mystique.

Unsurprisingly, the inability to forecast a tornado either practically or due to policy restrictions resulted in some confusion about how much the Weather Bureau knew ahead of time about the storm that struck the city. The “relenting” national forecast the *Bee* featured on their front page on Easter morning gave no indication of potential for dangerous storms. The April 5, 1913 issue of *Scientific American* also stated that the tornado’s appearance was a surprise: “For some reason that is hardly apparent from the weather maps,

²⁶⁷ Timothy A. Coleman et al., “The History (and Future) of Tornado Warning Dissemination in the United States,” *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 92, no. 5 (May 2011): 568. For example, one early warning system prototype involved placing telegraph wires on the southwest side of a town (in accordance with the direction most tornados travel) which would break in high winds, setting off alarm bells and a warning canon to alert town residents.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 568–569. A memo circulated by F.W. Reichelderfer, Chief of the Weather Bureau, in 1950 advised employees to stop telling people that they were not permitted to make tornado forecasts, as it was creating credibility problems for the Bureau. Reichelderfer then stated the “official viewpoint” on the matter: “There is no regulation or order against the forecasting of tornados. Whenever the forecaster has a sound basis for predicting tornados, the forecast should include the prediction in as definite terms as the circumstances justify.”

violent thunderstorms and scattered tornadoes occurred,” the author shrugged.²⁶⁹ But some credited the Weather Bureau with foreknowledge. The *Omaha World-Herald* reported that a warning was sent out, and that it was the result of a “general storm area of low barometer” that was over Colorado on Sunday morning. On this basis of the “threatening” weather in Colorado, the article reported, Willis Moore, the chief of the U.S. Weather Bureau and his office issued “warnings of shifting gales Sunday afternoon and night of the plain states and the upper Mississippi Valley.”²⁷⁰ Of course, “shifting gales” does not a tornado make, a point Omaha’s local forecaster, Lucius Welsh reiterated to the *Omaha Daily News*. The paper summarized Welsh’s explanation for its readers, informing them, “the prediction of gales did not mean a tornado, as the storm of yesterday was...but (it) did indicate dangerous winds.”²⁷¹ Welsh’s office received news of the gale warning around 3:15 on Sunday afternoon, “announcing a cold wave, preceded by gales.” While Welsh knew that the weather might soon take a turn, “the information could not be disseminated generally,” the paper noted. This was hardly Welsh’s fault, or the Weather Bureau’s—print sources, by far the most common source of news for the general public, could not offer the flexibility timely storm warnings would require. And anyway, noted Welsh to conclude the *Daily News*’ article “No one is able to predict a tornado.”

²⁶⁹ “The Recent Storms and Floods,” *Scientific American* 108, no. 14 (April 5, 1913): 315.

²⁷⁰ “Weather Bureau on Omaha Storm,” *Omaha World-Herald*, March 26, 1913, p. 10.

²⁷¹ “Weather Bureau Had Warning of Storm,” *Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 9.

Not everyone shared the Weather Bureau's hesitation to forecast tornados. For Irl R. Hicks, the Easter tornado was a moment of triumph.²⁷² Hicks was a former Methodist pastor turned self-styled "weather prophet," and the Easter tornado was perhaps his greatest success. Hicks had published the "Reverend Irl R. Hicks Almanac" since 1894, as well a monthly magazine called *Word and Works* that promised to cover "the whole field of religious, scientific and household literature...from a liberal and progressive standpoint," and was advertised in the almanac for an additional subscription. Hicks' undertaking of a yearly almanac was, as he saw it, a service to the greater public good. On the basis of a series of successful storm forecasts, Hicks claimed he had "been urged to the point beyond which our refusal would have been unkind and reprehensible," and that he was "sending it forth" as "a messenger of mercy and light, in God's name." Hicks made liberal use of his hallowed background, attributing his great skill to "the gifts that God (had) given (him)," and including the verse "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good" in every issue.²⁷³ Public humility aside, the "weather prophet" business was good to Hicks, who had a very comfortable income by the 1900s, and his obituary in 1916 claimed he had "amassed a fortune" through the almanac. He had a large and beautiful residence in a small town

²⁷² Not that the ever-confident Hicks needed vindication. Every issue of his almanac started with circulation figures and reiterations of its usefulness, and his "weather prophet" business had already made him financially secure.

²⁷³ Walter B. Stevens, *Centennial History of Missouri (the Center State) One Hundred Years in the Union, 1820-1921*, (St. Louis, Chicago :, 1921), 754, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hx2zc2>. Hicks always cited "Prove all things..." with an attribution to "Word." Its more typical citation is 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (KJV).

near Saint Louis, one he christened “Sky-View” in honor of the towering octagonal observatory perched on top of it.²⁷⁴

Servant of the Lord or no, Hicks saw his almanac as a work of science. “Perhaps no scientific publication ever met with heartier and more universal popular favor” than his inaugural almanac, Hicks crowed in 1895.²⁷⁵ Though Hicks’ almanacs (like other almanacs) were an amalgamation of meteorology, astronomy, astrology, calendars, and religious dates of note, Hicks took the mission of scientific education seriously.²⁷⁶ In 1896, Hicks dedicated a section of his almanac to explicating the differences and characteristics of tornados and cyclones, an apparently futile mission since mass confusion on this score still existed seventeen years later. A tornado, “a destroying monster,” in Hicks’ ever-colorful language, was “a small, exceedingly violent, whirling point.” Hicks conceded that the causes of tornados were still unknown, but rejected the notion that “tornadoes develope (sic) and rush upon their victims like the leap of the tiger from his secret crouching.” Instead, he claimed, tornados always exhibited “unmistakable indications” in the hours and days

²⁷⁴ Readers of the 1902 Hicks Almanac were treated to photos of the residence from every angle at the very beginning of the edition.

²⁷⁵ Humility was not Hicks’ specialty. The following year, in the process of thanking his readers for their support, he claimed “comparatively few books in the world’s history have reached a circulation so general and wide.”

²⁷⁶ The “science prophet” also saw the possibility of profit in science—by the 1897 issue, he was peddling his own barometer for \$10. Also in that issue, he advised readers that a quick glance at a “perfectly trustworthy barometer” would let anyone know “whether the time has come to seek refuge in the storm house.” Not coincidentally, a massive tornado (twice as deadly as Omaha’s Easter tornado) had hit Hicks’ hometown of Saint Louis the preceding May. A Hicks-brand hygrometer went on sale in 1903 for the home meteorologist.

preceding one, and that the well-prepared family would almost certainly have “ample time to take refuge.”²⁷⁷

By 1913, Hicks’ almanac was chock-full of advertisements, as well as reader-submitted photographs of weather phenomena verifying “a Vulcan blizzard,” or “Venus storm” Hicks had forecast. If using a very generous reading of Hicks’ predictions for March 1913, Hicks foretold the Omaha tornado, a coincidence that gained him attention and acclaim. One insurance company even used this “prophecy” as inducement to take out tornado policies, since the all-knowing Hicks also feared a “reactionary storm period” with “dangerous TORNADIC storms” on April 5 and 6.²⁷⁸ His famed Easter tornado forecast, published in the 1913 *Almanac* read thusly:

A Regular Storm Period involves the 17th to the 23rd...The Moon will be in opposition with Earth and Sun, at an eclipse node, on the 22nd, and on the celestial equator and in perigee on the 21st. We will venture to put down....the 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd, and 23rd, as constituting a period of great and *dangerous disturbances*. People in the southern parts of the country will do the wise and prudent thing to recognize the probability of equatorial and tornadic storms. A proper use of the barometer will give ample and timely warning of approaching atmospheric violence...This forecast was written and set in type May 8, 1912. We made a similar prediction and comment concerning the time when the Mount Pelee (sic) disaster occurred. Such results may not appear at this time, but the astronomic conditions are such as to suggest violent disturbances.

²⁷⁷ Interestingly, Hicks assumed that the characteristics of appropriate tornado shelters were already known to all, ending discussion of this topic with the admonition “In this age of practical devices—of knowledge and experience—it is needless to enlarge on the best methods of constructing these storm refuges; anyone who has a mind to the work can go at it...in a few hours, or days at the most” and gain assurance of safety in the event of a tornado.

²⁷⁸ “Hicks’ Predictions,” *The Examiner*, March 29, 1913, p. 13. April 5 and 6 were the clean up days in Omaha, and turned out to be lovely weather.

Predicting that there would be a strong storm somewhere in the United States over the period of a week in the spring was hardly the work of a great seer, and Hicks' closing sentence explaining away the event that such storms might *not* occur certainly covered any eventuality. That he included the possibility of tornadic storms seemed prescient in hindsight, though careful readers surely noted that his prediction appeared to pertain to states much farther south than Nebraska.

Hicks certainly had his detractors, even in Omaha. One man wrote into the *Omaha Daily News* about the terrible tendency toward superstition. "I believe superstitions make cowards or knaves of all believers, and it is my desire to offset this evil at the risk of great unpopularity," the determined campaigner wrote. "Being a thousand times disproved will not avail against one time when the sign happens to come true," he complained, before comparing the fostering of superstitions to "criminality." The "rubbish from the dark ages" included not just "forecasting the weather months ahead"—as a certain Irl R. Hicks made a living doing—but also Groundhog Day, the number thirteen, Wednesday weddings, Friday hangings, palmistry, and Santa Claus.²⁷⁹ Some weeks after the tornado, apparently responding to the buzz surrounding Hicks' prediction, another reader, P.O. Mullikin, wrote to the *Daily News*. "Some people pin too much faith on the Rev. Irl Hicks as a

²⁷⁹ "Evil of Superstitions," *Omaha Daily News*, March 25, 1913, p. 6. I believe this letter to the editor may have been written before the tornado, given the publication date, mention of activities on Good Friday, and lack of connecting weather prophecy to the recent tornado. However, the mention of "forecasting the weather months ahead" just as a "prophesized" tornado struck Omaha was perhaps clairvoyance of which Hicks would be envious.

weather prophet," he began. "I could prophesy tornadoes for the United States next year, and the tornadoes would come, not because I said so, but because they have come every year," he stated. "Some people can make money foretelling things for others and foretell nothing either, only make them believe they have," Mullikin concluded.²⁸⁰

In spite of Mullikin's well-founded skepticism, Hicks' willingness to attempt tornado prediction, in contrast to the Weather Bureau's steadfast reluctance to do the same, made his almanac appealing to some segments of the population. One author of a commemorative account of the storm gave Hicks his due for the prediction, but cautioned against both excessive trust in Hicks and denigration of the Weather Bureau. "In spite of the fact that the Reverend Irl Hicks forecasted, with (sic) remarkable accuracy the advent of disastrous storms between March 19 and March 25, 1913, few people even so much as heard of the forecast before the tornado... Still fewer, it appears, even heeded the admonition to prepare for the storm predicted. The exception does not tend to diminish the popularity of Hicks' publication, nor does it tend to bring the weather bureau operated by the government into bad repute... It rather brings into marked relief the fact that tornados cannot be foretold with accuracy."²⁸¹ The terrifying suddenness and unpredictability of these storms captivated public imagination, particularly in portions of the country where

²⁸⁰ "Hicks Not Only Prophet," *Omaha Daily News*, April 16, 1913, p. 6. The other prophet alluded to in the title of this letter was "some witch in Paris" who "foretold that 1913 would be a most disastrous year for the United States."

²⁸¹ Miles Greenleaf, *Thrilling Story of Omaha's Tornado* (Chicago, Ill.: Hamming Pub. Co., 1913), 51-52.

tornados frequently occurred. As the twentieth century dawned and Progressive rhetoric about the power of expertise to save humanity influenced many spheres of life, it seemed that more and more problems could be prevented, fixed, or ameliorated, and faith in the possibility of improvement characterized the rising generations. But in the realm of massive weather events, mastery remained maddeningly elusive, and science frustratingly unhelpful.

If the physical sciences could not accurately predict tornados, or prevent them, the best available option was to use engineering to protect people from them. In essence, Bert Davis' advice in the 1884 *Scientific American*—to take shelter in a cellar—was still the best bet for most. Unsurprisingly, the Easter tornado spawned renewed interest in subterranean safe spaces for families. “Cyclone cellars,” as one article dubbed them, experienced a mini building boom following the storm. While denying that the citizenry feared or expected another tornado in the near future, the article endorsed the cautionary plans of families inclined toward building such a space. The “popular plan,” involved “excavat(ing) a small cave to the side or corner, usually the southwest, of the cellar under the house big enough to shelter the family.” With such a shelter, “the worst that can happen is to be temporarily shut up in there,” effused the article. For those worried about the practicality of this expenditure, the new cellars might also be used for storing fruit. The wisdom of having a fail-proof shelter so clearly demonstrated on Easter Sunday called for a wholesale change in how Omahans protected their families and their property: “the up-to-date Omaha house is now being

equipped with a tornado policy, a barometer and a tornado cellar.”²⁸² The cost of learning the wisdom of preparedness had been a high one for the city as a whole, all survivors could do now was take the lesson, rejoice that knowledge of how to remain safe existed, and act accordingly.

However, the “cyclone cellar” was not a realistic plan for many, not only in Omaha, but in other tornado-prone areas of the country. High water tables or rocky ground made cellars less common in other parts of the country, and renters and apartment-dwellers also lacked the ability to construct such a cellar. It also cost money to excavate part of one’s basement, meaning that protecting one’s family laid beyond the reach of poorer families, even if they were lucky enough to have their own home.²⁸³ Consequently, the search continued for ways to combat destructive winds. Some plans were highly fanciful, such as the “disappearing house” featured in *The Examiner*. This dream residence featured a button that could be pushed at the first sign of danger, and within 30 seconds, the entire house would sink below ground level, safe from the storm. Presumably, one could ride out the storm in the comfort of one’s favorite living room chair.²⁸⁴

Creative though it was, it obviously was not a practical plan. But others still saw potential in building a better house to withstand a mighty wind. It

²⁸² “Cyclone Cellars Popular Here Now,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, p. 10.

²⁸³ There is still a class correlation with tornado fatalities today, since the most vulnerable type of dwelling in a tornado is a mobile home. Because mobile home residents are typically part of a lower socio-economic class, these neighborhoods, when struck, are far more vulnerable to death, injury, and property damage than neighborhoods consisting of single-family homes.

²⁸⁴ “The Disappearing House,” *The Examiner*, April 4, 1913, p. 2.

did not escape notice that the area of greatest destruction was near 24th and Lake Streets, and area largely populated by African-Americans and recent European immigrants. The houses in this part of the city were, as J.H. Millard put it, “of a very inferior character,” and the destruction was complete and dramatic.²⁸⁵ The complete structural obliteration of these buildings compared to the more modest damages to roofs and windows in the fashionable homes which were hit illustrated the difference that solid construction made in the face of winds strong enough to flip a streetcar. The editor of *The Examiner* alluded to this on April 5, declaring that the Omaha death toll had been “at least aggravated by the tendency to erect unsubstantial buildings.”²⁸⁶ It seemed logical that an engineering solution existed to combat this shortcoming. The first April 1913 issue of *Scientific American*, however, was skeptical. “As we go to press with an issue... devoted to the subject ‘harnessing nature,’ the country is being overwhelmed by telegraphic reports of appalling losses of life and property, which prove how limited, after all, is our boasted control of the primal forces of nature—should they make a sudden and more than average display of their latent powers,” intoned the author. He was relatively optimistic about the future of flood control: “When these terrific floods have been thoroughly investigated and the causes of the failure to hold them in leash have been ascertained, we shall have learned how to safeguard by better methods of control,” he predicted. But his prognosis for

²⁸⁵ J.H. Millard to Nathan Bay Scott, April 7, 1913, RG 200 National Archives Gift Collection, Records of the American National Red Cross 1881-1916, Box. No. 57, Folder 843 NEBRASKA, Omaha Tornado 3/23/1913.

²⁸⁶ “Man-Made Floods,” *The Examiner*, April 5, 1913, p. 4.

tornado prevention was vastly bleaker. "In the presence of such a tornado as has recently swept through the Middle West, we must confess to a feeling of absolute helplessness," he wrote. "Special construction" might "mitigate the devastation," he thought, but "it is questionable if even building massively in stone and concrete would suffice in the presence of such an appalling fury as recently swept over the ill-fated city of Omaha."²⁸⁷

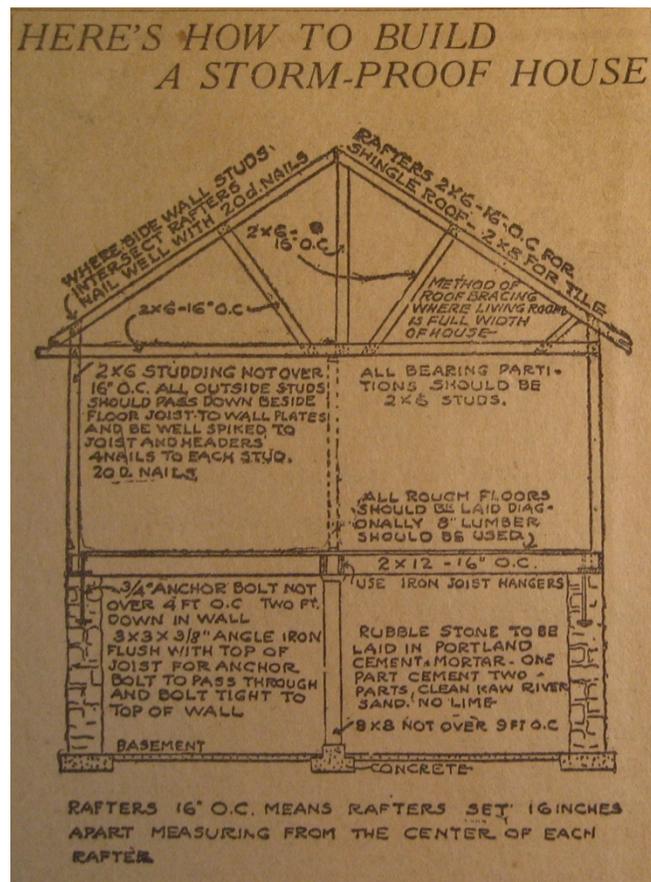


Figure 2

Still, those living in tornado-prone areas were understandably reluctant to accept such fatalism. A diagram of a supposedly tornado-proof house plan

²⁸⁷ "Harnessing Nature?," *Scientific American* 108, no. 14 (April 5, 1913): 304.

appeared in the *Omaha Daily News* several weeks after the storm.²⁸⁸ (Figure 2) There was no accompanying article explaining the merits of this design, nor any attempt to persuade readers that this method of building would save their homes and lives in the event of another tornado, leaving some of the more perplexing instructions a mystery, such as the mandate to install flooring diagonally. Presented without comment for the edification of those in the market for a new home, these directions seem primarily concerned not with innovative engineering, but with principles of solid, deliberate construction. Undoubtedly, solid construction at least improved one's chances. But not everyone was convinced. One newspaper reader dismissed the idea of "storm-proof" housing, going so far as to make the puzzling claim that in the case of the Saint Louis tornado of 1896, more sturdily built houses fared *worse* than other structures in the storm's path.²⁸⁹ The writer, who signed himself G.S. Ray of the village of Murray, Nebraska, 25 miles south of Omaha, challenged one promoter of storm-proof housing, asking if he really believed his "tornado-proof houses, anchored with rock chimneys and built with 2x6 studdings, stronger than the St. Louis houses that went down, which were built of concrete, reinforced with steel, also heavy lumber used." His attribution of widespread steel-reinforced houses to Saint Louis is certainly an exaggeration,

²⁸⁸ "Here's How To Build a Storm-Poof House," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 20, 1913, p. 5C.

²⁸⁹ "Tornado-Proof Houses," *The Omaha Daily News*, April 5, 1913, p. 4. The 1896 Saint Louis tornado was cited on occasion in Omaha after the Easter tornado, it being within living memory for many people. That tornado was at least as strong as the Omaha tornado, and probably stronger—Alphonse Schmitt noted in his *Weather Review* account that he thought the Omaha storm "far less severe, certainly," than the Saint Louis tornado. The Saint Louis tornado killed over 250 people.

but to naysayers he offered further experience: "I have seen the effects of three tornadoes," he wrote, "and believe the stronger the buildings were in the direct line, the more complete the destruction." Ray's conclusion is a strange one, and one completely at odds with everything observed in the Omaha storm (and in almost every other tornado.) Nevertheless, his doubt illustrates apprehension and distrust of schemes to improve the chances of humans unfortunate enough to be caught in a tornado. Scientists, engineers, and homebuilders might attempt to outwit the storm, but ultimately, the terror of a tornado lay in the inability to reliably fend it off.

This relative powerlessness, however, prompted a flurry of attempts at providing working explanations of a tornadic storm. "Tornado Caused By a Collision of Clouds," read one *Daily News* headline. In this rendering, two "immense clouds, one hot, the other cold," spawned the tornado. "The cold one came from the northwest in a huge black mass, approaching slowly and deliberately, with little commotion. The other came from the southwest, a white and yellow rolling pile of what appeared to be angry atmosphere." After they met, "instantly there was created the deadly roaring funnel that rushed across the city."²⁹⁰ Almost cartoon-like in its rendering, this account included the basic idea of colliding hot and cold air masses that play a part in tornado formation, but in an extremely accessible and easily understood, if not entirely accurate way. Another feature of many explanatory accounts of the storm was a simple vocabulary lesson. The tendency to conflate a "cyclone"

²⁹⁰ "Tornado Caused By Collision of Clouds," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 14.

and a “tornado,” or to use them interchangeably had a long history, evident in attempts to differentiate the two in both the 1884 *Scientific American* exchange between Bert Davis and John Schultz, and in Irl Hick’s 1896 *Almanac*.

With the backing of scientists, Omaha’s papers waded into the fray immediately after the storm. “It Was a Tornado And Not Cyclone,” read the headline of a story recounting “the meteorological side of the storm” in the *Daily News* two days after the twister.²⁹¹ This authoritative announcement did not prevent the paper from running a story several days later about the recent rage for “cyclone” shelters.²⁹² However, in the former article, the paper cited Father William F. Rigge of Creighton University, who told the *Daily News*’ readers that “scientifically, a tornado is an extremely violent form of a cyclone.” Well-known for his “astronomical achievements,” Rigge continued to explain: “A cyclone is the term applied to any circular movement of the air, such as the regular progress across the country of the prevailing westerlies, or the passage of a widespread storm center. A tornado is also a rotary motion of the air, but is generally of only local effect.” At least one person heeded the call to greater precision of language—the minutes of the executive committee of the Commercial Club of Omaha reveal a hand-written correction of the word “cyclone” to “tornado.”²⁹³(Figure 3)

²⁹¹ “It Was a Tornado And Not Cyclone,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 25, 1913, p. 10.

²⁹² “Cyclone Cellars Popular Here Now,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, p. 10

²⁹³ “Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Commercial Club of Omaha,” March 25, 1913.

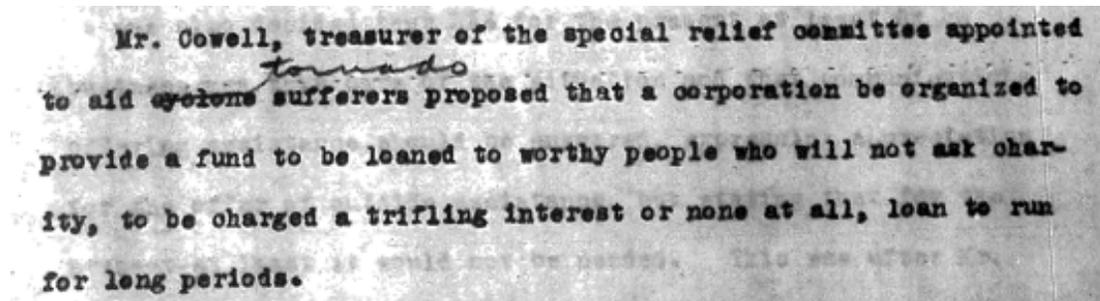


Figure 3

In addition to articles in each of Omaha's major papers, nearly every commemorative booklet of the storm featured some explanation of the science of the storm. Miles Greenleaf's *The Thrilling Story of Omaha's Tornado*, provided the longest, if not the most correct:

The most imminent (sic) authorities on the subject describe the formation of a tornado in practically the same manner. The conditions most favorable to the formation of tornados are said to exist when a layer of warm humid air lies next to the earth, while in the same vicinity at a higher altitude, there is a colder strata of air. The notable windstorms have occurred in the same manner and under similar conditions. When the upper strata of colder air with a high barometer comes into contact with a lower layer of warm, humid air, the warm air goes up. The dry cold air gives way for the warmer, and with a whirling motion, the storm becomes more violent...The centrifugal force due to the diurnal rotation of the earth also pushes more dense air toward the equator harder than it does lighter moist air and the lighter aid (sic) is raised up by the denser and overflows toward the pole.²⁹⁴

Greenleaf's partially accurate description of the formation of tornados mostly avoids scientific terms and explains the development (as he understood it) in a way accessible to a public largely unschooled in meteorology.

But the public was not alone in its confusion surrounding storms. Two professors from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln muddied the issue with their report. Professor Barbour, who worked in the university's natural science

²⁹⁴ Greenleaf, *Thrilling Story of Omaha's Tornado*, 52.

museum, and Professor Schramm, a geologist, “studied atmospheric conditions during the tornado in Omaha” and concluded, “there were three distinct storms.” Such an occurrence is not difficult to believe—thunderstorms often develop in a line, with several different cells developing near one another. The tornados that struck elsewhere in the eastern part of the state the same afternoon and evening of the Omaha storm likely were products of separate thunderstorms. But Barbour and Schramm’s explanation is not that simple. Instead, they gave the impression that the Omaha tornado may have traveled all the way from Lincoln to Omaha. “While it is usual for a tornado to spend itself after traveling from twenty-five to thirty miles, this storm traveled sixty,” claimed Barbour. “The cloud which caused so much destruction in Omaha undoubtedly started at University Place (in Lincoln) and followed the course to Omaha which the proposed Omaha, Lincoln & Beatrice interurban will take.”²⁹⁵ Barbour’s meaning may have fallen victim to his imprecise language—he first refers to a tornado, and then, without clearly stating a change in subject or meaning, he refers simply to “a storm,” and finally, a destruction-causing “cloud.” It is very possible that a thunderstorm might travel that distance and direction from northeastern Lincoln to Omaha—but it is far less likely that a fully formed tornado would travel that distance.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ “Three Distinct Storms, Say Uni Scientists,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 5.

²⁹⁶ In all likelihood, Barbour was wrong, and the same tornado did not travel this far. Not only would the fifty-odd miles between the two cities be an extremely long (though not unheard of) tornado track, it would have likely left damage along the route—a broken fence here, or a demolished barn there. Most other students of the storm in the following days determined that the tornado started southwest of Omaha, but not so far southwest as Lincoln. It is

Perhaps Barbour understood meteorological theory as well as any other in his day, but regardless of his level of knowledge, the language he used in this story paints a very confusing picture of the storm, and illustrates why the clarification of terms forms such a visible part of many post-tornado accounts.²⁹⁷

The unpredictability and potentially dramatic destruction exoticized tornados, even as they terrified. Floods were feared, but usually gave warning—heavy rain or snowmelt led to rising rivers, and while they were devastating, they held comparably little mystery. Hurricanes offered less forewarning than floods, but approached more slowly than tornados. Seasoned residents of the tropics could often detect some advance warning signals in waves and tidal patterns, and with improved communication

very possible, perhaps even likely, that the same thunderstorm traveled northeast from Lincoln to Omaha, and that this same storm spawned the tornado. It is also possible that the thunderstorm developed a funnel cloud (a tornado that does not make contact with the ground) near Lincoln that then dissipated and reformed near Omaha, since it is not unusual for tornados and funnel clouds to weaken, disappear, and reform several times within the life of a severe thunderstorm. Another account by University of Nebraska scientists, Professor Condra and Professor G. A. Loveland, who set out to study not just the Omaha tornado, but all of the March 23 tornados, seems more probable, and more clear. Condra and Loveland determined there were “three distinct, and possibly four tornados” on Easter Sunday, but that “they were all part of the same disturbance.” This description is more consistent with a strong line of thunderstorms with several cells capable of spawning tornados. “Omaha Missed Worst Tornado, Say Scientists,” *The Omaha Daily News*, April 5, 1913, p. 1.

²⁹⁷ In Barbour’s defense, it is possible that his meteorological knowledge was not to blame, and that the reporter, not Barbour, is at fault here. It may be that Barbour employed more accurate language, and the reporter changed his quotation for readability without fully realizing the implications of such an amendment. However, it is also possible that meteorology was not Barbour’s primary field, and he was less expert than he was represented to be by the press.

methods, some hurricanes could be tracked with some accuracy, even before the advent of radar. But tornados' terrifying cachet stemmed from their suddenness and their aftermath—one's house might literally be there one moment, and not the next. Capricious chance and the potential for radical transformation in the blink of an eye imbued tornados with a mystique that fascinated the public, precisely because these storms flew in the face of many truisms embraced and promulgated by the white middle class. Control and prevention of undesirable effects through expertise and science—these were the glittering promises of the Progressive movement. Poverty and misfortune, this segment of society believed, usually followed some sort of lifestyle flaw—a fondness for alcohol, bad character, physical uncleanliness—but tornados upended these expectations. Expertise and science stood relatively powerless in their face, and a tornado could reduce the most upstanding citizen to dire circumstances, with no personal fault to blame. This, to put it mildly, was upsetting.

CHAPTER 5

“A Full and Thrilling Account of the Most Appalling Calamities of Modern Times:’ Narrating the Easter Tornado”

THRILLING TALES OF HEROIC DEEDS; PANIC-STRICKEN MULTITUDES AND HEART-RENDING SCENES OF AGONY; FRANTIC EFFORTS TO ESCAPE A HORRIBLE FATE; SEPARATION OF LOVED ONES, ETC., ETC.

Narrow Escapes from the Jaws of Death

TERRIBLE SUFFERINGS OF THE SURVIVORS; VANDALS PLUNDERING BODIES OF THE DEAD; WONDERFUL EXHIBITIONS OF POPULAR SYMPATHY FOR THE STRICKEN SUFFERERS

--Frederick E. Drinker, 1913

It is a high-water mark in Omaha in the virtues of brotherhood and unselfishness.
--*The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 26, 1913

The recuperative powers of the city, after such a heavy loss, is almost unbelievable.
--*The Wall Street Journal*, 1914

* * * * *

Columbia stood on the steps of the United States Capitol, her face buried in her hand in obvious sorrow. Swathed in a flowing, star-spangled robe and a striped Phrygian cap, she exuded only sadness now, not liberty. Her compatriot, Uncle Sam, stood next to her in a jacket emblazoned with stars and striped pants, less bowed by grief, but his face clearly pained. Hat in hand out of respect and bearing a memorial wreath, the pair of dazed personifications of America could not bear to view the wreckage strewn in the distance. Below them, an inscription: “In Memoriam—Our Country in Sorrow.”²⁹⁸ (Figure 1)

²⁹⁸ Frederick E. Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire, Containing a Full and Thrilling Account of the Most Appalling Calamities of Modern Times; Including*



IN MEMORIAM—OUR COUNTRY IN SORROW

Figure 1

When John F. Hart painted this tribute to the victims of the Omaha tornado and the subsequent Ohio floods, he engaged in crafting a specific narrative of the storm, one which particularly resonated with Americans in the early twentieth century. Hart did not invent this manner of depiction, nor was he alone in its promulgation—his painting became the frontispiece of another carefully packaged account of the storm written by Frederick Drinker.

Vivid Descriptions of the Hurricane and Terrible Rush of Waters ... (Harrisburg, Pa., Minter Co., 1913).

Hart and Drinker, along with other writers of instant histories and newspaper reporters crafted their impressions of the storm in a literary way designed to romanticize the chaotic events, valorize chosen portions of the population, and reinforce parables of good citizenship. At the same time, this construction marginalized or even demonized segments of the population, actively undermining the claims of community unity and cooperation so strenuously asserted in many storm narratives.

Following the Easter tornado, the public, both locally and otherwise, developed an enormous appetite for depictions and accounts of the destruction. This demand was met in several ways. First, local newspapers offered extensive coverage in the weeks following the tornado, providing not only information like death lists or where to find shelter or take donations, but also hundreds of anecdotes about individual victims of the storm. Some told of miraculous escapes, some of tragic tales of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Many were accurate, but some were fabricated or embellished. For the local population, the daily newspapers, and to a lesser extent, the weekly newspapers, comprised their most immediate and exhaustive source of tornado narratives.²⁹⁹ Soon, the newspapers spawned a second major source of public tornado remembrance—the photo booklet. The many photographs captured by newspaper staff photographers or independent photographers became a commodity unto themselves. (Figure 2) Sold for a fraction of a

²⁹⁹ The daily papers, *The Omaha World-Herald*, *The Omaha Daily News*, and *The Omaha Bee* were supplemented by weekly papers like *The Examiner*, faith-based papers like the Catholic *True Voice*, and myriad other neighborhood or language-specific publications.

dollar, these booklets allowed purchasers to take a vicarious tour of the damage. The booklets also provided a way for residents of the city to share with family or friends far from Omaha the magnitude of the devastation. Most of the booklets contained little text, aside from an introductory paragraph outlining the particulars of time and date, and perhaps a table of statistics of deaths, injuries, and property damage. The third common form of tornado commemoration was sometimes literally a hybrid of the first two. "Instant histories," booklets purported to tell the complete story of the storm, were published within weeks or months of the storm also commanded a share of the market. This type of publication occurred for many disasters or major events in the United States, and in the case of the Easter tornado, it was often coupled with the Ohio floods of a few days later into a single compendium of tragedy.



Figure 2: Louis Bostwick (right) and Homer Frohardt (second from left) traveled Omaha in Bostwick's 1912 Packard documenting damage and victims. (Durham Museum Photo Archive)

The writers of these quickly published accounts of the storm frequently harvested newspaper anecdotes and repackaged them into a chronological or thematic account of the storm, sometimes without bothering to rewrite their source material. Other authors, like Frederick Drinker, who spared not a single superlative in his account of the Omaha and Ohio storms, used their flair for the dramatic to sensationalize the material and to more vividly impress any moral points they might make upon their readers.

Primarily through these three formats, Americans absorbed and interpreted the “appalling calamity.” Reflecting their position at the end of the

long nineteenth century and also within the early twentieth, two major modes of telling the tornado story were sentimentalism and sensationalism. Readers of the newspapers and tornado histories eagerly devoured tales filled with both the loving and the lurid, the sweet and the shocking.

Featuring stories designed to warm the heart might seem an incongruous way to cover a deadly natural disaster, but a surprising number of post-storm anecdotes bordered on the precious. For example, one article featured a story about babies born during or immediately after the tornado. "Twenty-five future Omaha men and women will claim the distinction of a mighty disturbance of the elements having heralded their birth," began one article.³⁰⁰ One unlucky mother had only just given birth when the tornado passed close by her house, forcing a visiting friend to shield the baby from debris, and the woman's husband to shield the new mother, who was unable to move from her bed. Another father was more eager to embrace the singularity of the circumstances of his son's birth, and proclaimed that his baby boy was to be named "Cyclone Bill," at least "provided the mother does not object." Little "Cyclone Bill" was born in the Swedish Mission Hospital "while the tornado was smashing the windows and otherwise making things unpleasant." The hope expressed by the article's author was that these families' memories of the tornado would be "refreshed" by the blessing of new life. However, even in the midst of these charming tales, it was

³⁰⁰ Another Omaha baby missed this distinction by a few months, but became a household name in the United States later in life even without a heralded birth. U.S. President Gerald R. Ford's mother, Dorothy, was five months pregnant with Gerald and living with her in-laws at 3202 Woolworth Avenue in Omaha, south of the tornado's path.

impossible to fully forget that the storm's most visible work was that of death, and nowhere was that more evident than the strange tale of Mr. and Mrs. George Medlock's son. The baby boy "just missed" the "distinction" of being born in a hearse. After losing their house to the tornado, the Medlocks moved on to a neighbor's roofless house, and Mr. Medlock, in spite of bleeding head wounds, struggled to secure transportation for his wife to a friend's intact home. Finally, he succeeded in stopping a "motor hearse," the driver of which consented to take his wife out of the wrecked area of town. The episode made for a vivid anecdote for the article writer, though the actual experience was probably far more traumatic than exciting for the Medlocks.

Stories like that of G.W. Stipe, a laborer and victim of the tornado, reinforced Victorian ideals of family and praised the ability to value "what was really important." Stipe, bruised and wearing "scanty and torn" clothing stood with his son in "excellent spirit" when a reporter came upon him outside of his burning home, which had ignited in the wake of the tornado. "I feel like one of the richest men in Omaha," Stipe reportedly said, "though I have no hat, and there goes up in smoke all the savings of my life. I have worked hard many a year for that little home, but somehow I can't cry about the loss of it. Here is my son, safe and more or less sound, and my wife and daughter are visiting in Lincoln. I would not have had them witness this for any money. So you see I am indeed fortunate."³⁰¹ Stipe's tale of noble forbearance in the face of incredible woe and his ability to value his family's

³⁰¹ "Lost All But Family; Says He Is Fortunate," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 4.

well-being over all else typified many of the accounts of the storm, and resonated with a public still imbued with the Victorian domestic ideal. Stipe, socio-economically marginalized in normal times as a laborer of modest means, represented the “pure gold of citizenry” that the Omaha media and Commercial Club eagerly promoted abroad after the storm. Here was a man with his priorities straight, a man who bore his suffering as a man ought, or so the narrative went. Stories like Stipe’s proliferated: in the newspaper column right next to Stipe’s story, was a similar one about Sidney D. Barkalow. “He really can laugh about the disaster to his home, which is almost completely demolished” the *Daily News* claimed, “because his wife and his daughter, Miss Carolyn Barkalow, are uninjured.”³⁰²

Not every story enlisting this sentimentality had a happy ending. The family of Mrs. John Egan had far less reason for “laughing at the disaster” than did Sidney Barkalow. Mrs. Egan and her family of five children were “gathering about the supper table when the cyclone struck the house” while John Egan was away at work as a clerk at a drug company. The house was completely wrecked and left all six Egans unconscious. Loretta, age 11, was the most seriously hurt, and, the paper grimly reported, “will probably die.” John Egan, after rushing home from the office, saw his decimated house and “was almost crazed,” at the thought of what must have happened to his family. In this instance, the emphasis on the domesticity of the pre-tornado scene was not meant as an endorsement of Omaha’s morally brave and

³⁰² “Barkalow is Cheerful, Even in His Loss,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 4.

upright citizenry as in the cases of Stipe and Barkalow. Rather, in the Egan's case, the family's dinner table gathering served to underscore the tragedy of little Loretta's presumably impending death.³⁰³

Another frequently circulated story in this mold was the tale of Patrick Hynes' tragic eighty-first birthday party. "The guests had just begun dinner and were drinking a toast to the health of (Patrick Hynes) when the storm swept the house away," said one account. "The young people were making merry" and old Mr. Hynes had "entered into the spirit" of the festivities. "The next minute," remembered Mr. Hynes, "the house was in ruins." Incredibly, most of the party sustained only minor injuries. However, the exception, Mr. Hynes' granddaughter, Cecilia Bigelow, suffered serious internal injuries made all the more tragic by her youth. "Oh, if only it had been me instead of Cecilia," moaned her devastated, octogenarian grandfather.³⁰⁴ But most poignant were stories where the bonds of family carried through to the last. Cliff Daniels, a mail carrier, and his wife provided one of the enduring images in this narrative. The doomed family, huddled together when the tornado approached, was found deceased in the ruins of their home. "The two little girls were clasped in the arms of their mother, while the body of the father was over them, as if he had tried to shield them with his own body," eulogized one account.³⁰⁵ A similar case was that of a Mrs. Holm, whose

³⁰³ "Family of Five Hurt And One May Die," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 5. Loretta, happily, did not die. The 1920 census shows 17-year-old Loretta living with her father and two sisters, employed as a stenographer at an insurance company, still in Omaha.

³⁰⁴ *Drinker, Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire*, 41–42.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

demise was “one of the most pitiful of all the deaths,” according to the *Daily Bee*. The woman was found with a 2-year-old baby “clasped to her breast...her arms stiffened about the little body and the finders had to use force to separate them.”³⁰⁶ The undeniably terrible description of the recovery of the Holms’ bodies likely provoked a horrified reaction in readers, yet horror was not the only reaction the reporter sought. Mixed with this grim depiction was the unstated but clear commendation of Mrs. Holm’s motherly devotion, a darkly iconographic portrait of Mother and Child.

In fact, tragedy intruding on domestic bliss was a more common motif than the thankful-for-family theme exemplified by the stories of the “fortunate” Stipe and Barkalow. Tragedy, it seems, was an especially fascinating feature of the storm’s aftermath, so far as the public consuming news of the tornado was concerned, and those not immediately affected by the storm exhibited a fascination with the macabre that manifested both in person and through written sources. Newspapers employed particularly stark language, designed to draw attention to the horror of the situation. “Lake Street Death List is Growing” proclaimed one headline, “Café May Be Deathtrap.”³⁰⁷ Two days after the tornado, the *Daily Bee* offered a horrifying

³⁰⁶ “Mother, Clasping Little Child, Taken From Ruins,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 24, 1913, p. 1.

³⁰⁷ “Lake Street Death List is Growing,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 2. The café mentioned, the Gem Restaurant, did not end up being nearly as lethal as feared, nor did the Diamond Movie Theatre, another site widely advertised as a place of near-certain mass fatalities immediately after the tornado. In the case of the latter, the *Bee* later reported that though the entire floor of the theatre was dug up, “the only thing found was a purse containing \$7.70 and a set of false teeth.” (“Idlewild Pool Hall Ruins Cleared Up,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 27, 1913, p. 4.)

prospect to readers in the headline “Wrecks May Yet Add to Long Death List: Bodies Thought to Be Buried in Several Places at Which No Work of Clearing is Yet Done.”³⁰⁸ The common feature of these grisly headlines was the looming threat of discovering bodies—the mystery of their number and their exact location adding further eeriness to the sad proceedings. But however gruesome the headlines, they exemplified what Americans in 1913 had come to expect from their print media—an emphasis on the sensational. “Yellow journalism” or charges of sensationalism might be employed as a way to denounce a reporter, publisher, or periodical; but that did not mean that such journalism was unpopular. Americans had developed a voracious appetite for the sensational, even if they simultaneously denounced it. Newspaper editors and writers of instant histories made liberal use of words like “calamitous,” “appalling,” “terrible,” “desolate,” and “horrific” because it enticed and excited readers. The anthropomorphized cruelty of the tornado itself was part and parcel of the same expectation—a tornado “blowing” or “twisting” across town lacked the panache of, for example, a “Devil Cloud” reaping destruction across the city.³⁰⁹ (Figure 3)

³⁰⁸ “Wrecks May Yet Add to Long Death List,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 26, 1913, p. 1.

³⁰⁹ “The Tornado,” Doane Powell, *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 25, 1913, p. 1. This striking cartoon is yet another example of the inexhaustible Doane Powell’s work.



Figure 3

The appetite for consuming the worst of the disaster was not limited to print sources. Seeing the devastation firsthand became a bona fide phenomenon within eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. The *Daily News* estimated that between 25,000 and 30,000 visitors took in the storm devastation in *one day* on the Sunday exactly one week after the tornado. The entry pass system was eliminated on March 30, and the curious took full advantage of their newly gained access. The damaged neighborhoods were “thrown open” to the public, and touring the ruins became a spectacle of enormous proportions. The city leaders and interested businesses had planned for this onslaught, expecting (accurately, it turned out) that demand to see the damage would be considerable. Railroads in particular benefitted from the

balloon in traffic, and the *Daily News* reported the statistics for each rail company, giving the total number of sightseers arriving in town via seven different rail companies as 12,600. The Burlington railroad brought the most, commissioning fifty extra railcars to accommodate the crowd, particularly those from Lincoln. The Rock Island railroad brought 300 people on a special train from Des Moines, Iowa, and other rail lines were packed with visitors from smaller towns within 200 miles of Omaha. The city's streetcars also felt the strain, even with 103 extra cars running in addition to the normal 240—200,000 fares were paid on the streetcars that Sunday, claimed the *Daily News*, without counting transfers. Enterprising individuals found ways to cash in on this sudden demand for transportation. Personal automobiles transformed into "sightseeing cars" with "barkers" who pointed out scenes of especial interest and destruction to paying passengers enjoyed brisk business.³¹⁰

Seven hundred soldiers and militiamen kept watch over the ruins and the spectators, and attempted to keep the crowds moving through the streets. Visitors were "not permitted to pick up anything that might be of value," though this did not deter souvenir-hunters from taking home their own piece of the Omaha tornado—"not less than a ton of battered bricks was carried away" by the curious crowds who wished to have a token of their trip. Those in uniform also tried to prevent visitors from interfering with relief workers, who were continuing their work "the same as on the preceding days."³¹¹ Allowing visitors into areas where workers still continued their efforts gave

³¹⁰ "25,000 Visitors See the Ruins," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 31, 1913, p. 9.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

the spectacle another dimension—instead of merely a scene of devastation, onlookers saw a scene of recovery and hard work as well, of a city with the situation well in hand and already working towards repairing itself. Visitors saw rubble, but they also saw almost one thousand workers clearing debris, fixing foundations, patching roofs, and replacing windows. This vision of industry and determined restoration fit well in the portrait of recovery city leaders wished to paint for the public.³¹²

Nowhere was this taste for the sensational more evident than in the story of Nathan Krinsky and his ill-fated family. Nathan, a handsome man with abundant black hair and a full mustache, and his wife, Hincke, lived above the bakery where he worked, along with their five young children and another baker named Solomon Wartzel. (Figure 4) The Krinskys' residence in Omaha had not been a long one, nor, perhaps had their residence in the United States.³¹³ After the tornado obliterated the family's bakery, news

³¹² Historical work on the development and impact of tourism on a place has flourished in the last decade and a half. Many studies focus on the economic, environmental, or cultural outcomes of the tourism complex. Hal K. Rothman, in particular, has contributed much to our understanding of how tourism has shaped the American West in the twentieth century, astutely drawing a connection between the West's mythological stature in the U.S. and its unparalleled development of tourist destinations and apparatuses. However, Rothman and others focus on long-term, sustained tourist locales, like Maui, Hawaii; Las Vegas; or the Grand Canyon. Omaha's post-tornado tourist influx is different in many ways, most notably that its impetus stemmed from a temporary condition, and that no attempt was made to parlay temporary tourist interest into long-term tourist interest (Omaha's leaders had no desire to craft their city into some sort of "Tornado Land" long-term—in fact, their desire was quite the opposite.) Little historical work exists on temporary tourism, and how it differs in aim and outcome from sustained locations of tourism.

³¹³ Nathan Krinsky appears in the 1912 Omaha City Directory, at the address where he died the following year, with his occupation listed as a baker. He

traveled quickly that Nathan and four of his children had been found dead. Hincke and the remaining child, however, had not yet been found. As searchers dug at the debris, crowds of curious onlookers watched their progress and the press snapped photos.³¹⁴ Public fascination with the family's tragedy did not end with the recovery of the bodies. Coverage of the funeral in the papers reveals that the family's services were thronged with onlookers. "One of the most pathetic sights was the funeral yesterday of the entire Krinski family...when eight were buried at once," intoned the *Daily News*.



Figure 4

The family, along with Solomon Wartzel, were laid to rest in front of an estimated crowd of 400-500 people, who "watched eight rough board boxes

does not appear in any of the earlier Omaha directories, and no listings for Nathan Krinsky or anything close to that name appear to be good matches for him and his family in the 1910 U.S. census.

³¹⁴ A photo purportedly showing the family's relatives searching the through the rubble of the Krinsky bakery appeared in the March 26, 1913 issue of *The Omaha Daily News* with the caption "The bodies of Nathan Klinsky (sic) and three (sic) children were found soon after the storm in the basement of their bakery. The bodies of the wife and her baby were found last night." (p. 2)

carried by on the way to the last gathering of the Krinski family.” The plainness of the coffins drew notice, although the family was not wealthy, but the lack of funerary frippery was explained to curious readers as “the ancient Jewish custom of burial in plain board coffins....three large boxes and five small ones were carried through the curious throng.” The Jewish Relief Society paid for the funeral and hosted it, but had to relocate the funeral service to the cemetery due to the “immense crowds.”³¹⁵ The sheer magnitude of the Krinsky’s tragedy arrested the attention of the public, and, at the same time, illustrated their thirst for the sensational.

Further proof of rampant morbid curiosity is evident in one of the other major headlines of the tornado—the Idlewild Pool Hall collapse. The “negro club,” located directly across the street from the Krinsky bakery, collapsed in spectacular fashion in the tornado and then caught on fire, dooming any of its trapped victims who may have survived the initial blow.³¹⁶ Accounts varied on how many men died in the hall, ranging from one dozen to over thirty.

³¹⁵ “Bowed Heads As Victims Are Buried,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 26, 1913, p. 3.

³¹⁶ The Krinsky bakery was located at 2308 N. 24th Street, and Idlewild Hall was at 2307 N. 24th Street.



Figure 5

Photographs show crowds of onlookers watching the recovery effort at the demolished hall, a state of affairs corroborated by the *Omaha Bee*. (Figure 5) “The work of clearing out the debris which buried the negro patrons of the Idlewild pool hall... came to a standstill Wednesday afternoon when it was determined that there were no more bodies left in the ruins,” the article stated. “Hundreds of sightseers thronged the dismal looking place Wednesday afternoon, but soon passed on when it was evident that no more work was to be done there.”³¹⁷ The *Bee* only says that the onlookers were interested in the “work,” but reading these two sentences together reveals that what many sought was the gruesome spectacle of mangled bodies. That the bodies belonged to black men seemed to negate any sense of restraint present when writing about other victims. For example, the description of Mrs. Holm, the deceased woman found clutching her child, was by its nature grim, yet it was

³¹⁷ “Idlewild Pool Hall Ruins Cleared Up,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 27, 1913, p. 4.

not overly graphic. Compare that account to the language the *Bee* employed to describe the recovery of remains at the Idlewild Hall:

Fragments of other bodies were unrecognizable. The remains of men were removed in baskets, boxes and pails. Here occurred the most awful mutilation. The building was shattered into a pile of brick and kindling wood. Iron rods and shingles were driven into bodies. Fire followed the wrecking of the structure and the horror was intensified. Heads, arms, legs and pieces of flesh were shoveled up by workmen and taken to an improvised morgue.³¹⁸

The detailed rendering of the men's gruesome fate is singular in descriptions of the storm. Other bodies were recovered, of course, and their discovery often remarked upon by newspapers. But in no other case was the violence of the victim's fate so fully depicted, nor treatment of human remains so cavalierly described. That over a dozen black men perished appeared to be a matter of interest to the Omaha reporters and readers primarily because their deaths provided an acceptable canvas on which to depict the most macabre curiosity surrounding the storm. White victims were "pinned by wreckage" or "trapped by timber," while the "unfortunate negroes...were caught like rats in traps."³¹⁹ By and large, who the men were was not deemed important—that their bodies were found burnt and in pieces was the relevant part of their lives, a chilling echo of the escalating violence, often mob-induced

³¹⁸ "Thirteen Dead Taken From Wreckage of Idlewild Pool Hall," *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 25, 1913, p. 2.

³¹⁹ "Coroner Has a Narrow Escape Rescuing Negroes," *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 25, 1913, p. 2.

and mob-witnessed, against African-American men across the United States during this time.³²⁰

Further underscoring the sense that the black men were curiosities of the storm rather than victims is the fact that most of them were not identified in the newspaper, in stark contrast to other storm victims.³²¹ There was one exception in Abner Thomas, because, as the *Bee* put it, “Abner was probably the best known old negro in Omaha.” Sixty-five years old, Thomas had put together a long career as a cook, specializing in preparing meals for hunting parties in western Nebraska. For the past decade, he had worked in this capacity at a ranch in the north-central part of the state along the border with South Dakota. Besides his age and occupation, one personal detail made it into print—Thomas had been “an inveterate ball fan.” But the real reason the *Bee* saw fit to eulogize him was because of his camp cook career, during which he “served dinners to many of the country’s prominent men.”³²² Thomas, moderately important in the eyes of the press because of his service to important white men, is the only African-American so covered in any of

³²⁰ In 1919, Omaha re-enacted the horrific deaths of the Idlewild victims when Will Brown was lynched, mutilated and burned by a white mob.

³²¹ There were other bodies that were not identified, but the lack of identity was often depicted as a point of tragedy, something that should be remedied if at all possible. With the Idlewild victims, their identities are simply omitted without comment, as if who the men were was not particularly important. It should also be mentioned that this occurred to a lesser extent with female victims, who, unless they were unmarried, were usually not identified by their first name. However, this type of name omission is, I think, different than simply not bothering to name the victims. In the case of female victims, it reflected their assumed subsumption within their husband’s identity—certainly a problematic assumption, but a different one than the treatment of the Idlewild men.

³²² *Ibid.*

Omaha's white-run newspapers.³²³ Other Idlewild victims instead were treated to nameless accusations of profligate, greedy behavior. A small item in the *Daily News* ran the headline "Negro Dies in Storm With Dice in Hands:"

Tightly clenched in the hand of one of the negro bodies taken from the Idlewild pool hall was a pair of dice. In the coat sleeve of another was concealed a playing card, an ace. Another man had a \$5 gold piece in his hand, which he had evidently snatched up when he heard the approaching storm.³²⁴

Although almost certainly apocryphal, this story clearly intended to paint a specific portrait of the black men killed in the pool hall.³²⁵ First, the men were in a pool hall on Easter Sunday. Given the popularity and proliferation of pool halls and other similar establishments in Omaha, as well as a lack of liquor laws relative to other parts of the country, they certainly were not the only men spending Sunday evening in this manner. However, not only were they gambling, but at least one of them was implied to be cheating at gambling, a double dose of moral corruption. In a similar vein was the man who allegedly snatched up a gold piece when he heard the tornado approach—compounding his gambling activity was his foolhardy greed. This ungenerous description of the Idlewild victims served to distinguish them from other

³²³ Omaha had various African-American newspapers throughout much of its history, including 1913, but no known issues from 1913 survive today.

³²⁴ "Negro Dies in Storm with Dice in Hands," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 25, 1913, p. 4.

³²⁵ Almost certainly apocryphal because of the highly stereotypical language used, and also because it contradicts the *Bee* reporting of the condition of the bodies. If the bodies were charred and in pieces, it seems unlikely that three would be found with archetypal examples of gambling misdeeds. Furthermore, even if a body was found with a gold piece in hand, the circumstances surrounding how it got there would be at best speculative. In all likelihood, the *Bee* exaggerated the condition of the bodies to some extent, but the *Daily News'* anecdote is doubtful in its entirety.

(white) victims. Cliff Daniels had died trying to shield his wife and children from the storm; one of the Idlewild victims was “shielding” an ace up his sleeve in order to swindle his comrades. Mrs. Holm had been found clutching her child in a final act of love; meanwhile an Idlewild gambler’s last action was to clutch a valuable piece of gold. In this narrative, white victims loved and valued their families in the end, and black victims loved and valued vice. This dichotomy served to underscore an assumption already evident in the distribution of aid—some were deserving of pity and help, and others were not. The fate of the Daniels family, Mrs. Holm and her baby, and even the Jewish immigrant Krinskys—all tragedies of the highest order because of the pathos evident in their deaths. Meanwhile, the Idlewild victims, portrayed as spending their final hours and moments in dissolute frivolity, barely deserved remembrance, let alone public sympathy.

The dichotomy between the coverage of African-American tornado deaths and white tornado deaths was rooted in racist mores dominant in mainstream American society at the time. Although the newspapers reported that black victims were entitled to the same aid as white victims and that “no racial lines were drawn,” racial differences were clearly intimated in the post-tornado coverage of the storm.³²⁶ But the Idlewild victims were not only part of a dichotomy about race, they were also part of a pervasive division of individual stories in the storm between heroes and villains.

³²⁶ See Chapter Two for more elaboration on the ways in which race influenced the relief process in the city.

The template of heroes and villains amassed enormous currency during the aftermath of the tornado. In some ways, the role of “villain” was already neatly filled by the tornado—natural force though it might have been, it was still easy enough to cast the “devil cloud” as a malevolent force intent upon the destruction of the innocent. Engaging these terms did not necessarily signify anything about one’s belief about who or what caused the tornado, but for those writing about the tornado after the fact, a cruel storm facing off against the outmatched and the innocent had undeniable dramatic flair. But even if the tornado itself starred as the major villain in accounts of the storm, there was still room for plenty of others to be cast opposite of the heroes: those who were cowardly, those whose lifestyles negated the tragedy of their demise, those who cheated or stole from victims, or those who did not properly appreciate their relative good fortune in escaping the tornado alive.

Though all of these examples were positioned opposite of the storm’s heroes, their villainy, such as it was, comprised several different orders of magnitude. Ingrates, or those who took their escape for granted, may not have been evil, but were certainly not heroes, and deserved ridicule. Gus Renze, a prominent member of the influential society and business philanthropy organization, Ak-Sar-Ben, reported a conversation with a particularly tone-deaf neighbor in his fashionable west Omaha neighborhood.³²⁷ The neighbor’s

³²⁷ “Complained Because One Of His Houses Is Wrecked,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 24, 1913, p. 13. The paper listed Renze and the unknown man’s neighborhood as 40th and Dodge Streets, an address only a block and a half from Omaha’s finest home, George Joslyn’s “Castle.” However, Renze’s address in the Omaha City Directory is different every year from 1910-1913, and none of them were 40th and Dodge. He was employed by Ak-Sar-Ben, and

home had been badly wrecked, and like most other Omaha residents, he did not carry tornado insurance on the property. He did, however, have another, smaller home that he had insured against tornado damage that was outside the path of the present storm. In the course of his alleged grousing, Renze reportedly told him: "Say, man, if you want to console yourself, go down along Twenty-fourth street. They are removing bodies there. You'll feel ashamed of yourself then, and will realize you have something to be grateful for." Thus chastened, the neighbor "winced, but passed on without reply." In this case, public shaming sufficed as punishment for the nameless man. His sin was not grievous enough for public identification, and his insensitivity broke no laws, but the *Bee* saw fit to include the anecdote as a public teaching about counting one's blessings, lest they look like the hard-hearted fool of Fortieth Street.

More strongly denounced were those whose transgressions clearly broke either the law or societal mores, or both. The *Omaha World-Herald* featured a front-page cartoon the Friday following the storm denouncing three kinds of "ghouls:" the "rent raiser," the "price booster," and the "looter."³²⁸ (Figure 6) Although reports contested the prevalence of looting, plenty of reports of theft and exploitation made the rounds of the Omaha press circuit.³²⁹ "Ghouls and Looters" were threatened with the severest punishment, and beyond their legal comeuppance, details of their treachery

the 1910 census listed his occupation as a "Designer" in the "Parade Floats" industry, which was one well-known facet of Ak-Sar-Ben.

³²⁸ "Ghouls—Three of a Kind," *Morning World-Herald*, March 28, 1913, p. 1.

³²⁹ Chapter Two examines possible reasons for the difference in accounting for looting after the tornado.

were published, with names when possible, so that everyone might know their ignominy, as in the case of John Flood and Arnold Dolan, two men arrested and charged with looting.³³⁰ As if their thievery did not earn them condemnation enough, the *Daily News* took pains to portray the superior character or innocence of their victims. "Looter Stole Child's Bank Containing \$13" blared the headline announcing the duo's arrest. The pair apparently entered the wrecked home of Carlyle H. Day, the manager of the U.S. Farm Land Company on Sunday night, some time after the tornado had passed. Day, the *Daily News* declared, had answered the call of the storm nobly, making his family "as comfortable as possible," and then "left his home to help some neighbors."³³¹ Day's selflessness was repaid by Flood and Dolan entering his house and stealing his daughter's bank and its \$13 worth of contents. Flood and Dolan's transgressions were multiplied: in addition to the act of theft, they stole from a "good" man, and on top of *that*, from a child. Flood and Dolan could hardly have calculated a more complete way to invite public condemnation.

³³⁰ "Ghouls and Looters Will Be Severely Dealt With," *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 25, 1913, p. 2. This article lists the men as "John Fletch" and "Arnold Dillon," but the jail register lists their names as "John Flood" and "Arnold Dolan," names corroborated by the 1913 city directory and in other accounts of their misdeeds.

³³¹ "Looter Stole Child's Bank Containing \$13," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 25, 1913, p. 14.

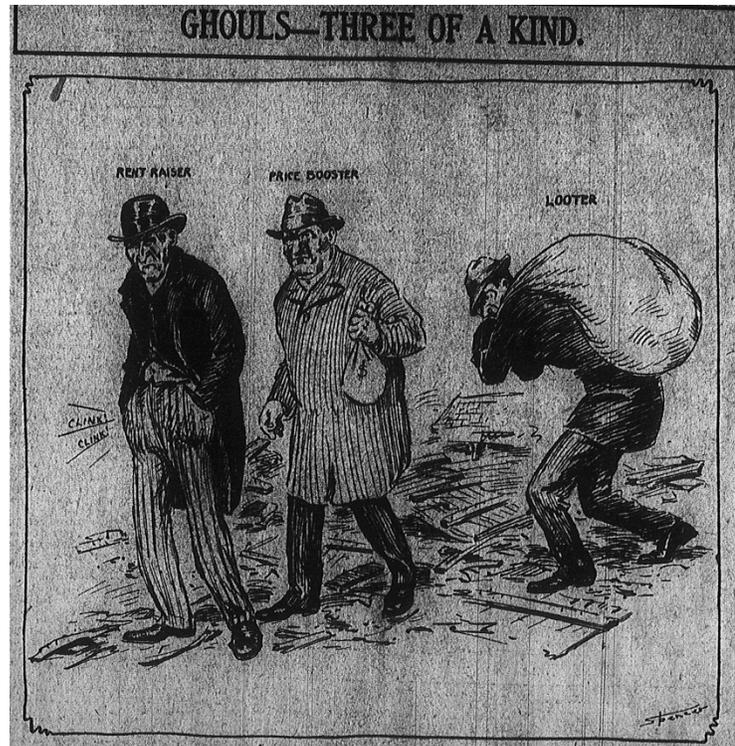


Figure 6

Beyond simple cases of theft, instances of “imposition” also earned public ire. Citing reports of “shyster lawyers,” “penurious landlords,” and insurance agents, the Central Relief Committee also attempted to take this potential problem in hand. A typical case presented by the *Omaha Daily News* credited Frank Ellick with investigating the case of a destitute woman ordered out of her wrecked house by her landlord. “Mr. Ellick sought out the landlord and forced him to permit her to remain in the house until she had made other arrangements,” the paper applauded.³³² Another blight on the city was the flock of opportunistic lawyers who “besieged” tornado victims and urged

³³² “Attempts to Impose on Sufferers Reported,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913. Ellick was not actually a member of the CRC, or any other official committee so far as I can tell. However, he was the manager of the Omaha Printing Company, owned by Frank Johnson who was a member of the CRC, and more notably, presumed by many to be city boss Tom Dennison’s main liaison with the “legitimate” business community.

them to take claims to court for a portion of the collected payout. Pioneers in the litigious habits of twentieth century America, these attorneys represented callous opportunism and greed at its most reprehensible, although the paper was unclear about who, exactly, was going to be sued for the tornado's work. In spite of condemnation by a "prominent lawyer" who suggested such attorneys be disbarred, such an application of the law only grew in popularity in subsequent decades.³³³

Predictably, some accounts chose to present storm villains with certain racial or ethnic characteristics their reading audience already associated with criminality. In the midst of a compilation of stories hailing Omaha's "Lessons of Human Sympathy," Frederick Drinker wrote the following anecdote in his memorial account of the storm:

Some imposition was detected at a few of the stations opened for relief and several arrests were made. In one case a colored woman told a pitiful tale of the suffering of herself and family as a result of the storm. She was supplied with a large quantity of food and clothing. Something in her attitude led to suspicion, and her case was investigated after she had left the station. She was traced to her home. It was found that the storm had not touched the place, and that she was keeping two men at her house who were not working and made no pretense of being laboring men. The three were sent to jail.³³⁴

Drinker's account is questionable at best—he names no names, in contrast to many other anecdotes, and more significantly, in spite of his claim that the three were jailed, the jail records show no such crime on the books attributed to a group matching this description. Only a few arrests for storm-related crimes appear in the jail register, but those that do are very specific, including

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Drinker, *Horrors of Tornado, Flood and Fire*, 62.

“soliciting for cyclone victims” and “defrauding relief committee.”³³⁵ Given the level of detail in the jail register, it is likely that Drinker’s trio, had they existed and been arrested, would also be specifically identified as tornado criminals. But veracity was not crucial to Drinker’s anecdote—the trio served to contrast the good work done by the Relief Committee and Omaha’s churches, which made up the paragraphs immediately preceding the account of the alleged deception. Drinker invoked ugly but pervasive racial stereotypes—the deceitful, scheming, greedy African-American woman, with an implied slur about her sexual promiscuity with the detail of her “keeping” two men at her house; coupled with the trope of lazy black men “who were not working and made no pretense of being laboring men”—as unquestioned shorthand for “people who act reprehensibly in times of chaos.” The “good” people were volunteering at their churches and helping to feed the homeless through the established channel the city had heroically provided. The “bad” people were cheating the relief committee out of supplies truly needed by others. That these canny thieves were both poor and African-American probably did not cause most of Drinker’s white readers much pause, since this was exactly what they expected. In turn, this apparent conformation to preconceived expectation meant it was easy to decide on which side of the hero-villain dichotomy the city’s black residents fell.

³³⁵ Neither perpetrator of these crimes was African-American or female—the jail register contained careful notes of nationality, occupation, and race, and the person(s) filling out the logbook during this period of 1913 tended to be exhaustive in filling out every detail in the book’s table. While Drinker’s story cannot be definitively debunked, there are ample reasons to doubt it, and nothing to confirm its veracity.

Although accounts of wrongdoing were far from rare, they were dominated by glowing accounts of individual and community acts of heroism. “During the hours that followed the terrible work of the storm, hundreds of heroic deeds were done,” crowed Charles Driscoll in his instant history commissioned by the *Omaha Daily News*. “Lives were saved at the risk of life by men and boys who had never laid claims to heroism. Those whose lives had been spared by the storm collected their scattered wits, saw their families on the way to some temporary shelter, and set about the work of dragging from the ruins those who had had no chance of escape.”³³⁶

In spite of Driscoll’s extremely gendered language in this passage, heroism narratives sometimes offered glory and honor to women as well as to men. Women primarily garnered praise in the course of relief work in the days after the storm, rather than in the immediate crisis of the storm or in physical forms of rescue. There were exceptions to this: the female staff of the telephone company earned widespread praise of their selflessness and devotion to their job in the hours following the storm, and Dr. Mildred Williams, a senior at the Omaha Medical college, gained accolades for her quick organization of a makeshift hospital at the Child Saving Institute. Williams, an intern at the Child Saving Institute, which sustained a direct blow from the tornado and was partially damaged, responded to the crisis by setting up an emergency hospital, correctly anticipating that nearby victims would make their way to the Institute for help. She treated more than fifty

³³⁶ Charles B. (Charles Benedict) Driscoll, *Complete Story of Omaha’s Disastrous Tornado* (Omaha [Neb.]: Mogy Pub. Co., 1913).

patients on her own throughout the night and into the early morning. In spite of these impressive efforts and the adulation rightly directed toward her, even in this hour of triumph Williams' efforts were couched in casually sexist language. "A Nurse on the Job," Driscoll labeled her story, even though he correctly identified her as a doctor and medical student in the first sentence. Driscoll also referred to her as a "girl interne" and described her work as "bath(ing), bandag(ing), sooth(ing), and comfort(ing)," verbs imbued with femininity and maternal connotations more than an equally accurate description that included her establishing triage and administering medical treatment.³³⁷ "Girl is Heroine at Child Saving Institute," read the *Daily News'* account of her work, at once infantilizing her and including her clearly in the ranks of the heroic.³³⁸

While women were praised, sometimes effusively, for their care and feeding of the tornado victims, Margaret Williams' adulatory headline is unusual in that most of the time, reporters and writers reserved overt language of heroism for men. "Among those who did heroic work during the storm were W. M. Ritchie and his father, E. A. Ritchie," began an account of a father and son rescuing two neighbor children. The younger Ritchie basked in

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ "Girl is Heroine at Child Saving Institute," *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 14. This article is the source, almost word-for-word in Driscoll's book, an unsurprising circumstance since the *Daily News* commissioned his account. The differences are in the title, which Driscoll changed from the "Heroine" version to "A Nurse on the Job," and an amendment to the death figures of a group of Williams' patients from a grading camp. The earlier version, the one in the *Daily News*, noted that "three had died and two are still (at the Institute), one of whom may not live," and Driscoll presumably amended the story to reflect the passing of the latter.

the glory, telling the paper a likely exaggerated account that included waist-deep water, violent wind, and downed electrical lines.³³⁹ Willis Crosby, the Omaha coroner, “played hero” at the Idlewild Hall. Crosby, “was one of the heroes,” who “pulled half a dozen men from the ruins of the Idlewild pool hall” at great personal risk to himself. Sadly, the report noted, Crosby was attempting to rescue another African-American man from the wreckage when the fire “became so fierce he had to leave him to die.”³⁴⁰ Crosby, for his part, sustained badly burned hair and eyebrows in the incident.

Nowhere was the heroism trope more hagiographic than when it came to Major Carl Hartman. Hartman, in command at Fort Omaha, ordered his troops into the storm district without waiting for orders from his higher ups or an invitation from city officials. Rather than censure him for this, his initiative was treated as a display of unparalleled and manly heroism. To familiarize the city with their new hero, the *Daily News* ran a full-page feature of the life and works of Carl Hartman.³⁴¹ “Who Is Major Hartman?” ran a tantalizing headline above a photo of Omaha’s hero. Any resident of the city

³³⁹ “Rescuers Wade Streets to Save Small Children,” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, March 24, 1913, 2. Ritchie’s account of the electrical wires may well be accurate, as other accounts make mention of this particularly dangerous hazard. However, no other source mentions flooding, especially anything as extreme as waist-deep water, nor do any photographs show flood evidence. Although rain followed the tornado, by all other accounts it was not a noteworthy amount of precipitation.

³⁴⁰ “Some Freaks and Oddities of Sunday’s Big Cyclone,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 24, 1913, p. 7.

³⁴¹ “Who Is Major Hartman?” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, Page 5A. Hartman’s name is spelled both “Hartmann” and “Hartman” with nearly equal prevalence, even across the decades in the U.S. census. I have chosen to use “Hartman” here simply because that is the spelling used in the main hagiographic article I am examining in this section.

paying even the slightest attention in the week following the storm already knew the basic answer to this—Hartman’s early response to the tornado garnered praise in nearly every public recounting of the storm. Apparently, that was not praise enough for the great man, at least according to the *Daily News*, which wasted no time in introducing readers to Hartman’s lifetime achievements. Omaha “was lucky enough to have a man who could take charge...and bring order out of the chaos of that trying situation” the paper oozed. Hartman’s quick action found him in the ruined area of the city two hours after the tornado, and for forty-eight straight hours after that without sleep, organizing and supervising his troops in rescue efforts and “guarding the ruins.” Omaha’s gallant hero, Major Carl F. Hartman, “commander of the signal corps at Fort Omaha, veteran of two wars, an earthquake disaster and a tornado, and a one-time famous cotillion leader of exclusive society circles in the east.” The man was good in an emergency *and* he could dance—what more could a city want in a hero?

A large photograph of Hartman dominated the page, the words “U.S.” in gold prominently displayed on his high-necked uniform. The photo depicts a serious-looking but handsome man in his early 40s, with light hair and eyes, a strong jaw, and a cleft chin. The paper trumpeted Hartman’s exceptionalism, expressing doubt that any other man (let alone a woman) could have “so successfully coped with that trying situation.” According to the *Daily News*, Hartman’s unsurpassed ability to manage the aftermath of the catastrophe was borne of his lifelong military career, and in particular, his time in San Francisco immediately following the earthquake. Interestingly, recent work

has documented a considerable amount of contemporary backlash against the military's actions in the wake of San Francisco's catastrophic 1906 earthquake, particularly the enactment of widespread martial law and grievously ill-advised dynamiting of wreckage that only exacerbated the city's already-existing inferno.³⁴² Yet the Omaha writer had either forgotten or deliberately excluded this part of the military management of that disaster, instead depicting Hartman as "prominent among the officers who led the work of restoration." Painting the intentional dynamiting of a major city as a "work of restoration" is perhaps a rather dramatic instance of artistic license or historic revision, nevertheless, both Hartman and the article's author credited his post-disaster time in San Francisco as critical to his ability to manage and direct troops and city leaders after the tornado.

In spite of Hartman's life spent in uniform, he defied a major tenet of military behavior at the news of the disaster—he did not wait for direct orders. Instead, Hartman mobilized all of the men at Fort Omaha and deployed them into the wrecked portions of the city, directing them to help rescue survivors and to guard destroyed property. "He was everywhere present at that time," wrote the admiring author of the seemingly omnipresent Hartman, "visiting all points of the guard lines, looking after the comfort of his men and assisting property owners in their search." Soon, Hartman's assumption of command extended beyond his men all the way to city hall,

³⁴²See, for example, Philip L. Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disasters* (New York: Viking, 2009).

where the “constant inquiry” of the Executive Relief Committee and city commissioners was “‘Where is Major Hartman?’ or, ‘What does Major Hartman say about it?’” According to this account, “almost every situation that arose the first several days after the tornado” was reported to Major Hartman, along with a plea for advice, and “always (his advice) was found sound.” Hartman apparently had a commanding presence and authoritative style, as the author noted that “partly by his demeanor, partly by the firmness of his commands,” he compelled “an almost military mode of action in the relief work.” Some “easy-going civilians” disliked his manner, “but they didn’t talk back,” and by the time the article was written one week after the storm, the disgruntled civilians allegedly claimed that the disaster could not have been handled well without Major Hartman.³⁴³ Even Hartman’s superiors were impressed: his bosses greeted his initiative with a message of commendation.

How did Hartman so easily commandeer the reins of the city? In part, his early presence on the scene of the disaster likely gave him a head start in making critical decisions. Furthermore, if his decisions were more or less

³⁴³ Not everyone came around to unreserved praise of Major Hartman and his decisions. Hartman’s relish of defending the property of the people from thieves only extended to the wealthy, according to one detractor, who wrote to the editor of the *Omaha Daily News*. Pleading with the paper to send a reporter to investigate, the letter writer asked “Has the property of the common people the same right to protection as the property of the rich? Do you know that the homes of the poor people are left without protection while the government is today furnishing the soldiers to protect the homes and property of the rich, in the city of Omaha?” In spite of the heralded unity and prevailing print narrative of a city’s collective triumph over the storm, this letter reveals the class- and race-based divisions that prevented access to relief and recovery on an equitable basis. “No Guards For Poor,” *The Omaha Daily News*, April 1, 1913, p. 4.

effective in meeting the main goals of the city's leaders—particularly, protecting property and keeping Omaha from spiraling into a state of embarrassing chaos or lawlessness—there would be no real reason to put a stop to his directing of the situation, and accounts indicate that with only a few exceptions, Hartman's measures adequately controlled the situation. Third, Hartman's prior experience in San Francisco conferred upon him an unusual expertise, one that few, if any, city leaders held. Trained social workers and relief personnel who flocked to Omaha following the tornado possessed this expertise as well, since for some of them, managing disasters was part of their job.³⁴⁴ But Hartman was unique in possessing both high-profile disaster management experience as well as a position of authority. Though he held no role in the city government and was a native New Yorker and only a temporary Nebraskan, he already had—through his troops and the U.S. Army—more ready access to men and supplies than did any person on the Citizen's Relief Committee.³⁴⁵ Finally, Hartman found his power and decision-making largely unquestioned simply because of who he was—a handsome, successful white man with good breeding. City leaders, who shared some (if not all) of these traits with Hartman had no real reason to not trust his leadership, because in him, they saw someone much like themselves with similar goals and values. The *Daily News* article underscored this point

³⁴⁴ For example, the Red Cross representatives who traveled to the city and who corresponded with relief workers and the CRC had cultivated relief experience through many natural disasters across the United States.

³⁴⁵ This includes the police commissioner, John Ryder, and Sheriff Felix McShane, who deferred to Hartman in deciding how to utilize their forces, as described in Chapter Three.

with the assertion that “Responsibility is the natural state for Major Hartman. Where he happens to be there is bound to be something unusual happen. He has grown to like it and accept it as a part of his life.” In this rendering, Hartman had been selected for leadership by higher powers than man, and who were a few city commissioners to get in the way of such a destiny? In an era where “great man” theories of history held strong sway, it was not ludicrous for Omahans to imagine that their ostensible deliverer had simply been born to command. Again, the article confirmed this as an inborn trait of Hartman’s: “Whether on the heat-swept border (of Mexico, where he had served for some time before coming to Omaha) or in the ruins of cities stricken by the fury of the elements, he retains the same demeanor that made him so popular in ball-room and drawing-room in his earlier days.”

It was also not inconsequential to Hartman’s man-of-the-hour mystique that he was a member of the United States Army. In 1913, American sensibilities about their armed forces were complicated, deeply influenced by the lingering shadow of the Civil War and by more recent forays into imperialism. Still many years from involvement in the Great War, the United States’ military might was relatively small compared to what was massing in Europe, and for a majority of Americans, this was just fine, since, they believed, the United States had no need to dirty its hands in the increasingly muddled and ominous European situation. Instead, the current U.S. Army contented itself domestically by experimenting with airships and the nascent development of military airplanes and tasks like “chasing Mexican rebels away from the border,” as well as maintaining its continuous presence in

Latin America and East Asia.³⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the impression of the Civil War, though still within living memory for some Americans, continued an ongoing reinterpretation steeped in nostalgia and white American reconciliation that emphasized valor and heroism on both sides and omitted reference to the causes of the conflict.³⁴⁷ Even the National Guard, according to Nebraska's Adjutant General, appeared to many as "a menace to society," or, at best, a "useless appendage."³⁴⁸ By and large, by 1913, many believed the American military need only be sufficient to engage in the occasional "splendid little war," provide résumé –burnishing credentials to aspiring politicians too young to claim Civil War service, and to give respectable employment to well-bred young men like Major Hartman.

Active and authoritative in a moment of crisis, Carl Hartman benefited from a society eager for its own heroes to replace those of their fathers' and grandfathers' generations, but one that also wished to avoid the disruptive, calamitous military events that had created the valorized men of yore. Nature had delivered to Omaha sufficient crisis to allow "born leaders" to rise above and display their latent capacity for heroism, and all that remained was acceptance and acclamation by the masses. Omaha's media and self-appointed

³⁴⁶ "Who Is Major Hartman?" *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, Page 5A.

³⁴⁷ Mere months after the tornado, thousands of wizened, surviving veterans of Gettysburg descended on that town to observe the 50th anniversary of the eponymous battle. Media coverage of the massive event was intense, and readers across the country read accounts celebrating "the indomitable spirit of the men who are now cementing in friendship the sections (of the country)." President Wilson praised the "venerable men" who "were willing to die that the people might live." "Wilson Talks to the Blue and Gray," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 5, 1913, p. 1.

³⁴⁸ *Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Nebraska for 1913-1914*, P.L. Hall, Jr. State of Nebraska, 1914, p. 4.

chroniclers of the storm happily obliged, and valorized not only Major Hartman, but other heroes of the tornado.

Three months after Omaha's storm, as President Woodrow Wilson addressed veterans of the Civil War and thousands of visitors observing the fiftieth anniversary of the pivotal battle, his speech reminded both heroes and civilians that the United States still required the service of its people:

Here is a great people, great with every force that has ever beaten in the lifeblood of mankind. And (the United States) is secure. There is no one within its borders, there is no power among the nations of the earth, to make it afraid... (But) the days of sacrifice and cleansing are not closed. We have harder things to do than were done in the heroic days of war, because harder to see clearly, requiring more vision, more calm balance of judgment, a more candid searching of the very springs of right... We are made by these tragic, epic things to know what it costs to make a nation... In armies thus marshaled from the ranks of free men you will see, as it were, a nation embattled, the leaders and the led, and may know, if you will, how little except in form its action differs in days of peace from its action in days of war.

Setting aside the great irony in Wilson's speech when his words about "candid searching of the very springs of right" are compared to the nation's legal and extralegal policies toward its racial minorities, his statements reveal both a faith that the United States' military capacities would not soon be tested and a conviction that "great men" must still lead the country, if not in literal battle. And significantly, as with several of the religious readings of the storm, Wilson explained hardship not as pure misfortune, but rather, as a refining fire, sent to strengthen the country's mettle. The heroism of blue- and gray-clad men at Gettysburg had evolved into a greater national story, one that included anyone making an effort to quell disaster, misfortune, chaos, or

lawlessness for the greater good of their community into a Real American Hero part of the great work of nation building.³⁴⁹

In one pictorial history of the storm published soon after the tornado, a photo of two members of the Nebraska National Guard, young and clearly very cold standing in the snow that followed in the days after the tornado, bears the caption “America’s Real Protectors.” Clutching their rifles and wearing long overcoats, the boy on the left side of the photo looks barely old enough to have graduated high school. “The country boys,” the caption continues, “did great and heroic work.”³⁵⁰ Fifty years earlier, the “great and heroic work” might have occurred in uniform and through violence. Now, Omaha’s tornado gave its residents an avenue to heroism at the same time it linked them to the United States more broadly. Standing guard over a wrecked house in Omaha, Nebraska was not just a good turn for the community—it made them heroic protectors of America. The boys’ ascension to national greatness illustrated a major theme of not just Omaha’s tornado, but with other catastrophic events of the era—there was a particular “Americanness” to the aftermath of disaster. In the first place, at least according to many narratives, other Americans naturally felt sympathy for

³⁴⁹ Obviously, the definition of “chaos and disorder,” and “the greater good,” depended a lot on who was doing the defining. In Wilson’s rendering, white and prosperous Americans represented the “greater good,” and things this group of people might have seen as “chaotic” and “dangerous”—labor agitation, racial minorities attempting to secure even basic human rights—certainly did not seem that way to Americans from other demographic groups. The definition of heroism and the belief of American exceptionalism and greatness was a contested and problematic formulation then, as it is now.

³⁵⁰ Miles Greenleaf, *Thrilling Story of Omaha’s Tornado* (Chicago, Ill.: Hamming Pub. Co., 1913).

those afflicted by misfortune, creating a unifying experience of warm-hearted pity. One of Frederick Drinker's (many) subtitles to his memorial account of the storm was *Wonderful Exhibitions of Popular Sympathy for the Stricken Sufferers*, emphasizing the empathy of the American people. Logan Marshall, another author of a disaster account, made the point even more emphatically—he titled his book *The True Story of Our National Calamity Of Flood, Fire and Tornado*.³⁵¹ Notably, Marshall did not include the word “Omaha” anywhere in his title, instead opting to describe the storm as part of a “national calamity” far greater in its effects than the locality in which it occurred. His subtitle again underscores his point: *How the Whole Nation Joined in the Work of Relief* promised not just a story of one community's resilience, but a national, American effort to rise from the ashes. As had Galveston in 1900 and San Francisco in 1906, periodic disasters offered the United States an avenue for national grief, but also a celebration of an assumed nation-wide, resilient character.

Of course, in spite of this broad and inclusive narrative, at the end of the day, the demolished houses and snapped telephone poles had the greatest influence in Omaha itself. But here too, the narrative formation took on a triumphant tone: not only were Americans resilient as a people, but Omahans were the *most* resilient of Americans. After the initial shock and horror of the tragedy ended, it was quickly replaced by reminders to Omahans that they

³⁵¹ Logan Marshall, *The True Story of Our National Calamity of Flood, Fire and Tornado ...: How the Whole Nation Joined in the Work of Relief* (Lima, Ohio: Webb Book & Bible Co., 1913). As the title implies, Marshall's book covers not just the Omaha tornado, but also the subsequent Ohio floods.

were doing an exceedingly good job in coping with the tornado. “It is a high-water mark in Omaha in the virtues of brotherhood and unselfishness,” chirped the *Omaha Bee*. “No sooner had the first thrill of horror passed from the minds of Omaha citizens after the disaster of last week, than the spirit of helpfulness asserted itself,” added the *Daily Bee*.³⁵² Although individuals were chastised for how they handled the storm—such as the man moaning about his uninsured property when he had escaped with his life and other properties—Omaha’s populace as a whole was credited with superb resilience and strength of character. Instead of a story of misfortune and loss, the storm, in capable hands, became a parable of good citizenship. A year after the tornado, this, city leaders hoped, would be the general impression of the storm—Omaha underwent a great trial, but through the heroism of its people, emerged as good as new. And thus noted a small article in *The Wall Street Journal* a year later, summarizing the comeback: “The recuperative powers of the city, after such a heavy loss, is almost unbelievable.”

The deliberate construction of narratives designed to highlight the good about Omaha and reinforce what people already believed to be bad should not negate the actions of many in the city. Hundreds of individuals gave of their time and money to help victims, and many behaved selflessly, working to free family and neighbors from wreckage, donating goods and services, working to distribute and organize aid, and giving their weekends removing tree branches, bricks, and debris from thoroughfares and lawns. It would be

³⁵² “The Spirit of Helpfulness is Manifested By Benefit Activities,” *The Omaha Daily News*, March 30, 1913, p. 3B.

wrong to assume that these activities did not do a substantial amount of good in the community or to assign an overly cynical reading of motivations after the fact. Individual and community recovery occurred because of the efforts of hundreds of men and women, especially in an era where state-sponsored relief remained sporadic and primarily financial. But under whatever spirit the actions of rescue and recovery carried on, these events provided powerful rhetorical material for authors, media members, and city leaders who were ready, able, and willing to shape it for their own ends.

CONCLUSION

The Devil Cloud, Revisited

The wind swirls skiffs of snow as my friend Melissa picks me up at the airport to take me to Metro Community College, formerly the site of Fort Omaha, where Major Carl Hartmann drilled his troops one hundred years before. Her little Mazda slips and slides perilously as we approach the newly built conference center, a spacious all-purpose room occupying the second story of the building that also houses the college's Culinary Arts program. My fellow panelists and I will be seated directly above the school's bakery, which is, regrettably, closed on this Sunday afternoon. I think of Nathan Krinsky and his family, huddled together in their small, ill-fated bakery on 24th and Lake streets, 2.3 miles and one hundred years away. It would only take four minutes to drive there from campus in a car now. Longer than that today, since it is snowing even harder and the road conditions are absolutely wretched. A lot of things have changed in Omaha during the intervening century, but Nebraska March weather remains as cruelly capricious as ever. Guy Spencer's cantankerous crone sending icy blasts toward Omahans would resonate just as well on a day like this. His employer, the *Omaha World-Herald*, is still around—for those still reading newspapers. The only daily paper left in the city, ninety-eight years after the Easter tornado, it was bought by Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, now Omaha's most famous corporation, helmed by a man richer than the entire 1913 Omaha Commercial Club combined.

I meet the rest of the panelists as they arrive. One, a filmmaker for Nebraska Public Television, has put together a documentary about the storm in honor of the 100th anniversary. Local historians and a meteorologist round out our number on the raised platform at the front of the room. Unsurprisingly for a 100th anniversary observance, there are no first-hand survivors on the panel or in the audience.³⁵³ In spite of the horrid road conditions, a healthy crowd turns up. They want to know about Tom Dennison's machine, and whether or not Omaha residents had basements in 1913. They wondered how it compared with the deadly 1975 tornado in Omaha and why, having lived their entire lives in Omaha, they'd never heard much, if anything, about the Easter tornado until its 100th anniversary.³⁵⁴

The last question still gives me pause. Why do communities remember some natural disasters and not others? Some might argue that it is death toll that makes a calamity stick in the collective memory. There is some truth to that—the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, the 1900 Galveston hurricane, 2005's Hurricane Katrina—all of these had death tolls above 1,000, and all are remembered today. But there are exceptions to this. The Great Chicago fire of 1871 remains one of the most

³⁵³ Though she was not present at the panel, there was one known survivor who saw the tornado's 100th anniversary. Maude Fodrea Wangberg, who was seven years old when the tornado hit Omaha, passed away February 6, 2015 at the age of 109.

³⁵⁴ The May 6, 1975 Omaha tornado is one of the better-remembered disasters in Nebraska today. Though it killed only three people thanks to much more advanced prediction and warning systems, it caused a massive amount of damage. When it occurred, it was the most costly tornado disaster in the United States. Today, adjusted for inflation, it is ninth all-time, due in large part to a spate of recent tornados striking heavily populated areas like Joplin, MO and Tuscaloosa, AL in 2011 and Moore/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1999 and 2013. Rankings are from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). [http://www.spc.noaa.gov/faq/tornado/damage\\$.htm](http://www.spc.noaa.gov/faq/tornado/damage$.htm)

famous disasters in United States history, and yet, its fatalities numbered only an estimated 200-300, a relatively small number compared to scores of other U.S. disasters and compared with the scope of the fire. Another fire on the same day as the Chicago fire killed at least 1,000, and possibly 2,000 more people, and yet the Peshtigo Fire holds little place in the national memory.³⁵⁵ There is no easy answer to why we remember some disasters and not others, although at least some of the answer may lie in our readiness to recognize disaster in locations we already deem important before a disaster makes them infamous. Perhaps we are predisposed to care more about the destruction when it happens to cultural landmarks like Chicago, San Francisco, or New Orleans. It is sad, but not particularly memorable for most, when it happens to Peshtigo, or Omaha, or Dayton.

In part, historical survival also depends on how residents of the affected area treat the memory of the event. Chicagoans preserved their fire-surviving water tower, lovingly restoring it and designing streets around it to provide it a place of honor. The way that the city rose from the ashes became part of the city's lore, a point of pride, not shame. Its amazing restoration from devastation became a message of empowerment and celebratory boastfulness, not a sad footnote to history. What couldn't Chicago do after coming back so completely from a fire like that? But not every city wished to define itself that way—Omaha leaders certainly did not. They celebrated their recovery—a year after the tornado, the *Omaha Bee* published a

³⁵⁵ Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). In her introduction, Sawislak takes up a comparison of the Peshtigo, Wisconsin fire and the Great Chicago fire, and in part considers why these two fires hold such different places in American lore.

booklet of side-by-side photographs showing buildings and streets taken right after the tornado and their fully restored condition a year later. The title was one of hyperbolic pride, a la Chicago: *Wrecked in a Night, Rebuilt in a Day*.³⁵⁶ The public could own a copy of this record of civic recovery for only a few cents, and the Commercial Club saw to it that a copy made its way to Harvard University, so that men of means on the East Coast might see for themselves the completeness of Omaha's return to normalcy. A small item in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1914 provided numbers comparing Omaha's key economic indicators and showing that the "devastating tornado" had not hampered the city's economy in the least.³⁵⁷ It was "valuable food for thought," the writer urged readers.

However, after the one-year anniversary, mention of the Easter tornado dries up. There is little evidence of regular observances of the anniversary, even on the five-year or ten-year dates. In the following decades, there was one exception to this: whenever Omaha was visited by a tornado or particularly vicious windstorm, the city's newspapers would dutifully trot out a list of other notable tornados in Omaha's past, and the Easter tornado always had pride of place on these lists, at least until 1975. The tornado became a historical footnote, not a defining moment for the city.

From time to time, the tornado enjoyed a revival with a feature in the "History" section of one of the city's papers. The destruction and the death frequently made it into these accounts, but so too did Mayor Jim Dahlman's refusal of aid. But over time, the story of this refusal had gotten less complicated. In 1975, the *Omaha World-*

³⁵⁶ Omaha Bee (Firm), *Wrecked in a Night-Rebuilt in a Day: Omaha after the Tornado* ([Omaha, Neb.]: Omaha Bee, 1913).

³⁵⁷ "Omaha's Come-Back," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 1914, 2.

Herald interviewed 96-year-old Wilmer Blackett about the events of “65 Easters Ago.”³⁵⁸ Blackett still remembered Dahlman’s refusal of the aid, and apparently, it still rankled: “Mayor Dahlman—you remember Dahlman?—well he issued a decree that they didn’t want any help cleaning up,” Blackett told the reporter “with some disgust.” He continued, “All the towns around offered to help, but Dahlman said we didn’t need any. Consequently, they didn’t get enough money to take care of all the needs.” The reporter filled in the details for his readers: “Rugged individualist Dahlman later reversed his decision under pressure.”

There are two notable things about this version of the storm. First, the decision to refuse aid (and to reverse the decision) is implied to be solely Dahlman’s. He alone is the target of Blackett’s lingering ire, and the recipient of the author’s admiring description of “rugged individualist.” Of course, Dahlman did not act alone. He publicly responded to Wilson with the refusal of aid because the telegram from Wilson had been addressed to him as the official head of the city of Omaha. In 1913, the public indignation about the “business interests” guiding the decision to refuse aid prove that the Commercial Club’s involvement was known or suspected by a great deal of the population. But in the decades following the tornado, their involvement fell out of the picture. Secondly, the description of Dahlman as a “rugged individualist” is a striking phrase. But for a man who obtained his position and mayoral career through the good graces of a well-run machine, it is not an appropriate descriptor. Dahlman was mayor precisely *because* he was not an individualist. He was a good-natured, pliable man who seemed to really only have strong personal political convictions on

³⁵⁸ “Survivor Recalls 1913 Tornado,” *The Omaha World-Herald*, March 26, 1978.

the subject of Prohibition. Conveniently for him, he was perfectly in step with his machine bosses on that particular issue.

However, the “rugged individualist” label is reminiscent of another piece of the aid refusal puzzle. The Commercial Club initially refused aid to preserve their credit, and because “if she is able to handle the situation on her own,” the club believed it would reflect well on the city. Their hope was that in refusing aid and handling the recovery independently, they could make their city a parable of self-reliance. Sixty-five years later, it seems that at least one writer at the *World-Herald* bought what they had been trying so hard to sell.³⁵⁹

In 1988, the *World-Herald* again revisited the tornado in their Sunday magazine feature, *Magazine of the Midlands*. This time, the aid refusal underwent yet another revision. Claiming to take their information from the *World-Herald* files, the magazine writer offered a litany of emotions experienced by Omahans who witnessed the tornado:

Horror, as those inside the Idlewild pool hall...watched the roof of the building suddenly sucked up into the sky and just as suddenly crashed down, crushing the men inside.

Joy, as a baby was swept from her father’s arm and found only steps away, still peacefully swaddled.

³⁵⁹ This version of events did not survive everywhere. The *North Omaha Sun*, a newspaper that did not exist in 1913, revisited the tornado on several occasions throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1975, it ran a small history feature about Dahlman and the aid refusal, based around the photograph of the mayor at his desk reading post-storm telegrams. The *Sun*’s summary of the aid refusal is far more historically accurate: “On the advice of the Commercial Club, which wanted to maintain the image of Omaha as a well-off earthly paradise, the mayor at first refused to accept help. Leaders soon changed their minds, because so much help was needed, and available.” “Dahlman and ’13 Tornado Aid,” *The North Omaha Sun*, June 5, 1975, 3-A.

Pride, as when Mayor James C. Dahlman declined President Woodrow Wilson's telegraphed offer of federal aid by saying that Omahans could take care of themselves. (Dahlman reversed his stand later when the extent of the damage became known.)³⁶⁰

In the first place, the description of the Idlewild Pool Hall is a confusing one, apparently at once purporting to show events from the point of view of the men inside *and* any onlookers watching the scene unfold at the pool hall (given the heavy damage in the neighborhood, there cannot have been many in the vicinity casually watching the horror and not taking shelter themselves). And though the families and friends of the victims certainly found their fate tragic and horrifying, white Omahans' response to this particular site of tragedy is better described as morbid curiosity rather than horror.

Secondly, the description of Mayor Dahlman and the aid refusal underwent even greater revision in the decade following the 1978 "rugged individualist" article. In this rendering, Dahlman's refusal was not only uncontested; it was a source of civic pride! The reasons for the reversal are also softened—instead of giving in to protest and community outrage, in this portrayal refusal was based on nothing more than an accounting error, and was quickly rectified when true damage costs were known.

Why this shift over time? How did the Omaha Commercial Club come to so completely get their wish about how the aid refusal was perceived (albeit seventy years too late)? Perhaps it is a simple case of those of influence having an inordinate amount of say in how history is written—after all, Omaha, especially through

³⁶⁰ "Four-Minute Fury: Omaha's Easter Tornado of 1913," *Omaha Sunday World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands*, March 20, 1988.

insurance and through the proximity of Berkshire-Hathaway, has become an influential financial center to a degree that would make the Commercial Club swell with pride. It is still a city where wealthy white men have an inordinate amount of power. But in this case, I think the answer lies in the era in which the *Magazine of the Midlands* was printed—at the end of the Reagan era, and in a solidly Republican state.³⁶¹ After the better part of a decade of political discourse spent blasting federal programs and inciting fear about welfare queens, it was a climate where the *World-Herald's* readers might well have felt pride at a mayor refusing federal aid. The problem, of course, is that projecting current feelings onto the past and calling it historical fact results in a distorted view of history.

The Easter tornado of 1913 does not stand among the well-known disasters in American history, and this dissertation will not change that. But even with its relative anonymity and public status as a historical footnote, it is an important episode of United States history. Disasters are useful to historians because they disrupt the established order of things, and they completely upset life as usual. In the choices that are made to bring order to the chaos, we are able to see the values and true state of affairs with a clarity not always evident when society is humming along like a well-oiled machine. It is when the gears get stuck that the cover is lifted, and we can see all of the moving parts, interconnected, in a way we usually cannot. Instead of making our best guess about what is driving a society, we can see who is making decisions, and if we are lucky, understand why they made them. The Easter tornado blew apart

³⁶¹ In the 1984 presidential election, all 93 Nebraska counties voted for Ronald Reagan, who enjoyed a 70.55% majority in the state's popular vote.

the machinery of Omaha, and in the rush to put it back together, its citizens revealed a group of people grieving, coping, and making sense of it all in a country wildly in flux.

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