IN 1870 much of southwestern Minnesota still awaited the settler's plow. It was a raw frontier, full of promise. Before that promise could be realized, however, the settlers were subjected to a series of hardships and setbacks which severely tested their self-reliance and perseverance. Pioneers on every successive frontier experienced privation and suffering, but those who migrated to southwestern Minnesota were confronted with an unusual number of natural reverses and hazards as they sought to establish farms.

Settlers, who had only recently occupied the new country, suffered heavy losses from extensive prairie fires in 1871. Some pioneer farmers lost hay, grain, stables, machinery, livestock, and even their houses. For example, a farmer near Albion in Wright County wrote to Governor Horace Austin on November 7 that a fire had burned four stacks of hay, his stable, a henhouse, a hog house and two hogs, an ox yoke and plow, and all his fencing. Henry A. Castle, who investigated the results of several fires for Governor Austin, reported that in the neighborhood of Morris several families were in dire need. One farmer had lost all his hay, his wagon, plow, and harrow. He was very poor, according to Castle, "with a family of seven children, a cow, a yoke of oxen and no money." ¹

Destruction and loss from hail struck many southwestern Minnesota farmers in the early 1870s. A letter to Governor Austin dated December 4, 1871, said that twenty families in Pope County had lost their crop and were "almost destitute." Hail in the Butternut Valley in Blue Earth County did untold damage to crops on July 7, 1871, and forced numerous desperate settlers in that vicinity to ask for charity.²

The greatest threat to the region's development, however, was the series of grasshopper scourges which hit parts of the area during the years between 1873 and 1877. Describing the western part of Martin County in June, 1874, one correspondent of

¹George Eagy to Austin, November 7, 1871; Castle to Austin, November 2, 1871, file no. 259, Governor's Collection, in the Minnesota State Archives. All documents cited in this article may be found in this collection. The editor wishes to express his appreciation to Mr. Robert M. Brown and Mr. Fred Thibodeau for their co-operation during his research in the Minnesota State Archives. Some financial assistance for this project was provided by the University of Oklahoma Faculty Research Committee.

²Ole Peterson to Austin, December 4, 1871; affidavits of Hans Madsen and M. O. Strom, December 2, 1871, file no. 259.
the governor declared that it was “entirely
stripped of all crops.” From Lake Shetek
came a report that grasshoppers were “very
numerous and destructive,” and that they
had devoured “fully one-half of all the crops
in this [Murray] county.” Grasshopper
damage was repeated during the next three
years. In 1877 some farmers declared that
they had not raised a full crop in four years.

Such natural hazards as these brought
unusual hardship to thinly settled communi­
ties and to farmers who had very little capi­
tal or ready cash. Most pioneer settlers spent
nearly all their funds to construct buildings
and to plant their first crop. If it was dam­
aged or destroyed, they were left destitute
and had to depend upon charity or upon ex­
pensive credit. One farmer told Governor
Austin in 1871 that he had mortgaged 160
acres of land for two hundred dollars on
which he was paying twenty per cent inter­
est. Sparse population on the frontier and the
lack of an established tax base contributed to
individual hardship. Governor Austin re­
ported to the legislature in January, 1873,
that there were only 530, 560 and 1,260
people in Murray, Rock and Nobles counties
respectively. Such newly organized coun­
ties, with meager population and limited tax
resources, were in no position to take full
responsibility for their needy citizens. Con­
sequently, there were numerous requests for
private charity from outside the stricken
area, and a widespread demand for state
aid. During periods of severe hardship, many
farmers described their condition in letters
to the governor and other state officers. The
official files throughout the 1870s include
hundreds of communications from distressed
pioneers pleading for help. Many of these
letters have been preserved in the Minne­
sota State Archives. They constitute a source
of agricultural history which has been left
untapped, not only in Minnesota but else­
where. Those here presented are only a
sampling from the multitude available. They
tell of the needs, frustrations, and sufferings
of farmers on the Minnesota frontier during
a most trying period of settlement.

As accounts of want and destitution in the
southwestern counties poured into St. Paul
after the fires and hailstorms of 1871, Gov­
er Austin issued a proclamation “calling
for aid and setting forth the urgent necessity
which existed for immediate and systematic
efforts for relief.” The response was prompt
and generous; cash, clothing, and provi­sions
were donated by Minnesotans and by citi­
zens of Eastern states who heard of the
appeal. Austin entrusted the supervision and
issuing of these supplies to his private secre­
tary, Andrew R. McGill, and he appointed a
number of commissioners to survey local
conditions and investigate cases of need. De­
spite hard work and good intentions, this
hastily improvised machinery for distribut­ing
relief frequently lacked efficiency. Some
of its shortcomings are revealed in the fol­
lowing pleas for additional help. On Christ­
mas Eve, 1871, a farmer from Green Isle in
Sibley County wrote to Governor Austin:

I received a box of Clothes between me
and James D—— it contained 1 over coat
and a cape [cape] 2 pair of toren pants 1
pair of vest old that would fit a boy of 12
year old 2 pair of drawer 2 old quilts 2 com­
forters for the neck 1 hat 1-1/2 pair of socks
1 pair of inside shirts torn and no womens
Clothing whatever we divided them be­
tween us without any difficulty whatever but
Dear Governer this is poor recompense for
what i have lost by the fire when you sent
your printed form to have it sworn to by
witnesses i did so i had to be taken to hen-
derson in a waggon 20 miles not been able to go with rheumatism and there swore to my Losses signed by responsible persons. . . .

It is hard to see my few head of stock starving with the hunger and i not able to buy 1 ton of hay to help them and my field open without a real or fence to keep any thing out of it and i have no help to fence nor i am not able to do it myself i am old besides i am laid up with rheumatism so dear Governor i hope that you will not forget a poor helpless family that was and is trying to raise his family i would not trouble your Excellency but necessity compels me as i am not able to help myself i wish you a Merry Cristmast and a happy New Year.

On December 25, 1871, an Alexandria woman wrote what was apparently her second letter to the governor:

Pleas pardon me for troubleing you again. I asked one favor of ya & it was kindly granted & now I will thank ya a thousand times. Mr. Aaker has helped us a little, for which to you we are Sincerely thankfull Mr. Aaker told us that he was expecting a Box of clothing from Saint Cloud & for us to come over & get some & we went but there was nothing in the Box that we could wear the clothing was mostly for children & young men & girls & as we are so very needy I thought I would ask ya to send us some from Saint Paul We are very much in want of boots & Shoes & all kinds of Clothing Socks & under & over garments. My husband has not had a sock on his feet this winter & he sufferes with the cold very much. we both suffer with cold for want of clothing to keep us warm. Now Dear Gov if ya will fix up a Package of the clothing that has been sent in & send it to me ya will be doing a deed of kindness which I will never forget we have not boght any clothing since we came here for it has took all we could raise to live without buying Clothes If ya send anything Pleas send it as soon as ya get this for we do need them so much. Mr. S—— is a very large man over six feet tall & wears No 11 Boots. I am medium sisse & wear No 5 shoes Pleas write to me if ya send the things.

Edward C—— to Austin, file no. 259. The names of applicants for aid have been omitted. Otherwise these letters have been reproduced without change or editing, unless some explanation appeared necessary for clarity.

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On April 13, 1872, Browning Nichols, a member of the newly created board of commissioners of Lac qui Parle County, appealed to the governor on behalf of destitute settlers in his area:

I have just received a letter from Abner Tibbetts of New Ulm with a petition enclosed that was Sent to you prying for help for Anna A of this County. She is a widow woman with two Small children and is very poor and no doubt but needs help. She is living with Mr. L her Brother-in-law and is a woman that does a good deal of work. We have a good many up here in our County that are very destitute and really need help and if you have any more funds in your hands for that purpose there is Some that I would be glad to see helped if they could not get more than enough to buy two or three bushels of Seed potatoes it would help them a good deal. I think Mrs. A is deserving of help but no more. So than some others up here if you have any funds in your hands that you can spare for the poor up here I will be glad to spend time in looking them up and see that it is fairly divided amongst them.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR, 1873, saw the first major grasshopper invasion, which left a path of destruction and poverty in southwestern Minnesota. In 1874 the plague spread to twenty-eight counties, reaching north as far as Polk and east to include Sibley and Blue Earth. The legislature of that year appropriated five thousand dollars for direct relief and twenty-five thousand dollars for the purchase of seed grain. The difficulties involved in distribution of aid are reflected in a letter written by an elderly Watonwan County farmer and addressed to Governor Cushman K. Davis on July 20, 1874:

I have observed in the papers that you pretends to help and aid people whose grain has been destroyed by Grasshoppers, and the people of Minnesota is very much indebted to you for your Generousity. Yet there is many very many whose sufferings and hardships has not yet been prevented and many Sufferers have hitherto tried all in their power to help themselves, but they are now obliged to place the matter before the Father of the State and other generous people in hope to obtain relief. For this reason I the Undersigned your humble servant have dared to make out a statement of my present condition accompanied by the signature of the Justice of the Peace in hope that it may find relief for me among the generous and kindhearted people of St. Paul and as I hope with you will [receive?] full assistance.

I am 74 years old my wife is 63 years old. We live on a homestead in Sec 8 Town of Long Lake Watonwan County in this State. We have a small Farm under cultivation only sufficient to support us when we gets a good crop but our crops has now ben destroyed two year in succession and we can see nothing but starvation in the future if relief do not come in time to prevent its approach. The grasshoppers have only left a little corn and potatoes at present. We have no cattle for sale. We lost a cow this Summer by Disease and we have now only a heifer and a calf. We did not receive any thing from the relief comitee last Winter for We could not leave our home on account of our age and we have 7 miles to St James where the articles was distributed. It would take about 100 Dollars to support us during the year and to buy seed wheat for next year. I however do not expect as much, but if I could get as much as a loan on 3 years time with resonabl intiest it would satisfy me the best. But if this cannot be had I will ask you to aid us with provitions gathered among the good People of St. Paul or if you could collect by subscription money enough for me to buy a cow and I should send receipt for every thing received. Oh! most...
honorable governor I hope you will help us poor old mortals so that we can support us during this hard year. We can not help us self for we are too old to earn any Thing by labor.\textsuperscript{12}

On August 21, 1874, a disheartened Brown County woman wrote "To the Governor of the Statt of Minnesota" as follows:

No doubt you will be surprised at receiving a letter on such busness as I am about to write, my apology is necesity we have lived on our claim three years last spring last year our crops were distroyed or nearly, consequly we owe for last years seed, this spring we sold our team for this reson we do not owe for our seed this year, but our wheat is intirly distroyed so that it cannot be harvested my husband took a great deal of panes in getting the ground ready for it, for we realy need the wheat to pay debts as well as other things, it is rather discouraging to leave all our dear friends and come here and instead of making something having to go in debt. I heard through a friend a few days since, that persons who had there crops distroyed by grasshoppers were allowed to travel on the cars free of charge, to there friends where they could be helped, or a place where they were going to work, now if this is the case I would be very thankfull if you would send husband and I a ticket or pass which ever is required, to take us to Canandaguia N. Y. where our friends are. \ldots We have two small children and I expect there will soon be another added and if I could get to my friends I should have good care, and they think there would be no doubt but my husband could get work there through the winter. My health has been very poor for over two years, so poor that we have had to have help a great part of the time, and medicine that I have has cost a great deal it has made us poor. It is necessary to go the first of next month, then we shall need no other help. if I had been able to have been left alone perhaps we should not have been obliged to have asked so great a favor. I have written this in the absence of my husband but I am so anxious to go where we can help ourselves a little.\textsuperscript{13}

From Richwood Township in Becker County came the following letter, dated March 21, 1875:

Being informed that it is a sume of money raised by the government of the State of Minnesota for the relive and Suport of those persons that has Suffered from the destruc-

\textsuperscript{12} Johannes J—— to Davis, file no. 321.
\textsuperscript{13} Mrs. John S—— to Davis, file no. 321.
tion of their Crops by the Grashoppers: being driven to the action to apply to your honer for a Small part thereoff: not being able to Support our self on the account not being any Work to be got:

I Olén J — with Wife and Six Children: the Oldest about ten years Came to the County four years ago: poor; the grashoppers has destroid the Crope more ore lase every year but one: I got along very well as long as I could get plenty work but sence this Money Crees Cam on, and the work stoped: it is no place were a man can mak a cent: 14

And also one Svante J — Creppeld upp by Reumatism and not able to Support hem Self, and do requier imidiat reliev: for to prevent Suffering: 15

The quiet desperation of those who had borne the scourge the longest is reflected in a terse note of May 13, 1875, from Seward Township in Nobles County:

No time since the grasshopper invasion have provisions been scarcer here than at present And for one I am at a loss to know what to do. My family consists of Eight persons, and ere this reaches you will be entirely out of provisions. I cannot buy any thing having nothing to buy with, and as for credit, that is out of the question. The relief Committee here have nothing to distribute. What then can I do. The 26th of April last, the Government issued to me 150 lbs of Flour and 75 lbs Bacon. 16 We having nothing else whatever to subsist upon, have Consumed about all of it. And as stated above, ere this reaches you all will be gone. And then I know not what to do. 17

The grasshopper ravages were less extensive in 1875 than during the two previous years, and as the season advanced, the settlers pinned their hopes on a promising crop. For many, however, time was running out. The father of a family in the vicinity of Sacred Heart, Renville County, wrote on June 1:

I am oblige to call on you for help for i am in Such a position that i can not help myself i hav a Family of a Wif ant 7 Children ant i dont now where i will get anymore Provisions for them untill the new Crop comes in everything wat i hav is a Mortgage on et ant i can not get trust for anything like Fliower or other Provisions of any Kint my Fliower is all gone ant i dont now wat to do my Familie is in Such a position that i am oblige to colll on your honer for help Now ef you want Sent me Somthing pleas sent et to Beaver Falls or Willmar. 18

A letter of the same date from Frithjof Riis, a county commissioner of Cottonwood County, reported similar conditions in that area:

I saw a few days ago G. A. Purdy chm. Board of County Commissioners and I asked him if there would bee any more relief flour, and he said no, by the way you wrote to him. I will now ask you if it is possible that we can not receive any more aid from State or any other source. I have today had an old man 69 years old 4 in the family and asked me for flour he had not enough for one baking, and when I said no he cried, and said he did not know where to get any. Now if State relief is suspended entirely, it is too bad, it would have been far better for the people if relief had been suspended last fall, and not helped them along untill now, because now they have got their fields sown into Wheat, Oats and Corn, etc and cannot leave, without getting their fields destroyed or damaged to a great extent. I have in my district many familys that are about on

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the verge of starvation, and will have to leave if they do not get help. The crops are now looking splendid, I never saw the prospects better for a good crop. Do let me know immediately if you cannot do something for these people. The county has not any funds to help them out of their destitution and I do not know what to do with them. I do hope you will do all you can to relieve the poor sufferers, the case is very urgent. I do hope the good Lord will give us a good crop, and stop the suffering it is our prayer almost from every house.\(^1\)

Still the end had not come. In 1876 new swarms of grasshoppers, descending from the Red River Valley, spread destruction even farther through the state, visiting forty counties and damaging five hundred thousand acres of crops.\(^2\) The human side of this story was revealed in the stream of letters which continued to pour across the governor's desk. John S. Pillsbury succeeded Davis as chief executive in January, 1876, and it was to him that a Jackson County farmer addressed the following undated communication:

If you got any more Relief Provision I wish you would send me some as I have none and I want to stay at home and put in some crop and try and raise something for next winter. There is no work to be had around here even at 25 cents a day. Now if you can't help those that want to help themselves I think it is not right to help those that never lost 5 dollar worth since they came on this prairie as it has been the case with a good many around here. These are some around here that has been away all last summer and they got more help than those that stayed here and lost there crops. Now I lost over $100 worth of seed last season have only 20 bushels of wheat and a few potatoes and now if you can't send me what will keep us until I get through seeding I will have to leave my place without any crops. I have 80 acres under cultivation we are 8 in the family and the oldest of the children is only 10 years old. Six children in all. Trusting you will help soon.\(^3\)

From Charlestown in Redwood County came another plea, dated February 15, probably 1877:

I your obedient servant will state in this letter my desire in regard of some aid. I will state how long I have suffered with the Grasshopper Plague; I have suffered with them since 19th June 1873 and I don't know how much more we all have to suffer with them this year. Here I will state to your Ex. how much I received from those men from Winona, one sack of white flour and a sack of corn meal, a few lbs. of pork and a few other articles; and a few pieces of old clothing for my children.\(^4\) Here I will give you the number of my family which they depend on me. We are as follows: 7 children and me, and my wife. The children age are as follows: One boy 15 year one girl is 13 years, second girl 6 years, the sec: Boy 5 years, the fourth girl 3 years and fifth a Boy of 4 weeks old, that is the number of my family. If your Ex: could favor me with some aid, I will acknowledge thankfully for it. I shall here mention once more that is all I have received since any aid was distributed. . . . And if your Ex. would assisting my brother with some aid he would acknowledge thankfully to your Ex. he is a small family 2 children him and his wife, One boy 12 years the other boy 6 years old.\(^5\)

The spring and early summer months of 1877 saw the farmers' last bitter struggle with the locust hordes—a struggle to which Governor Pillsbury gave active leadership and encouragement. The following note

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\(^1\) Riis to Davis, file no. 361.
\(^2\) Folwell, Minnesota, 3:105.
\(^3\) D. W. N to Pillsbury, file no. 386.
\(^4\) These were apparently donations handled by some private charitable group.
\(^5\) George L. W to Pillsbury, file no. 386.
from Sacred Heart in Renville County was evidently written on March 21, 1877, in response to a promise of help from the governor:

yours came duey to hand, I will be very Thankful to you if you will Send Something to my Family as we have Baked (?) the last of our Flower in the house and the Prospects looks Poor for any more the Children is Bare Footed. Please send what you have and we will be thankfull.24

THE NEEDS of these and hundreds of other destitute farmers were met by both private charity and state aid. Space does not permit a full account of the relief efforts, but it is important to point out that help was provided. For example, during 1871 over $15,400 in cash was received by the governor's relief committee for distribution among suffering frontier settlers in Minnesota. In addition, contributions of clothing, bedding, and provisions came to an estimated value of eleven thousand dollars. In late 1874 and early 1875 a committee appointed by Governor Davis and headed by General Henry H. Sibley collected money and supplies for the state's grasshopper-ridden farmers. By January, 1875, Sibley reported that $18,959 had been received. Of this amount $10,800 had been donated by counties outside the stricken area, following an urgent appeal by Governor Davis that such action be taken. The state legislature later reimbursed the counties and some individuals for their donations.25 Relief from private sources continued to be provided through the winter of 1876-77.

Once awakened to the extent of the emergency, the legislature did not turn its back on needy citizens. In January, 1873, the lawmakers appropriated five thousand dollars for medicines and medical care, while in the following year an additional five thousand dollars was provided for direct relief, plus twenty-five thousand dollars to help farmers buy seed grain. In 1875 another twenty thousand dollars was appropriated for “the immediate relief of the suffering settlers on the frontier,” and other funds were made available with which to buy seed. Further state aid was provided for suffering settlers in 1876 and 1877.26

The large amounts of money and goods distributed by private charity to Minnesota farmers in the 1870s indicate a philanthropic spirit among both individuals and organized groups who fared better than the destitute farmers. Legislative help demonstrated that there was no basic philosophical objection to providing state aid to suffering and needy citizens when it seemed in the best interests of the individuals and the state.

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24 Henry F. B—— to Pillsbury, file no. 386.
25 Minnesota, House Journal, 1872, p. 401; Senate Journal, 1875, p. 97–106; Trenerry, in Minnesota History, 36:55. A large amount of correspondence relating to the work of the later committee may be found in box 15 of the Sibley Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

THE INDEX for volume 36 of Minnesota History is now available. While the supply lasts, members and subscribers may receive copies by writing to Mrs. Phyllis Sandstrom, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul 1.

THE PICTURE on page 208 is used through the courtesy of the Lac qui Parle County Historical Society; the others are from the Minnesota Historical Society's collection.