

Field Report to Harry Hopkins

Lorena Hickok

Introduction

Like Oscar Ameringer and Meridel Le Sueur, Lorena Hickok grew up in the Midwest during the first decades of the twentieth century, surrounded by Populists, Wobblies, and socialists. Hickok left college and started working as a journalist in Milwaukee and Detroit, eventually becoming the first woman to have a byline for the Associated Press. The AP assigned Hickok to cover Eleanor Roosevelt during Franklin D. Roosevelt's first Presidential election in 1932. Hickok resigned from the AP after she began a romantic relationship with the First Lady. Instead, Hickok worked as a chief investigator for Harry L. Hopkins, the administrator of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

For three years, Hickok visited thirty-two states and sent detailed - and salty - reports on the living and working conditions of Americans and the impact of New Deal programs worked on a ground level. Below is her report from Tucson, Arizona¹.

Primary Source

Phoenix, Arizona, May 4, 1934

Dear Mr. Hopkins:

...I lost a day this week. On Sunday, driving across desert from Lordsburg, N.M., to Tucson, I turned over in loose gravel on a road which seems to be a sort of political football. The towns of Douglas and Bisbee, wishing to keep the road as bad as possible, have enough influence at the Statehouse to prevent its being repaired. The result is about one wreck a week, with a couple of fatalities every month or so. Douglas and Bisbee are interested because it diverts traffic away from them...So, since I had apparently carried most of the weight of the car on the back of my neck during the split second while it was rolling over, the doctor seemed to think it might be a good idea for me to spend Monday in bed, which I did. Incidentally sir, you have to have a darned good neck to get away with anything like that. I think mine had no doubt got toughened up these last five or six weeks from carrying the weight of the world on it.

...Since Monday I've been moving fast, with little opportunity to write. Anyway, I haven't felt much encouraged to write. Damn it, it's the same old story down here, wherever I go. Two classes of people. Whites, including white collar people, with white standards of living, for

¹ Lorena Hickok, [Report to Harry L. Hopkins](#), May 4, 1934. Hickok [donated](#) the copyrights to all her papers to the U.S. Government. It is believed that because Hickok wrote this letter in the course of her duties as an employee of the U.S. Federal Government that this letter is in the public domain.

whom relief as it is now, is anything but adequate. No jobs in sight. Growing restive. Mexicans - or, east of the Mississippi, Negroes - with low standards of living, to whom relief is adequate and attractive. Perfectly contented. Willing to stay on relief the rest of their lives. Able, many of them, to get work, but at wages so low that they are better off on relief. So many Mexicans and Negroes on relief that, with a limited amount of money, we are compelled to force the white man's standard of living down to that of the Mexicans and Negroes.

I believe that in the whole Southern half of the United States you will find this to be the big relief problem today. Certainly it is in every urban community. I've encountered it everywhere I've been on this trip: Alabama, Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico, although not so bad there, and Arizona. Add to it newspaper publicity - carried out of Washington by the press associations, I am told - that has led the population to believe that everyone in the state on relief is going to get \$21 a month cash, no more and no less, under the new program, and you have Arizona's problem. The Mexicans all want "the \$21 a month the Government has promised us." The whites, who have actually been getting more than that on direct relief, don't see how they can get along on it and are worried stiff. It represents a "raise" for the Mexicans, from relief with which they were perfectly satisfied and which apparently was adequate, and a "cut" for the whites...

I have been writing you right along that the only way I could see to clean up this Negro-Mexican business would be to reinvestigate thoroughly the Negro and Mexican case-loads, closing the intakes to get them out of the habit of registering for relief for a few weeks and to turn the case workers loose for the reinvestigation, and to force every Negro or Mexican who could get any work at all, at WHATEVER wages, to take it and get off the relief rolls...I must admit that there are people in the set-up who don't agree with me on this. They argue first of all that we are forcing these people into peonage. Employers, particularly farmers and housewives - the two worst classes of employers in the country, I believe - will take advantage of the situation.

I've written you about housewives who think Negroes, Mexicans, or even white girls ought to be glad to work for their room and board. And last week in New Mexico I heard about sheep growers who want to hire herders at \$7 a MONTH! It is also argued that, particularly in cities, thousands of the Mexicans and Negroes actually CAN'T get work - that, if there is any job, no matter how lowly and how poorly paid, a white man will take it, and that there would be Hell to pay if a Negro or a Mexican got it. I don't believe that, however, to the extent that some people do.

It's almost impossible to get to the bottom on this farm labor proposition. The farmers - sheep and cattle men, cotton growers, and so on - are all yelling that they can't get the Mexicans to work because they are all on relief. But when Mexicans and Spanish-Americans won't go out and herd sheep for \$7 a month because they can get \$8 or \$10 on relief, it seems to me that the farmer ought to raise his wages a little. Oh, they don't admit trying to get herders for \$7 a month. If you ask them what they are paying, they will say, "Anywhere from \$15 a month up." But our relief people looked into the matter and found out what they actually were willing to pay. A thing that complicates the whole situation right now is our hourly rate under the new program. In Arizona, for instance, the minimum is 50 cents an hour. We adopted it because it is the hourly rate on public works in the state of Arizona. But, don't you see, it's a "political" hourly rate? Jobs on highways on public works in Arizona are dealt out as political patronage. The ACTUAL

prevailing wage in Arizona is nowhere nearly that high. Up to now there haven't been many people getting 50 cents an hour in Arizona-and damned few Mexicans. Now we come along and announce we are going to pay everybody on relief 50 cents an hour. You can imagine the furor.

You've got the Latin temperament to deal with down here, too. Latin and Indian. They don't "want" things. They haven't any ambition. A man who is half Spanish and half Indian has an entirely different slant on life from ours. To begin with, it's a semi-tropical country. The Spaniards came here generations ago. They are easy-going, pleasure loving. It isn't in their makeup to "get out and hustle." And the Indian in them certainly wouldn't make them ambitious. The Indian never was a hustler. He wanted just enough' no more. Your Mexican, or your Spanish-American, is a simple fellow, with simple needs, to be obtained with the least effort.

And if he could work five days a week at 50 cents an hour or three days a week at 50 cents an hour, he'd work three days, even though it meant less income. His attitude is: "Why work any more, after you've got enough?" And when it comes to working seven days a week, 10 hours a day, for no more than, or even less than, he'd be getting on relief - well, he just can't see that at all².

...And so, this 50-cent hourly rate is just swell for a Mexican, even though the number of hours he can work and the amount of money he can get per month on it are limited. And \$21 a month, earned at the rate of 50 cents an hour-why, that's just Heaven to him! He'd have a grand time on \$10 or \$12. And has been. The Mexican or Spanish-American diet is so different from ours. Chili beans, red beans, a little grease, flour or cornmeal, a few vegetables and a little fruit in the fall. It's a cheap diet. But they've thrived - or would it be "thriven?" - on it for 500 years. We're silly to try to change it. As a matter of fact, doctors over in New Mexico have been making a study of that diet, observing the effect on the children. They've had the surprise of their lives.

Those children are a darn sight better off physically, on that diet, than most of our white children are in families living on minimum subsistence rations. In Tucson not long ago arrived a huge shipment of surplus commodity butter. They had no place to keep it. They had to ration it out to Mexicans and Indians as well as whites. The Mexicans and Indians had never tasted butter before. They didn't even like it. They tried to fry beans in it - and came back yelling for lard! Now if these people can live on \$10 or \$12 a month and be reasonably healthy and so contented that they won't even take work when it is offered them, let alone go out and look for it, why, in the name of common sense, raise them above that? Especially when we have a limited amount of money.

I'll grant that the work that is offered them pays darned little - that it's practically peonage - but it's all they've ever known, and I doubt if the Relief administration is financially in a position to battle low wage scales all over the South and Southwest. There is a way of handling the problem, other than throwing the Mexicans and Negroes off relief - and the local relief administrations have been doing it. Discrimination.

² Remember Indian Reformer, Merrill Gates: The tribal organization tends to retain men in such barbarism. It is a great step gained when you awaken in an Indian the desire for the acquisition of property of his own, by his own honest labor

Two standards of relief. The idea will sound horrible in Washington, but - I'm beginning to wonder. The only place where they've come right out and admitted to me that they've been doing it is in Tucson. They were doing it before Federal money came in, there, and during April, between CWA and the new program³, which went into effect May 1, they went back to it. They said April had been the smoothest month they'd had for a long time. In Tucson - without any publicity, but so quietly that people didn't even know they were being classified - they divided their case load into four groups, Classes A, B, C, and D. They have about 2,800 families on relief there: 1,200 Mexicans, American citizens, but with a low standard of living; 800 Yaqui Indian families, political refugees from old Mexico; 800 white families.

Into Class A went 60 families. Engineers, teachers, lawyers, contractors, a few former businessmen, architects, and some chemists who used to be connected with the mines. They and each of the other three groups had their own intakes. No mixing. They gave this group a \$50 a month maximum, 50 per cent cash. It took care of them fairly adequately, rents, clothing, and everything. They set up projects for them, manning their auxiliary staff with them. Although they were required to work only a few hours a week for what they were getting, these people have been giving full time, voluntarily.

Into Class B went 250 families, on a maximum of \$36 a month, from 33 1/3 to 40 per cent cash. It consisted of some white collar people-clerks, stenographers, bookkeepers, and so on-and skilled labor. Many of these people were able to augment their incomes by a few days' work now and then.

Into Class C went 1,000 families, on a \$25 maximum, 30 per cent cash. It consisted of white unskilled labor and Mexican and Spanish-American unskilled labor with standards of living higher than those of most Mexicans. And into Class D went 1,490 families, on a \$10 maximum, all in kind. These were the low class Mexican, Spanish-American, and Indian families. They have a commissary in Tucson - and I'm beginning to wonder, too, if a commissary IS such a bad thing where you've got a large crowd of people with low standards of living to feed. As a work project, they raise two-thirds of the vegetables distributed through the commissary. They buy milk wholesale, giving it out at 8 cents a quart instead of 15 cents as charged retail. Incidentally, from school districts where these low class Mexicans and Indians live and where distribution of milk to children has been going on for years there came a few weeks ago word that the health of the children had improved to such an extent that they no longer needed to distribute the milk!

"Now this all may seem pretty bad to you...", the relief administrator told me, "but you're going to quit some day and leave us, here in these communities, to you. We'll never be able to carry on under the conditions Washington is imposing on us now."

And so - I'm wondering if perhaps we should try to set up a national standard and impose it on a state like Arizona, a town like Tucson. I'm wondering if we shouldn't give these state and local committees a little more latitude, a little more discretionary power...Don't think I can't see the dangers in it. And I realize the terrific pressure brought to bear by the Labor crowd on those

³ The Civilian Works Administration was a short-lived New Deal program from 1933-34. The CWA, along with FERA, was replaced by the Works' Progress Administration in 1935.

wage scales. But, dammit, man, our job is to feed people and clothe them and shelter them, with as little damage to their morale as possible. And that's all, as I see it. We haven't got the money to do any more. I can't see – I've never been able to see - that it was the job of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to fight the battle of the American Federation of Labor⁴. We ARE feeding people, clothing them, and providing shelter for them as best we can. But what are we doing to their morale? I've been on the road nearly a year now. More and more I've come to the conclusion that, the less we interfere with the normal lives of these families, the less damage we're going to do to their morale. If by relief, we raise a family's income beyond whatever [it] has been before or beyond what it has any chance of becoming normally, we are damaging the morale of that family. And if we lower a family's standard of living too much, we are going to ruin its morale, too - or make a rebel out of the head of that family.

In Tucson, if we enforce that 50-cent hourly wage rate with the limit on hours, we're going to do both of those things, I'm afraid. I was in Tucson May 1, the day the new program went in. All the Mexicans who could read - and even more who couldn't - were over at their intake, demanding the \$21 a month "the Government has promised us."

In the office of the administrator, I sat talking for an hour with half a dozen white collar clients. Among them were a landscape painter, a certified public accountant, a former businessman, an architect, a former bank cashier. All save the artist were men of 45 or thereabouts. All had been in the group of 60, Class A. We went over their budgets, to see if they could possibly get along on that \$21 maximum.

Said the painter:

"I pay \$6.50 a month rent. There are three of us, my wife, my 18-months-old baby, and myself. We have three rooms in a garage. No water. An outside toilet. The baby's food costs us \$6.03 a month – \$4.11 for milk, .46 for Cream of Wheat, .26 for prunes, \$1.20 for vegetables. He should have more, but he can get by on that. Our lights and coal oil for fuel come to \$4.30 a month. Add \$6.50 for rent, \$6.03 for the baby food, and \$4.30 for light and oil, and you get \$16.83. Subtract that from \$21, and you see my wife and I will have \$4.17 a month for food for ourselves. Can't do it...

The certified public accountant was trying to hang onto his home. "If I lose that," he said, "it's the end-that's all...He has a Federal Home Loan, which requires that he pay \$10 a month interest. That leaves him an \$11 balance, and he has six in the family and a baby coming. In April he got \$40 and managed to get by, although, of course, he had to keep one of the children out of school to help his wife because he couldn't hire anyone. He wasn't kicking about that, however.

The former bank cashier also had six in the family, himself, his wife, his parents, his crippled sister, and her child. He wasn't paying rent. They had moved in with friends. But they were paying half of the electric, water and fuel bills. "I'm afraid for my parents," he said. "Lord only

⁴ Hopefully you remember the AFL. The Knights of Labor lost support after the Haymarket Riot in 1886. The more conservative AFL replaced the Knights as most powerful union, discouraging strikes and encouraging "business unionism."

knows how we'll get along. They are unhappy now and feel they are in the way. It's a bad situation."

The former businessman, who told me that, when the depression hit, he was worth \$60,000 - and other people told me he was telling me the truth - had only three in his family, his wife, himself, and a son, who had to leave college, but who has been unable to get steady work of any kind. He is paying \$15 a month rent, having recently moved out of a \$25 apartment. That leaves \$6 a month for food for the three of them.

"All this - it breaks you down," he said quietly. "We men who have been the backbone of commerce, who have had ambitions and hopes, who have always taken care of our families-what is going to become of us? I've lost twelve and a half pounds this last month, just thinking. You can't sleep, you know. You wake up about 2 A.M., and then you lie and think."

"Why, I've sat across the tables from Jesse Jones and talked contracts with him, running up into many thousands of dollars! But I'd be afraid to face him now. You get so you feel so whipped!" There was a moment's silence. Then the former bank cashier spoke. "Yes," he said, "all those years of practical experience you and I have had don't count for anything now."

"When you're 45 and trying to get a job, they say to you, 'I'll get in touch with you later, Mr. So-and-So. Mighty glad you dropped in.'"

"But you never hear from them." In Albuquerque the other day, I was talking with a lawyer, a former judge, who is one of the big men in the town. "The Government has got to take care of these people," he said, "if it takes your hat and mine. Why, we don't know the beginning of taxation in this country yet. And if society, as it is now organized, can't give a man a job, then the Government, representing all the people, must do it-a decent job, at a living wage."⁵

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⁵ I just want to point out that five years after Lorena Hickok's report, Luther Standing Bear died on the set of the movie *Union Pacific*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, a pioneer of the modern cinematic drama. (Do you know the infamous line, "I'm ready for my close up, Mr. DeMille?" - Norma Desmond, played by the incomparable Gloria Swanson, *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950, directed by Billy Wilder). I assume you remember Luther Standing Bear and his memoir, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, recounting his life at Carlisle Indian Industrial School. We read it Week 3, back in September. I want to pause here and consider this:

Luther Standing Bear lived through every single thing we have studied this semester. An Oglala Sioux, born on unceded land in the Dakota Territory in 1868. In the first few months of his life, the Federal Government forced the Sioux to sign a treaty turning that same land into Pine Ridge Reservation. Standing Bear left for Carlisle in 1879, two years after Reconstruction ended and the Great Railroad Strike began. He left Pine Ridge just weeks before the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. He attended the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 as part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. He witnessed World War I and the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. He watched the country become electrified, and was one of the first people on the planet to speak on a telephone. One of the first people to hear recorded music, one of the first to hear a baseball game on the radio, and one of the first to watch a motion picture. He was among the first people on the planet to ride in a car. He was among the first people on the planet to watch a basketball game (invented in 1891) or watch soccer turn into football. He died in 1939, the year Nazi Germany invaded Poland and Franklin Roosevelt received a letter from German physicists Leo Szilard and Albert Einstein warning that Germany had the technology to build an atomic bomb. What a life.